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## Strategic Maritime Boundaries for Trilateral Cooperation: Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea

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### Article Info:

### Abstract

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#### Keywords:

Connectivity, exports, fishery, marine resources, prosperity

**Purpose:** This study examines the development of trilateral economic cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea, focusing on maritime transport connectivity, fisheries management, and tourism and education collaboration. The research highlights how these initiatives can support regional integration and promote sustainable economic growth in border areas.

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**Study Design/Methodology/Approach:** The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach by analysing secondary data on transportation networks, fisheries production, and cross-border trade. It integrates theoretical perspectives on international trade, blue economy, and regional cooperation to evaluate the potential and challenges of trilateral partnerships.

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**Findings:** The study finds that improved sea route connectivity can reduce transportation costs, enhance export competitiveness, and stimulate investment and trade. Collaboration in fisheries can boost local livelihoods through increased production, job creation, and technology transfer. Furthermore, tourism and education cooperation can strengthen regional ties, improve human resource quality, and support sustainable economic development.

**Originality/Value:** This study contributes to the literature on regional economic cooperation by providing insights into the strategic potential of trilateral partnerships in eastern Indonesia. It highlights practical recommendations for enhancing connectivity, fostering resource sustainability, and promoting social and economic development in maritime border areas.

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## INTRODUCTION

Strategic relations among Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) are shaped by their geographical proximity and shared historical interactions. These nations are not only connected through maritime borders but also by a land border between Indonesia and PNG. In these border areas, indigenous peoples of the Melanesian race maintain kinship ties, such as those between the Kanum tribe in Merauke Regency and related tribes in the Morehead District of PNG (Metherall et al., 2022). Similarly, cultural bonds also extend to the indigenous populations of northern Australia. This long-standing socio-cultural connection predates the formal establishment of national borders.

Moreover, these countries share a history of environmental cooperation, notably in managing conservation areas like Wasur National Park in Merauke, Tonda National Park in PNG, and Kakadu National Park in Australia. Despite such cultural and environmental collaborations, the broader economic and strategic relationships among these countries have not been optimised. National borders continue to be viewed primarily as restrictive demarcations, hindering the free movement of goods, services, and people (Villanueva et al., 2020). However, global examples demonstrate that cross-border governance can foster economic integration and development (Forbes, 2022).

Currently, land connectivity between Indonesia and PNG has improved through infrastructure developments such as the Transnational Border Post (PLBN) at Sota in Merauke, which facilitates cross-border trade (Mandibondibo et al., 2022). Nonetheless, there remains a critical gap in sea connectivity despite the strategic location of maritime borders with Australia and PNG. This lack of sea route infrastructure restricts opportunities for economic growth and regional integration.

Given its ambition to become a global maritime axis, Indonesia has prioritised maritime development. However, the absence of sea routes connecting the southern Papua region to Australia and PNG undermines this goal. Enhanced connectivity in this area could significantly contribute to trade relations, linking Oceania, New Zealand, and other Pacific economies to Southeast Asia. Progress in land-based infrastructure has demonstrated positive economic outcomes, but comparable advancements in sea border infrastructure remain inadequate.

The Arafura Sea, which borders these nations, holds substantial marine resources, including fisheries in Merauke, where production reached 14,856 tonnes in 2023. However, these resources are underutilised due to limited cooperation and infrastructure. Australia's northern border and PNG's coastal regions also possess rich fishery resources, which could be jointly managed to support the blue economy. Collaborative management could promote socio-economic development through improved trade routes, regional accessibility, and increased cross-border interactions (Jailly, 2022).

Economic prosperity in these border areas is vital for maintaining stability and security, as economic development has a direct impact on national security (Malawat, 2020). Effective border management should integrate five critical elements: sovereignty, economic activities, national identity, governance participation, and socio-economic welfare improvements. Developing maritime connectivity and trilateral partnerships in

these areas is essential to supporting Indonesia's national development objectives and enhancing security and prosperity.

Despite these opportunities, research addressing the strategic potential and challenges of trilateral maritime cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and PNG remains limited. Despite these opportunities, research examining the strategic potential and challenges of trilateral maritime cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea remains sparse. This study aims to address this gap by analysing the prospects for partnerships in economic, trade, and resource management. The primary research focuses are: First, the challenges currently faced in establishing trilateral maritime cooperation; Second, the ways in which sea connectivity between these nations can be enhanced to foster regional growth; and Third, the strategic policies and frameworks required to facilitate sustainable cross-border economic integration.

## Literature Review

Cross-border governance theory highlights the necessity of coordinated efforts between central and regional governments, non-governmental institutions, and stakeholders to foster economic and security integration in border regions, enabling the establishment of infrastructure and policies that enhance cross-border trade and cooperation (Villanueva et al., 2020). International trade theory emphasises that reducing trade barriers and improving connectivity can boost economic competitiveness by lowering transportation costs, suggesting that strategic trade routes linking border regions, such as those between Merauke, Darwin, and Port Moresby, can accelerate economic activities and regional integration through enhanced trade flows (Forbes, 2022). The principles of the blue economy focus on the sustainable use of marine resources to promote long-term economic growth, ecological balance, and social welfare, advocating for collaborative management of fisheries, which is crucial for the rich marine ecosystem of the Arafura Sea, where coordinated efforts among Indonesia, PNG, and Australia can optimise fisheries productivity while preserving marine biodiversity (Buiney et al., 2024). Empirical studies reveal that countries with strong maritime infrastructure and cross-border partnerships achieve higher economic growth and security, as demonstrated by the development of the Sota border post in Merauke, which has stimulated regional economic activities through improved trade connectivity, although sea route development in eastern Indonesia remains underdeveloped, limiting potential regional integration and trade expansion (Mandibondibo et al., 2022).

## Challenges in Building Trilateral Maritime Cooperation

The primary challenges in establishing trilateral maritime cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea stem from differences in national policies. These policy discrepancies often hinder the achievement of effective cross-border collaboration (Jailly, 2022). Additionally, inadequate maritime infrastructure, including ports and sea transport routes, slows the movement of goods, services, and people, thereby limiting the potential for regional economic integration (Mandibondibo et al., 2022). Trust issues among the countries in managing shared resources further complicate negotiations and the implementation of cooperation agreements (Buiney et al., 2024).

Addressing these challenges requires the harmonisation of policies, stronger cross-country coordination, and investment in infrastructure to facilitate mobility and economic activities across the border regions.

### **Enhancing Sea Route Connectivity**

Enhancing sea route connectivity to support regional growth requires significant investment in maritime infrastructure, including strategic ports in Merauke, Darwin, and Port Moresby (Villanueva et al., 2020). Central and regional governments must collaborate to accelerate the implementation of these routes through intensive coordination and integrated management (Errico et al., 2024). Additionally, the use of information technology in supply chain management can streamline the flow of goods, reduce logistics costs, and increase the competitiveness of export products in the region (Park et al., 2022).

### **Strategic Policies for Cross-Border Economic Integration**

Strategic policies for sustainable cross-border economic integration involve the adoption of harmonised trade agreements, such as comprehensive economic partnerships, which can expand regional markets and strengthen international trade (Pangemanan et al., 2022). Furthermore, the management of maritime resources based on blue economy principles, with an emphasis on marine biota conservation and joint fisheries management, can boost economic productivity while preserving marine ecosystems (Buiney et al., 2024). Strengthening multilateral cooperation by involving various stakeholders, including research institutions, the private sector, and non-governmental organisations, is essential for better coordination and innovation in cross-border management, thereby supporting regional economic integration (Villanueva et al., 2020).

## **METHODS**

This research aims to analyze the potential for cooperation in opening access via sea routes as entry and exit points in the South to the Pacific Region and Oceania countries. blue economic cooperation on the utilization of marine fisheries resources, marine biota conservation, tourism and education. Trilateral partnership cooperation between Indonesia, Australia and Papua New Guinea is very important and urgent because of its geographical proximity and the potential to increase development progress. The research method used is a descriptive qualitative approach. Mapping the potential of water resources in border areas to improve the economy in border areas. This method will present descriptive data in the form of written words regarding the phenomena and behavior observed. Qualitative descriptive is a research approach to describe variables related to the problem being studied. Data source using data sourced from journals, reports, books and relevant documents. Data collection techniques through library research

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Maritime border areas possess strategic importance due to their geographical proximity and abundant resources. The cities of Merauke in Indonesia, Darwin in Australia, and Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea (PNG) serve as key hubs with functional port infrastructure that supports trade mobility. Figure 1 highlights the strategic location of these cities, which form essential trade routes connecting the three countries. International trade theory highlights how improved transportation networks reduce trade barriers, enhance competitiveness, and facilitate regional integration by promoting the efficient movement of goods and services (Villanueva et al., 2020; Forbes, 2022). Although these cities have established ports, the limited development of sea routes continues to hinder full economic integration and cooperation.

The development of infrastructure in Merauke Regency illustrates how investments in productive sectors drive regional growth. This region, recognised as a national food barn, produces significant volumes of rice and fishery products. The government has facilitated agricultural expansion by opening 1.2 million hectares for farming and 2 million hectares for sugarcane plantations to support bioethanol production. Figure 1 further indicates the proximity of Merauke Harbour to Darwin Harbour and Port Moresby Harbour, which underscores the strategic importance of sea connectivity between these regions. Collaboration with Australian entrepreneurs strengthens local productivity, aligning with economic theories that emphasise the importance of regional proximity and infrastructure in fostering growth (Errico et al., 2024). Merauke's multi-ethnic population and secure environment, as reflected in its Human Development Index (HDI) score of 72.94 in 2022, enhance its capacity to attract investment.

Darwin City, which boasts one of the fastest-growing economies in the region, plays a central role in promoting regional cooperation. This city supports diverse sectors, including agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and trade, through advanced infrastructure and high-quality human resources. The presence of Charles Darwin University contributes to the city's leadership in education and research, positioning it as a strategic partner for economic initiatives. Port Moresby, the largest city in PNG, serves as both a trade gateway and administrative capital. Despite its reliance on small and medium-sized industries, this city can strengthen its role in trilateral cooperation through capacity-building and infrastructure upgrades (Mandibondibo et al., 2022).

These cities demonstrate strong potential for trilateral economic collaboration. Figure 1 reinforces this point by illustrating the distances between the ports of Merauke, Darwin, and Port Moresby, showing how improved maritime connectivity can reduce transportation costs and enhance trade efficiency. The development of maritime connectivity and infrastructure aligns with growth and security theories, which suggest that investments in regional access facilitate economic activities and contribute to political stability through strengthened interdependence (Buiney et al., 2024). To fully realise these opportunities, the three nations need to harmonise policies, enhance cooperation, and invest strategically in infrastructure to address existing challenges.



Figure 1. Strategic location for Trilateral economic cooperation between Indonesia, Australia and Papua New Guinea

Potential of trans boundaries trilateral such as:

### **Development Cooperation and Opening of Sea Transportation Route Connectivity**

The potential for transboundary trilateral cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) lies in the development of sea transportation routes connecting the key port cities of Merauke, Darwin, and Port Moresby. These cities, as shown in Figure 1, are strategically positioned for trade. Merauke Harbour is located 704.29 miles from Darwin Harbour, Darwin Harbour is 1,122.58 miles from Port Moresby Harbour, and Port Moresby Harbour is 465.97 miles from Merauke. Opening and optimising these routes can reduce transportation costs, which in turn will increase the competitiveness of goods. Furthermore, better connectivity will encourage the mobility of people, particularly in business and tourism, thereby enhancing economic growth. This connectivity will also support industrial supply chains by facilitating the flow of raw and semi-finished materials, allowing Indonesia to export goods from nearby areas at lower costs and with higher competitiveness.

Countries in close proximity often benefit from stronger collaboration as spatial concentration of economic activities stimulates innovation and local development (Errico et al., 2024). Governments and other stakeholders must intensify coordination efforts to create supportive infrastructure and regulatory frameworks that can open gateways to Oceania and Pacific markets. By expanding trade, this cooperation will increase foreign exchange reserves and generate economic activities that enhance stability and growth in border regions. Despite this potential, national borders still limit the movement of goods and services, making regional trade inefficient. However, strengthening economic

proximity by developing maritime routes can reduce trade barriers. Cheaper and higher-capacity sea transportation can accelerate the flow of goods, improve welfare, and strengthen security. Indonesia aims to maintain a stable, prosperous environment in the Pacific region, while Pacific countries see Indonesia as an experienced maritime and development partner (Buiney et al., 2024).

The relationship between Indonesia and Australia reflects the strategic partnership outlined in the good neighbour policy. Indonesia views Australia as a vital partner for maintaining regional stability and cooperation (Moran, 2020). Australia, which initiated Asia-Pacific cooperation, ranks as the twelfth-largest economy globally with a GDP of USD 1.729 trillion in 2023. This economic power plays a significant role in the Pacific region. Trade between Australia and Indonesia is substantial and mutually beneficial. Australia ranks as Indonesia's eighth-largest import partner, exporting industrial goods, beef, milk, and wheat. In contrast, Indonesia's exports to Australia, valued at USD 3.47 billion in 2023, include palm oil, cocoa, wood, and rubber products. Australia also invests heavily in Indonesia, contributing USD 545 million in foreign investment. Australian aid through infrastructure and technical assistance programmes further strengthens cooperation between the two countries. This partnership was formalised through the signing of the Indonesia-Australia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (IA-CEPA) on 4 March 2019 (Pangemanan et al., 2022).

Papua New Guinea also holds a strategic partnership with Indonesia in the Pacific. PNG's economy relies heavily on natural resources, including forestry, mining, fisheries, agriculture, and tourism. The trade relationship between Indonesia and PNG increased to USD 322 million in 2021 from USD 212 million in 2020 (Wirapranatha et al., 2022). Despite this growth, PNG remains highly dependent on imports from Malaysia and China, with Chinese goods dominating its local markets. In 2023, PNG exported USD 50.7 million worth of goods to Indonesia. Australia remains PNG's largest trade partner, exporting goods worth USD 1.5 billion and investing USD 26 billion in 2022. PNG's role in the Melanesian Spearhead Group (MSG) enhances its importance in regional cooperation. However, limited infrastructure at the land borders between Indonesia and PNG restricts the efficient transport of goods. Developing sea gates, transnational border posts, and improved transportation networks will help overcome these limitations and boost trade efficiency (Farneubun, P. K., 2016; Galuh, (2022).

By developing maritime transportation routes and strengthening cooperation, Indonesia, Australia, and PNG can achieve sustainable economic integration. Improved connectivity will promote trade, increase the flow of goods, and support long-term regional growth and stability.

## **Fisheries Industry Cooperation and Marine Biota Conservation**

The fisheries industry in the Arafura Sea holds substantial potential for trilateral cooperation and sustainable development. The Arafura Sea, designated as Indonesia's Fisheries Management Area (WPP-NRI 718), is rich in marine resources. In Merauke Regency alone, marine production reached 14,856 tons in 2023. This figure remains significantly below previous levels, such as the 59,217 tons recorded in 2014 when PT. Dwikarya Reksa Abadi operated in the region. However, the suspension of foreign-flagged vessels due to a moratorium negatively impacted the local economy. This policy caused a decrease in the Regional Domestic Product, halted exports, and led to job losses and reduced income for fishermen due to limited market access and a lack of storage facilities. To revitalise the fisheries sector, stakeholders have emphasised the importance of inviting foreign investors, particularly from neighbouring countries such as Australia, to collaborate in managing fishery resources in border areas.

The northern Australian waters within the Arafura Sea and Torres Strait also possess significant fisheries potential, which can be developed through cooperative partnerships. As an advanced industrial nation, Australia has the capacity to manage these resources efficiently and to support the supply of fishery products from both Merauke and Port Moresby. Processed fish products generated through downstream industries will create additional economic value and contribute to national prosperity. Furthermore, growing demand for fish in both the Merauke region and Port Moresby will stimulate job creation and improve the livelihoods of local fishing communities. Collaborative efforts in this industry will facilitate the transfer of skills, expertise, and technology from Australia to both Indonesia and PNG, thereby strengthening regional capabilities.

In addition to enhancing fisheries production, cooperation in marine biota conservation plays a crucial role in maintaining the sustainability of marine ecosystems. Conservation efforts align with the principles of the blue economy, which emphasise balancing economic growth with environmental protection and social welfare. Through coordinated conservation strategies, Indonesia, Australia, and PNG can promote the long-term viability of marine resources, ensuring that future generations continue to benefit from the region's natural wealth. This integrated approach to fisheries management and marine biota conservation will drive sustainable economic development while preserving biodiversity in the Arafura Sea.

## **Tourism and Education Cooperation**

Tourism and education cooperation among Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea (PNG) holds significant potential for fostering regional integration and economic development. The unique characteristics of each border region, including distinct



climates, maritime landscapes, and socio-cultural traditions, attract tourists seeking diverse experiences. The shorter travel distance between these regions further reduces costs and travel time, increasing their appeal. Research shows that international tourism flows between 1995 and 2019 were strongly influenced by the proximity of neighbouring countries, with cross-border tourist arrivals contributing between 8.1% and 45.8% of total flows depending on the model used (Park et al., 2022).

Australia's tourism management success serves as a model for Indonesia and PNG to enhance their own border tourism areas (Pearlman, M., 2003). In 2023, Australian tourists accounted for 12.26% of foreign visitors to Indonesia, ranking second after Malaysia's 16.28%. PNG, with its vast natural and cultural resources, possesses significant potential to become a major earner of foreign exchange through tourism. Australia's progress in tourism management has contributed significantly to its economy, generating USD 63 billion in Gross State Product (GSP) from tourism in the 2022–23 fiscal year. The increasing global demand for travel, driven by rising incomes, technological advancements in transportation, and the growing trend of travel among urban populations, presents a promising opportunity for all three countries to collaborate. Joint planning and development of tourism infrastructure, including hotels, transport systems, and other supporting facilities, will further enhance the sector's contributions to national and regional economies.

In addition to tourism, education offers another crucial area for trilateral cooperation. The border regions of Indonesia, Australia, and PNG exhibit varying levels of educational development and human resource capacity (Alfiano, J., Hergianasari, P., Simanjuntak, T. R., & Fahmi, M., 2022); Kelton, M., & Willis, D., 2019). By collaborating in education, these countries can create opportunities for student and faculty exchanges to promote cultural understanding and knowledge sharing. Each of the three border cities—Merauke, Darwin, and Port Moresby—hosts a major university, which can serve as a hub for research and development partnerships. These collaborations can facilitate the exchange of innovative ideas, enhance the quality of education, and support regional advancement.

Through coordinated efforts in tourism and education, Indonesia, Australia, and PNG can strengthen their trilateral relationships, boost economic growth, and improve social cohesion. These partnerships will not only enhance the economic potential of each nation but also promote long-term stability and cultural enrichment in the region.

## CONCLUSION

The development of trilateral economic cooperation between Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea addresses key challenges related to connectivity, resource management, and regional integration. Collaborative initiatives focus on opening maritime transport routes, enhancing fisheries industry partnerships, conserving marine biota, and promoting tourism and education cooperation. These efforts aim to reduce high transportation costs, simplify supply chains, and expand access to broader markets. By increasing export and import transactions, stimulating investment, and supporting downstream industries, the partnership promotes economic growth and competitiveness. Additionally, the cooperation enhances local livelihoods by improving fishing community incomes, expanding employment opportunities, and advancing sustainable development in border areas. These activities strengthen regional stability and security, as economic prosperity reduces territorial inequalities and fosters harmonious relations between the three nations.

To maximise the potential of this cooperation, governments and stakeholders must prioritise the development of supportive infrastructure and regulatory frameworks. Local and central governments, non-governmental institutions, political actors, and universities should work together to intensify coordination and promote better sea route accessibility. Investments in modern transportation facilities, fisheries processing centres, and tourism infrastructure are essential to ensure the efficient flow of goods, services, and people. Furthermore, capacity-building programmes in education and technology transfer should be prioritised to improve human resources and foster innovation. Sustained efforts to enhance connectivity and collaboration across sectors will accelerate regional economic integration, improve welfare, and secure long-term stability for Indonesia, Australia, and Papua New Guinea.

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