

Rewiring Regional Resilience: The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative and the Geoeconomics of Connectivity in West Africa

Reconfigurer la résilience régionale : l'Initiative Atlantique marocaine et la géoéconomie de la connectivité en Afrique de l'Ouest

Salma BENAIZ
Full Professor, HDR
FSJES Ain Sebâa
Hassan II University of Casablanca - Morocco

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Abstract

In a context of overlapping global crises and reconfigured global value chains, West Africa remains highly vulnerable to external shocks and constrained by structural connectivity deficits. This article analyzes the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative through a geoeconomic and resilience-oriented lens, assessing its capacity to address logistical asymmetries and fragmented regional integration. Moving beyond ideological readings, the Initiative is conceptualized as a pragmatic South–South cooperation model based on the provision of regional public goods. By prioritizing shared infrastructure, energy interdependence, and digital connectivity, the study examines its potential to restructure regional value chains and strengthen collective sovereignty. Drawing on theories of economic resilience, regional public goods, and economic geography, the analysis argues that the Initiative transforms structural vulnerabilities into drivers of adaptive regional integration. It concludes that the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative represents an innovative, infrastructure-led regionalism that complements continental frameworks while advancing Africa's role as an active agent in global economic transformation.

Keywords: Regional resilience; Geoeconomics of connectivity; Infrastructure-led regionalism; South–South cooperation.

Résumé

Dans un contexte de crises globales imbriquées et de reconfiguration des chaînes de valeur mondiales, l'Afrique de l'Ouest reste structurellement vulnérable aux chocs externes et marquée par des déficits persistants de connectivité. Cet article analyse l'Initiative Atlantique marocaine à travers un prisme géoéconomique et de résilience, en évaluant sa capacité à corriger les asymétries logistiques et la fragmentation de l'intégration régionale. S'éloignant des lectures idéologiques, l'étude conçoit l'Initiative comme un modèle pragmatique de coopération Sud–Sud fondé sur la production de biens publics régionaux. En privilégiant les infrastructures partagées, l'interdépendance énergétique et la connectivité numérique, l'analyse montre comment l'Initiative peut reconfigurer les chaînes de valeur régionales et renforcer une souveraineté collective. Elle conclut que l'Initiative Atlantique marocaine incarne un régionalisme innovant, fondé sur les infrastructures, complémentaire aux cadres continentaux et adapté à la diversité des besoins régionaux.

Mots clés: Résilience régionale ; Gééconomie de la connectivité ; Régionalisme fondé sur les infrastructures ; Coopération Sud–Sud.

Introduction

In an era marked by overlapping global crises—ranging from geopolitical tensions and climate volatility to the restructuring of global value chains—Africa finds itself at a crossroads. While the continent holds significant demographic, natural, and strategic assets, its regional economies remain highly vulnerable to external shocks and insufficiently integrated among themselves. Nowhere is this vulnerability more acute than in West Africa, where landlocked states depend heavily on fragile supply routes, and coastal countries grapple with infrastructural bottlenecks and uneven development. In this context, rethinking the continent's connectivity from a South–South perspective has become both a necessity and a strategic opportunity.

It is against this backdrop that His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco launched the Atlantic Initiative in 2023, proposing a transformative model of cooperation among African Atlantic countries. Going beyond traditional development aid or bilateral agreements, the Initiative seeks to reposition the Atlantic as a space of solidarity, co-development, and economic resilience for Africa. By linking landlocked Sahelian countries to the Atlantic Ocean through Moroccan infrastructure and port connectivity, this vision aspires to reconfigure regional logistics, strengthen intra-African trade, and support sovereign development strategies tailored to African realities.

This Initiative is particularly significant in light of the limitations of existing regional frameworks. Despite ambitious continental strategies such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Agenda 2063, many African economies continue to operate within fragmented economic blocs, constrained by logistical, institutional, and geopolitical hurdles. The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative offers a pragmatic alternative—one grounded in actionable infrastructure, sustained diplomatic engagement, and inclusive cooperation. Rather than imposing a one-size-fits-all model, it responds to differentiated regional needs, with particular emphasis on the integration of historically marginalized economies.

This article argues that the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative represents more than a geopolitical ambition; it constitutes a geoeconomic strategy of resilience capable of reshaping development dynamics in West Africa. Drawing on theories of economic resilience, regional public goods, and cooperative logistics, the article analyzes the Initiative's potential to transform structural vulnerabilities into opportunities for collective sovereignty. Special attention is given to its emphasis on inclusive infrastructure—such as the planned Atlantic ports in Dakhla and Nador—as well as its role in enabling energy interdependence (notably through the Nigeria–Morocco gas pipeline) and digital connectivity.

The article is structured into three main sections. The first outlines the structural vulnerabilities and logistical asymmetries that have long constrained West African integration. The second examines the strategic vision and infrastructure framework underpinning the Atlantic Initiative. The third applies conceptual tools from economic geography and regional development to assess how the Initiative functions as a catalyst for regional resilience and value-chain transformation.

In adopting this analytical framework, the article avoids politicization by focusing on socioeconomic outcomes, regional complementarities, and the practical mechanisms of cooperation (Rodrik, 2011; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). Rather than presenting the Initiative as an ideological or unilateral project, it is examined as an innovative and inclusive response to shared challenges, grounded in development pragmatism and regional integration theories (Sachs, 2015; Baldwin, 2016). This approach highlights its potential to reposition Africa not as a passive recipient of globalization, but as a proactive architect of its own future—capable of shaping development trajectories through endogenous strategies and cooperative governance frameworks (Adebajo, 2013; Moyo, 2018).

1. Structural Vulnerabilities and Logistical Asymmetries in West Africa

1.1. Structural Exposure to External Shocks and Global Value Chain Dependence

West African economies remain structurally exposed to external shocks as a result of long-standing patterns of integration into the global economy. Despite episodes of sustained growth and macroeconomic stabilization over the past two decades, the region continues to exhibit a narrow productive base, strong dependence on primary commodities, and limited participation in higher value-added segments of global value chains. This configuration renders economic performance highly sensitive to fluctuations in international prices, shifts in global demand, and disruptions in transnational logistics networks.

Recent global developments have intensified these vulnerabilities. The convergence of climate-induced shocks, geopolitical fragmentation, and the reorganization of global value chains in the post-pandemic era has revealed the fragility of development models reliant on distant markets and external supply routes. As Rodrik (2011) argues, deep economic integration without adequate domestic and regional buffers tends to amplify exposure to volatility rather than mitigate it. In the West African context, this dynamic is particularly pronounced given the limited scope for countercyclical policies and the structural constraints facing domestic industrial upgrading.

Moreover, the region's position within global value chains is characterized by functional specialization that prioritizes extraction and export of raw materials over manufacturing, logistics, and knowledge-intensive activities. This pattern restricts learning effects, weakens backward and forward linkages, and constrains the emergence of resilient production ecosystems (Gereffi, 2018). Consequently, external shocks are not merely episodic disruptions but recurring stressors embedded in the architecture of regional economies.

1.2. Internal Fragmentation and Persistent Infrastructural Deficits

Beyond external dependence, internal fragmentation constitutes a central obstacle to economic integration in West Africa. The region displays pronounced spatial and structural asymmetries, particularly between landlocked and coastal countries. Landlocked states face disproportionately high transport costs, prolonged transit times, and dependence on a limited number of corridors that are often vulnerable to political instability, security risks, and infrastructural deterioration. Coastal economies, while benefiting from maritime access, frequently confront port congestion, inadequate hinterland connectivity, and uneven territorial development.

These asymmetries are rooted in historical infrastructure patterns largely inherited from the colonial period, which prioritized outward-oriented trade with extra-regional partners rather than intra-regional connectivity. As a result, transport networks remain poorly interconnected, with limited multimodal integration and weak cross-border coordination. According to Estache and Fay (2019), such infrastructural fragmentation significantly raises transaction costs, reduces economies of scale, and undermines regional competitiveness, even in contexts where formal trade barriers have been reduced.

Institutional factors further exacerbate these physical constraints. Divergent regulatory frameworks, customs procedures, and investment regimes continue to impede the fluid movement of goods and services across borders. While regional economic communities have pursued policy harmonization, implementation gaps persist, particularly in logistics governance and infrastructure financing. The cumulative effect is a region that operates less as an integrated economic space than as a collection of loosely connected national markets, despite geographic proximity and evident complementarities.

1.3. The Structural Limits of Existing Integration Frameworks

Continental and regional integration initiatives have articulated ambitious visions for Africa's economic transformation, emphasizing market integration, industrialization, and shared prosperity. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks has been uneven, particularly in

regions confronting compounded vulnerabilities related to geography, security, and fiscal capacity. In West Africa, the gap between strategic commitments and material implementation remains substantial.

A key limitation lies in the tendency of existing frameworks to privilege regulatory and trade liberalization measures over the physical foundations of integration. While tariff reduction and policy harmonization are necessary components of integration, they are insufficient in the absence of reliable transport corridors, logistics platforms, and energy connectivity capable of supporting increased economic flows (Collier & Venables, 2009). As Baldwin (2016) notes, connectivity—not merely openness—has become the decisive factor in determining participation in contemporary value chains.

Furthermore, standardized integration models often fail to accommodate differentiated regional needs. Landlocked economies, fragile states, and peripheral regions frequently remain marginal to integration processes, reinforcing spatial inequalities rather than correcting them. This has generated growing recognition of the need for complementary approaches that combine continental ambitions with targeted, pragmatic initiatives focused on infrastructure, resilience, and regional public goods.

In this perspective, West Africa's vulnerabilities cannot be reduced to a deficit of coordination or political will alone. They reflect deeper structural challenges embedded in geography, infrastructure, and historical patterns of economic insertion. Addressing these challenges requires approaches that move beyond abstract integration goals toward concrete mechanisms capable of rebalancing connectivity, reducing exposure to external shocks, and enabling more inclusive regional development trajectories.

2. The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative: Strategic Vision and Infrastructure Architecture

2.1. Genesis and Strategic Rationale of the Atlantic Initiative

The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative emerged in 2023 within a context of heightened awareness regarding Africa's structural exposure to global disruptions and the persistent limits of existing regional integration mechanisms. Rather than constituting a rupture with prevailing continental strategies, the Initiative can be understood as a complementary and operational response to long-standing connectivity deficits in West Africa. Its strategic rationale lies in reimagining the Atlantic not merely as a maritime boundary, but as an economic and logistical interface capable of supporting intra-African integration and collective resilience.

At its core, the Initiative reflects a shift from aid-centered cooperation toward a partnership model grounded in shared infrastructure, mutual dependence, and long-term strategic

alignment. This approach resonates with contemporary development literature emphasizing the importance of regional public goods and collective action in overcoming structural constraints faced by fragmented economies (Kanbur, 2015). By focusing on connectivity rather than conditionality, the Initiative seeks to create enabling conditions for endogenous development pathways tailored to regional realities.

Importantly, the Initiative is framed as inclusive and differentiated, explicitly addressing the needs of landlocked Sahelian countries whose economic prospects are constrained by geographic isolation. In this respect, it aligns with economic geography perspectives that stress the centrality of access, distance, and spatial integration in shaping development outcomes (Krugman, 1991 ; Venables, 2020). The Atlantic Initiative thus situates infrastructure not as an auxiliary policy instrument, but as a foundational element of regional economic transformation.

2.2. Infrastructure as a Regional Public Good

A defining feature of the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative is its emphasis on large-scale, multi-purpose infrastructure conceived as a regional public good. Central to this architecture is the development and upgrading of Atlantic port infrastructure, notably in Dakhla and Nador, alongside associated logistics corridors linking coastal hubs to hinterland economies. These investments are designed not only to expand capacity, but to reconfigure regional trade routes and reduce dependence on fragile and congested corridors.

From an analytical standpoint, such infrastructure plays a dual role. First, it lowers transaction costs by reducing transport times, improving reliability, and facilitating scale economies. Second, it generates positive externalities that extend beyond national borders, enhancing regional connectivity and competitiveness (Estache & Fay, 2019). This aligns with the argument advanced by Collier (2007) that infrastructure investments are particularly critical for landlocked and resource-dependent economies, where high logistics costs function as binding constraints on growth.

Unlike traditional corridor-based approaches that often reinforce existing asymmetries, the Atlantic Initiative seeks to rebalance spatial integration by anchoring connectivity in stable and scalable maritime gateways. By doing so, it aims to transform Morocco's Atlantic façade into a platform for shared access rather than exclusive advantage. This cooperative framing is essential to mitigating concerns related to uneven gains and ensuring broad-based participation in emerging trade and production networks.

2.3. Energy, Digital, and Strategic Interdependence

Beyond transport and logistics, the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative encompasses a broader vision of functional interdependence in energy and digital infrastructure. The proposed Nigeria–Morocco gas pipeline represents a cornerstone of this strategy, with implications extending beyond energy supply to industrial development, regional integration, and energy security. From a regional resilience perspective, shared energy infrastructure reduces vulnerability to external shocks by diversifying supply sources and fostering long-term interdependence (IEA, 2021).

Energy connectivity also plays a critical role in enabling industrial upgrading and value chain development, particularly in energy-intensive sectors. By facilitating access to reliable and affordable energy, the Initiative addresses one of the most persistent structural bottlenecks facing West African economies. In this sense, energy infrastructure functions as both an economic enabler and a geopolitical stabilizer, reinforcing incentives for cooperation over competition.

Digital connectivity constitutes a complementary pillar of the Initiative's architecture. Enhanced digital infrastructure supports trade facilitation, logistics coordination, and the integration of small and medium-sized enterprises into regional markets. As Baldwin (2016) emphasizes, digitalization has become a decisive factor in shaping participation in modern value chains, often compensating for physical distance and infrastructural gaps. The integration of digital networks within the Atlantic Initiative thus reflects an understanding of connectivity as a multidimensional process, encompassing physical, energy, and informational flows.

2.4. Pragmatism, Differentiation, and Cooperative Governance

A further distinctive feature of the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative lies in its pragmatic and adaptive governance approach. Rather than advancing a uniform integration model, the Initiative acknowledges differentiated regional needs and varying levels of institutional capacity. This flexibility is consistent with contemporary critiques of one-size-fits-all regionalism and aligns with arguments favoring modular and context-sensitive integration pathways (Rodrik, 2011 ; Pritchett et al., 2017).

Cooperation under the Initiative is structured around gradual engagement, project-based collaboration, and diplomatic dialogue, allowing participating countries to align commitments with domestic priorities and constraints. Such an approach reduces coordination failures and enhances ownership, both of which are critical for the sustainability of regional initiatives. By

embedding infrastructure projects within broader frameworks of diplomatic and economic cooperation, the Initiative seeks to align incentives and minimize free-rider risks.

In analytical terms, the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative can thus be interpreted as an experiment in cooperative geoeconomics—one that leverages infrastructure to foster interdependence, resilience, and collective agency. Its strategic architecture reflects an understanding that durable integration emerges not from formal agreements alone, but from shared assets, mutual benefits, and institutional learning over time.

3. The Atlantic Initiative as a Geoeconomic Strategy of Regional Resilience

3.1. Conceptualizing Regional Resilience and Collective Sovereignty

In recent development literature, resilience has increasingly been conceptualized not merely as the capacity to absorb shocks, but as the ability of economic systems to adapt, reconfigure, and transform in response to structural disruptions (Martin & Sunley, 2015). Applied to the regional scale, this perspective shifts the analytical focus from short-term stability toward long-term adaptive capacity, institutional learning, and strategic autonomy. Within this framework, the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative can be interpreted as an attempt to operationalize regional resilience through shared infrastructure and cooperative governance.

West Africa's vulnerability to external shocks is not solely the result of exposure to global volatility, but also of limited control over the infrastructures and nodes that structure trade, energy, and information flows. As such, resilience cannot be achieved exclusively through national policies; it requires collective mechanisms capable of reducing systemic dependencies. The Atlantic Initiative addresses this challenge by proposing a model of collective sovereignty grounded in access, connectivity, and shared assets rather than territorial control alone. This conception aligns with emerging approaches that view sovereignty as relational and functional, particularly in regions characterized by economic interdependence (Graz & Nölke, 2012).

By anchoring resilience in regional public goods—ports, corridors, energy networks, and digital infrastructure—the Initiative seeks to transform vulnerability into a source of leverage. Rather than insulating economies from globalization, it aims to reinsert them into global and regional value chains on more balanced and resilient terms.

3.2. Reconfiguring Value Chains and Trade Dynamics

A central implication of the Atlantic Initiative lies in its potential to reshape regional value chains by reducing logistical frictions and improving market access for previously marginalized economies. High transport costs, unreliable transit routes, and fragmented logistics systems have long constrained West Africa's participation in intra-African trade and limited

opportunities for industrial upgrading. By addressing these constraints, the Initiative creates conditions for deeper regional production networks and more diversified trade patterns.

Economic geography research underscores the importance of connectivity in enabling agglomeration effects, scale economies, and knowledge spillovers (Venables, 2020). Improved access to Atlantic ports through stable corridors can alter firm location decisions, encourage investment in processing and manufacturing activities, and strengthen backward linkages with local suppliers. Over time, such dynamics may support a gradual shift from extractive specialization toward more complex and resilient value chains.

Importantly, the Initiative's geoeconomic logic does not rest on immediate trade expansion alone, but on the cumulative effects of reduced uncertainty and improved coordination. By lowering logistical risks and enhancing predictability, shared infrastructure can facilitate long-term investment decisions and foster trust among regional actors. In this sense, the Atlantic Initiative functions less as a trade policy instrument than as a structural enabler of regional economic transformation.

3.3. Inclusivity, Differentiation, and Long-Term Transformation

A distinguishing feature of the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative is its explicit attention to inclusivity and differentiated integration. Rather than assuming uniform capacities and interests among participating countries, the Initiative recognizes the heterogeneity of West African economies and seeks to accommodate diverse development trajectories. This approach resonates with critiques of linear integration models and supports a more flexible, layered understanding of regionalism (Hettne & Söderbaum, 2000).

Landlocked countries, fragile economies, and peripheral regions stand to benefit disproportionately from improved access and reduced isolation. However, inclusivity is not automatic; it depends on governance arrangements, complementary policies, and sustained cooperation. The Initiative's emphasis on diplomatic engagement and gradual project-based collaboration reflects an awareness of these risks and an attempt to align infrastructure development with institutional capacity-building.

From a long term perspective, the Atlantic Initiative may contribute to a rebalancing of development dynamics in West Africa by embedding resilience into the region's economic architecture. Its transformative potential lies not in replacing existing continental frameworks, but in complementing them with concrete mechanisms that translate strategic visions into material connectivity. In doing so, it offers a model of South–South cooperation grounded in pragmatism, mutual benefit, and shared agency.

Conclusion

This article set out to examine the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative through a geoeconomic and resilience-oriented lens, situating it within the broader context of West Africa's structural vulnerabilities and persistent connectivity deficits. Rather than approaching the Initiative as a geopolitical posture or a symbolic diplomatic project, the analysis has emphasized its material foundations, strategic logic, and potential contribution to reshaping regional development dynamics. In doing so, the article contributes to ongoing debates on regional integration by foregrounding infrastructure, access, and interdependence as central determinants of economic resilience.

The findings suggest that West Africa's exposure to global shocks is not merely a function of external volatility, but is deeply embedded in historical patterns of infrastructure, geography, and asymmetric integration into global value chains. Existing regional frameworks, while normatively ambitious, have struggled to translate integration objectives into tangible connectivity and inclusive growth. Against this backdrop, the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative emerges as a complementary and pragmatic response, grounded in the provision of regional public goods and differentiated cooperation rather than uniform integration template.

By reconfiguring access to Atlantic maritime routes, enhancing energy and digital interdependence, and prioritizing logistics reliability, the Initiative holds the potential to transform structural constraints into levers of collective agency. Its geoeconomic significance lies less in immediate trade gains than in its capacity to reduce uncertainty, foster investment, and enable more resilient and diversified regional value chains over time. In this respect, the Initiative contributes to an evolving understanding of sovereignty—not as isolation from global markets, but as the ability to engage with them on more balanced and adaptive terms.

From a theoretical standpoint, the article underscores the relevance of resilience-oriented approaches to regional development, particularly in contexts marked by fragmentation and vulnerability. It also highlights the importance of viewing infrastructure not merely as a technical input, but as an institutional and political economy construct capable of reshaping incentives, spatial relations, and governance practices. The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative thus offers a valuable case for rethinking South–South cooperation beyond traditional aid paradigms, emphasizing mutual dependence, shared assets, and long-term strategic alignment. At the same time, the analysis recognizes that the Initiative's transformative potential is neither automatic nor guaranteed. Its success will depend on sustained political commitment, inclusive governance arrangements, and the alignment of infrastructure development with domestic

policy reforms and institutional capacity. Future research would benefit from empirical assessment as project mature, including the measurement of trade flows, investment patterns, and distributional outcomes across participating countries. Comparative analysis with other connectivity initiatives may further enrich understanding of the conditions under which infrastructure-led regionalism fosters resilience rather than reinforcing existing asymmetries. Ultimately, the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative invites a broader reflection on Africa's place in a rapidly changing global economy. By anchoring regional integration in concrete connectivity and cooperative pragmatism, it points toward an alternative development trajectory—one in which Africa is not positioned as a passive recipient of globalization, but as an active architect of its own regional and global engagement.

Policy Implications

The analysis of the Moroccan Atlantic Initiative yields several policy-relevant insights for regional development strategies in West Africa and beyond. These implications do not advocate a single institutional model, but rather identify conditions under which infrastructure-led regional cooperation can enhance resilience, inclusivity, and long-term economic transformation.

First, infrastructure should be approached as a regional public goods rather than a purely national asset. The Initiative underscores the importance of designing ports, corridors, and energy networks with transnational spillovers in mind. For policymakers, this implies prioritizing governance arrangements, financing mechanisms, and maintenance frameworks that reflect shared ownership and collective benefit. Regional coordination around infrastructure planning can significantly reduce duplication, improve efficiency, and mitigate the risk of uneven spatial development.

Second, connectivity policies should explicitly address differentiated regional vulnerabilities. Landlocked and peripheral economies face structurally higher logistics costs and greater exposure to external shocks. Policy frameworks that incorporate differentiated access mechanisms, such as guaranteed transit, harmonized customs procedures, and targeted corridor investments; are more likely to generate inclusive outcomes. The Atlantic Initiative illustrates how tailored connectivity can function as a compensatory mechanism rather than reinforcing existing asymmetries.

Third, energy and digital interdependence must be integrated into regional resilience strategies. Shared energy infrastructure, including cross-border pipelines and renewable energy platforms, can enhance security of supply while supporting industrial upgrading. Similarly, investments

in digital connectivity are essential for reducing transaction cost, improving logistics coordination, and enabling the participation of small and medium-sized enterprises in regional markets. Policymakers should therefore consider infrastructure as a multidimensional system rather than a sector-specific intervention.

Fourth, pragmatic and flexible governance arrangements are critical to sustaining cooperation. The Initiative highlights the value of gradual, project-based collaboration over rigid institutional harmonization. Adaptive governance structures—capable of accommodating varying capacities and political constraints—can enhance ownership and reduce coordination failures. This approach is particularly relevant in regions characterized by heterogeneity and institutional fragmentation.

Finally, infrastructure-led regionalism should complement, not substitute, existing continental frameworks. The Moroccan Atlantic Initiative demonstrates how targeted connectivity initiatives can operationalize broader integration objectives by translating strategic visions into tangible economic linkages. For policymakers, the key lesson lies in aligning continental ambitions with implementable projects that generate visible and shared benefits, thereby strengthening the credibility and durability of regional integration efforts.

Taken together, these implications suggest that resilience-oriented regional development requires a shift from abstract integration commitments toward concrete mechanisms that embed cooperation in shared assets and mutual dependence. In this respect, the Atlantic Initiative offers insights that extend beyond the West African context, contributing to broader policy debates on South–South cooperation, infrastructure governance, and adaptive regionalism in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

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