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Paradiplomacy Capacity of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government in Optimizing Regional Economic Connectivity

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the paradiplomacy capacity of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government in optimizing regional economic connectivity. In the context of globalization and regional integration, paradiplomacy has become a crucial instrument for subnational governments to expand cross-border cooperation and enhance economic competitiveness. The main issue addressed concerns the extent to which the institutional, regulatory, and resource capacities of the Riau Islands Government are able to support subregional economic diplomacy within the framework of the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). This research employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, utilizing policy document analysis, in-depth interviews, and secondary data from relevant institutions. The findings indicate that paradiplomacy practices in the Riau Islands have significantly contributed to increasing foreign investment, exports, and strengthening cross-border logistics networks. Furthermore, collaboration among local governments and the private sector has fostered the development of halal tourism, the creative economy, and the digitalization of regional connectivity. However, challenges remain, particularly in legal harmonization and inter-agency coordination. This study concludes that enhancing institutional capacity and human resources is essential for the success of subnational paradiplomacy in strengthening regional economic connectivity and achieving inclusive and sustainable growth.

Introduction

In the context of economic globalization and increasingly complex regional integration dynamics, subnational governments are required to develop adaptive capacities to engage more actively in cross-border cooperation (Aguirre, 1999; Aldecoa & Keating, 2013). The evolution of paradiplomacy reflects a shift in the role of local governments from mere implementers of national policies to subnational actors capable of independently conducting international relations (Fathun, 2021; Jackson, 2018). Through this approach, regions can optimize their economic, social, and cultural potential by advancing economic diplomacy aimed at improving public welfare (Liu & Song, 2020; Paquin, 2020). The Kepulauan Riau Province, given its strategic location along the international shipping lane of the Malacca Strait, holds significant opportunities to expand regional economic networks through the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). However, these opportunities have not been fully realized due to limited institutional capacity and the absence of an integrated regional diplomatic strategy.

The core research problem lies in the disparity between the region's strategic potential and the local government's capacity to effectively manage international cooperation. Despite the availability of relatively advanced port infrastructure, industrial zones, and special economic zones, the contribution of cross-border economic activities remains suboptimal. Key constraints include weak inter-agency coordination, limited human resources with diplomatic expertise, and insufficient regulatory harmonization. Furthermore, existing paradiplomatic practices tend to be ceremonial rather than outcome-oriented (Novialdi et al., 2022; Surwandono, 2018). This condition highlights the urgent need to strengthen institutional, regulatory, and human resource capacities to optimize regional economic connectivity.

Based on these conditions, this study addresses a research gap by focusing on the comprehensive strengthening of subnational paradiplomacy capacity, particularly in the context of the Kepulauan Riau, which remains underexplored as a subnational actor within the IMT-GT framework. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize normative aspects or general constraints of paradiplomacy, this research concentrates on identifying operational capacity dimensions namely institutional, regulatory, and human resource components and their relevance to enhancing cross-border economic connectivity. Accordingly, the main contribution of this study lies in formulating a model for strengthening paradiplomacy that is aligned with the strategic characteristics of an archipelagic region, while also providing both conceptual and practical foundations for developing more effective and outcome-oriented subnational economic diplomacy policies.

Table 1. Summary of the Linkages between Paradiplomacy and Regional Economic Connectivity

Analytical Aspect	Main Focus	Implications for the Kepulauan Riau
Institutional	Coordination structures across governance levels	Strengthening the region's position in the IMT-GT forum
Regulatory	Harmonization of central and local policies	Ensuring legal certainty in cross-border cooperation
Human Resources	Diplomatic and international management skills	Enhancing the effectiveness of economic negotiations
Economic Connectivity	Cross-border infrastructure and logistics	Expanding trade and investment flows

Source: Processed by the author, 2025

The research question is articulated as follows: to what extent do the institutional, regulatory, and resource capacities of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government facilitate the implementation of paradiplomacy in promoting regional economic connectivity? This question provides the foundation for organizing the analytical framework and guiding the interpretation of empirical findings. The study concentrates on assessing the capability of the local government to act as an active participant within subregional cooperation networks, as well as examining the strategies employed to address existing structural limitations.

The overarching objective of this study is to examine the paradiplomacy capacity of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government in enhancing regional economic connectivity. More specifically, the study seeks to: first, identify both internal and external determinants that influence the performance of subnational paradiplomacy; second, assess the effectiveness of institutional arrangements and inter-actor coordination in the implementation of IMT-GT cooperation; and third, develop strategic recommendations for strengthening paradiplomacy capacity grounded in productive economic approaches. These objectives are intended to contribute to the advancement of scholarly discourse on subnational international relations policy in Indonesia.

Method

This study was carried out over a four-month period, from August to November 2025, with primary research locations in Kepulauan Riau Province, specifically Batam, Bintan, and Karimun, which are directly integrated into the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) cooperation framework. These locations were selected based on their strategic relevance as key nodes of regional economic connectivity in western Indonesia. Data collection was conducted through in-depth interviews, field observations, and document analysis of regional policies and international cooperation agreements. The interviews involved a total of 15 key informants, comprising government officials from the Bureau of Governance and Cooperation (4 persons), the Regional Investment Agency (3 persons), the Batam Indonesia Free Zone Authority (3 persons), cross-border business actors (3 persons), and academics with expertise in IMT-GT cooperation (2 persons). The research process included several stages: instrument design, field data collection, data processing, and the preparation of the final report.

The research materials consisted of a range of policy documents, including the Regional Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMD) of Kepulauan Riau Province 2021–2026, memoranda of understanding related to international cooperation, and annual IMT-GT reports published by the Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation (CIMT). Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that participants possessed direct knowledge and involvement in subnational paradiplomacy practices. Secondary data were gathered from national and international institutions, including Statistics Indonesia (BPS), the ASEAN Secretariat, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), to support comparative analysis and strengthen empirical interpretation.

Data analysis was conducted using a qualitative content analysis approach aimed at identifying key themes related to the paradiplomacy capacity of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government. The analytical procedure involved systematic data reduction, thematic coding, categorization, and interpretation based on indicators of institutional, regulatory, and human resource capacity. To enhance analytical rigor, the coding process was conducted iteratively, allowing for refinement of categories and validation of emerging patterns. The validity and reliability of the findings were ensured through triangulation of both sources and methods, including cross-verification of interview data, observational evidence, and policy documents. In addition, member checking was conducted with selected informants to confirm the accuracy of interp10.59066/ijoms.v5i1.2299retations, while peer debriefing was employed to minimize researcher bias. The findings derived from this analytical process were subsequently used to address the research question regarding how the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government manages and strengthens paradiplomacy to support regional economic connectivity through policy frameworks, institutional arrangements, and cross-border multi-actor collaboration.

Results and Discussion

1. Subregional Economic Integration and Inclusive Growth

The execution of the Implementation Blueprint (IB) 2022–2026 under the Indonesia Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) framework demonstrates that subregional economic integration strategies have been directed toward strengthening cross-border connectivity and accelerating inclusive growth across western Indonesia, southern Thailand, and Peninsular Malaysia. Through a corridor-centric integration approach, development priorities are concentrated on six economic corridors linking production centers with logistics networks, ports, and strategic industrial zones. This initiative is intended to establish linkages between high-income areas and less-developed regions along border areas. Consequently, economic growth is not confined to the macro-national level but extends to local communities, enhancing competitiveness and generating new employment opportunities. Analytical findings indicate that real GDP growth in this subregion averaged approximately 5 percent annually during 2021–2023, aligning with projections of the ASEAN Economic Community.

The implementation of economic integration within IMT-GT is reinforced by a shared commitment to strengthening intra-subregional trade and increasing foreign direct investment (FDI) flows. The three participating countries have agreed upon a single-window trade facilitation mechanism that simplifies export–import procedures, reduces logistics costs, and expedites cargo movement at major ports such as Belawan, Songkhla, and Penang. Data from ASEAN Secretariat (2023) reveal that intra-IMT trade rose from US$ 212 billion in 2020 to US$ 274 billion in 2023, reflecting a substantial post-pandemic recovery. This growth has been influenced by tariff reductions, the expansion of digital trade platforms, and regional banking support for cross-currency transactions. Through this integration, the IMT-GT subregion has successfully expanded its regional production network and strengthened its position as an epicentrum of growth in Southeast Asia.

From an investment perspective, subregional cooperation places the private sector as the primary driver of economic development. The Joint Business Council (JBC) plays a strategic role in identifying priority projects, fostering cross-border partnerships, and bridging business interests with government policies. During the 2023 JBC forum in Batam, several initiatives were agreed upon, including the development of the IMT-GT Digital Mall (X-Space) as a cross-border marketing platform, the Green City Action Plan program in Malaysia, and renewable energy projects at the Andaman Gateway in Thailand. Private sector participation not only enhances financing efficiency but also reinforces the public–private partnership (PPP) principle underpinning the IB 2022–2026 implementation. Accordingly, investments in the region are directed toward generating sustainable and inclusive value creation.

The success of economic integration is also reflected in the strengthened role of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) within regional value chains. Supported by ASEAN Single Window and IMT-GT Connect, thousands of MSMEs in Sumatra, Kedah, and Trang Province have gained access to cross-border markets with significantly reduced transaction costs. Entrepreneurial training, digital capacity building, and logistics assistance constitute essential components in broadening local participation. These developments have resulted in more equitable growth patterns, as the digital economy provides equal opportunities for business actors in previously isolated border regions. This inclusivity reinforces socio-economic foundations and reduces regional disparities.

Table 2. Growth of Trade and Investment in IMT-GT 2019–2023

Year	Intra-IMT Trade (US$ Billion)	FDI Inflows (US$ Billion)	Growth (%)
2019	166.1	119.8	-3.2
2020	212.4	224.2	4.1
2021	240.5	254.8	6.7
2022	258.0	275.3	7.2
2023	274.6	290.0	7.4

Source: compiled by the researcher, 2025

The increase in trade and investment has been accompanied by notable improvements in social welfare indicators. Data from the IMT-GT Implementation Blueprint show that subregional GDP per capita grew at an average rate of 5.2 percent annually, while poverty levels declined by approximately 2 percentage points since 2020. These outcomes are largely attributable to the synergy of fiscal policies, investment deregulation, and the expansion of transportation and communication infrastructure linking emerging economic centers. The Economic Corridor 6 program, encompassing Johor, Pahang, and Terengganu, has also generated multiplier effects on trade volumes in consumer goods, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors.

Field observations indicate that the economic corridors function not only as trade routes but also as instruments for development equity. Cities such as Medan, Padang, Songkhla, and Langkawi have experienced increased economic activity, particularly in service industries, halal food production, and agro-industrial sectors. Rising investment flows have directly contributed to job creation, especially in logistics, port operations, and retail trade. This approach highlights that IMT-GT prioritizes not only economic efficiency but also social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

A key innovation supporting this integration is the implementation of a results-based monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system. Under this framework, project performance is assessed based on tangible outputs and societal impacts rather than budget realization alone. Evaluation results in 2023 indicate that more than 70 percent of priority projects achieved their key performance indicators on schedule. This mechanism enhances transparency, strengthens institutional accountability, and enables continuous policy refinement. Consequently, IMT-GT cooperation serves as an example of adaptive and effective subregional governance.

Further analysis reveals an increasing level of local government participation in cross-border policy formulation. The Chief Ministers and Governors' Forum (CMGF) functions as a coordination platform for aligning regional development priorities between national and local levels. Key agendas discussed include connectivity, digital trade, and empowerment of border communities. This intergovernmental synergy accelerates the resolution of bureaucratic constraints and reinforces ownership of development programs, reflecting a shift from a top-down approach toward participatory regional governance.

The integration of macroeconomic policies, local participation, and private sector engagement produces a synergistic effect on subregional competitiveness. Value chains among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand are increasingly interconnected through the exchange of raw materials, intermediate goods, and supporting services. Halal food, tourism, and automotive industries have emerged as leading sectors benefiting from this cross-border production structure. With the growing role of creative and digital economies, the IMT-GT subregion holds strong potential to become a resilient development model capable of sustaining growth through 2036.

Overall, the findings confirm that IMT-GT economic integration has established a more robust, inclusive, and adaptive growth structure. The combination of coordinated policies, digital innovation, and local empowerment constitutes a key success factor distinguishing IMT-GT from other subregional cooperation frameworks in Asia. Future challenges include expanding cross-border financing schemes, harmonizing technical standards, and strengthening institutional capacity to ensure more efficient and sustainable integration.

2. Digital Transformation and Green Economy

Digital transformation represents a central pillar in the Implementation Blueprint (IB) 2022–2026, positioning information technology as a primary driver of economic integration and competitiveness within the IMT-GT subregion. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have jointly established a Working Group on Digital Transformation to accelerate the digitalization of public services, cross-border trade transactions, and integrated electronic payment systems. This approach emphasizes not only efficiency but also equitable access, ensuring that border communities benefit directly from digital connectivity. Through the adoption of technologies such as cloud-based trade facilitation, blockchain for halal

Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Sciences (IJoMS)
Vol. 5 No. 1 2026, 66-76

certification, and fintech inclusion, IMT-GT is being developed into a data-driven, transparent, and inclusive economic region.

Cross-border trade digitalization has been implemented through ASEAN Single Window and Electronic Form-D systems, reducing export–import document processing time by up to 40 percent compared to conventional methods. Simultaneously, IMT-GT Connect and the X-Space Digital Mall have been launched as online trading platforms connecting MSMEs in Batam, Medan, Padang, Langkawi, and Hat Yai. Batam functions as Indonesia's digital logistics hub due to its status as a free trade zone and information technology center. Supported by modern port infrastructure and regional data centers, Batam serves as a gateway integrating physical and digital economic systems in western Indonesia.

Digital innovation in Batam aligns with the smart city development agenda through collaboration among BP Batam, CIMT, and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). This initiative integrates public services, transportation, energy, and waste management into a unified Internet of Things (IoT)-based system. Batam thus serves as a pilot model for green-digital urban development in Indonesia. The implementation of smart grids, e-government, and sensor-based emission monitoring systems demonstrates that technological innovation can simultaneously reduce operational costs and enhance governance transparency.

Digital transformation is further integrated with sustainable development through the Urban-Act Transboundary Project led by UNESCAP and GIZ in collaboration with CIMT. This program focuses on strengthening institutional frameworks for climate action and enhancing the capacity of IMT-GT cities to adopt low-carbon development principles. Four pilot cities—Medan, Padang, Batam, and Phuket—represent diverse geographical and economic characteristics, functioning as experimental platforms for evidence-based urban planning aimed at reducing carbon emissions and increasing public participation.

Table 3. Impact Indicators of the Urban-Act Program in IMT-GT Region

Pilot City	Emission Reduction (Ton CO_2/year)	Recycling Capacity (Ton)	Citizen Participation (%)
Medan	8,500	1,200	74
Padang	6,200	950	68
Batam	9,300	1,500	77
Phuket	7,800	1,100	71

Source: compiled by the researcher, 2025

The program's outcomes indicate that Batam reduced carbon emissions by 9,300 tons of CO_2 annually through solar-based energy systems and green container terminal operations at Batu Ampar Port. Recycling capacity increased to 1,500 tons of solid waste per year through the development of material recovery facilities. Public participation reached 77 percent, the highest among pilot cities, demonstrating the effectiveness of digital environmental applications in raising awareness of sustainability issues.

The integration of Batam into the IMT-GT green-digital network has accelerated renewable energy adoption and resource efficiency innovations. Industrial zones such as Batamindo have implemented smart energy management systems capable of real-time monitoring, reducing energy waste by up to 12 percent annually. This reflects cross-border knowledge transfer derived from Green City Action Plans in Malaysia and Thailand, highlighting the collaborative nature of IMT-GT.

The synergy between digital transformation and the green economy establishes a framework of sustainable digital connectivity, integrating physical and digital infrastructure. The Batam–Penang–Songkhla maritime corridor is now equipped with digital tracking systems that reduce cargo loss and shorten transit time by approximately 20 percent. Smart port systems enable emission monitoring and automated waste control, forming the basis of low-carbon economic integration and supporting a sustainable blue economy.

Empirical analysis for 2023 indicates that digital-green initiatives yield both economic efficiency and social benefits. Industrial energy savings reached 10 percent, while logistics costs decreased by 15 percent in Batam, Medan, and Padang. Additionally, cross-border innovation ecosystems have emerged through collaborative research between universities and technology centers. For instance, Universitas Riau and Universiti Sains Malaysia have partnered on green blockchain research for regional carbon trade certification. These initiatives also contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 8 (decent work), Goal 9 (industry and innovation), and Goal 13 (climate action). Batam exemplifies how an industrial port city can transition into a smart green city without compromising economic productivity. In summary, the integration of digital transformation and the green economy within IMT-GT, with Batam as a primary model, has fostered a more efficient, inclusive, and resilient subregional economy.

3. Paradiplomacy Capacity of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government in Optimizing Regional Economic Connectivity

Paradiplomacy has become a crucial instrument in strengthening the position of Kepulauan Riau Province as a strategic hub for economic connectivity in western Indonesia. As an archipelagic province bordering Malaysia and Singapore, Kepulauan Riau possesses significant geopolitical relevance within the IMT-GT framework. Through paradiplomatic strategies, the provincial government expands its economic diplomacy beyond central government channels by establishing cross-border cooperation in trade, investment, and maritime transport.

The paradiplomatic capacity of the Kepulauan Riau Government is demonstrated through active participation in subregional forums such as the CMGF and JBC. Within these platforms, Kepulauan Riau consistently promotes port connectivity, maritime tourism development, and industrial investment expansion. Research findings indicate that strengthened paradiplomacy capacity correlates with increased cross-border trade and investment flows over the past five years. Batam, Bintan, and Karimun have recorded the highest investment growth outside Java, averaging 7.1 percent annually since 2019.

Table 4. Regional Economic Connectivity Indicators in Kepulauan Riau (2019–2024)

Key Indicator	2019	2021	2023	2024	Growth (%)
Export Value (US$ Billion)	12.6	14.3	16.9	18.5	7.2
Foreign Investment (US$ Billion)	3.8	4.6	5.9	6.3	8.1

Sea Cargo Volume (Million Tons)	26.4	29.7	33.1	35.0	6.1
International Ship Visits	19,280	20,770	22,980	24,100	5.3

Source: Kepulauan Riau Provincial Transportation Office (2024), processed by the researcher

These data confirm that economic paradiplomacy has significantly enhanced regional connectivity and logistics performance. Strategies implemented include infrastructure diplomacy, trade diplomacy, and investment diplomacy. Institutionally, Kepulauan Riau has established a Foreign Cooperation Desk under the Bureau of Governance and Cooperation, ensuring alignment between local initiatives and national foreign policy frameworks. Collaboration among government, private sector, and civil society further strengthens paradiplomatic effectiveness. Partnerships with KADIN and Johor Chamber of Commerce have resulted in projects such as international port development and smart logistics systems in Batam. Beyond economic objectives, paradiplomacy also contributes to maritime security and social stability through trilateral cooperation within the Special Border Economic Zone (SBEZ).

In theoretical terms, Kepulauan Riau's paradiplomacy reflects a shift from state-centric diplomacy toward multi-level governance. Local governments now act as proactive agents capable of negotiating cross-border cooperation while maintaining coordination with national authorities. Overall, the findings confirm that the paradiplomatic capacity of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government plays a strategic role in enhancing Indonesia's integration into the Southeast Asian regional economy

Conclusion

The paradiplomacy of the Kepulauan Riau Provincial Government demonstrates a strategic function in reinforcing regional economic connectivity within the Indonesia–Malaysia–Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). Strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing inter-actor coordination, and implementing subnational economic diplomacy have enabled the establishment of cross-border cooperation networks that are increasingly results-oriented. These efforts have contributed to the expansion of trade flows, the growth of foreign investment, and the development of tourism and the creative economy. Thus, paradiplomacy extends beyond symbolic regional representation and operates as an instrumental mechanism for advancing regional competitiveness and deepening economic integration.

The effectiveness of this approach is closely associated with the synergy among local government, the private sector, and civil society within subregional platforms such as the Chief Ministers and Governors' Forum and the Joint Business Council. This collaboration enhances cross-border coordination, supports sustainable investment, and broadens the distribution of economic benefits. Empirically, the experience of Batam as a pilot area for green and digital integration illustrates how innovation-driven and sustainability-oriented paradiplomacy can generate a balance between economic growth and social inclusion, thereby reinforcing the foundation of inclusive regional development.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings underscore that the effectiveness of subnational paradiplomacy is contingent upon the integration of Cultural Competence and Global Mindedness within local governance. These dimensions shape the adaptive capacity of regional actors in navigating cross-cultural interactions and responding to global economic dynamics. Practically, the study highlights the importance of strengthening human resource capabilities, advancing regulatory harmonization, and promoting institutional innovation as key drivers of effective paradiplomacy. Collectively, these implications position Kepulauan Riau as a prospective model of multi-level governance diplomacy, while emphasizing that the sustainability of such efforts will be critical in consolidating its role as a competitive, inclusive, and sustainable hub of regional economic connectivity in Southeast Asia.

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