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Research on the Path of High-Level Two-Way Investment Opening-Up Between China and ASEAN Driven by the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China

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Abstract: As a landmark project of the Belt and Road Initiative, the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China has become an important economic corridor and opening-up platform connecting western China with ASEAN countries. Grounded in the Eclectic Paradigm of International Production, the Investment Inducing Factors Combination Theory and the Proximity-Concentration Trade-off Theory, this paper systematically sorts out the realistic foundation for the corridor to advance high-level two-way investment opening-up between China and ASEAN. It conducts an in-depth analysis of the specific implementation paths from six dimensions: logistics channel upgrading, industrial collaborative layout, institutional and rule alignment, financial support strengthening, digital empowerment and innovation, and hub economy cultivation. The research shows that through the chain transmission logic of "channel driving logistics, logistics driving economy and trade, economy and trade driving industries, and industries gathering factors", the corridor has formed a logistics network covering 138 domestic stations and reaching 584 ports in 127 countries and regions worldwide. In the first three quarters of 2025, the import and export volume of western China via the corridor reached 611.5 billion yuan, up 19.3%, and the corridor's driving effect on two-way investment has become increasingly prominent. On this basis, this paper puts forward path optimization schemes and policy recommendations for the 15th Five-Year Plan period, providing theoretical reference and practical guidance for promoting high-level two-way investment opening-up between China and ASEAN.

Keywords: New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China; China-ASEAN; Two-Way Investment Opening-Up; Path Research; High-Quality Development

1. Introduction

The Report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China explicitly set forth the strategic task of "accelerating the construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China". The Fourth Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China further emphasized "high-quality Belt and Road cooperation", and the Proposal for the 15th Five-Year Plan clearly stated to "speed up the construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China"[1]. Since the trial operation of the first Chongqing-Guangxi-Singapore rail-sea intermodal freight train in 2017, the corridor has evolved from an initial inter-provincial cooperation framework into an international economic corridor participated by 13 domestic provinces and municipalities and 5 ASEAN countries, emerging as the fastest-growing economic corridor and new highland of opening-up under the Belt and Road Initiative.

From the perspective of two-way investment, China-ASEAN investment cooperation lies at the core of regional economic integration. In the first three quarters of 2025, the import and export volume of western China via the corridor hit 611.5 billion yuan with a year-on-year growth of 19.3%, pulling up the foreign trade growth of western China by 3.4 percentage points. The effects of "channel driving logistics, logistics driving economy and trade, and economy and trade driving industries" have gradually come into play. In September 2025, the rail-sea intermodal cargo volume exceeded 1 million TEUs for the first time, marking a qualitative leap in the corridor's transportation capacity. However, the promoting effect of corridor construction on two-way investment is not automatically realized, but needs to be transmitted and implemented through a set of specific paths. How to systematically identify and optimize these paths so that they can better serve high-level two-way investment opening-up between China and ASEAN is an important topic requiring in-depth research at present.

This paper aims to systematically construct a path system for the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China to drive high-level two-way investment opening-up between China and ASEAN, clarify the function orientation, implementation priorities and synergistic relations of each path, and provide theoretical support and policy reference for deepening corridor construction and boosting high-quality two-way investment development.

2. Realistic Foundation for the Corridor to Promote Two-Way Investment Opening-Up

2.1 Major Progress in Corridor Construction

Since its launch in 2017, the construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China has made remarkable achievements. In terms of infrastructure, the corridor has formed a parallel pattern of three major transportation modes: rail-sea intermodal transport, international railway through transport, and cross-border highway shuttle buses. As of April 2026, the corridor's logistics network covers 138 domestic stations and reaches 584 ports in 127 countries and regions across the globe [2]. In September 2025, the rail-sea intermodal cargo volume exceeded 1 million TEUs for the first time, an increase of more than 10 times compared with 2019.

In terms of cooperation mechanisms, a new pattern of joint promotion by 13 domestic provinces and municipalities and 5 ASEAN countries has taken shape. Departments including customs, taxation, the People's Bank of China, courts and trade promotion agencies have successively established cooperation mechanisms in relevant fields. In December 2025, eight departments led by the People's Bank of China jointly issued the Opinions on Financial Support for Accelerating the Construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China, putting forward 21 key measures in six aspects such as improving the organizational cooperation system, strengthening capital financing services, and optimizing cross-border capital settlement facilitation [3].

In terms of trade driving effect, in the first three quarters of 2025, the import and export volume of western China via the corridor reached 611.5 billion yuan, up 19.3%, driving the foreign trade growth of western China by 3.4 percentage points. The effects of channel driving logistics, logistics driving economy and trade, and economy and trade driving industries have gradually manifested.

2.2 Development Status of China-ASEAN Two-Way Investment

From the perspective of China's outward investment in ASEAN, China has remained ASEAN's largest trading partner for many consecutive years, and the stock of China's investment in ASEAN has kept growing. Provinces along the corridor, such as Chongqing, Sichuan, Guangxi and Yunnan, have registered significantly higher growth rates of investment in ASEAN than the national average [4]. The investment scope has expanded from traditional resource development and infrastructure construction to manufacturing, digital economy, new energy and other fields. The advancement of the "Three Countries, Three Parks" international production capacity cooperation among China, Laos and Thailand indicates that investment cooperation along the corridor has shifted from individual projects to park-based and cluster-based development.

From the perspective of ASEAN's inward investment in China, ASEAN countries including Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand have maintained growing investment in western China. Platform carriers such as the Beibu Gulf Port Cluster and Chongqing Hub Port Industrial Park provide favorable conditions for ASEAN enterprises to invest in western China. ASEAN's investment in China is spreading from coastal areas to inland cities along the corridor, and the investment structure is also being optimized and upgraded continuously.

2.3 Main Challenges Facing Two-Way Investment

Despite notable progress, China-ASEAN two-way investment still faces prominent problems: first, the investment structure needs optimization, with a relatively low proportion of investment in high-tech industries; second, the level of investment facilitation remains to be improved, and the cross-border investment approval process is relatively complicated; third, the investment protection mechanism is not sound enough, with weaknesses in safeguarding investors' rights and interests; fourth, financial service support is insufficient, and cross-border financing channels are limited; fifth, the degree of industrial synergy is not high, and the in-depth integration of industrial and supply chains has not yet been achieved.

3. Path System for the Corridor to Advance Two-Way Investment Opening-Up

3.1 Logistics Channel Upgrading Path: Consolidating the Physical Foundation of Two-Way Investment

Logistics channel upgrading is the fundamental path for the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China to promote two-way investment opening-up. Its core logic is to reduce the logistics and transaction costs of two-way investment by improving the corridor's transportation capacity and service level, so as to provide efficient physical support for investment activities.

Accelerate the construction of main channel infrastructure. During the 15th Five-Year Plan period, efforts should be made to speed up major projects such as the Huangtong-Baise Railway and the second track of the Guizhou-Guangxi Railway, and smoothly open up the eastern, central and western main channels as soon as possible [5]. Upon completion and opening to navigation in 2026, the Pinglu Canal will build an efficient river-sea intermodal system and add a new transportation dimension to the corridor. On the China-Vietnam route, we should promote the accelerated construction of railways and expressways connecting Vietnam and Guangxi to further enhance China-Vietnam connectivity.

Improve multimodal transport service quality. We should further optimize the connection efficiency of rail-sea intermodal transport, international railway through transport and cross-border highway shuttle buses, advance the reform of the "single document system" and "single container system", and realize seamless transshipment of goods across different transport modes. The experience of rail-sea intermodal cargo exceeding 1 million TEUs in 2025 proves that the efficiency improvement of multimodal transport exerts a significant driving effect on trade and investment.

Expand the corridor coverage network. On the basis of the existing 138 domestic stations and 584 overseas ports, we should further expand the corridor's coverage, increase the frequency of train operations, and improve the accessibility and convenience of corridor services. In particular, we should strengthen connections with the inland areas of ASEAN countries and extend corridor services to the ASEAN hinterland markets.

The promoting effect of this path on two-way investment is mainly reflected in three aspects: reducing the transportation cost of investment goods and intermediate goods, and cutting the initial input of fixed asset investment; shortening the supply chain response time and improving the operation efficiency of transnational production networks; expanding market coverage and enhancing the expected return on investment.

3.2 Industrial Collaborative Layout Path: Building Industrial Carriers for Two-Way Investment

Industrial collaborative layout is the core path for the corridor to promote two-way investment opening-up. Its core logic is to guide the rational distribution of industries along the corridor, form an industrial pattern with complementary advantages and coordinated development, and provide industrial bearing space and cooperation platforms for two-way investment.

Advance the construction of international production capacity cooperation parks. The "Three Countries, Three Parks" international production capacity cooperation among China, Laos and Thailand is a typical example of industrial synergy along the corridor. Building on this, we should further expand the layout of international production capacity cooperation parks and build more cooperation parks in ASEAN countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia and Malaysia. Meanwhile, corresponding industrial undertaking parks should be deployed along the domestic section of the corridor to form a cooperation pattern of "two countries, two parks" and "multiple countries, multiple parks".

Promote in-depth integration of industrial and supply chains. Relying on the corridor's advantages, we should drive the in-depth integration of industrial and supply chains between China and ASEAN in fields such as electronic information, automobile manufacturing, new energy and new materials. Through the mode of "chain-leading enterprises + supporting enterprises", we will guide upstream and downstream enterprises to distribute along the corridor and form cross-border industrial clusters. The construction experience of Chongqing Hub Port Industrial Park shows that developing hub economy with hub nodes as carriers can effectively boost industrial agglomeration and two-way investment.

Cultivate characteristic industrial clusters along the corridor. We should give full play to the comparative advantages of regions along the corridor and foster distinctive industrial clusters. Guangxi may focus on cross-border processing trade and port-oriented industries targeting ASEAN; Chongqing and Sichuan may prioritize electronic information, automobile manufacturing and equipment manufacturing; Yunnan may concentrate on biomedicine and agricultural product processing for South and Southeast Asia. Through differentiated positioning and coordinated development, a new landscape of industrial investment along the corridor will take shape.

The promoting effect of this path on two-way investment is mainly reflected in: providing clear industrial directions and cooperation platforms for two-way investment; reducing investment risks and uncertainties through industrial chain synergy; improving economies of scale and scope of investment via industrial cluster effects.

3.3 Institutional and Rule Alignment Path: Optimizing the Institutional Environment for Two-Way Investment

Institutional and rule alignment is the guarantee path for the corridor to promote two-way investment opening-up. Its core logic is to reduce institutional transaction costs by promoting the alignment and coordination of trade and investment rules among countries and regions along the corridor, so as to create a stable, transparent and predictable institutional environment for two-way investment.

Fully leverage RCEP rule dividends. The entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has provided a more favorable institutional framework for China-ASEAN two-way investment. We should make full use of RCEP's investment facilitation clauses and rules of origin accumulation to lower investment thresholds and trade costs. Meanwhile, we will actively advance the construction of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area 3.0 and further deepen rule alignment in investment access, investment protection, dispute settlement and other aspects.

Improve the "13+2" inter-provincial consultation and cooperation mechanism. We should promote in-depth and solid inter-provincial consultation and cooperation, and form a closer cooperation mechanism in investment promotion, industrial collaboration, customs clearance facilitation and other fields. In particular, we should strengthen policy coordination among provinces along the corridor, avoid homogeneous competition, and form joint efforts to promote two-way investment.

Enhance investment facilitation. We should simplify the cross-border investment approval process, implement "one-stop" services, and shorten the investment approval cycle. We will strengthen intellectual property protection, improve the investor rights and interests protection mechanism, and boost investor confidence. Efforts will be made to establish a cross-border investment dispute settlement mechanism to provide effective legal relief channels for investors.

Promote standard and qualification mutual recognition. We should advance the mutual recognition of product standards, technical standards and vocational qualifications along the corridor to reduce the compliance costs of cross-border operations for enterprises. Especially in emerging fields such as digital economy and green economy, we should speed up standard alignment to create more favorable conditions for two-way investment.

The promoting effect of this path on two-way investment is mainly reflected in: reducing institutional transaction costs and lowering investment uncertainty; improving investment protection and enhancing investor confidence; facilitating investment, shortening the investment cycle and improving investment efficiency.

3.4 Financial Support Strengthening Path: Activating the Capital Momentum of Two-Way Investment

Financial support strengthening is an enabling path for the corridor to promote two-way investment opening-up. Its core logic is to provide sufficient capital support and convenient financial services for two-way investment by improving the financial service system and innovating financial products and services.

Implement financial support policies. In December 2025, eight departments led by the People's Bank of China jointly issued the Opinions on Financial Support for Accelerating the Construction of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China, which put forward 21 key measures covering the improvement of the organizational cooperation system, the strengthening of capital financing services, and the optimization of cross-border capital settlement facilitation. We should accelerate the implementation of these policy measures to ensure the full release of policy dividends.

Innovate cross-border investment and financing products. We should encourage financial institutions to develop financial products and services tailored to the two-way investment needs along the corridor, such as cross-border supply chain finance, cross-border industrial investment funds and cross-border financial leasing. Eligible enterprises will be supported to raise cross-border investment funds through bond issuance, listing and financing and other channels.

Optimize cross-border capital settlement facilitation. We should promote the use of RMB in trade and investment along the corridor and expand the scale of cross-border RMB settlement. We will optimize foreign exchange management policies, simplify the approval procedures for cross-border capital flows, and improve capital turnover efficiency.

Strengthen financial risk prevention. While promoting financial innovation, we should strengthen the monitoring and prevention of cross-border financial risks, establish and improve risk early warning and emergency response mechanisms, and ensure the safety and sustainability of financial support for two-way investment.

The promoting effect of this path on two-way investment is mainly reflected in: providing sufficient capital support for two-way investment; reducing financing costs and improving return on investment; facilitating cross-border capital flows and improving investment efficiency; diversifying investment risks and boosting investment confidence.

3.5 Digital Empowerment and Innovation Path: Elevating the Intelligent Level of Two-Way Investment

Digital empowerment and innovation is an innovative path for the corridor to promote two-way investment opening-up. Its core logic is to improve the intelligent and convenient level of two-way investment and foster new investment growth points in the digital economy sector by empowering corridor construction and investment services with digital technology.

Advance the construction of the digital land-sea trade corridor. We should speed up the building of the digital New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor and promote the digital transformation of corridor logistics, trade, finance and other links. Relying on the national blockchain network, we will promote the innovative application of blockchain technology, build trusted interaction capabilities for public data on the chain, share data elements securely, and collaboratively enable business model innovation.

Build smart ports and digital customs clearance systems. We should promote the intelligent transformation of ports along the corridor, construct smart ports and digital customs clearance systems, and realize automated and intelligent customs clearance processes. Through the "single window" platform, we will integrate customs clearance, logistics, finance and other information to provide enterprises with "one-stop" digital services.

Cultivate new investment areas in the digital economy. Relying on the corridor’s advantages, we should promote China-ASEAN investment cooperation in the digital economy field, with a focus on two-way investment in cross-border e-commerce, digital trade, smart cities, artificial intelligence and other sectors. The resource integration capacity of hub cities and national-level new areas along the corridor is continuously improving, providing sound bearing conditions for digital economy investment.

Build a digital investment service platform. We should develop a digital service platform for China-ASEAN two-way investment, integrating functions such as investment information, policy interpretation, project matching and legal consultation, to provide investors with all-round and whole-process digital services.

The promoting effect of this path on two-way investment is mainly reflected in: improving the transparency and accessibility of investment information; reducing investment risks caused by information asymmetry; fostering new investment growth points in the digital economy; improving the efficiency and convenience of investment services.

Hub economy cultivation is a carrier-based path for the corridor to promote two-way investment opening-up. Its core logic is to gather logistics, trade, industry, finance and other factor resources by building high-level hub nodes, so as to form an agglomeration highland and radiation center for two-way investment.

Build high-level hub ports and hub cities. We should develop the hub economy with Chongqing Hub Port Industrial Park as the core driver, advance the construction of the Beibu Gulf International Gateway Port, and build a highland for opening-up and cooperation facing ASEAN. Relying on ports and comprehensive bonded zones, we will vigorously develop bonded logistics, processing trade, cross-border e-commerce and other business forms to expand and strengthen the hub economy.

Build a multi-level hub system. We should establish a multi-level hub system with Chongqing, Chengdu, Nanning and Kunming as core hubs, Guiyang, Lanzhou and Xi'an as regional hubs, and small and medium-sized cities along the route as node hubs. Hubs at all levels will form complementary functions and coordinated linkage, jointly serving two-way investment opening-up.

Develop hub-preferred industries. We should focus on hub-preferred industries that are highly sensitive to logistics timeliness and costs, such as electronic information, biomedicine, cold chain logistics and cross-border e-commerce. Through the agglomeration effect of the hub economy, we will attract relevant industrial investment to gather along the corridor.

Promote the linkage development between hubs and hinterlands. We should strengthen the linkage between hub nodes and the hinterland economy, and transform the opening-up advantages of hubs into the development advantages of hinterlands through the "hub + hinterland" mode. We will promote in-depth cooperation between hub cities and surrounding areas in industrial collaboration, factor flow, market sharing and other aspects.

The promoting effect of this path on two-way investment is mainly reflected in: reducing the comprehensive cost of investment through the agglomeration effect; expanding the market space of investment through the hub's radiation function; improving investment facilitation through the hub's service function; enhancing investment attractiveness through the hub's brand effect.

4. Synergistic Mechanism and Guarantee Conditions for Path Implementation

4.1 Synergistic Relationship Among the Six Paths

The six paths mentioned above do not exist in isolation, but form an integrated system that supports and interacts with each other. The logistics channel upgrading path provides the physical foundation for other paths; the industrial collaborative layout path defines the industrial direction for two-way investment; the institutional and rule alignment path offers institutional guarantee for two-way investment; the financial support strengthening path provides capital support for two-way investment; the digital empowerment and innovation path delivers technical support for two-way investment; the hub economy cultivation path supplies spatial carriers for two-way investment.

In the implementation process, attention should be paid to the synergy and coordination among all paths: logistics channel upgrading should be aligned with industrial layout to avoid the problem of "channels without industries"; institutional and rule alignment should be matched with financial innovation to ensure that institutional dividends can be effectively transmitted through financial channels; digital empowerment should be integrated with hub construction to build a smart hub economic system.

4.2 Guarantee Conditions for Path Implementation

First, organizational guarantee. We should give full play to the role of the "13+2" inter-provincial consultation and cooperation mechanism, and strengthen coordination and cooperation between the central and local governments as well as among local governments. A special working mechanism for the corridor to promote two-way investment should be established to clarify the division of responsibilities and strengthen supervision and inspection.

Second, capital guarantee. We should increase fiscal support for corridor infrastructure construction and public service platform construction. Social capital will be guided to participate in corridor construction and operation, forming a diversified investment and financing pattern.

Third, talent guarantee. We should strengthen talent training in corridor construction and two-way investment, especially the cultivation of compound and international talents. Cooperation among universities, scientific research institutions and enterprises will be promoted to provide intellectual support for the corridor to advance two-way investment.

Fourth, security guarantee. We should strengthen security risk assessment and prevention along the corridor, and establish and improve security early warning and emergency response mechanisms [6]. In particular, we should pay attention to the impact of geopolitical risks, exchange rate risks, legal risks and other factors on two-way investment, and provide investors with effective risk prevention tools.

4.3 Priority Arrangement for Path Implementation

Based on the urgency, feasibility and influence of each path, it is recommended to advance them in the following priority order:

Short term (2026–2027): Focus on the logistics channel upgrading path and institutional and rule alignment path, accelerate the supporting construction after the Pinglu Canal opens to navigation, and promote the full release of RCEP rule dividends.

Medium term (2028–2030): Focus on the industrial collaborative layout path and financial support strengthening path, promote the large-scale development of international production capacity cooperation parks, and implement all measures of the financial support policies.

Long term (2031–2035): Focus on the digital empowerment and innovation path and hub economy cultivation path, fully complete the construction of the digital New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, and form a hub economic system with international competitiveness.

5. Conclusion

By constructing a six-dimensional path system of "logistics channel upgrading – industrial collaborative layout – institutional and rule alignment – financial support strengthening – digital empowerment and innovation – hub economy cultivation", this paper systematically analyzes the realization paths for the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China to promote high-level two-way investment opening-up between China and ASEAN. The main conclusions are drawn as follows:

First, the promotion of two-way investment opening-up by the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China is a systematic project driven by the synergy of multiple paths. The six paths, from the dimensions of physical foundation, industrial carrier, institutional environment, capital momentum, technical support and spatial carrier, jointly form a complete path system for the corridor to advance two-way investment opening-up.

Second, there are clear logical relations and synergistic mechanisms among the paths. Logistics channel upgrading is the foundation, industrial collaborative layout is the core, institutional and rule alignment is the guarantee, financial support strengthening is the enabler, digital empowerment and innovation is the driving force, and hub economy cultivation is the carrier. The six paths support each other and function synergistically, jointly serving the goal of high-level two-way investment opening-up between China and ASEAN.

Third, path implementation should follow the priority arrangement of "consolidating the foundation in the short term, strengthening industries in the medium term, and upgrading the level in the long term". We should advance the implementation of each path in stages with clear priorities to maximize the corridor's effect in promoting two-way investment opening-up.

Finally, during the 15th Five-Year Plan period, major opportunities such as the opening of the Pinglu Canal to navigation, the deepening of China-Vietnam connectivity, the implementation of financial support policies and the construction of the digital corridor will inject new impetus and space into the implementation of all paths. The corridor boasts broad prospects for driving high-level two-way investment opening-up between China and ASEAN.

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