



Analysis of Indonesia's Role in the IMT-GT Tourism Cooperation Framework (2021-2024)

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ABSTRACT

This research aimed to identify and analyze the factors influencing Indonesia's implementation within the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) cooperation framework in the tourism pillar during 2021–2024. The research focused on cross-border tourism programs and Indonesia's domestic dynamics, particularly in the Sumatra region, in fulfilling its commitments under the subregional cooperation framework. The analysis employed the concept of tourism in International Relations and the subregional cooperation framework proposed by Myo Thant and Min Tang (1996), comprising four factors: economic complementarity, geographical proximity, political and institutional commitment, and infrastructure availability. Data were collected through document analysis and in-depth interviews with representatives of the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia and the Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation (CIMT). The findings show that economic complementarity provided opportunities for implementation through cross-border tourism development, but was constrained by low international demand and the dominance of established tourism destinations. Geographical proximity and infrastructure availability presented challenges related to connectivity, destination management, and port facilities. Political and institutional commitment emerged as the most influential factor, as effective implementation depended on policy consistency and coordination between central and local governments. As this study is limited to Indonesia and the tourism pillar, future research could compare the implementation of all three IMT-GT member states or

examine other subregional cooperation arrangements in Southeast Asia.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Southeast Asian region has continued to show rapid development in line with increasing global connectivity and integration. The intensity of cross-border movement of goods, services, and people has encouraged countries in the region to make more optimal use of their economic potential, while also giving rise to various cooperation initiatives, both at the regional and subregional levels. One important form of subregional cooperation in this region is the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT), which was first initiated by Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and gained the support of Indonesian President Soeharto and Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai at a meeting in Langkawi in 1993. This cooperation covers 35 provinces and states with a total area of approximately 683,300 square kilometers, consisting of ten provinces on the island of Sumatra (Indonesia-GT), eleven states in Peninsular Malaysia (Malaysia-GT), and fourteen provinces in southern Thailand (Thailand-GT) (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation, 2022).

Since the adoption of the IMT-GT Vision 2036 at the 10th IMT-GT Summit in Manila in 2017 (IMT-GT, 2017), tourism has been designated as one of the region's strategic Lead Focus Areas alongside agro-based agriculture and halal products, with an ambitious target of 109 million international tourist visits per year by 2036 (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation, 2022). This target was later translated into four five-year Implementation Blueprints containing work programs accompanied by measurable performance indicators. Nevertheless, recent data reveal a striking implementation gap among member countries. As shown in Figure 1 below, total international tourist visits to the IMT-GT region in 2024 remained far below this collective target. Malaysia-GT recorded the highest achievement with approximately 29.74 million visits, followed by Thailand-GT with 26.42 million visits, while Indonesia-GT only reached approximately 1.13 million visits (IMT-GT, 2025).

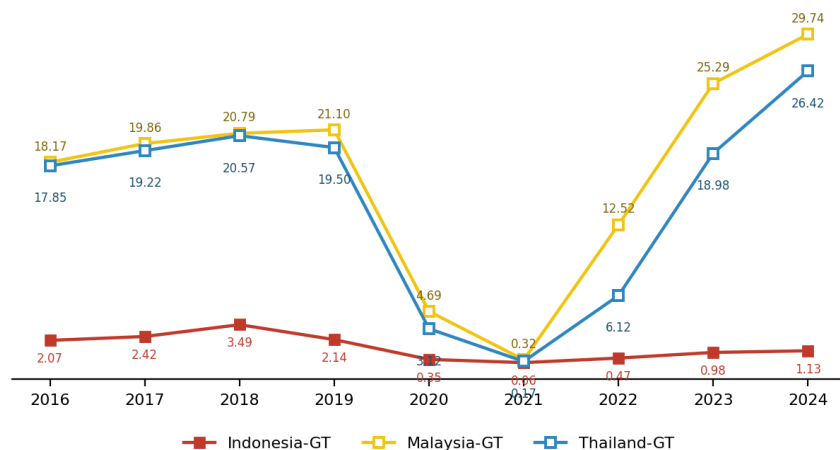


Figure 1. International Tourist Arrivals in the IMT-GT Region, 2016-2024 (million visits)

Source: IMT-GT (2025)

The Covid-19 pandemic did suppress tourist flows across the entire region in 2020-2021, with Indonesia-GT experiencing a sharp decline to its lowest point of approximately 0.06 million visits in 2021 due to international travel restrictions and border closures (IMT-GT, 2025). However, although a recovery trend began to emerge throughout 2021-2024, the pace of Indonesia-GT's recovery did not show growth commensurate with that of the other two member countries. This condition indicates that Indonesia's lag was not solely caused by the pandemic, but was also influenced by other structural factors in the implementation of tourism cooperation at the national level.

Yet, Indonesia possesses substantial comparative advantages for tourism. As the world's largest archipelagic country with 17,380 islands, Indonesia holds natural wealth and cultural diversity that constitute a cross-border attraction. Indonesia's involvement in the IMT-GT has also been supported by a clear institutional foundation, namely Presidential Decree Number 72 of 1996 concerning the Establishment of the IMT-GT Coordination Team, in which the Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs acts as chair of the national coordination team (Fadhil, 2023). The government has also placed the enhancement of tourism value-added as one of its priorities in the Rencana Pembangunan Jangka Menengah Nasional 2020-2024 (Kementerian Pariwisata dan Ekonomi Kreatif Republik Indonesia, 2024). In other words, policy and institutional support has essentially been available, so that the achievement gap seen in Figure 1 raises a fundamental question regarding the factors that actually shape or constrain Indonesia's implementation on the ground.

Studies on subregional cooperation in Southeast Asia have thus far extensively highlighted the strategic significance of the IMT-GT as a building block for regional economic integration (Kartini et al., 2020), as well as its appeal to external partners such as India (De et al., 2023) and its role in post-pandemic economic recovery (Sudirman et al., 2023). At a more specific level, research on tourism cooperation within the IMT-GT framework has generally focused on the perspectives of Thailand (Putri & Kresnawati, 2023) and Malaysia (Jeevan et al., 2019), as well as Indonesia's halal tourism program (Maria, 2021). Meanwhile, studies on the domestic dynamics of Indonesian tourism have discussed more general tourism development policy (Lestari & Suharyanti, 2020), the implementation of the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan in West Sumatra (Moenir et al., 2021), sustainable tourism in Natuna (Anjeli, 2020), and post-pandemic community-based tourism policy in Bintan (Rianto et al., 2023). Although these studies provide important understanding of the IMT-GT and the dynamics of Indonesian tourism separately, research that specifically identifies and analyzes the factors influencing Indonesia's implementation within the IMT-GT framework in the tourism pillar, particularly during the post-pandemic period and the use of the current 2021-2024 Implementation Blueprint, remains scarce.

It should be noted that the IMT-GT partnership has already undertaken concrete efforts to strengthen this tourism development model. At the operational level, the Implementation Blueprint outlines four work-program strands aimed at tourism recovery, the development of cross-border tourism routes, the enhancement of destination competitiveness, and the promotion of IMT-GT as an integrated tourist destination (Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation, 2022). This commitment was further reaffirmed at the political level during the 28th IMT-GT Ministerial Meeting in Phuket (2022), where the Indonesian delegation pledged to revitalize the region's tourism sector through enhanced connectivity and infrastructure, support for micro, small, and medium enterprises, and joint digital marketing strategies (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Perekonomian, 2022). Despite these efforts, based on this research gap, this article was prepared to answer the research question of what factors influence the implementation of Indonesia's tourism cooperation program within the IMT-GT framework during the 2021-2024 period. In line with this question, this study aimed to identify and analyze the factors influencing Indonesia's implementation at the national level within the IMT-GT cooperation framework, specifically in the

tourism pillar during the 2021-2024 period. The scope of the research was limited to domestic factors influencing Indonesia's implementation, without covering other pillars within the IMT-GT Vision 2036 or the perspectives of other member countries, except when used as a comparative basis for analysis. The 2021-2024 time span was chosen because it represents the transitional period between the first and second Implementation Blueprints as well as the post-pandemic recovery period, making it relevant for examining how Indonesia rebuilt its implementation capacity in the subregional tourism pillar.

The concept of subregional cooperation developed alongside the intensifying process of regionalization, which has made regions increasingly complex and given rise to the need for more specific forms of cooperation (Hettne, 2005). Unlike regional cooperation, which is generally designed through formal intergovernmental mechanisms, subregional cooperation grows more through practical, flexible local dynamics oriented toward the immediate needs of border areas (Söderbaum & Shaw, 2003). Hook and Kearns (1999) viewed subregionalism as arising from the pressures of globalization and the limitations of larger regional mechanisms, while Jessop (2003) emphasized that globalization shifts the boundaries of governance scale, so that development management is no longer entirely monopolized by the state but also involves local and cross-border actors.

The growth triangle, as represented by the IMT-GT, is a concrete form of subregional cooperation that emerged to address the interregional development gaps that are a common characteristic of developing countries in Asia. According to Thant and Tang (1996), this approach enables particular areas to move faster through private-sector initiatives and cross-border production networks without having to wait for formal consensus at the regional level. Thant and Tang (1996) proposed four main factors that determine the collective success of subregional cooperation, namely (1) economic complementarity, which ensures mutually beneficial relationships between areas; (2) geographical proximity, which facilitates the flow of goods, services, and socio-cultural relations; (3) political and institutional commitment at both the national and local levels, which creates legal certainty and stability; and (4) the availability of quality infrastructure as a prerequisite for the formation of an efficient interregional value chain. These four factors are used in this study as the analytical framework for examining implementation at the level of a single member country, namely Indonesia.

Regarding the relationship between central and local governments in the implementation of subregional cooperation, Soldatos, as cited in Kuznetsov (2015), proposed four patterns of interaction. The first is cooperative-coordinated, in which the central and local governments closely coordinate their actions. The second is cooperative-joint, in which they operate as a single, unified body. The third is parallel-harmony, in which they function independently while pursuing aligned objectives. The fourth is parallel-disharmony, in which they operate independently without alignment. This concept is used to sharpen the analysis of whether the implementation of IMT-GT tourism cooperation in Indonesia is supported by a harmonious center-local relationship or is instead hindered by operational misalignment.

In terms of tourism, this study refers to the understanding that tourism is a social, cultural, and economic phenomenon involving the movement of individuals outside their usual place of residence, as well as a complex ecosystem involving tourists, industry actors, governments, and local communities. In International Relations studies, tourism is no longer understood merely as a recreational activity but has developed into a transnational socio-political activity that involves non-state actors and plays an important role in strengthening cultural, civilizational, and economic relations between countries, particularly those that are geographically close (Seyfi & Hall, 2024). The neoliberal institutionalist perspective views tourism as an important instrument that strengthens cooperation, increases interdependence, and encourages opportunities for peace between countries, with a spill-over effect that extends to other political, economic, and social domains (Çokişler & Çokişler, 2023). This conceptual framework forms the basis for understanding why the tourism sector is relevant to examine within subregional cooperation such as the IMT-GT and why Indonesia's implementation needs to be further analyzed through the four success factors of subregional cooperation.

2. METHOD

This study used a qualitative method with an exploratory approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing Indonesia's implementation within the IMT-GT cooperation framework in the tourism pillar. According to Creswell and Creswell (2023), qualitative research is used to understand a social phenomenon through data analyzed inductively. The object of the research was the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia as Indonesia's focal point in the IMT-GT Working Group on Tourism for the 2021-2024 period. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with two key informants, selected purposively based on their direct relevance to the research topic and their in-depth knowledge of and experience in Indonesia's involvement in the IMT-GT tourism pillar. The informants were the Assistant Deputy for International Interagency Relations of the Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Indonesia, representing Indonesia's national focal point, and the Senior Tourism Project Coordinator of the Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation (CIMT), representing the IMT-

GT's permanent secretariat. This selection ensured that the data captured perspectives from both the national implementing agency and the subregional coordinating body. Secondary data were obtained from official IMT-GT documents (including the Implementation Blueprint), ministry reports, laws and regulations, journals, previous research, and official government and IMT-GT secretariat press releases.

Data collection was carried out through interviews and documentation study. The collected data were analyzed using the interactive analysis technique of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the data reduction stage, raw data from interviews and literature were selected and simplified, then grouped to sharpen the analytical focus on the factors influencing Indonesia's implementation within the IMT-GT tourism pillar during the 2021-2024 period, while eliminating less relevant information. In the data display stage, the reduced data were organized into thematic matrices, tables, and structured narratives to reveal patterns and relationships among findings regarding Indonesia's implementation and the constraints encountered. In the final stage, conclusion drawing and verification, preliminary interpretations were continuously refined throughout the analysis process and verified through source triangulation, comparing findings across interview results, official documents, and supporting literature, to produce valid and well-supported final conclusions regarding the factors influencing Indonesia's implementation.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

During the 2021-2024 period, Indonesia's implementation within the IMT-GT cooperation framework in the tourism pillar can be mapped into four main aspects that follow the objectives of the 2022-2026 Implementation Blueprint, namely post-pandemic tourism recovery, the development of cross-border tourism routes, the enhancement of destination competitiveness, and integrated destination promotion. In terms of recovery, Indonesia reallocated a budget of IDR 500 billion to address the pandemic's impact on the tourism sector and strengthen Cleanliness, Health, Safety, and Environmental Sustainability standards through Regulation of the Minister of Tourism and Creative Economy Number 13 of 2020 (Sekretariat Kabinet Republik Indonesia, 2020). This domestic effort was subsequently integrated at the subregional level through the preparation of the Joint BIMP-EAGA and IMT-GT Tourism Recovery Communications Plan and Toolkit 2022-2024, which carried the 'Ease of Travel' campaign to rebuild tourist confidence after the pandemic (BIMP-EAGA Facilitation Center & Centre for IMT-GT Subregional Cooperation, 2022). The reopening of international gateways was carried out in stages, starting from strict health protocol requirements to a relaxation of procedures in October 2022.

Table 1. Foreign Tourist Visits to Indonesia and the Indonesia-GT Region, 2021-2024

Year	National Foreign Tourist Visits (million people)	Indonesia-GT Regional Foreign Tourist Visits (million people)
2021	1.56	0.35
2022	5.89	0.47
2023	11.68	0.98
2024	13.90	1.13

Source: Badan Pusat Statistik (2025); IMT-GT (2025), processed by the author

As presented in Table 1, this recovery trend is empirically reflected in the increase in foreign tourist visits, both nationally and in the Indonesia-GT region, throughout 2021-2024. Nationally, visitor numbers increased from 1.56 million people in 2021 to 13.90 million people in 2024, while at the Indonesia-GT regional level, they increased from 0.35 million to 1.13 million visits over the same period. Sumatra also serves as one of the main gateways for foreign tourists entering Indonesia, with Batam Port in Riau Islands and Kualanamu Airport in North Sumatra among the top five national entry points, with Batam recording 1.3 million tourists, dominated by Singaporean and Malaysian nationals (Badan Pusat Statistik, 2025).

In terms of cross-border tourism route development, Indonesia signed the Memorandum of Understanding for the Langkawi-Satun-Toba UNESCO Global Geopark at the 27th IMT-GT Ministerial Meeting in 2021, integrating Lake Toba into a regional geotourism network based on geological, cultural, and environmental heritage. This was followed up by the Langkawi Business-to-Business Roadshow in Samosir Regency in December 2023, which helped establish a cross-country travel pattern among Toba, Langkawi, and Satun. In addition, the holding of the ASEAN-India Cruise Dialogue in Sabang in October 2024 represented Indonesia's effort to position its border area as a node of regional maritime tourism connectivity with the potential to link the Sabang-Phuket-Langkawi route (Kementerian Pariwisata Republik Indonesia, 2026).

In terms of enhancing destination competitiveness, Indonesia directed community-based destination development through the IMT-GT Tourism Village Forum and the Post Tour to Burai Village 2022 in Ogan Ilir Regency, South Sumatra, which involved approximately fifty IMT-GT participants (Effendi & Aisyah, 2024). The

implementation of this program also demonstrated a bottom-up mechanism, as the local government subsequently institutionalized the Burai Festival as an independent annual event (Website Kabupaten Ogan Ilir, 2022). In 2024, the IMT-GT Tourism Student Exchange program, which made Riau Province the host for participants from Malaysia and Thailand, further strengthened cross-cultural interaction while also serving as an indirect means of destination promotion (PPID Riau, 2024).

Finally, in terms of integrated destination promotion, Indonesia initiated the IMT-GT Visit Year 2023-2025, launched at the 15th IMT-GT Summit in Labuan Bajo with three main pillars: strengthening connectivity, innovative branding, and digital tourism (Antara, 2023). As chair of the tourism pillar during that period, Indonesia also organized the IMT-GT Expo 'Gebyar Melayu Pesisir' 2023 in Riau Islands, involving approximately 38 MSMEs from the three member countries and introducing Malay cultural heritage through the IMT-GT UNINET activity (Putri & Afnira, 2024).

Notwithstanding these four aspects of implementation, which demonstrate Indonesia's active participation in various IMT-GT forums and programs, some programs ran relatively well while others faced obstacles that had not even been realized by the end of the research period. However, it is precisely this gap between participation and actual tourist visit achievements that drives the need for further analysis of the factors that shape or constrain the scope of Indonesia's implementation, as elaborated below using the four success factors of subregional cooperation from Thant and Tang (1996).

Economic Complementarity as a Driver of Cross-Border Tourism Development

Economic complementarity acts as a fundamental driver behind Indonesia's engagement in the IMT-GT framework, particularly within the tourism sector. Indonesia-GT destinations have an advantage in the beauty of their natural resources and cultural heritage, Malaysia-GT excels in urban tourism and its status as a halal hub, while Thailand-GT excels in globally established beach destinations. This difference in profile creates opportunities for the diversification of regional tourism products, as explained by Thant and Tang (1996), and is concretely manifested in the Langkawi-Satun-Toba Geopark MoU, in which Toba offers caldera scenery and Batak culture, Langkawi offers the biodiversity of its conservation forests, and Satun offers karst landscapes, so that the three complement one another in a single sustainable geopark tourism package. This awareness is also reflected in the IMT-GT Expo 'Gebyar Melayu Pesisir,' which harnesses cross-border Malay cultural identity as a thematic tourist attraction that distinguishes this region on the global stage.

However, at the operational level, this economic complementarity potential has not yet been fully translated into sustainable market demand. As of the end of 2024, only Kualanamu Airport in North Sumatra had direct flights to the Malaysia-GT region, while air connectivity to Thailand-GT still required transit (Nur & Raharjo, 2023). The Medan-Hat Yai flight route, which was once opened, was even discontinued after several months of operation due to low passenger demand, according to information from the Ministry of Tourism (2026) in an interview. This low demand is also related to foreign tourists' preferences, which remain concentrated on mainstream destinations, where even Lake Toba, as a Super Priority Destination, attracts more domestic than international tourists, with the international market segment still limited to only a few countries of origin (Waruwu et al., 2023). This condition is exacerbated by the weak digital visibility of Indonesia-GT destinations amid the global trend of increasing reliance on social media and digital platforms in travel planning (Mega, 2025). Thus, economic complementarity functions as a strong conceptual foundation, but its driving force weakens without adequate market demand and promotion.

Geographical Proximity as a Challenge to Cross-Border Connectivity

Second, geographical proximity, in fact displays a contradictory character for Indonesia compared to the general context of subregional cooperation, which is usually advantaged by regional proximity (Thant & Tang, 1996). Although Sumatra is geographically close to Peninsular Malaysia and Southern Thailand, this proximity does not produce equivalent connectivity because Malaysia-GT and Thailand-GT are directly connected by land, whereas Indonesia-GT is separated by the Malacca Strait without a direct land connection. This condition was confirmed in an interview with the Ministry of Tourism (2026), which noted that Indonesia's position as an archipelagic state is in fact a structural challenge rather than an advantage within the IMT-GT framework. Malaysia and Thailand have even developed a self-drive route connecting Perlis, Kedah, Perak, and Penang with Satun, Songkhla, and Yala in Southern Thailand, allowing tourists to move between destinations in a single seamless overland journey. In contrast, to include Sumatra in the same travel package, tourists must take a sea or air route with far greater additional time and cost, as explained by CIMT (2026) in an interview, reaching Sumatra requires a relatively long travel time given its separate island location, making the region less accessible within a short timeframe.

As a concrete illustration, the land route from Penang to Hat Yai or Songkhla can be covered in approximately 2.5 to 4.5 hours, depending on the mode of transport (train, bus, or minivan), with multiple

departures available daily. By contrast, connecting Sumatra with Malaysia-GT requires either a direct Medan-Penang flight, lasting around 50 minutes, or the Batam-Johor Bahru ferry, taking approximately 1.5 to 2 hours at. While these durations are relatively comparable to the Malaysia-Thailand land route, the more significant challenge lies in Sumatra's connectivity with Thailand-GT. The direct Medan-Hat Yai flight that was previously operated is no longer running consistently, meaning travelers wishing to make this journey typically must transit through Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, or Jakarta, with total travel time reaching four to six hours or more and costs considerably higher than the Malaysia-Thailand land route. This connectivity gap concretely illustrates why the development of an integrated tourism route among IMT-GT member countries has yet to be realized evenly, particularly in the segment involving Indonesia-GT and Thailand-GT.

This structural geographical gap also affects the disparity in tourist visit statistics among member countries. According to CIMT (2026), this disparity stems from fundamental structural differences in each member region's geography. Malaysia-GT includes Kuala Lumpur International Airport, one of the busiest airports in Southeast Asia, while Thailand-GT has globally established beach destinations such as Phuket and Krabi, whereas Indonesia-GT, which only covers the Sumatra region, does not yet have access to an international hub airport of that caliber. This condition has driven Indonesia to shift its connectivity focus toward sea routes through ports in Riau Islands such as Batam, Tanjung Uban, and Tanjung Balai Karimun, while also underlying the urgency of the Dumai-Malacca Roll-on/Roll-off project, designed to connect Sumatra with Peninsular Malaysia. Unfortunately, by the end of the research period, this project was still under construction and had not become fully operational, so its impact on the implementation of tourism cooperation during the 2021-2024 period remained limited (Naja, 2025).

Infrastructure Availability as a Constraint on Cross-Border Tourism Connectivity

Third, infrastructure availability, also functions as a factor constraining Indonesia's implementation. As emphasized by Thant and Tang (1996), an efficient interregional value chain in subregional cooperation is marked by the availability of quality infrastructure. In an interview, the Ministry of Tourism (2026) claimed that physical infrastructure in the Indonesia-GT region is broadly adequate, pointing to existing air and road connectivity at priority destinations such as the Medan-Parapat Toll Road and Silangit Airport serving Lake Toba. However, the revocation of Silangit Airport's international status through Decree of the Minister of Transportation Number 31 of 2024, on grounds of minimal international passenger movement, has in fact weakened the airport's function as a cross-border connectivity hub (Utomo, 2024). This policy misalignment between the Ministry of Tourism, which seeks to promote Lake Toba's international accessibility, and the Ministry of Transportation, which prioritizes domestic flights, reflects sectoral ego among ministries at the central level. This condition has also affected the Toba Caldera Geopark, which received a yellow card warning from UNESCO in 2023 regarding management quality that had not met standards, thereby risking the weakening of the effectiveness of the Langkawi-Satun-Toba Geopark MoU's implementation.

Infrastructure limitations are also evident in the Tanjung Kelayang Special Economic Zone, Bangka Belitung, where development budget support from the Ministry of Public Works and Housing amounting to IDR 4.45 billion has not been matched by tourist visits due to limited maritime connectivity to the island (Nugroho, 2024). In an interview with CNBC Indonesia, the director of the Tanjung Kelayang SEZ, Napitupulu (2025), confirmed that limited infrastructure supporting maritime connectivity remains one of the main obstacles to tourism development in the area. A similar problem is seen in the 2nd IMT-GT Cruise Business Forum in 2022 which, according to the Ministry of Tourism (2026) in an interview, had by the end of the research period not yet been carried out due to shallow port depths unable to accommodate large cruise ships. Structurally, Indonesia-GT's maritime connectivity remains in stark contrast to Malaysia, which has Port Klang as the region's busiest cruise ship hub, and Southern Thailand, which has developed the Phuket Deep Sea Port as a center for the world's luxury cruise ships (Hamidin, 2025). This gap has also affected the realization of the Sabang-Phuket-Langkawi Tourism Belt project which, although agreed upon since 2017, had not been fully realized by 2024 due to the unavailability of adequate maritime connectivity infrastructure (Anuar et al., 2024).

Beyond the physical dimension, the need for digital infrastructure, such as visa facilitation and digital accommodation services, is also becoming increasingly urgent amid the shift in global tourism orientation toward quality tourism, which demands a seamless travel ecosystem, a need reinforced by CIMT (2026) in an interview, which emphasized that advancing IMT-GT's tourism agenda requires strong cross-sectoral coordination across tourism, transportation, immigration, and digital services alike.

Political and Institutional Commitment as the Determinant of Tourism Cooperation Implementation

Fourth, political and institutional commitment, was found to be the most dominant factor because it influences Indonesia's implementation at two levels simultaneously, namely national and local, while also determining the extent to which the other three factors can be optimized. Both informants in this study stated that political and institutional commitment is a fundamental factor that enables the other factors to be implemented

effectively. The presence of the Ministry of Tourism as the focal point in the Working Group on Tourism demonstrates relatively consistent institutional commitment, reflected in Indonesia's active role as chair of the IMT-GT Visit Year 2023-2025 and its participation in various forums such as the Strategic Planning Meeting, Senior Officials Meeting, and Ministerial Meeting. Nevertheless, the institutional restructuring from the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy into the Ministry of Tourism in 2024 also caused a rotation of working-level teams, which, according to CIMT (2026), required an adjustment period and had the potential to create a gap in the continuity of program implementation.

Indonesia's institutional capacity is also affected by the absence of an active National Tourism Organization other than the Ministry of Tourism, following the dissolution of the Indonesia Tourism Promotion Board in 2014 on the grounds of institutional efficiency (Astuti, 2020). This condition differs from Malaysia and Thailand, which respectively have Tourism Malaysia and the Tourism Authority of Thailand as promotional bodies that operate more adaptively without being disrupted by changes in ministerial structure, as emphasized by CIMT (2026) in an interview, so that the burden of coordinating Indonesia's tourism promotion rests on a single institution that simultaneously acts as the policy regulator. At the subnational level, the IMT-GT's institutional mechanism requires the active involvement of local governments, but in reality shows a parallel-disharmony pattern, following Soldatos's typology in Kuznetsov (2015), in which, of the ten Sumatran provinces covered under Indonesia-GT, the Ministry of Tourism (2026) revealed that only two to three provinces are actively involved in IMT-GT forums and programs, namely Aceh, North Sumatra, and South Sumatra, while the other seven provinces tend to be passive. The more active and committed a local government is, the greater the likelihood of connectivity development programs proceeding in its area (Abdullah et al., 2026). Budget limitations further reinforce this challenge, as the Ministry of Tourism (2026) stated that funding for IMT-GT programs remains available but very limited amid the government's budget efficiency policy, in line with the findings of Effendi and Aisyah (2024) that funding for community-based tourism programs such as the Tourism Village Forum remains highly dependent on local governments. Such funding constraints, in turn, directly limit infrastructure development and can lower the quality of the tourism experience the government aims to achieve (Rakhmadi et al., 2025). Ultimately, as emphasized by CIMT (2026), the IMT-GT is a country-driven agenda without a firm enforcement mechanism, so that without strong and consistent political commitment across all levels of government, the potential offered by economic complementarity, geographical proximity, and infrastructure availability will be difficult to realize effectively.

4. CONCLUSION

This study found that the strategic potential of IMT-GT, particularly tourism as a means of strengthening economic interdependence, has not yet led to optimal implementation in Indonesia. The four factors identified by Thant and Tang (1996) affected implementation in different ways. Economic complementarity supported implementation through the potential development of cross-border tourism packages, but this was limited by low international demand and the dominance of well-known tourism destinations. Geographical proximity also faced connectivity challenges because Sumatra is separated from Malaysia and Thailand by the Malacca Strait. Meanwhile, infrastructure availability remained limited, particularly in terms of air connectivity, destination management, and port facilities.

Political and institutional commitment was the most important factor because it affected the ability to optimize the other factors. Weak coordination between central and local governments, sectoral interests among institutions, and the low priority given by local governments to subregional cooperation were the main obstacles to Indonesia's implementation. This condition shows that the effectiveness of the flexible, non-binding, and country-driven IMT-GT depends greatly on the domestic capacity of each member country. Therefore, Indonesia's low level of implementation does not only reflect its national tourism performance, but also its limited ability to make use of the opportunities provided by IMT-GT.

This study has several limitations. The analysis focused on only one member country, Indonesia, and one cooperation pillar, namely tourism. This limits the study's ability to capture differences in implementation patterns across the three IMT-GT member states or across other cooperation pillars. Future research could therefore use a comparative approach by examining the implementation of all three member countries within the same pillar, or by applying this analytical framework to other subregional cooperation arrangements in Southeast Asia. Such comparative studies could provide a broader understanding of the patterns and factors that shape subregional cooperation outcomes in different national contexts.

Based on these findings, several measures are recommended. First, establishing an independent and sustainable National Tourism Organization (NTO), separate from the Ministry of Tourism's regulatory function, could strengthen Indonesia's tourism promotion capacity and ensure continuity that is less affected by institutional changes. This addresses a capacity gap that currently distinguishes Indonesia from Malaysia and Thailand. Second,

a formal coordination mechanism involving the Ministry of Tourism, the Coordinating Ministry for Economic Affairs, and the Ministry of Transportation is needed to align tourism promotion with connectivity and infrastructure planning. Third, incentive schemes, such as targeted funding allocations or priority access to national tourism promotion programs, should be provided to local governments that actively participate in IMT-GT forums and initiatives, in order to reduce the current disparity in contribution among provinces within the Indonesia-GT region.

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6. CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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