

Nation Branding of Kepulauan Riau Through Subregional Cooperation in The Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT)

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ABSTRACT

Nation branding has become a key element in modern communication strategies, particularly in the context of globalization. Countries strive to establish a positive international image, reflecting their unique identity and values. Nation branding is a marketing and communication strategy aimed at enhancing a country's image, both domestically and globally. Kepulauan Riau participation in the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) cooperation, and its hosting of the IMT-GT event in 2023, represents an effort to strengthen its image internationally. The IMT-GT is a subregional economic collaboration involving Indonesia (Sumatra), Malaysia, and Thailand, with the Kepulauan Riau being an active participant. This research utilizes a descriptive-analytical approach, supported by secondary data, to examine the impact of this initiative. One of the notable implementations of this cooperation is the IMT-GT Expo "Gebyar Melayu Pesisir," which showcases Kepulauan Riau local culture and products. This event aims to foster economic growth among the three countries, particularly in the Kepulauan Riau as the host region. The outcomes of the IMT-GT initiatives include agreements that enhance connectivity among member countries, fostering an integrated, innovative, inclusive, green, and sustainable growth strategy, with a vision extending to 2036. This research highlights the potential for the Kepulauan Riau to leverage nation branding through subregional cooperation, enhancing economic growth and international recognition.

Keywords: Nation Branding; Connectivity; IMT-GT; Economic Growth

INTRODUCTION

Nation branding aims to reshape the world's perception of a country through various marketing and communication strategies. It encompasses multiple complex elements such as culture, history, arts, geography, education, politics, economics, and numerous other aspects that reflect a nation's character and identity. National branding efforts typically include promotional campaigns, the use of social media, participation in international events, enhancement of tourism, foreign investment, and cooperation across various sectors (Hassan & Mahrous, 2019). Overall, nation branding plays a crucial role in enhancing a country's competitive advantage, expanding global presence, and supporting diplomatic and international collaboration efforts. A positive national image can attract investment, boost tourism, and strengthen both cultural and diplomatic appeal. By effectively managing its external image, a country can achieve broader strategic objectives and contribute to its overall progress (Hao et al., 2021)

Globalization and regionalism are expected to intensify among countries engaged in international cooperation. Such collaborations span multiple sectors to support economic

balance and strengthen diplomatic relations between states. One notable partnership explored in this study is the trilateral cooperation within the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT). The IMT-GT initiative was officially announced on July 20, 1993, during the Ministerial Meeting in Langkawi, Malaysia, and subsequently recognized by the United Nations. The cooperation is designed to promote investment, infrastructure development, and economic growth within the triangle region (Aziza et al., 2015). The IMT-GT framework primarily focuses on fostering economic development and improving the welfare of communities in the border areas of its member states (Wiranata et al., 2019). This cooperation was initiated by Malaysia's Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Indonesia's President Soeharto, and Thailand's Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai. The IMT-GT subregional cooperation aligns with the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, aiming to enhance inter-member state connectivity within ASEAN (Raharjo, 2023; Raharjo et al., 2017). The IMT-GT comprises 10 provinces from Sumatra, Indonesia, 11 states from Peninsular Malaysia, and 14 provinces from southern Thailand (Yuniarti, 2019), as outlined in Table 1.1.

Table 1. Members IMT GT

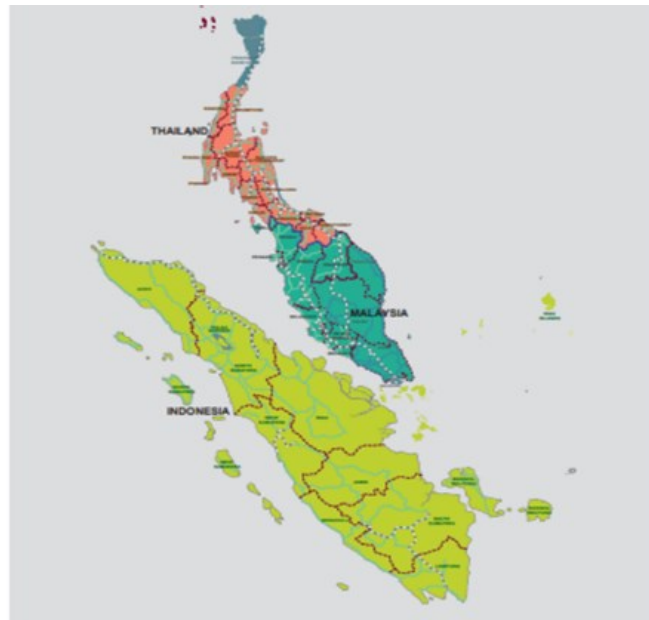
Indonesia-GT	Malaysia-GT	Thailand-GT
Aceh	Johor	Chumphon
Bangka Belitung	Kedah	Krabi
Bengkulu	Kelantan	Nakhon Si Thammarat
Jambi	Melaka	Narathiwat
Lampung	Negeri Sembilan	Phang Nga
Sumatera Utara	Pahang	Phatthalung
Riau	Penang	Phuket
Kepulauan Riau	Perak	Ranong
Sumatera Selatan	Perlis	Satun
Sumatera Barat	Selangor	Songkhla
	Terengganu	Surat Thani
		Trang
		Yal
		Pattani

Source: IMT-GT, 2023

Based on the IMT-GT Blueprint, seven strategic pillars support the achievement of Vision 2036. These pillars have been carefully identified as the key focus areas that can deliver the most significant economic and social impact in the subregion during the 2017–2026 period. These pillars include: (a) Agriculture and Agro-based Industries; (b) Tourism; (c) Halal Products and Services; (d) Transport and ICT Connectivity; (e) Trade and Investment Facilitation; (f) Environment; and (g) Human Resource Development (HRD), Education, and Culture. To support the promotion of the IMT-GT subregion as a trade- and investment-friendly area, efforts in trade and investment facilitation are expected to be realized by 2026 (IMT-GT Implementation Blueprint 2022–2026, 2022; IMT-GT Vision 2036, 2018). Baseline metrics have been established to monitor the inflow of intra-IMT-GT trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) into special economic zones (SEZs) or designated economic zones for performance evaluation (IMT-GT Vision 2036, 2018). Because the IMT-GT subregion is committed to enhancing its role as a competitive economic zone, the strategic pillars outlined in the IMT-GT Blueprint have been meticulously developed to address key areas that will drive sustainable growth and regional integration. Each pillar is designed to leverage the subregion's strengths and opportunities, such as its agricultural potential, tourism appeal, and expertise

in halal products and services, while also focusing on critical enablers like transport and ICT connectivity, which are vital for seamless trade and investment flows. In particular, the pillar of trade and investment facilitation aims to create a more conducive environment for business by reducing barriers and fostering collaboration across borders, thereby promoting the IMT-GT as an attractive destination for foreign direct investment (FDI).

Figure 1. Map of the IMT-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle)



Source: Centre for IMT-GT (CIMT) Subregional Cooperation

This figure would typically show a geographical representation of the IMT-GT region, highlighting the key areas of cooperation between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. It would likely include the provinces of Sumatra in Indonesia, the peninsular states of Malaysia, and the southern provinces of Thailand, which form the core of this subregional cooperation framework. The map would also indicate important economic corridors, connectivity routes, and significant special economic zones (SEZs) that are critical for trade, investment, and development in the region. Because this map serves as a visual representation of the IMT-GT region, it is crucial for illustrating the spatial relationships and geographical proximity that underpin economic cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. It highlights the key areas that are strategically important for the subregion's growth, such as the provinces of Sumatra in Indonesia, the southern provinces of Thailand, and the peninsular states of Malaysia. These areas are central to the IMT-GT's mission of promoting cross-border trade, investment, and development.

Furthermore, the figure would likely detail economic corridors and connectivity routes, such as major highways, rail links, and maritime routes, which facilitate the movement of goods, services, and people between the three countries. It would also pinpoint significant special economic zones (SEZs) that have been established to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and foster industrial growth. These SEZs play a vital role in advancing the IMT-GT's objectives by offering incentives and infrastructure to support industries like manufacturing, agriculture, and tourism.

The map would serve not only as a tool for policymakers to understand the region's economic landscape but also as a means to communicate the IMT-GT's strategic vision for enhancing regional connectivity and integration. By highlighting the physical and economic

linkages between member states, it underscores the importance of collaborative efforts in boosting competitiveness, fostering inclusive growth, and achieving the long-term goals outlined in the IMT-GT Vision 2036.

Figure 2. Indicative Plan for Sumatra, Indonesia



Source : Asian Development Bank based on the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020–2024

This figure would typically depict a strategic development plan for Sumatra, highlighting key infrastructure projects, economic corridors, and areas of focus for growth. It may include transportation networks (such as highways, ports, and airports), special economic zones (SEZs), and regions prioritized for investment and development. The indicative plan aims to align with broader national and regional goals, such as enhancing connectivity, fostering economic integration, and leveraging Sumatra's strategic location within initiatives like the IMT-GT and ASEAN connectivity frameworks. The plan would also emphasize sustainable development and the optimization of natural and human resources in Sumatra.

To implement Sumatra's regional development plan, the 2020-2024 National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) emphasizes the international role of cooperation initiatives such as the IMT-GT, Belt and Road Initiative, and the ASEAN Economic Community in expanding trade, investment, and promoting regional and global markets. Consequently, Sumatra is poised to become a key gateway for international trade (ARF, 2019; ARF-Maritime Security, 2020). These partnerships are expected to strengthen the business community and local governments, with leaders promoting investor-focused incentives. The Kepulauan Riau, located in Sumatra, are part of this IMT-GT development plan. IMT-GT represents a broader subregional cooperation compared to SIJORI (Singapore, Johor, and Riau) (Xiaodong, 2019).

The establishment of IMT-GT follows the development of collaboration that has been ongoing between private entrepreneurs from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. As a result, the development of the IMT-GT subregional economic cooperation is the government's effort to equitably improve the well-being of its people while ensuring the sustainable use of natural and human resources across each region. The economic sector was selected in this research because it provides speed and accuracy, while also considering the region's potential (Avianto & Koestoer, 2015). The economic sector also plays a crucial role in strengthening regional connectivity, such as in trade, investment, and tourism (Raharjo, 2023; Rai et al., 2019;

Ridwan, 2019). Kepulauan Riau geographical advantages can facilitate the development of cooperation with other countries. Several areas, such as Batam, Bintan, and Karimun, have been designated as FTZ/SEZ zones, and if projected optimally, the economic growth of the Kepulauan Riau will increase, creating job opportunities for the local population. Furthermore, in 2023, the Kepulauan Riau were declared the host of the IMT-GT, highlighting their diverse potential, including tourism, economy, SMEs, fisheries, mining, and more. Through IMT-GT, it is expected that the Kepulauan Riau national branding on the international stage will be enhanced.

METHODOLOGY

The research employs a qualitative descriptive method aimed at identifying the potential and analyzing both primary and secondary data related to the issues being examined. This approach allows the researchers to explore the phenomenon in question in detail, drawing from credible sources to form a comprehensive understanding. The data collection process involves various tools such as document analysis, literature reviews, and observations, ensuring that the analysis captures the multifaceted aspects of nation branding in the Kepulauan Riau within the context of IMT-GT cooperation. The study was conducted in Tanjungpinang, the capital of the Kepulauan Riau Province. The location was selected due to its strategic importance as a host region for the IMT-GT initiatives. By focusing on this area, the research seeks to provide a localized perspective on the broader subregional cooperation efforts.

The data collected is analyzed deductively, with conclusions being drawn based on observed patterns and the interrelationship between the IMT-GT initiatives and the nation branding efforts of the Kepulauan Riau. This method is intended to clarify the impact of IMT-GT on economic growth, cultural promotion, and regional development. The researchers emphasize the use of secondary data from credible sources, including government reports, academic publications, and relevant documentation of the IMT-GT Expo and related events. This data supports the analytical framework used in the study and helps provide a detailed account of how the Kepulauan Riau have utilized IMT-GT to enhance their nation branding. Through a systematic analysis of these sources, the study aims to offer actionable insights into the success and challenges of subregional cooperation as a tool for promoting regional identity and economic development.

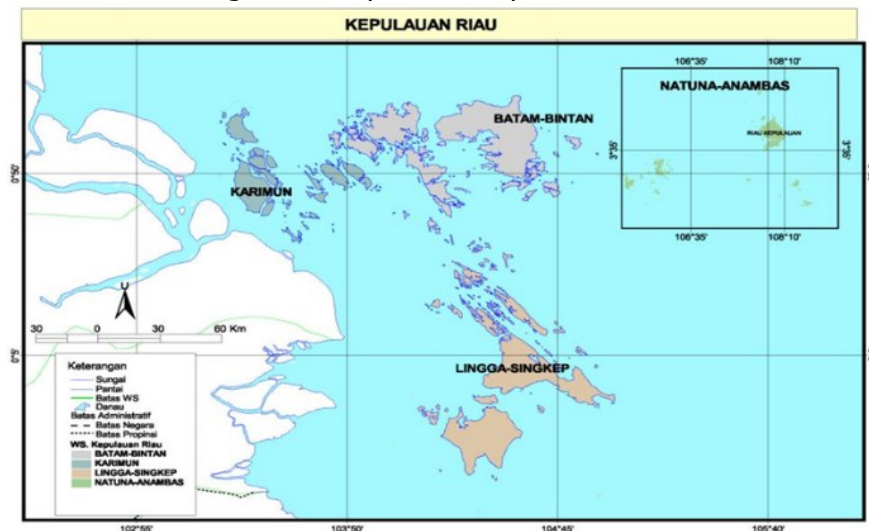
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Potential of the Kepulauan Riau

The Kepulauan Riau Province was established under Law Number 25 of 2002, making it the 32nd province of Indonesia. Geographically, the Kepulauan Riau are strategically located, sharing borders with neighboring countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. To the west, the province is bordered by South Sumatra and Jambi Provinces, while to the north lies the South China Sea. Its southern borders are with Malaysia and West Kalimantan Province, and to the east, it is bordered by Singapore, Malaysia, and Riau Province. Administratively, the Kepulauan Riau Province consists of two cities: Tanjungpinang, the provincial capital, and Batam, as well as five regencies: Karimun, Bintan, Natuna, Lingga, and the Anambas Islands (General Overview of the Kepulauan Riau, n.d.).

Economic Growth in the Kepulauan Riau Province in the first quarter of 2023, the Kepulauan Riau Province recorded a year-on-year (yoy) growth rate of 6.51%, surpassing the previous quarter's growth of 6.40% (yoy). This consistent growth trajectory has been evident since the first quarter of 2022, positioning the province as the fastest-growing region in Sumatra and the fourth-highest in Indonesia, significantly exceeding the national growth rate of 5.03% (yoy) (Faridatussalam et al., 2023).

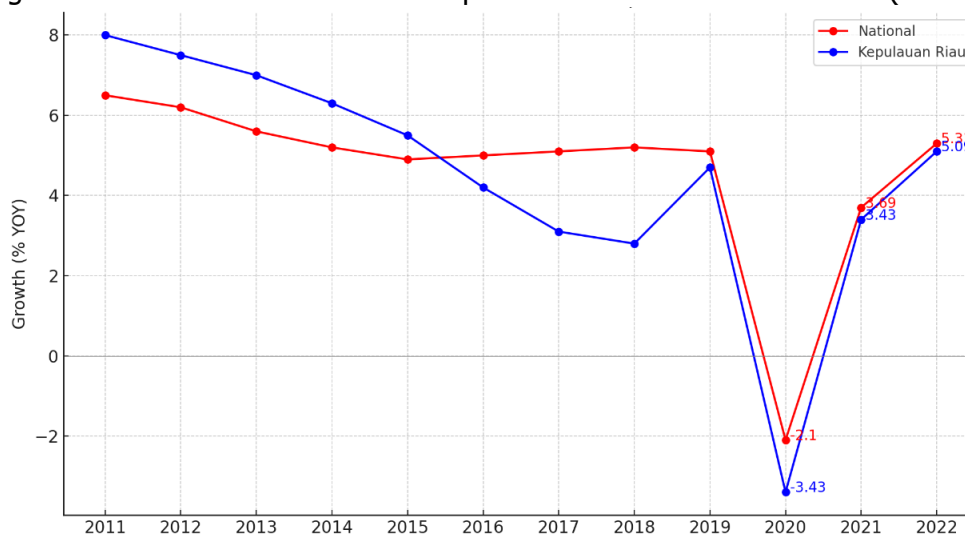
Figure 3. Map of the Kepulauan Riau



Source: BPK RI Kepulauan Riau

One of the primary drivers of this growth has been the continued infrastructure development and steady investment flows, which align with the gradual increase in mobility following the post-COVID-19 recovery phase. Additionally, the rise in tourist visits, particularly in the transportation, hospitality, and restaurant sectors, has further supported this growth. The manufacturing sector has also performed strongly, with notable outputs in the production of metals, optics, maritime transport equipment, and electronic products. Figure 4 highlights the growth trends in the Kepulauan Riau and nationally from 2012 to 2022. The economic downturn in 2020, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, led to a decline in both national and regional economies. However, in 2021, the economy of the Kepulauan Riau began to recover, driven by the relaxation of mobility restrictions and the resumption of economic activities, both domestically and internationally (Bank Indonesia, 2022).

Figure 4. Economic Growth of the Kepulauan Riau and National Level (2012-2022)



Source: Bank Indonesia, Kepulauan Riau

The economic growth of the Kepulauan Riau and the national economy during the period from 2012 to 2022 exhibited both regional and macroeconomic trends. This decade

witnessed fluctuating growth rates, influenced by both domestic and global factors, including changes in commodity prices, trade dynamics, and policy interventions aimed at stabilizing the economy. For the Kepulauan Riau specifically, the region's economic development was largely shaped by its strategic location as a key hub for trade and industry, benefiting from its proximity to neighboring countries like Singapore and Malaysia. However, this advantage also made the province's economy vulnerable to external shocks, such as fluctuations in global demand and regional trade disruptions.

Nationally, Indonesia experienced moderate growth, driven by various sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and services. Nevertheless, the Indonesian economy faced challenges such as infrastructure gaps, uneven regional development, and the need for structural reforms to enhance competitiveness. The period under review also includes the effects of the global financial crisis, fluctuations in oil prices, and, towards the end of the decade, the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which had profound implications for both regional and national economic performance. In sum, the economic trajectory of the Kepulauan Riau mirrors broader national trends, with both experiencing periods of robust growth and contraction due to varying internal and external conditions. Understanding this economic evolution requires a comprehensive analysis of both regional and national policy responses and economic drivers.

The development orientation in border regions also needs to shift from being "inward-looking" to "outward-looking" in order to serve as gateways for economic and trade activities with neighboring countries (Try Setyasih et al., 2020). The mission to develop underdeveloped and border areas has further inspired the growth of subregional economic cooperation. The Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) was established in 1993 to accelerate the economic transformation of underdeveloped provinces or states in the three member countries. Its goal is to reduce the development gap between regions in these three neighboring countries. IMT-GT is a subregional cooperation program aimed at promoting economic cooperation and integration between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand (Avianto & Koestoer, 2015; Fadhil, 2023).

Table 2. IMT-GT Local Development

Special Economic Zone	National Strategic Activity Center	Industrial Zone	National Strategic Tourism Zone	Free Trade Zone and Free Port	Metropolitan Region	Integrated Marine and Fishery Center
Arun (Lhokseumawe, Aceh)	Sabang (Aceh)	Kuala Tanjung (Batubara, North Sumatra)	Lake Toba (North Sumatra)	Sabang (Aceh)	Palembang	Sabang (Aceh)
Sei Mangkei (Simalungun, North Sumatra)	Ranai (Natuna, Kepulauan Riau)	Bintan Aerospace (Kepulauan Riau)	Padang-Bukittinggi (West Sumatra)	Batam-Bintan-Karimun (Kepulauan Riau)	Medan	Mentawai (West Sumatra)
Galang Batang (Kepulauan Riau)	Bengkalis (Riau)	Tanjung Enim (Muara Enim, South Sumatra)	Batam-Bintan (Kepulauan Riau)			

Special Economic Zone	National Strategic Activity Center	Industrial Zone	National Strategic Tourism Zone	Free Trade Zone and Free Port	Metropolitan Region	Integrated Marine and Fishery Center
Tanjung Api-Api (Banyuasin, South Sumatra)		Kemingking (Muaro Jambi, Jambi)	Bangka Belitung (Bangka Belitung Islands)			
Tanjung Kelayang (Belitung, Bangka Belitung Islands)		Sadai (Bangka Belitung Islands)				
		Tenayan (Riau)				
		Tanggamus (Lampung)				
		Pesawaran (Lampung)				
		Way Pisang (Lampung)				
		Katibung (Lampung)				
		Tanjung Buton (Riau)				
		Ladong (Aceh)				

Source: Based on the National Medium-Term Development Plan (RPJMN) 2020–2024.

Kepulauan Riau region is included in this development initiative, with the aim of boosting Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which is part of a shared agreement between the participating countries, creating job opportunities, and integrating domestic industries into global value chains through an integrated, innovative, inclusive, and sustainable sub-regional approach. In 2023, the Kepulauan Riau will host the IMT-GT, with the expectation of having a positive impact on both the Kepulauan Riau and Indonesia as a whole. In fact, the economic growth of the Kepulauan Riau has increased post-COVID-19 pandemic (Putri et al., 2023).

This economic acceleration is also driven by investment growth in border areas, one example being the completion of the Base Transceiver Station (BTS) network construction as a result of the Kepulauan Riau becoming the launch station for the Satria-1 satellite (Satelit Republik Indonesia). The Kepulauan Riau also possess other potential sectors, such as industry and tourism. The implementation of the IMT-GT in the Kepulauan Riau will foster the development of halal industries through the Bintan Halal Hub, the digital technology industry at Nongsa Digital Park, the MRO industry, and the Galang Batang Special Economic Zone. Kepulauan Riau strategic location, directly bordering neighboring countries, strengthens Indonesia's role in the Malacca Strait (Anggarkasih & Resma, 2022; Diskominfo Kepri, 2023).

2. Nation Branding in the Implementation of IMT-GT in Kepulauan Riau

The vision of IMT-GT for 2036 includes (1) revitalizing the tourism sector within the sub-region, (2) accelerating the development of hard and soft infrastructure, and (3) realizing

a green and sustainable sub-regional economy, supported by collaboration among stakeholders from member countries who work synergistically to achieve the implementation of these three focus areas. The performance of the IMT-GT in the Kepulauan Riau reflects the region's branding in executing IMT-GT activities and promotional events aimed at building the national branding of the Kepulauan Riau. One such event is the IMT-GT Expo "Gebyar Melayu Pesisir." The Kepulauan Riau, predominantly characterized by Malay culture, leverage "Malay" branding, with the hope that this will be recognized by attending delegates through international promotions. The potential for tourism in the Kepulauan Riau has increased significantly post-COVID-19, with a rise of 35.93% or approximately 126,527 international tourist visits in March 2023 compared to previous periods. The launch of the IMT-GT Visit for 2023-2025 aims to promote tourism and local SMEs from the Kepulauan Riau through the IMT-GT Expo "Gebyar Melayu Pesisir."

Figure 5. IMT-GT Expo Gebyar Melayu Pesisir



Source : IMT-GT

The IMT-GT Expo "Gebyar Melayu Pesisir" was held concurrently with the commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) cooperation. The event took place from September 26 to October 1, 2023. In addition to showcasing cultural arts, cuisine, fashion, and souvenirs, the IMT-GT Expo 2023 aimed to unlock the potential for increasing cross-border trade within the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle. Furthermore, the IMT-GT event was designed as a platform to highlight the strengths of the creative industries in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. This event served as a forum to promote the local economies within the Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand Growth Triangle. The presentations featured 10 SMEs from Thailand, 14 from Malaysia, and dozens of booths representing SMEs from Indonesia and Sumatra. The event also aimed to promote the SME sectors of the three countries and served as a platform for sharing experiences in building and developing SMEs, with the goal of advancing and growing these enterprises so they can enter the Asian and global markets, thereby becoming a driving force for economic development in the region.

The IMT-GT "Gebyar Melayu Pesisir" exhibition coincided with the 30th anniversary of IMT-GT. The expo was attended by approximately 38 participants, offering a variety of activities such as culinary bazaars, beverages, handicrafts, fashion products, and other high-quality goods from SMEs of the three countries. The IMT-GT Expo also served as a platform to showcase the strengths of the creative industries within the IMT-GT region. The exhibition,

which was attended by SME representatives from Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, was expected to open opportunities for business actors to expand market access and inspire more concrete cross-border collaboration to support economic growth in the region. The event also featured the Regional Local Currency Transaction (LCT), which is the implementation of an initiative by five ASEAN countries—Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines—using QR Codes or e-wallets for cross-border payments (Humas Kementerian Ekon, 2023).

Figure 6. Booth IMT-GT Expo Gebyar Melayu Pesisir



Source: Author, 2024

The IMT-GT "Gebyar Melayu Pesisir" exhibition, marking the 30th anniversary of the IMT-GT collaboration, represents a significant milestone in regional economic integration, particularly in fostering cross-border trade and cultural exchange between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The participation of approximately 38 SMEs offering diverse products such as food, beverages, handicrafts, and fashion items highlights the event's focus on promoting local businesses. This initiative is not only a showcase of creative industry strengths within the region but also an essential platform for SMEs to gain exposure to international markets. The inclusion of cultural elements, through the "Melayu" branding, further adds value by providing a unique identity that differentiates the region on the global stage. By drawing attention to the local creative industries, the exhibition emphasizes the importance of supporting SMEs as drivers of economic growth and regional development.

Moreover, the introduction of the Regional Local Currency Transaction (LCT) system during the expo reflects a progressive step towards financial integration in ASEAN. By implementing QR code and e-wallet systems for cross-border payments, IMT-GT member countries are promoting smoother and more efficient economic transactions, reducing dependency on major international currencies. This initiative, part of a broader ASEAN agenda involving Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, fosters regional financial resilience and strengthens local economies. The use of digital payment systems also signals a shift towards greater technological adoption in the region, enabling SMEs to engage in cross-border commerce with greater ease. Ultimately, the IMT-GT Expo and its associated initiatives are poised to create long-term opportunities for economic collaboration and sustainable growth in the region.

The implementation of IMT-GT UNINET (an IMT-GT side event) held at UMRAH involved delegates from various universities within the IMT-GT subregion. In this event, UMRAH, as the host, provided souvenirs as part of the branding of the Kepulauan Riau. Female

delegates were given shawls with the distinctive batik motif of the Kepulauan Riau, known as Batik Gonggong, while male delegates received "Tanjak," a traditional Malay men's headpiece. After the event, the delegates were also invited to visit Penyengat Island to explore the heritage of the Malay people in the Kepulauan Riau

Figure 7. IMT-GT UNINET in UMRAH



Source: Author, 2024

The IMT-GT UNINET event at UMRAH not only served as an academic platform for universities within the subregion but also played a significant role in promoting cultural diplomacy and nation branding for the Kepulauan Riau. By offering souvenirs like the Batik Gonggong shawls and the Tanjak headpieces, UMRAH strategically used cultural symbols to create lasting impressions on international delegates. These gifts were not merely tokens of appreciation but represented the unique identity and heritage of the Kepulauan Riau, tying local traditions into a broader regional collaboration. The incorporation of traditional Malay attire into the event aligns with the overarching goals of the IMT-GT initiative to foster economic, cultural, and academic connections across the borders of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Through these branding efforts, the Kepulauan Riau can enhance their visibility and reputation in the region, while positioning themselves as a key player in cultural and educational exchanges within the IMT-GT framework.

Furthermore, the visit to Penyengat Island provided an immersive experience for the delegates, allowing them to connect more deeply with the cultural and historical roots of the Malay people in the Kepulauan Riau. This post-event excursion served a dual purpose: it reinforced the cultural narrative introduced during the official proceedings and further highlighted the potential of the Kepulauan Riau as a destination rich in historical significance. By integrating cultural tourism with academic collaboration, the event demonstrated how soft power initiatives could contribute to regional development. The combination of academic exchange and cultural diplomacy at IMT-GT UNINET exemplifies how education and heritage can work in tandem to strengthen regional ties and promote sustainable growth within the IMT-GT subregion.

3. Strategic Opportunities for the Kepulauan Riau in the IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation

The Kepulauan Riau Province consists of 1,796 islands situated between Sumatra, the Semenanjung Malaya, and Kalimantan. Located along the strategic Malacca Strait, the province shares maritime borders with neighboring countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, and Vietnam. The Kepulauan Riau have substantial potential in mineral, energy, and marine resources. Capture fisheries dominate the local industry, producing 122,433 tons in Karimun

and Tanjungpinang in 2018. Fish processing plants in Batam, Tanjungpinang, and Natuna produce frozen fillets, salted fish, and fish chips. Other fresh seafood products include grouper, which is exported to Hong Kong and China. Seaweed is exported to China, Vietnam, and Singapore. Other key products include Chinese cabbage (Batam and Bintan), chili peppers (Batam), rubber (Karimun and Lingga), and coconuts (Natuna) (Guina, 2023).

Figure 8. IMT-GT Economic Corridor



Source: Asian Development Bank. 2021.

The IMT-GT has played a crucial role in the development of Economic Corridors (EC) in Sumatra, as identified in the Development Roadmap 2007-2011 through various Economic Corridors (EC). These corridors are designed to enhance connectivity, foster regional trade, and promote integrated development among the participating regions of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The first of these is EC 1: The Extended Songkhla–Penang–Medan Economic Corridor, which stretches across Nakhon Si Thammarat, Phatthalung, Songkhla, Yala, Pattani, Penang, and Medan, linking these key cities for trade and economic cooperation. EC 2: The Malacca Strait Corridor covers the western coastal belt from Trang in southern Thailand to Melaka in Peninsular Malaysia, promoting maritime and trade activities along this strategic waterway. EC 3: The Banda Aceh–Medan–Pekanbaru–Palembang Economic Corridor is a north-south road corridor across Sumatra that enhances land connectivity and supports economic integration from the northern to the southern parts of the island.

Another significant route is EC 4: The Dumai–Melaka Economic Corridor, a maritime corridor that connects Sumatra to Peninsular Malaysia, serving as a vital shipping route for bilateral trade. EC 5: The Ranong–Phuket–Aceh Economic Corridor further strengthens connectivity between Thailand’s west coast and northern Sumatra. Lastly, EC 6 links Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat in Thailand with Perak and Kelantan in Malaysia, and extends to the Kepulauan Riau, Bangka Belitung, and southern provinces of Sumatra in Indonesia. These economic corridors are integral to the IMT-GT framework, aiming to boost cross-border

economic activities, infrastructure development, and regional collaboration, which in turn supports sustainable and inclusive growth in the broader subregion.

Figure 9. Map of the 6th Economic Corridor (EC) in the Kepulauan Riau



Source: Asian Development Bank

Including Johor in EC4 will establish a crucial connection to the Kepulauan Riau (particularly Batam) and the Bangka Belitung Islands, which form part of the proposed route for EC6. The rapid urban and industrial transformation of Johor, as part of the Iskandar Malaysia Special Economic Zone and significant planned rail projects aimed at enhancing connectivity with the entire peninsula and Singapore, will create positive spillover effects across the region. Tanjung Pelepas Port and Johor Port serve as key maritime gateways to the southern islands and international destinations. Tanjung Pelepas Port, in particular, has a direct rail link to Malaysia's national railway network, which connects to Singapore and Southern Thailand (Guina, 2023).

Thailand proposed the sixth economic corridor (EC6) during the 24th Ministerial Level Meeting held in Melaka on October 1, 2018. The ministers directed a study to determine the proposed route for this corridor. The suggested route for EC6 is expected to connect Thailand's southern provinces of Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat with Malaysia's east coast through Perak and Kelantan, and with Indonesia in southern Sumatra, as shown in Figure 3.7, Map of the Sixth Economic Corridor (EC6) in the Kepulauan Riau. Regional development in Sumatra is being carried out through two main approaches: the growth approach and the equity approach. Both methods are reflected in designated growth corridors and equitable or island-based distribution corridors. Growth corridors promote national economic growth through the acceleration of regional development. The growth areas identified in the plan are designated

as national activity centers, regional activity centers, special economic zones (SEZ), industrial zones, national strategic tourism areas, as well as urban agglomeration areas in districts and small cities located within the growth corridors. The equitable corridors are oriented toward providing more equitable access to essential services.

The Kepulauan Riau are located along one of the world's busiest shipping routes through the Strait of Malacca, sharing maritime borders with neighboring countries—Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Singapore. Some Thai fishing vessels also operate near the Natuna Sea (around 17.4% of foreign vessels). Given that the Kepulauan Riau Province shares a border with West Kalimantan Province on the island of Kalimantan, EC6 has the potential to establish connectivity with the West Kalimantan Economic Corridor in the East ASEAN Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA), comprising Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The Kepulauan Riau have maritime links with Malaysia. Due to their location, ports in Riau, as well as islands such as Bangka Belitung, are mainly connected to Singapore and Johor. The economic relationship between Johor and Batam began in the 1980s with the establishment of the Singapore-Johor-Riau Triangle.

Batam–Bintan–Karimun has been designated as a free trade zone and free port and is also part of the National Strategic Tourism Area. Tanjungpinang (Bintan) is the capital of the Kepulauan Riau Province, located on Bintan Island. The Galang Batang SEZ, which covers an area of 2,334 hectares, is also located on the same island. Operating since December 2018, this SEZ focuses on bauxite as the primary source for aluminum minerals. Among Indonesia's ten SEZs, Galang Batang has made the highest contribution to Indonesia's economy, amounting to IDR 36.25 trillion (38.60%) as of November 2019. It plays a crucial role in the bauxite supply chain in Sumatra and other IMT-GT regions. Tanjungpinang also hosts the Bintan Aerospace Industrial Zone.

IMT-GT has driven significant infrastructure and industrial development in Batam and Tanjungpinang (Bintan), aligning with Indonesia's goal to make Batam a regional hub for industry, logistics, and tourism. Malaysia's proposal to include Johor in EC4 would open up opportunities for collaboration between Johor and the Kepulauan Riau. The distance between South Sumatra and southern Thailand has made it challenging to establish strong economic ties between the two regions. The Kepulauan Riau have no direct sea or air connections with southern Thailand. Trade between the Kepulauan Riau and Thailand is minimal, contributing an average of only 1.14% to provincial exports between 2014 and 2018 and less than 1% to imports.

Nevertheless, the Kepulauan Riau could serve as a transit point for foreign trade from southern Sumatra, which has a significant share of trade with Thailand, particularly Jambi (12.89%), Lampung (4.63%), and Bengkulu (2.98%). For Bengkulu, Palembang (South Sumatra) would need to transport its commodities by land to ports on Sumatra's east coast. The Kepulauan Riau could also serve as a transit point for the Bangka Belitung Islands, which had a combined average trade growth rate with Thailand of 44.06% from 2014 to 2018, promising an improvement in future trade performance.

EC6 could play a role in domestic supply chains, where upstream and intermediate products from southern Sumatra, such as crude palm oil (CPO), rubber, white pepper, and raw fishery products, could be processed in industrial zones and special economic zones in the Kepulauan Riau. This would align with the Indonesian government's plan to position Batam as an international logistics hub for Indonesia. The inclusion of southern Sumatra provinces (Bangka Belitung Islands, South Sumatra, Jambi, Bengkulu, and Lampung), along with the Kepulauan Riau as a transit point and industrial hub, has excellent potential for strengthening economic relations between Malaysia and Thailand through the IMT-GT economic corridor network.

CONCLUSION

The IMT-GT (Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle) program involves 32 provinces or states with a combined population of approximately 70 million people, consisting of 10 regions in Indonesia, 8 states in Malaysia, and 14 provinces in Thailand. IMT-GT promotes private sector-led economic growth and facilitates subregional development by leveraging the complementary and comparative advantages of the member countries. All participating provinces in the IMT-GT are located on the island of Sumatra, which plays a crucial role in Indonesia's national development. Covering a land area of 480,793.3 square kilometers (km²), Sumatra constitutes 25.08% of Indonesia's total landmass. The geographic features of the Kepulauan Riau offer significant advantages for fostering international cooperation. Notably, certain areas, such as Batam, Bintan, and Karimun, have been designated as Free Trade Zones (FTZ) or Special Economic Zones (SEZ), which, if fully optimized, could lead to increased economic growth in the Kepulauan Riau and the creation of job opportunities for the local population.

Batam, Bintan, and Karimun are strategically important within the IMT-GT framework due to their status as economic hubs. These zones benefit from special incentives designed to attract investment and facilitate trade, positioning them as focal points for economic activity. As key nodes within the growth triangle, they serve as gateways for trade and tourism between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The Kepulauan Riau unique geographical location, bordering both Malaysia and Singapore, enhances their potential for trade expansion and cross-border collaboration. In particular, the industrial and economic potential of Batam, with its focus on manufacturing, logistics, and high-tech industries, holds great promise for further development under the IMT-GT initiative. Meanwhile, Bintan's emphasis on tourism and Karimun's maritime and trade capabilities complement the broader subregional development goals.

In 2023, the Kepulauan Riau Province hosted the IMT-GT event, highlighting its diverse potential across various sectors, including tourism, economy, SMEs, fisheries, and mining. Hosting this event demonstrated the province's growing significance in the subregional economic landscape, further promoting its image on the international stage. Through IMT-GT, there is a strong expectation that the Kepulauan Riau will continue to enhance their global branding, tapping into their natural resources, strategic location, and industrial capabilities.

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