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Trade Structure Optimization and Breakthrough Pathways for Chongqing–ASEAN Trade under the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor Initiative

Zhai Haomiao[1], Ye Rui[1] & Lu Jing[1]

[1] School of International Finance and Trade, Sichuan International Studies University, Chongqing 400031, China

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Abstract

In the context of the development of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, trade ties between Chongqing and ASEAN have continued to deepen. The corridor has created new opportunities for inland regions to open up further and participate in the regional division of labor, although trade structure upgrading continues to face several constraints. Focusing on trade between Chongqing and ASEAN, this paper examines trade structure optimization through product and market diversification, the upgrading of trade modes, and the extension of firms into higher-value-added segments of cross-border industrial chains. It then analyzes the mechanisms through which corridor development may promote such optimization. The analysis indicates that trade between Chongqing and ASEAN has expanded overall and industrial ties have strengthened. However, challenges remain, including insufficient upgrading toward higher-value-added products and activities, inadequate cross-border industrial coordination, and limited diversification into new markets. Accordingly, this paper proposes pathways for optimizing trade structure through industrial upgrading, cross-border industrial cooperation, the development of trade services, and improved corridor connectivity. These measures aim to translate the corridor's advantages into stronger industrial capabilities and greater trade competitiveness.

Keywords

New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, Chongqing–ASEAN trade, trade structure optimization, industrial coordination

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1. Introduction

Comprehensively expanding opening-up in response to profound changes unseen in a century is an important strategic choice for China in promoting high-quality economic development in the new era. Global economic growth faces mounting headwinds, global industrial and supply chains are undergoing rapid restructuring, and regional development disparities are intertwined with the opportunities and challenges arising from a new round of scientific and technological revolution and industrial transformation. Against this background, China continues to use opening-up to promote reform, development, and innovation, thereby advancing economic transformation and upgrading as well as the high-quality development of foreign trade. As China's economy enters a new stage of development, foreign trade needs to shift from expansion in scale toward improvements in quality. Technological innovation, industrial upgrading, and innovation in trade modes have become important drivers of this transition (Hu, 2024; Liu et al., 2025).

The New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor is an important strategic initiative for promoting coordinated regional development and high-level opening-up in China. As its development progresses, the corridor is gradually evolving from a traditional transport route into an integrated platform for logistics, industrial cooperation, and regional opening-up. By connecting inland ports, border ports, and seaports, the corridor has improved transport conditions in western China and strengthened links between inland hubs and international markets, creating new logistics routes for inland regions to participate in international trade. It also connects the Silk Road Economic Belt with the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, promotes land-sea connectivity and regional cooperation, and supports an opening-up pattern characterized by links between land and sea, connectivity between domestic and international markets, and mutually reinforcing east–west connections. As a key logistics hub and operational coordination center for the corridor, Chongqing combines a strong manufacturing base, an integrated transport network, and established opening-up platforms. These advantages make it a representative case for examining how inland regions can develop foreign trade through transport corridors. ASEAN is an important trading partner for Chongqing, and the two sides have a solid foundation for cooperation, supported by geographical conditions, complementary industrial supply and demand, and policy frameworks. The corridor further strengthens the connectivity needed for logistics, industrial cooperation, and economic and trade exchanges between Chongqing and ASEAN.

Existing studies have examined the strategic significance, logistics efficiency, regional economic impacts, and implementation pathways of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor (Huang & Zeng, 2021; Jia et al., 2024). These studies suggest that corridor development can improve logistics conditions and reduce transport costs, creating favorable conditions for inland regions to expand opening-up and participate in the international division of labor (Huang & Zeng, 2021; Jiang et al., 2020). Related research further indicates that the corridor strengthens logistics links between western China and ASEAN and other markets. By improving logistics efficiency and trade facilitation and fostering industrial agglomeration and coordination, corridor development can support the growth of export-oriented industries in regions along its routes. Meanwhile, research on the new pattern of foreign trade has focused on the optimization of trade structure, innovation in trade modes, and

upgrading positions in global value chains, emphasizing a shift from growth in trade volume toward improvements in quality and efficiency. New forms and models of foreign trade help overcome the time and geographical constraints of traditional trade and diversify trade channels. Cross-border e-commerce, overseas warehouses, market procurement trade, integrated foreign trade services, bonded repair and maintenance, and offshore trade have emerged as important areas of development (Bai et al., 2021; Zhao, 2022).

Overall, existing research has examined the effects of corridor development from the perspectives of logistics efficiency, regional opening-up, and industrial development. However, further research is needed to clarify how the corridor's advantages can be translated into improvements in regional trade structure through industrial coordination and innovation in trade modes. To address this gap, this paper examines trade between Chongqing and ASEAN. It analyzes the potential mechanisms through which the corridor may promote the optimization of trade structure from four perspectives: trade costs, industrial coordination, trade modes, and institutional support. Drawing on the characteristics of Chongqing–ASEAN trade and the constraints it faces, the paper explores pathways for optimizing trade structure.

2. Theoretical Mechanisms Linking the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor to Trade Structure Optimization between Chongqing and ASEAN

2.1 Corridor Development Reduces Trade Costs and Deepens Trade Links

The New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor improves the conditions for Chongqing's participation in international trade by upgrading transport systems and logistics infrastructure. Improvements in multimodal transport networks and logistics organization can reduce the number of transport stages across regions, accelerate the movement of goods, and lower firms' logistics costs. Lower logistics and time costs can enhance the competitiveness of Chongqing's exports, improve firms' access to ASEAN markets, and create opportunities to diversify export products and destination markets. Geographically, Southwest China shares land borders with several ASEAN member states. By relying on the corridor and connecting through Guangxi and other transport hubs, Chongqing can improve its accessibility to ASEAN markets. Overall, improvements in cross-border transport conditions can support closer trade ties between Chongqing and ASEAN, facilitate the movement of intermediate goods, and create favorable conditions for adjustments in product and market structures.

2.2 Industrial Coordination Promotes Trade Structure Upgrading

The New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor facilitates the cross-border movement of components and intermediate goods, providing logistical support for a deeper division of labor between Chongqing and ASEAN. From a global value chain perspective, trade structure optimization involves not only an increase in trade volume but also the stages of cross-border production in which firms participate and their capacity to generate value added. Improved transport conditions for intermediate goods can strengthen connections between different stages of production and expand opportunities for cross-border supply-chain coordination and supporting activities. Chongqing's automotive and electronics industries complement production needs in some ASEAN countries, providing a foundation for cross-border industrial specialization. Building on improved logistics links and industrial complementarity, firms can strengthen cross-border production cooperation and technological innovation, increase product value added, and participate more extensively in higher-value-added activities, thereby promoting trade structure upgrading.

2.3 Digitalization and New Quality Productive Forces Promote the Transformation of Trade Modes

The development of digital technologies creates opportunities to transform traditional goods-trade practices and develop new forms of foreign trade. By connecting orders, transportation, customs clearance, and settlement, digital platforms and smart logistics can improve cross-border supply-chain coordination and reduce information and transaction costs. Integrating data as a factor of production into manufacturing and logistics can improve firms' responsiveness to overseas market demand and supply-chain conditions, thereby facilitating adjustments in production organization and trade services. Emerging trade modes, including cross-border e-commerce and digital trade, broaden firms' access to international markets and create new opportunities for trade innovation. Accordingly, integrating digital technologies with the corridor's logistics network can support the transformation of Chongqing–ASEAN trade from traditional goods transactions toward more digitally enabled, service-oriented, and diversified forms of trade.

2.4 Institutional Innovation Improves Regional Trade Facilitation

The development of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor requires not only infrastructure support but also institutional innovation to improve trade facilitation and reduce institution-related costs for firms engaged in international trade. Effective coordination of customs procedures, transport standards, and regulatory rules can reduce duplicative procedures and information asymmetries, thereby improving trade efficiency. Regional cooperation mechanisms such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) provide an institutional framework for cross-border sourcing and regional production specialization through tariff arrangements, rules of origin, and related institutional coordination. Institutional coordination can therefore complement logistics-network development, reduce barriers to cross-border industrial cooperation, and support adjustments in the trade structure between Chongqing and ASEAN.

3. Current State of Trade Structure Optimization between Chongqing and ASEAN under the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor Initiative

3.1 Trade Links between Chongqing and ASEAN Continue to Deepen

ASEAN has long been an important trading partner for Chongqing, and the two sides have an established foundation for economic and trade cooperation. Their cooperation is supported by geographical conditions, complementarity in industrial supply and demand, policy arrangements, the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and plans for infrastructure connectivity. In terms of trade volume, imports and exports between Chongqing and ASEAN have fluctuated but generally followed an upward trend. From 1999 to 2019, total trade between Chongqing and ASEAN increased from US$88 million to US$15.763 billion. Over the period from 1999 to 2024, trade with ASEAN accounted for an average of 15.62% of Chongqing's total imports and exports, indicating that ASEAN maintained a relatively stable position in the city's foreign trade. Following the release of the Overall Plan for the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in 2019, the corridor was elevated to a national-level strategic initiative, supporting stronger economic and trade cooperation between Chongqing and ASEAN through rail–sea intermodal transport and other modes. From 2019 to 2024, Chongqing's annual trade with ASEAN exceeded RMB 100 billion, averaging RMB 116.393 billion per year and accounting for an average of 16.15% of Chongqing's total imports and exports. These figures indicate that ASEAN has remained an important trading partner for Chongqing.

3.2 Chongqing–ASEAN Trade Exhibits Industry-Linked Characteristics

Trade between Chongqing and ASEAN has developed a structure closely linked to Chongqing's industrial base. As some ASEAN countries have industrialized and upgraded their industries, demand has grown for Chongqing's automobile and motorcycle components, electrical machinery, and electronic information products. Chongqing also imports tropical agricultural products, mineral resources, chips, and electronic components from ASEAN, reflecting a degree of industrial complementarity between the two sides. In the first half of 2024, electronic information products accounted for more than half of Chongqing's exports to ASEAN by value, while automobile components accounted for approximately one-fifth. Imports included rubber, tropical agricultural products, and mineral resources. Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand are among Chongqing's principal ASEAN trading partners. The composition of Chongqing's major ASEAN trading partners has also changed over time: Malaysia ranked first during 1999-2018, whereas Vietnam took the lead during 2019-2024. This shift indicates a change in the country composition of Chongqing–ASEAN trade. In 2024, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand remained Chongqing's major ASEAN trading partners, and trade was relatively concentrated among these countries. Overall, trade between Chongqing and ASEAN involves not only the exchange of goods but also component supply and cross-border industrial linkages, reflecting the close relationship between trade structure and regional industrial specialization.

3.3 Logistics and Trade-Service Systems for the Corridor Have Gradually Improved

Chongqing has gradually developed a logistics network linking rail, road, and maritime transport to support trade with ASEAN through the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor. Chongqing launched a cross-border road freight service to Hanoi, Vietnam, in 2016, launched its first rail freight service to Southeast Asia in 2018, and introduced the "ASEAN Express" in 2024, helping integrate the China–Europe Railway Express with the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor. By September 2024, rail–sea intermodal services between Chongqing and Vietnam had handled more than 53,000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), with cargo valued at more than RMB 10 billion. In trade with Thailand, Chongqing's electronic products are transported to Thailand by rail and sea, while Thai agricultural products are shipped to Chongqing using cold-chain logistics. The corridor has also strengthened logistics links between Chongqing and Malaysia. On the trade-services front, Chongqing has introduced policies to facilitate cross-border trade and promote new forms and models of foreign trade, including measures to streamline customs clearance, support cross-border e-commerce, and develop overseas warehouses. In 2024, Chongqing's cross-border e-commerce exports to ASEAN grew by more than 10%, indicating continued expansion of these trade channels.

4. Challenges to Optimizing the Trade Structure between Chongqing and ASEAN

4.1 The Trade Structure Requires Further Upgrading

Some of Chongqing's exports to ASEAN, particularly electronic information products and automobile components, remain concentrated in assembly and basic manufacturing, with limited participation in higher-value-added products and service activities. Imports, meanwhile, remain concentrated in resource-based and primary products. Although this trade structure reflects industrial complementarity between the two sides, it also leaves trade vulnerable to fluctuations in international raw material prices and changes in end-market demand. In terms of destination markets, Chongqing's trade with ASEAN is concentrated mainly in Vietnam, Malaysia, and Thailand, while opportunities to expand trade with

other ASEAN markets remain underexplored. A relatively concentrated market structure can help deepen established trade relationships, but it may also increase vulnerability to changes in demand among major trading partners. Further diversification of destination markets is therefore needed.

4.2 Coordination across Industrial and Supply Chains Remains Insufficient

Chongqing and ASEAN have developed a degree of industrial specialization in the automotive and electronics sectors, but cross-border coordination across research and development, production, and other stages remains insufficient. Cooperation between Chongqing's automobile and motorcycle industries and ASEAN is still concentrated mainly on finished vehicles and components, while local production and supporting-service networks require further development. Although the electronics sector has established some cross-border component-sourcing links, coordination in key segments of the industrial chain remains limited. Some Chongqing firms also continue to rely primarily on original-equipment manufacturing (OEM) arrangements in ASEAN markets, with limited capabilities in local operations and independent brand development. Industrial cooperation between Chongqing and ASEAN has therefore not yet fully extended from product trade to production collaboration and a division of labor along value chains. Consequently, the logistics links created by the corridor have not yet been fully translated into stronger industrial-chain coordination and value-added gains.

4.3 Digital Trade and New Trade Modes Remain Underdeveloped

Although cross-border e-commerce and other new forms of trade between Chongqing and ASEAN have developed to some extent, the application of digital technologies in trade and supply-chain management remains limited. Some firms rely primarily on third-party platforms to conduct overseas business, while digital operations remain insufficiently integrated with logistics, warehousing, financial services, and after-sales support. As a result, an integrated cross-border operating system covering transactions, transportation, warehousing, and services has yet to be fully established. Chongqing's cross-border e-commerce exports to ASEAN continued to grow in 2024, indicating that new trade channels are expanding. However, overseas warehousing, local delivery, and other supporting capabilities still require improvement to support firms' long-term operations. Digital trade is still used mainly to expand transaction channels rather than to integrate supply chains and strengthen localized operations, limiting firms' ability to develop ASEAN markets sustainably and upgrade their trade modes.

4.4 Trade Facilitation and Institutional Coordination Need Improvement

The New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor has improved logistics links between Chongqing and ASEAN, but inadequate coordination among transport modes and differences in cross-border rules continue to constrain trade efficiency. Although Chongqing's Guoyuan Port has established connections among rail, road, and waterway transport, standards across these modes have not yet been fully harmonized. Cargo may still require repeated container changes and inspections during transshipment, increasing transport time. Differences in track gauge between the China–Laos Railway and Thailand's railway system also mean that some cargo must be transloaded at the border, reducing the efficiency of cross-border transport connections. At the market-access level, ASEAN countries differ in product certification, inspection and quarantine procedures, and technical standards. Chongqing firms exporting to different ASEAN markets must comply with the relevant requirements, increasing compliance costs and market-entry time. Therefore, expanding logistics routes alone is not sufficient to substantially improve trade facilitation. Better coordination of multimodal transport standards, customs procedures, and cross-border regulatory rules is also necessary.

5. Pathways for Optimizing Chongqing–ASEAN Trade Structure under the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor Initiative

5.1 Upgrade Industrial Structure and Enhance the Value Added of Trade

To address the limited value added of some export products, Chongqing should build on its strengths in the automotive, electronic information, and equipment-manufacturing industries to promote exports of products with higher technological content and value added. The automotive industry should prioritize the development of new-energy vehicles and intelligent connected vehicles; the electronic information industry should accelerate the development of high-end products such as integrated circuits and advanced display panels; and the equipment-manufacturing industry should promote industrial robots and intelligent manufacturing equipment. Firms should also be encouraged to move beyond assembly and expand into higher-value-added activities, including research and development, design, brand marketing, and after-sales services. This would help firms capture more value within cross-border production networks. While consolidating existing export strengths in electromechanical products, Chongqing should expand trade in specialty agricultural products and processed agricultural goods, while diversifying its export products and destination markets in response to demand in different ASEAN countries.

5.2 Deepen Cross-Border Industrial Cooperation and Strengthen Firms' Local Operating Capabilities

To deepen cross-border industrial cooperation and strengthen firms' local operating capabilities, Chongqing should support firms in key industries, including automotive, electronic information, and equipment manufacturing, in establishing production bases, research and development centers, and local service networks in ASEAN. These efforts would help develop cross-border industrial chains spanning research and development, production, and sales. Through cross-border industrial parks and overseas production bases, Chongqing firms should strengthen their research and development and high-end component manufacturing capabilities while cooperating with ASEAN firms in assembly, marketing, and supporting services to establish complementary divisions of labor.

5.3 Develop Digital Trade and Strengthen Support Systems for New Trade Modes

Building on existing cross-border e-commerce activities, Chongqing should improve digital business channels and cross-border trade-service systems serving ASEAN markets to help firms expand overseas. Public service platforms for cross-border e-commerce should be strengthened, and information sharing among orders, logistics, customs clearance, and financial services should be improved to promote coordination among the trade, transport-capacity, capital, and data chains. To reduce firms' reliance on third-party platforms and address gaps in local service infrastructure, Chongqing should support the development of independently operated cross-border e-commerce channels and expand overseas warehouses in key ASEAN markets. Cooperation between overseas warehouses and local logistics providers should also be encouraged to establish cross-border service networks covering international transport, warehousing, distribution, and after-sales services.

5.4 Improve Multimodal Transport and Institutional Coordination to Facilitate Trade

To address inefficiencies in multimodal transport, Chongqing should improve coordination among rail, road, and waterway transport, harmonize logistics standards, and reduce cargo transshipment. Major hubs such as Guoyuan Port should strengthen coordination with maritime gateways in Guangxi, ASEAN ports, and overseas logistics nodes to optimize cargo transfers and transport organization and reduce logistics costs. In terms of cross-border institutional cooperation, Chongqing should make use of mechanisms such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the

China–Singapore (Chongqing) Demonstration Initiative on Strategic Connectivity to strengthen coordination with ASEAN countries on product certification, inspection and quarantine, and technical standards. Greater alignment of standards and mutual recognition of certifications should be promoted to reduce repeated certification and market-access costs. In addition, the International Trade Single Window should be improved, information sharing and standardization of rail, road, and waterway transport documents should be advanced, and the one-document system for multimodal transport should be promoted to reduce duplicate declarations and institutional barriers at the interfaces between transport modes.

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