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The New Custom Union in the West African Sub-Region and Its Impacts on Sub-Regional Peace and Economic Development

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ABSTRACT
The formation of a new customs union by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso in West Africa represents a significant step in regional economic integration. West African nations have historically sought various forms of economic cooperation to promote development and stability, with varying levels of success. This study used a historical research design to examine the evolution of regional economic initiatives and their impact on peace and development. It applied the theory of regionalism to explore how regional integration drives economic growth, reduces conflict, and enhances collective self-reliance. The study evaluated the potential benefits of the new customs union, such as increased intra-regional trade, harmonized tariffs, and improved infrastructure, while also addressing challenges like political instability, poor governance, and external economic pressures. The findings suggest that, with strong institutional frameworks and political commitment, the customs union could significantly enhance sub-regional economic development and peace. The conclusion highlights the importance of political stability and regional cooperation for achieving sustainable development. Among its recommendations, the study suggested that the AES (Alliance of Sahel States) should engage in constructive dialogue with ECOWAS and other regional bodies to ensure alignment with broader West African integration goals, fostering mutual understanding and shared initiatives in trade, security, and infrastructure. This study contributed to the broader conversation about regional integration's role in promoting peace and development in conflict-affected regions.

Keywords: West Africa, customs union, regional integration, peace, economic development

INTRODUCTION
The West African sub-region has a long history of pursuing economic integration to promote development and maintain peace among its member states. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), founded in 1975, has played a key role in these efforts, aiming to foster economic cooperation and regional stability. However, recent political upheavals have tested this framework (International Crisis Group, 2023). Between 2020 and 2023, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso underwent military coups, resulting in strained relations with ECOWAS and the imposition of sanctions. In response, these three Sahelian nations

formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in July 2024, signaling a significant shift in regional dynamics (Reuters, 2024).

The AES confederation seeks to coordinate diplomatic efforts, establish an investment bank, and launch projects in key sectors, representing a push for self-reliance and a departure from traditional alliances. This shift raises important questions about its potential impact on regional peace and economic development, particularly in light of West Africa's history of regional integration. The departure of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS to form the AES presents both opportunities and challenges for the sub-region (Issa, 2024). On one hand, the new customs union could strengthen economic cooperation among the member states, promoting development through shared resources and coordinated policies. On the other hand, it could undermine ECOWAS's broader goals, potentially leading to fragmentation and instability in the region (Wanep, 2024).

The central issue addressed by this study is the dual nature of the AES's formation: while it aims to foster economic growth and sovereignty for its members, it also carries risks to regional peace and cohesion. Understanding this balance is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders navigating the changing landscape of West African regional integration. The establishment of the AES raises several key questions:

1. How would the new customs union impact intra-regional trade, especially in relation to existing ECOWAS agreements?
2. What are the security implications of this realignment, given the ongoing threats posed by extremist groups in the Sahel?
3. To what extent would the AES influence the political landscape of West Africa, particularly regarding democratic governance and human rights?

Addressing these questions is vital for understanding the broader effects of the AES on regional peace and economic development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regional integration refers to the process by which two or more countries within a geographic region collaborate to form a unified economic or political entity. This process usually involves reducing trade barriers, harmonizing economic policies, and establishing shared institutions to promote economic growth, stability, and peace. Economic unions represent a more advanced form of regional integration, where member countries not only coordinate economic policies but may also adopt a common currency and fiscal policies (African Union, 2021). Examples include the European Union (EU) and the East African Community (EAC). The key stages of regional integration are:

1. **Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA):** The initial stage where countries reduce tariffs on certain goods traded among themselves.
2. **Free Trade Area (FTA):** Removes tariffs between member countries, while maintaining individual tariffs on non-member countries. Example: North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).
3. **Customs Union:** Creates a common external tariff and eliminates internal tariffs among member countries. Example: Southern African Customs Union (SACU).
4. **Common Market:** Extends beyond a customs union by allowing the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor. Example: European Economic Area (EEA).
5. **Economic Union:** Integrates economic policies and may include a shared currency. Example: European Union (EU).
6. **Political Union:** The most advanced form, which involves the merging of policies, laws, and possibly even a single government, though this is mostly theoretical (African Union, 2021).

Economic Unions: Characteristics and Examples

Economic unions are characterized by coordinated monetary and fiscal policies, sometimes a common currency, and uniform economic laws across member states. These unions aim to achieve macroeconomic stability, enhance competitiveness, and stimulate economic growth by pooling resources and creating larger markets.

i. **The European Union (EU):** The EU is a leading example of an economic union. It began as a customs union and evolved into a full economic and political union, featuring a single market and a shared currency (the Euro) for many member states (European Union, 2021).
ii. **African Union (AU) and Regional Economic Communities (RECs):** In Africa, the AU and various RECs, such as ECOWAS, the Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the East African Community (EAC), are advancing toward deeper economic integration, with the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) being a key step in this direction (African Union, 2021). The benefits of regional integration and economic unions include:

1. **Economic Growth:** Larger integrated markets attract more investment and drive growth.
2. **Political Stability:** Economic interdependence can reduce conflicts among countries.
3. **Increased Bargaining Power:** Regional blocs can negotiate more favorable terms in global trade and politics.
4. **Efficient Resource Allocation:** Free movement of labor and capital leads to more efficient resource utilization. However, challenges in regional integration and economic unions include:

1. **Sovereignty Concerns:** Member states may be hesitant to relinquish control over national policies.
2. **Economic Disparities:** Differences in economic development among member countries can result in unequal benefits.
3. **Implementation Challenges:** Lack of political will and insufficient institutional capacity can hinder the implementation of agreements (African Union, 2021).

Analysis of West African Regional Integration Efforts

West Africa's efforts toward regional integration are primarily led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which was established in 1975. ECOWAS aims to promote economic cooperation, increase trade, ensure regional stability, and improve the overall well-being of its member countries. The region's diverse economic conditions and political landscapes present both challenges and opportunities for integration. West African nations have pursued integration to address the limitations of small, fragmented markets and foster economic development. Early attempts, such as the establishment of the Mano River Union in 1973, had limited impact. ECOWAS, however, represented a significant advancement by creating a broader platform for both economic and political integration across 15 member states, including Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Senegal (Ogunleye, 2020). Key milestones in economic integration include:

a. **Trade Liberalization Initiatives:** In 1979, ECOWAS introduced the ECOWAS Trade Liberalization Scheme (ETLS), aiming to create a free trade area by eliminating customs duties on goods from member countries. However, implementation has faced delays due to non-tariff barriers, inadequate infrastructure, and administrative hurdles.

b. **Common External Tariff (CET):** In 2015, ECOWAS adopted the CET as a significant step toward forming a customs union. The CET sought to standardize tariffs on imports from outside the region, promoting trade and protecting local industries. Despite this, full compliance remains challenging, particularly for countries with differing economic capacities.

c. **Monetary Integration Plans:** ECOWAS has long aimed to introduce a common currency, the ECO, to reduce transaction costs and stabilize the regional economy. However, the goal of a single currency has been repeatedly delayed due to economic disparities, political instability, and differing macroeconomic policies among member states.

d. **Political and Security Cooperation:** ECOWAS has played a proactive role in addressing political instability through initiatives like the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which has intervened in conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and, more recently, Mali. These interventions underscore the organization's role in promoting peace and security, a critical element for successful economic integration (Economic Community of West African States, 2021).The outcomes of integration efforts include:

a. **Economic Growth:** Regional integration has shown potential to boost economic growth by expanding markets, attracting investment, and facilitating the movement of labor and capital.

b. **Enhanced Security:** ECOWAS's involvement in conflict resolution has contributed to greater regional stability, which is crucial for fostering economic activity.

c. **Social Development:** Integration efforts have also targeted social issues such as health, education, and human rights, leading to improved living standards (Ogunleye, 2020).

However, challenges to economic integration include:

a. **Political Instability:** Political instability in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has hindered integration efforts. Military coups and weak governance undermine trust and coordination among member states.

b. **Economic Disparities:** The region's economies vary greatly, from oil-rich Nigeria to smaller, agriculture-dependent nations like Guinea-Bissau. These disparities complicate the adoption of unified economic policies and standards.

c. **Infrastructure Shortcomings:** Poor infrastructure, including inadequate transportation and energy networks, limits the movement of goods and services. Initiatives like the West Africa Power Pool and Trans-West African Highway are crucial but require substantial investment and coordination.

d. **Non-Tariff Barriers:** Despite the ETLS, non-tariff barriers such as roadblocks, harassment, and unofficial fees continue to undermine trade liberalization efforts (Signe, 2021).

Although West Africa's regional integration, led by ECOWAS, has made notable progress, it faces numerous challenges. Overcoming political instability, economic disparities, and infrastructure deficiencies is essential for deeper integration. Recent developments, such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), present new opportunities to advance these integration efforts.

Review of Recent Political Developments in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso

The Sahel region, particularly Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, has experienced significant political upheavals in recent years, marked by military coups, political shifts, and changes in governance. These developments have had far-reaching implications for regional stability, economic progress, and international relations. This review offers an in-depth analysis of these political changes, exploring their causes, key events, and broader impacts on the region and beyond.

In July 2023, Niger underwent a major political shift when President Mohamed Bazoum was overthrown in a military coup led by General Abdourahamane Tchiani (The Economist, 2024). The coup was driven by military discontent with Bazoum's handling of security issues, particularly with jihadist groups, and broader socio-economic dissatisfaction with the government's performance.

1. **Context and Causes:** The Sahel has been grappling with escalating violence from Islamist militants, and while Niger had been relatively stable, it faced increasing attacks. The coup was also fueled by general socio-economic frustration and perceptions of ineffective governance.
2. **Immediate Aftermath:** The junta suspended the constitution, dissolved the government, and formed a transitional council. ECOWAS, the African Union (AU), and the international community condemned the coup and imposed sanctions to press the junta into restoring civilian rule (The Economist, 2024).

The junta promised a return to civilian rule but was met with skepticism. Their focus shifted towards building military alliances and forging new diplomatic relationships, particularly with Russia and other non-Western powers.

i. **Economic Consequences:** Sanctions from ECOWAS severely impacted Niger's economy, causing inflation and disrupting trade. In response, the junta sought to form new economic partnerships, especially with Russia and China.

ii. **Security Measures:** The junta focused on enhancing military strength and launched operations to counter jihadist threats, while also renegotiating military agreements with Western powers (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Mali's political instability deepened with two coups in the span of a year. The first occurred in August 2020, removing President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta by a military faction led by Colonel Assimi Goïta. Goïta then staged a second coup in May 2021 to solidify his control.

1. **Causes:** The coups were spurred by widespread public dissatisfaction with Keïta's administration, primarily due to corruption, poor governance, and failure to tackle the insurgency. The military's intervention was initially welcomed by segments of the population frustrated with the status quo.

Following the coups, Mali's new military government pledged to transition to civilian rule but postponed elections, citing security concerns.

i. **Shift in Alliances:** Mali's government distanced itself from traditional Western partners, notably France, ending longstanding military cooperation. Instead, it sought closer relations with Russia, including hiring the Wagner Group for security assistance.

ii. **Domestic Challenges:** The junta faced difficulties in implementing reforms and maintaining control, especially in northern regions dominated by insurgent groups (International Crisis Group, 2023).

Burkina Faso also experienced two coups in 2022, first in January, removing President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, followed by a second coup in September that ousted Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. Captain Ibrahim Traoré emerged as the new leader.

1. **Motivations:** Both coups were driven by the military's frustration with the government's inability to address the jihadist insurgency that was causing significant displacement and economic disruption.
2. **Public Sentiment:** The public initially supported the coups, hoping for a more effective approach to security and governance. However, continued instability and limited progress in addressing security challenges tempered these expectations (United Nations, 2023).

Under Traoré's leadership, Burkina Faso focused on intensifying military operations against insurgents and seeking new partnerships.

i. **Security Policies:** The government adopted aggressive military strategies and sought regional collaboration, particularly with Mali and Niger, to combat cross-border terrorism.

ii. **Economic and Social Initiatives:** The government aimed to stabilize the economy through measures supporting agriculture and reducing reliance on foreign aid, although challenges in governance and resource allocation persisted.

In response to regional and international pressures, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) in July 2024, marking a break from their previous ties with ECOWAS.

1. **Goals:** The AES aimed to foster stronger regional cooperation in security, economic development, and diplomacy, with a focus on self-reliance and reducing dependence on Western powers.
2. **Strategic Plans:** The alliance proposed establishing a common investment bank, launching joint infrastructure projects, and coordinating military operations to improve regional stability (United Nations, 2023).

The creation of the AES challenged ECOWAS's influence, potentially leading to fragmentation in regional integration efforts. ECOWAS's sanctions and diplomatic isolation of these countries have strained relations, deepening divides within West Africa. The AES represents a shift in the Sahel's security strategy, with these countries pursuing more independent methods to address terrorism and insurgency, aiming to reduce reliance on external military support.

The realignment posed both economic risks and opportunities. While ECOWAS sanctions and international donors' withdrawal created immediate economic challenges, the AES members sought to leverage regional resources and form new partnerships with non-traditional allies to bolster economic resilience. The political shifts in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have elicited mixed responses internationally.

1. **Western Powers:** The United States and the European Union expressed concerns over the erosion of democracy and the security implications, often imposing sanctions or cutting aid.
2. **Russia and China:** These countries capitalized on the realignment by strengthening diplomatic and economic ties, filling the void left by Western powers and reshaping geopolitical dynamics in the region (United Nations, 2023).

The political changes in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso represent a significant realignment in the Sahel, driven by security and governance challenges. The formation of the AES signifies a new phase in regional politics, emphasizing self-reliance and less dependency on Western alliances. While these shifts offer the potential for greater regional autonomy and security cooperation, they also pose risks of increased isolation and economic instability.

Importance of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso in Regional Stability and Their Strategic Relevance

Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, located in the heart of the Sahel region in West Africa, are crucial to regional stability and security dynamics. Their geographic, economic, and political significance plays a vital role in shaping the security landscape and the broader development trajectory of West Africa.

1. Geopolitical Importance

a. **Strategic Location:** Situated in the Sahel, a semi-arid area that bridges the Sahara Desert in the north and the savannas in the south, these countries are key transit zones for trade, migration, and unfortunately, for criminal networks and terrorist organizations.

i. Niger borders seven nations, including Libya, Algeria, Chad, and Nigeria, making it essential for managing trade and security, particularly due to instability in Libya and Boko Haram's activities in Nigeria.

ii. Mali shares borders with Algeria, Mauritania, and Senegal, with its northern regions, often ungoverned, becoming a hotspot for jihadist groups, central to combating terrorism in the Sahel.

iii. Burkina Faso, strategically located between Mali and Niger, acts as a buffer against instability spilling over from its neighbors.

b.**Barrier to Jihadist Spread:** The Sahel, especially these three countries, has become the epicenter of jihadist insurgencies. Terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) exploit weak governance and large unpoliced areas. The stability of these countries is essential in preventing jihadist groups from advancing into more stable coastal states in West Africa, such as Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire.

2. Economic Significance

a. **Resource Wealth:** Despite security issues, these countries are rich in natural resources that significantly contribute to the region's economy.

i. Niger is a major uranium producer, essential for global nuclear energy, and holds substantial reserves of oil and gold.

ii. Mali, Africa's third-largest gold producer, relies heavily on mining for national revenue.

iii. Burkina Faso has a rapidly growing gold industry, becoming one of Africa's top gold producers.

b. **Agricultural Potential:** Agriculture is vital for these nations, supporting the livelihoods of most of the population. With stable governance, agricultural productivity could be greatly enhanced, boosting food security and economic growth in West Africa.

3. Security Roles

Regional Military Collaboration: Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are critical in regional security initiatives, such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, aimed at fighting terrorism and transnational crime. Despite challenges, their military forces are on the frontlines against extremist groups.

i. Niger hosts foreign military bases, including those from the U.S. and France, essential for counterterrorism operations.

ii. Mali, at the center of the Sahelian conflict, plays a pivotal role in counterterrorism strategies, with the presence of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA).

iii. Burkina Faso has also significantly contributed to regional military efforts, despite its internal challenges from insurgencies.

4. Political Influence

a. **Regional Leadership:** The political developments in these countries affect the entire West African region, particularly through their roles in organizations like the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Political instability here can undermine ECOWAS's initiatives, impacting regional stability.

b. **Governance and Political Transitions:** The political shifts in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, including military coups, have sparked discussions on governance, democracy, and security in West Africa, influencing neighboring countries' political trajectories. Instability in these countries has caused internal displacement and cross-border migration, with significant effects on neighboring states and Europe. Niger, especially, is a key transit country for migrants heading to Europe, and its cooperation is essential in managing migration and tackling human trafficking.

Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso are central to the stability and security of the Sahel and West Africa. Their strategic position, resource wealth, and roles in regional security make them crucial in shaping the region's future. The recent political developments, including coups and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), have redefined their role, presenting both challenges and opportunities for fostering peace and development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theory of regionalism, which refers to the process by which countries within a specific region collaborate to pursue shared economic, political, or security goals, often through regional organizations, frameworks, or alliances. The theory of regionalism can be viewed from different perspectives, including economic integration, political cooperation, and security dynamics. Several notable scholars have contributed to the development of regionalism in international relations, economics, and political science, including:

Karl W. Deutsch, a key figure in the theory of regional integration, is renowned for his concept of "security communities," where he explored how regions can establish collective security through shared norms and increasing political cooperation. Deutsch argued that regional integration fosters interdependence, communication, and a sense of community among nations, which can promote peaceful cooperation and more stable international relations (Deutsch et al., 1957).

Ernst B. Haas, a major scholar in regional integration studies and a proponent of neofunctionalism, examined how regional institutions, such as the European Union (EU), can encourage greater economic and political cooperation among countries. Haas introduced the idea of "spillover," where economic integration in one area creates pressures for further integration in other sectors. He argued that regional cooperation leads to deeper integration as nations discover common interests and expand their collaboration over time (Haas, 1958).

Though not an academic theorist, U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson played a key role in advancing regionalism, especially in Latin America. His support for regional organizations like the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Alliance for Progress shaped the political dimension of regional cooperation. Johnson advocated for stronger regional relationships in the Americas, focusing on economic development and political stability, particularly during the Cold War. His policies aimed to prevent the spread of communism and stimulate regional economic growth (Johnson, 1961).

David Lake and Robert Powell have made significant contributions to the strategic and security aspects of regionalism, emphasizing regional cooperation for collective security. They argue that states form regional organizations to enhance their security through collaboration. In their theory of security communities, they highlight how states in a region can create collective security agreements that reduce the likelihood of conflict, which is especially important in regions with historical instability (Lake & Powell, 1999).

James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin are influential in understanding how ethnic and national identities affect regional cooperation and conflict. Their work provides insight into the conditions that either promote or hinder cooperation among states, particularly in regions with identity-based tensions. Their theory examines how social and political factors influence the creation of stable regional organizations and cooperation (Fearon & Laitin, 2000).

The theory of regionalism has evolved through contributions from various scholars across disciplines. From the foundational works of Karl Deutsch and Ernst Haas in the mid-20th century to more recent contributions by scholars like Buzan and Fearon, the theory emphasizes the importance of cooperation and integration in regional political, economic, and security matters. As global and regional dynamics continue to evolve, these theories remain essential for understanding how regional arrangements shape international relations.

The theory of regionalism refers to the process through which countries within a specific geographic area or region come together to form institutions, alliances, or organizations to promote mutual interests, whether they are economic, political, or security-related. Regionalism typically arises from the recognition that countries in the same region face common challenges and opportunities, making cooperation more effective than acting in isolation. Below are the main principles of regionalism:

One key principle of regionalism is that countries within a particular region are more likely to cooperate due to their geographic proximity and shared challenges. These common interests may include security, trade, environmental issues, and economic development. For example, the European Union (EU) brings together European countries that share cultural, economic, and political ties, fostering integration. Similarly, the African Union (AU) aims to enhance cooperation among African nations facing shared issues like poverty, conflict, and disease.

Regionalism often stems from economic interdependence, where countries realize that collaborating on economic matters such as trade, investment, and resource management is more beneficial than working alone. This interdependence may lead to the creation of regional trade agreements or economic unions that facilitate the free movement of goods, services, and capital. For instance, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) created an economic interdependence zone among the U.S., Canada, and Mexico, boosting trade and investment flows.

Countries in a region also seek to establish political and security structures to maintain stability and peace. Regional security arrangements address shared threats, including terrorism, organized crime, and border disputes. Political cooperation may involve strengthening democratic governance, human rights, and conflict resolution mechanisms. An example is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which includes provisions for political and security cooperation, such as a peacekeeping force for regional conflicts.

For regional cooperation to be lasting, it is often formalized through treaties, agreements, or institutions. These institutions provide frameworks for dialogue, decision-making, and enforcement of agreements, ensuring that the collective interests of member states are upheld. Strong regional institutions, such as the African Union (AU) and its bodies like the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, facilitate political and social cooperation across African nations.

Regionalism also aims to foster peace and stability by addressing the root causes of conflict within a region. Regional organizations can mediate disputes and prevent conflicts from escalating through dialogue and conflict resolution mechanisms. For instance, ECOWAS played a vital role in mediating and resolving conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone during their civil wars.

The theory of regionalism assumes that countries can achieve more effective outcomes through collective action, especially in managing shared resources such as water bodies, natural resources, or energy. Cooperation over these resources can prevent conflicts and ensure sustainability. The Nile Basin Initiative, which involves countries like Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia working together to manage the Nile River's water resources, is an example.

Beyond economic and political goals, regionalism may also seek to promote cultural exchange and shared identity. Socio-cultural integration can foster mutual understanding and strengthen bonds between regional populations, which is essential for long-term peace and cooperation. The Southern African Development Community (SADC) promotes socio-cultural exchanges alongside economic and political collaboration, encouraging regional unity.

Although regionalism encourages cooperation, the theory also acknowledges that national sovereignty and the protection of national interests are crucial considerations. States may enter regional arrangements for economic or security advantages but often retain the right to act independently when their core interests are at stake. For instance, while European Union countries cooperate on trade and human rights, they may have different stances on issues like immigration and defense, recognizing the importance of preserving national sovereignty.

Regionalism is often viewed as a way to accelerate development by pooling resources, creating larger markets, and leveraging economies of scale. By working together, regional partners can enhance infrastructure, trade facilitation, and financial support, leading to growth and poverty reduction. The East African Community (EAC), for example, seeks to improve infrastructure and trade cooperation to foster economic development.

Overall, the theory of regionalism encompasses a range of political, economic, and social dynamics that encourage cooperation between neighboring countries for mutual benefit. By promoting economic integration, political collaboration, and security cooperation, regionalism can contribute to more stable, prosperous, and peaceful regions. However, the success of regionalism depends on balancing these principles with national sovereignty and effectively addressing regional challenges through collaborative frameworks.

Application of the Theory of Regionalism to the Study

The theory of regionalism offers a useful lens for understanding the political, economic, and security dynamics that influence the creation and outcomes of regional cooperation initiatives. In the case of the new customs union formed by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, regionalism theory sheds light on how these countries are working to strengthen their collective position in West Africa, addressing political instability, security threats, and economic challenges. The following outlines how regionalism applies to this study.

Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso share a geographical location in the Sahel region of West Africa, facing common challenges such as terrorism, organized crime, and climate change. Their geographic proximity makes regional cooperation more natural, as they are linked by similar security risks, economic issues, and social conditions.

The creation of a customs union between these nations is a response to the realization that their stability and development are interdependent. By pooling resources and focusing on shared priorities like economic growth, infrastructure, and security cooperation, the union aims to strengthen the region and increase resilience. Regionalism theory suggests that countries in a specific region are more likely to cooperate due to common external and internal challenges. This customs union is a response to the shared instability and economic difficulties in the Sahel. Through collaboration, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso aim to address these issues more effectively than they could individually.

A central concept in regionalism is economic interdependence, which leads to the creation of mechanisms that facilitate trade, investment, and the free movement of goods and services. By forming a customs union, the three countries are working to create a shared economic space, reducing trade barriers and expanding the regional market. This economic cooperation is vital since these countries depend on agriculture, mining, and trade with neighboring states. The customs union can stimulate economic growth by encouraging trade, attracting investment, and promoting economic diversification. Shared infrastructure projects, like transportation corridors and energy networks, can also contribute to regional development, benefiting all members.

According to regionalism theory, economic interdependence fosters cooperation among neighboring states. For Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, the customs union is a step toward building a more integrated regional economy. The theory suggests that such economic cooperation can drive growth and stability, as countries with common economic interests are likely to gain mutual benefits from shared resources and coordinated policies. Regionalism theory also emphasizes the need for political and security cooperation, particularly in unstable and conflict-prone regions. Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have struggled with political instability and security threats from insurgencies, terrorism, and ethnic conflicts, undermining their capacity to maintain peace independently.

The new customs union may evolve to address these challenges by promoting collective security measures and enhancing political cooperation. By coordinating diplomatic actions and developing common defense strategies, these nations can better respond to external threats and internal conflicts, reducing the risk of further destabilization. Moreover, regional cooperation can create a platform for conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and governance promotion. Regionalism theory posits that regions often form collective security frameworks to tackle shared security issues. By establishing this union, Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso not only address economic concerns but are also likely to collaborate on security matters, especially given the shared threat of terrorism and instability in the Sahel. Their cooperation could bolster regional peace and security, as regional alliances are often better suited to manage local security challenges than external forces.

Regional integration can take place through supranational institutions (where member states delegate some of their sovereignty to a higher authority) or intergovernmentalism (where states maintain full control over their actions but cooperate on specific issues). The nature of the customs union formed by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso may lean toward intergovernmentalism, considering the sensitivity of sovereignty in the context of political instability. However, as the union progresses, supranational elements could emerge, especially in areas such as trade policy, border management, and security cooperation. Initially, the customs union may be intergovernmental, with the three countries retaining significant control over national policies. Over time, as the union proves successful in economic cooperation and conflict resolution, deeper integration and supranational governance may evolve, similar to the European Union's development.

Regionalism theory underscores that regional integration can play a vital role in conflict prevention by establishing mechanisms for dialogue, cooperation, and conflict resolution. Given the political and security challenges in the Sahel, the customs union between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso is a proactive effort to create a framework for peaceful coexistence and stability. By promoting political dialogue, trade cooperation, and security partnerships, the union can reduce the likelihood of conflict within and between these nations. Regionalism theory suggests that collective action within a region can act as a deterrent to conflict and foster peacebuilding. The formation of this customs union can be seen as a response to regional instability, aiming to create a peaceful, integrated space where these countries can resolve differences through cooperation.

Despite the drive for regional cooperation, regionalism theory recognizes the ongoing importance of national sovereignty. The formation of the customs union between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso is likely motivated by national interests, including economic development, security concerns, and the desire to maintain control over their political futures. While the union offers opportunities for collaboration, it is crucial that the countries involved retain autonomy and sovereignty over sensitive national issues. The customs union between Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso reflects the balance between regional cooperation and national sovereignty. These nations are likely to prioritize national interests but also recognize the benefits of working together within a regional framework. Regionalism theory emphasizes that while regional arrangements can foster integration, states are unlikely to fully surrender their sovereignty.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a historical research approach to gain a thorough understanding of the subject. This research design seeks to examined the creation, execution, and outcomes of the new customs union formed by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, with an emphasis on its effects on sub-regional peace and economic growth. Utilizing this historical framework, the study provides significant insights and adds to the broader discussion on regional integration and development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The establishment of the AES marks a significant change in the political and economic landscape of West Africa. Key observations from the study include:

i. **Political Instability and Response to ECOWAS:** The political turmoil in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso between 2020 and 2023, particularly the military coups, strained relations with ECOWAS, resulting in sanctions. In response, these countries formed the AES to create a new cooperative framework that aims to reduce their reliance on external entities and increase their independence in the face of regional instability.

ii. **Economic and Security Cooperation:** The AES aims to promote economic integration by establishing a customs union, which will create a larger regional market, improve trade, and enhance infrastructure. The political cooperation within the AES also targets security issues, such as the growing threat of terrorism and insurgency in the Sahel, through coordinated diplomatic and military efforts.

iii. **Challenges to ECOWAS Integration:** The departure of these countries from ECOWAS underscores the fragmentation of regional unity in West Africa. This move challenges ECOWAS's role as the central body for regional cooperation and peacebuilding, especially in areas such as economic integration and collective security.

2. The implications of the AES for regional peace and economic development are complex and multifaceted:

i. **Impact on Regional Peace:** On the positive side, the formation of the AES could strengthen regional peace by promoting greater political and security cooperation among its member states. The new customs union may provide a platform for addressing shared security issues, like terrorism and cross-border insurgencies, through joint defense and coordinated diplomatic efforts. However, the fragmentation of West Africa's integration, exemplified by the withdrawal from ECOWAS, could create tensions between the AES and ECOWAS members, potentially leading to conflicts in the region.

ii. **Impact on Economic Development:** The AES has the potential to increase regional cooperation, trade, and joint infrastructure projects, which could drive growth and development in the Sahel. By eliminating trade barriers and establishing a common economic area, the AES could address some of the economic challenges faced by these countries, such as poverty and underdevelopment. However, the long-term success of the AES in fostering economic growth will depend on how effectively the member states overcome internal challenges like political instability, corruption, and limited resources.

iii. **Regional Integration and Fragmentation:** While the AES presents an opportunity for its member states to strengthen their regional economic position, it also highlights the tension between national sovereignty and regional integration. Both the AES and ECOWAS will face the challenge of balancing these competing interests and ensuring that regional cooperation does not lead to further fragmentation.

3. The future relationship between the AES and ECOWAS is likely to involve both cooperation and competition:

i. **Potential for Cooperation:** Despite existing tensions and political challenges, there is potential for collaboration between the AES and ECOWAS, particularly in areas like regional security, climate change, and infrastructure development. Since both regional organizations aim to promote peace and economic growth in West Africa, they may find areas for cooperation, especially on issues like transnational terrorism or environmental challenges that go beyond national borders.

ii. **Challenges to a Harmonious Relationship:** The strained relationship between the AES and ECOWAS may persist, particularly as the AES seeks to lessen its reliance on ECOWAS and external influence. The withdrawal of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS could weaken the organization's efforts to maintain unity and coherence in its policies. Additionally, the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS on AES members may continue to hinder efforts to build a cooperative relationship.

iii. **A Divided West Africa:** If the divide between the AES and ECOWAS continues to widen, it could result in a fragmented regional order, with some countries aligning with the AES and others remaining committed to ECOWAS. This fragmentation could reduce the effectiveness of regional integration initiatives and make it harder to address shared issues like security threats, economic inequality, and political instability.

iv. **Role of External Actors:** The involvement of external actors, such as international organizations, foreign governments, and multinational corporations, will play a significant role in shaping the future dynamics between the AES and ECOWAS. Both regional bodies are likely to seek international backing for their initiatives, and external powers may influence the direction of cooperation or rivalry between the two organizations.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined the creation of a new customs union by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, known as the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), and its potential impacts on regional peace and economic development in West Africa. It explored the historical context of regional integration, the political factors leading to the formation of the AES, and the possible consequences for the wider West African region, particularly in relation to the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

The establishment of the AES marks a significant change in the regional dynamics of West Africa, bringing both positive and negative implications for peace and economic development. While the AES could enhance cooperation and foster development within the Sahel, it also presents challenges to the broader framework of regional integration, especially in relation to ECOWAS. The future success of the AES will depend on how effectively it manages internal unity and external relations while balancing national sovereignty with regional cooperation. ECOWAS, in turn, will need to adapt to these new developments and find ways to maintain its relevance in a potentially divided West Africa.

In conclusion, both the AES and ECOWAS must navigate the complexities of regional integration, balancing cooperation with the protection of national interests, and promoting peace, stability, and sustainable development across the West African sub-region. The relationship between these two organizations will ultimately shape the future of regional cooperation in West Africa. Based on the findings of this study, several policy recommendations and strategies have been suggested for the AES member states, ECOWAS, and international stakeholders to enhance regional stability and economic growth in the region.

i. The AES (Alliance of Sahel States) should initiate constructive discussions with ECOWAS and other regional stakeholders to ensure their policies are aligned with the broader goals of West African integration. Such dialogue can help reduce fragmentation, foster mutual understanding, and promote joint initiatives in areas like trade, security, and infrastructure. Prioritizing collaborative projects, particularly in regional security and economic development, is essential to strengthen cooperation and prevent further political divides in West Africa.

ii. The member states of the AES (Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso) should focus on diversifying their economies beyond agriculture and natural resources. Investment should be directed toward developing critical infrastructure, such as transportation networks, energy projects, and communication systems, to support regional trade and improve economic resilience. These initiatives will not only enhance intra-regional trade but also drive broader economic growth, ensuring sustainable development within the AES and the wider region.

iii. To address the security challenges in the Sahel, AES member states must collaborate on regional security efforts and reinforce conflict prevention mechanisms. Coordinated counterterrorism initiatives, better intelligence sharing, and unified military strategies are crucial in combating the rising instability caused by insurgencies and terrorism. Moreover, promoting conflict resolution efforts that tackle the underlying causes of political and social unrest is vital for achieving long-term peace and stability in West Africa.

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