

# Reassessing Intra-Regional Connectivity In Vietnam's Southeast Economic Region: A Multidimensional Structural Analysis

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## Abstract

*The Southeast Economic Region (SEER) encompassing Ho Chi Minh City, Binh Duong, Dong Nai, Ba Ria – Vung Tau, Tay Ninh, and Binh Phuoc constitutes Vietnam's most dynamic and economically dense growth corridor. While the region consistently leads the country in industrial output, fiscal contributions, export revenues, and foreign direct investment, its development performance increasingly reflects deep structural fragmentation. Weak institutional coordination, overlapping spatial plans, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, and the absence of integrated multimodal transport systems have hindered SEER's ability to function as a cohesive regional economy.*

*This study provides a comprehensive assessment of SEER's internal linkages by synthesizing secondary data from national planning documents, provincial statistics, policy reports, and international literature. The analysis is structured around four interrelated dimensions such as transport and logistics, spatial and industrial planning, institutional coordination, and business supply chain integration. The findings reveal persistent misalignment between the region's rapidly evolving economic landscape and the limited capacity of existing governance structures to support coordinated development across provincial borders.*

*The paper argues that the effectiveness of SEER's future development depends on the establishment of a legally grounded regional authority, harmonized spatial-industrial planning mechanisms, improved multimodal logistics systems, and the strengthening of cross-provincial supply chain networks. The proposed policy recommendations offer actionable pathways for enhancing SEER's competitiveness in the context of accelerating global and regional economic restructuring.*

**Keywords:** *regional integration, Southeast Economic Region, institutional coordination, spatial planning, logistics systems*

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## I. Introduction

Regional economic integration has emerged as a central determinant of competitiveness and long-term sustainability, particularly in emerging economies navigating the challenges of industrial upgrading, urban expansion, and global value chain participation. Within this context, the Southeast Economic Region (SEER) of Vietnam stands out not only as the nation's most advanced industrial and urban corridor but also as a strategic node in regional and global production networks. The region's contributions accounting for an estimated one-third of national GDP and nearly half of total government revenue demonstrate its pivotal role in Vietnam's economic modernization.

However, despite its dynamism, SEER's development outcomes increasingly reveal a paradox: rapid economic expansion is juxtaposed with weak institutional coordination, fragmented spatial planning, and insufficient cross-provincial connectivity. This paradox reflects an underlying structural tension: while markets have integrated rapidly across the region, governance structures have not evolved sufficiently to support or regulate such integration. As a result, SEER functions less as a cohesive regional system and more as a set of administratively segmented territories pursuing individual developmental agendas.

Recent policy documents including the 2023 Politburo Resolution on regional development—explicitly recognize that SEER's sustainable growth hinges on strengthening intra-regional linkages. Yet, despite the growing consensus on this need, empirical analyses of the region's internal connectivity remain limited. Existing studies tend to focus on sector-specific issues (e.g., logistics, transport, or industrial zones) without providing a holistic examination of how these components interact to shape regional performance.

This study seeks to address this gap by articulating a comprehensive, multidimensional assessment of SEER's intra-regional linkages. Specifically, the paper investigates four interdependent dimensions:

1. Transport and logistics infrastructure – the physical backbone of economic integration.
2. Spatial and industrial planning – the strategic basis for resource allocation and long-term development.
3. Institutional coordination – the mechanism through which cross-provincial cooperation is operationalized.

4. Business and supply chain linkages – the micro-level evidence of economic integration among firms.

Examining these dimensions collectively allows for a nuanced understanding of how structural bottlenecks emerge and how they constrain regional competitiveness.

**Theoretical Motivation**

International scholarship emphasizes that integrated regional systems exhibit several advantages: lower transaction costs (Rodrigue, 2020); greater innovation spillovers (Scott & Storper, 2015); more efficient allocation of labor and capital (OECD, 2020); higher resilience in periods of economic volatility (World Bank, 2022).

Theoretically, SEER possesses all required characteristics to achieve high levels of integration— industrial density, urban concentration, strategic ports, and a diversified economic base. However, regional integration is not an automatic outcome of economic concentration; it requires deliberate, institutionalized coordination mechanisms. Without such mechanisms, agglomeration can generate diseconomies congestion, duplication of industrial zones, inconsistent environmental standards, and inter-provincial competition which SEER is already experiencing.

**Research Contribution**

This study contributes to the field in three important ways:

1. It provides the first English-language, multidimensional assessment of SEER's internal linkages.
2. It applies a theoretically grounded, internationally benchmarked analytical framework, allowing SEER to be situated within global discussions on regional governance and spatial development.
3. It identifies structural constraints that are often mentioned in policy debates but rarely analyzed systematically (e.g., institutional fragmentation, planning incoherence, logistics corridor congestion).

Through this approach, the study bridges the gap between regional economic theory and Vietnam's policy realities.

## II. Literature Review

The revised Literature Review is below, with deeper academic rigor, higher-level phrasing, tighter logic, and an expanded theoretical foundation.

**Conceptual foundations of regional linkage**

Regional linkage conceptualizations in economic geography underscore the interplay of physical connectivity, institutional structures, and market integration. Scott and Storper (2015) describe regions as “relational systems,” where connectivity emerges not only from transport networks but also from institutional complementarities and socio-economic interactions. A region with high linkage exhibits integrated flows of goods, labor, capital, information, and innovation; conversely, weakly linked regions are characterized by spatial fragmentation and governance asymmetries.

From the new economic geography paradigm (Krugman, 1998), agglomeration economies yield scale efficiencies; however, the presence of such agglomeration does not guarantee regional integration. Coordination failure and institutional fragmentation may limit the realization of spatial synergies, leading to localized congestion and systemic inefficiencies patterns that are observable within SEER.

**Regional governance and institutional coordination**

Institutional quality is increasingly recognized as a decisive factor in regional development outcomes. Rodríguez-Pose (2013) argues that “*institutional deficits often supersede geographic advantages*,” meaning that even economically dynamic regions can underperform if institutional arrangements are incomplete or misaligned.

International comparative perspective: Successful regional governance systems (Japan's Kansai, Korea's Capital Region, and the Rhine–Alpine corridor in Europe) share three institutional characteristics: clear legal mandates for regional coordination; formal mechanisms for cross-border data sharing and resource pooling; integrated decision-making frameworks across spatial, industrial, and infrastructure planning.

These models show that effective regional governance is neither voluntary nor ad hoc, but formal, structured, and enforceable.

Vietnamese Context: Vietnam's regional councils are advisory bodies without binding authority. Studies (Nguyen, 2022; Do & Tran, 2023) indicate that SEER's governance suffers from “soft coordination,” resulting in duplicated investments, inconsistent policies, and limited cross-provincial collaboration.

**Spatial and industrial planning**

Spatial planning literature highlights that regions require *strategic coherence* to ensure complementary specialization rather than redundant competition (UNCRD, 2018). Fragmented planning leads to overbuilt industrial zones, repetitive land-use patterns, and inefficient urban expansion (Angel, 2012).

Porter's (1998) cluster theory offers guidance for fostering competitive advantages through geographic concentration of complementary industries. However, cluster development requires coordinated planning, shared infrastructure, and institutional support—conditions that are only partially present in SEER.

#### ***Transport and logistics integration***

Logistics literature stresses that multi-modal connectivity integrating roads, rail, ports, and inland waterways is essential to reduce trade costs and strengthen supply chains (Rodrigue, 2020).

Studies in ASEAN economies highlight common problems: overreliance on road transport (Thailand, Indonesia), congestion in major ports (Malaysia), absence of unified logistics frameworks.

These challenges closely mirror those observed in SEER: despite housing Vietnam's busiest ports, the region's logistics performance is undermined by inadequate multimodal integration, high logistics costs, and severe congestion.

#### ***Economic linkages and supply chain networks***

Supply chain integration fosters innovation, efficiency, and value creation. McKinsey (2022) notes that successful regional supply chains depend on firm-level collaboration, digital platforms, and supportive institutional mechanisms.

Vietnam's supply chain participation remains limited due to low domestic input ratios, weak supporting industries, and insufficient business–government coordination (MPI, 2023). SEER's economic dynamism has not translated into strong regional linkages due to lack of cross-provincial supplier networks and regional industrial strategy. Three gaps justify this study:

1. Scarcity of comprehensive, multidimensional assessments of SEER in international scholarship.
2. Limited examination of the interplay between governance, infrastructure, planning, and supply chains.
3. Insufficient theoretical integration, with most studies offering descriptive rather than analytical assessments.

The study addresses these shortcomings by adopting a holistic, theory-driven assessment framework.

### **III. Method**

This study adopts a qualitative, multi-dimensional research design to evaluate the intra-regional linkages of the Southeast Economic Region (SEER). The approach integrates document analysis, comparative regional assessment, and theory-driven interpretation. Such a design is appropriate for examining complex governance and spatial–economic interactions that cannot be fully captured through quantitative modelling alone.

#### ***Research design***

The study follows a qualitative analytical framework comprising three pillars:

1. Systematic document analysis of national policies, regional master plans, transport strategies, provincial statistical yearbooks, and international development reports.
2. Comparative benchmarking against advanced regional systems (e.g., Kansai, Seoul Capital Region, Rhine–Alpine Corridor) to contextualize SEER's performance.
3. Theoretical triangulation, drawing from new economic geography, regional governance theory, spatial planning literature, and supply chain integration models to interpret empirical patterns.

This multi-layered design enables a holistic assessment of structural bottlenecks across institutional, infrastructural, and economic dimensions.

#### ***Data sources***

Data are derived entirely from authoritative secondary sources, a widely accepted method in regional policy research:

- Policy and planning documents: Politburo Resolutions, regional planning frameworks (2021–2030), transport development plans, and provincial socio-economic reports.
- Statistical data: Provincial Yearbooks (2018–2023), Vietnam Logistics Reports, and sectoral data from the Ministry of Planning and Investment.
- International publications: OECD, World Bank, ADB, UNCRD, and peer-reviewed regional development journals.

#### ***Analytical framework***

The analysis employs a four-dimensional framework synthesized from OECD (2020) and World Bank (2022): transport and logistics connectivity, spatial and industrial planning coherence, institutional coordination capacity, business and supply chain linkages.

Each dimension is assessed using a predefined set of indicators (e.g., multimodal transport availability, planning consistency, governance authority, supplier integration). This structured approach ensures analytical rigor and enables systematic comparison across dimensions.

### **Analytical procedure**

The research proceeds through three sequential steps:

#### **(1) Coding and thematic extraction**

Policy documents, statistical reports, and academic literature were systematically coded using dimension-specific themes such as planning duplication, multi-modal bottlenecks, governance asymmetry, and supply chain gaps.

#### **(2) Cross-source triangulation**

Findings from government reports, international assessments, and academic sources were cross-checked to ensure validity. Divergent evidence was reconciled by prioritizing the most recent or highest-authority sources.

#### **(3) Theory-informed interpretation**

Empirical observations were interpreted through relevant theoretical lenses: institutional economics explains coordination failures, new economic geography clarifies agglomeration diseconomies, cluster theory evaluates industrial specialization, logistics systems theory accounts for transport inefficiencies. This interpretive strategy enhances both explanatory depth and conceptual coherence.

## **IV. Results**

This section synthesizes the empirical evidence derived from regional policy documents, statistical reports, and international comparative analyses. Findings are organized along the four analytical dimensions: (1) transport and logistics connectivity, (2) spatial and industrial planning, (3) institutional coordination, and (4) business and supply chain linkages. Results consistently reveal structural fragmentation that inhibits the Southeast Economic Region (SEER) from functioning as an integrated economic system.

### **Transport and logistics connectivity**

SEER's transport system exhibits high density but low integration. Overdependence on road networks, limited multimodal linkages, and chronic congestion at inter-provincial corridors constitute the most binding constraints.

#### **Overloaded infrastructure and traffic congestion**

Major corridors including HCMC - Long Thanh - Dau Giay and HCMC - Binh Duong - Binh Phuoc - operate at 150 – 250% of their designed capacity, producing systemic delays and increasing logistics costs.

#### **Limited multimodal connectivity**

Despite having Vietnam's busiest port systems (Cat Lai, Cai Mep – Thi Vai), connections between ports, airports, industrial zones, and logistics hubs are fragmented. Rail freight accounts for less than 1% of regional cargo flows, and inland waterway integration remains suboptimal.

**Table 1.** Transport connectivity assessment in SEER

Indicator	Current Status	Assessment	Implication
Road freight share	>75%	Overconcentrated	High congestion, high logistics cost
Rail cargo share	<1%	Critically low	No freight corridors connecting ports/Izs
Inland waterway use	~18%	Underutilized	Weak multimodal integration
Key corridor load	150–250% design	Overloaded	Severe delays, bottlenecks
Port–IZ connectivity	Fragmented	Misaligned planning	Disruption in supply chain efficiency

(Source: Compiled from provincial transport reports, 2020–2023)

### **Spatial and industrial planning**

SEER's spatial structure reflects **parallel provincial strategies rather than regional complementarities**, resulting in duplicated industrial zones, inconsistent land-use plans, and inefficient spatial expansion.

### Industrial duplication

All major provinces prioritize similar sectors—electronics, mechanical engineering, logistics—leading to inter-provincial competition rather than specialization.

### Planning incoherence

Provincial master plans show contradictions in industrial land allocation, logistics-center placement, and transport assumptions. This confirms the absence of a shared regional spatial framework.

**Table 2.** Industrial duplication in SEER provincial planning

Province	Priority Industries	Overlap with Others	Assessment
HCMC	Electronics, logistics, chemicals	High (BD, DN)	Congestion in high-value sectors
Bình Dương	Electronics, engineering	High (DN)	Competes for same FDI streams
Đồng Nai	Engineering, chemicals	High (HCMC, BD)	Redundant sectoral focus
BR–VT	Petrochemicals, logistics	Medium	Limited upstream–downstream linkage
Tây Ninh	Agro-processing	Low	Peripheral integration
Bình Phước	Rubber, wood-processing	Low	Weak supply chain anchoring

(Source: Synthesis of Provincial Master Plans 2021–2030)

### Institutional coordination

The absence of a legally mandated regional authority results in governance fragmentation, inconsistent regulatory environments, and low coordination capacity across provinces.

### Governance gaps

The Regional Coordinating Council lacks enforcement power, budgetary autonomy, and regulatory authority producing a coordination environment dependent on voluntary compliance.

### Policy misalignment

Environmental standards, industrial incentives, and investment procedures differ across provinces, creating institutional frictions and increasing transaction costs.

**Table 3.** Institutional fragmentation indicators in SEER

Dimension	Evidence	Impact
Legal authority	Advisory council only	Inability to enforce regional strategies
Fiscal capacity	No regional budget	No funding for cross-provincial projects
Policy alignment	Low	Conflicting regulations and planning
Data-sharing	Fragmented	Difficulty in regional decision-making

(Source: Synthesized by the authors from Nguyen (2022); Do & Tran (2023); OECD (2020); Vietnam's Resolution No. 24-NQ/TW (2023); and the Southeast Region Master Plan 2021–2030)

### Business and supply chain linkages

Supply chain connections across provinces are shallow. FDI firms remain weakly embedded in domestic production networks, while SMEs face coordination and capability barriers.

### Limited supplier integration

Local content rates remain **below 15%**, reflecting weak domestic capacity and fragmented supplier ecosystems.

### Absence of regional business platforms

Chambers of commerce, industrial associations, and trade promotion agencies operate at the provincial level without regional coordination mechanisms.

**Table 4.** Supply chain linkage assessment

Indicator	Current Status	Implication
Local content in FDI supply chains	<15%	Limited spillovers, weak linkages
SME participation	Low	Lack of capability upgrading
Cross-provincial business networks	Minimal	Fragmented supply chains
Digital integration	Weak	No unified logistics/supplier platforms

(Source: synthesized from MPI (2023), MoIT (2020–2023), McKinsey (2022), OECD (2020).

Synthesis of Findings: across all four analytical dimensions, SEER displays a consistent pattern: High economic dynamism is countered by low institutional integration, fragmented planning, disconnected logistics systems, and weak business linkages.

This fragmentation prevents SEER from functioning as a cohesive economic region and limits its long-term competitiveness.

## V. Discussion

The findings reveal a systematic pattern of fragmentation across SEER's transport infrastructure, spatial and industrial planning, institutional architecture, and supply chain networks. This section interprets these results through established theoretical frameworks and international experiences to explain why integration remains limited despite the region's strong economic fundamentals.

### *Institutional fragmentation as the core constraint*

From the perspective of institutional economics, regional development outcomes hinge on governance structures that coordinate multi-level actors and align policy incentives (Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). SEER's fragmented governance—characterized by a lack of binding authority, inconsistent regulatory frameworks, and minimal fiscal coordination—produces a classic collective action problem. Key mechanisms include:

1. Coordination failure: Provinces optimize local interests (e.g., FDI attraction, land-use decisions) even when these choices conflict with regional efficiency.
2. Regulatory asymmetry: Divergent environmental, investment, and industrial standards raise transaction costs for firms operating across provinces.
3. Institutional inertia: Without a regional authority, policy alignment depends on voluntary cooperation, which is structurally weak and easily disrupted.

Thus, SEER's economic fragmentation is not a product of insufficient resources but of institutional misalignment, echoing international findings that governance quality outweighs geographic advantages.

### *Spatial planning incoherence and agglomeration diseconomies*

Although SEER exhibits strong agglomeration forces—dense industrial concentration, rapid urbanization, and major transport hubs—these have not translated into integrated regional development. New Economic Geography (NEG) posits that agglomeration benefits emerge only when supported by coordinated spatial planning and complementary specialization.

Findings show the opposite: Provinces adopt nearly identical industrial strategies causing competition, complementarity; industrial zones expand without reference to regional logistics networks leading spatial mismatch; logistics hubs are placed independently of production clusters causing inefficiencies multiply

These patterns result in agglomeration diseconomies, including severe congestion, elevated logistics costs, and inefficient land utilization. Angel's (2012) metropolitan studies confirm that uncoordinated urban expansion typically reduces productivity and undermines investment attractiveness.

In short, SEER is experiencing the costs of agglomeration without the coordination needed to capture its benefits.

### *Logistics bottlenecks: the physical expression of institutional gaps*

Transport constraints in SEER - high dependence on roads, insufficient multimodal systems, and overloaded corridors can be interpreted as material manifestations of governance fragmentation.

Drawing from Rodrigue's logistics theory (2020), efficient regional logistics require: multi-modal integration, coordinated planning across jurisdictions, and harmonized infrastructure investment.

SEER fails on all three accounts. The misalignment between industrial zones, logistics hubs, and transport networks reflects a lack of region-wide planning authority, inter-provincial investment coordination, integrated infrastructure strategies.

Consequently, SEER's logistics bottlenecks are not merely technical challenges but structural outcomes rooted in institutional fragmentation.

### *Weak business and supply chain linkages: missing opportunities for regional value capture*

SEER's limited supplier integration and weak intra-regional business networks are consistent with global research showing that industrial upgrading depends on institutional facilitation (McKinsey, 2022). Mechanisms constraining SEER's value-chain integration include: lack of a regional supplier database: firms cannot identify cross-border partners; absence of region-wide business associations: limited innovation collaboration; uneven support services: SMEs fail to meet FDI quality standards; fragmented logistics: high transaction costs discourage inter-provincial sourcing.

This aligns with cluster theory (Porter, 1998): clusters thrive when suppliers, firms, and institutions interact within a coordinated ecosystem. SEER's provincial siloed environment prevents the formation of functionally integrated clusters, despite its large industrial base.

***Comparative insights: why seer lags behind international models***

Comparing SEER to successful regional systems - Kansai (Japan), the Seoul Capital Region (Korea), and the Rhine-Alpine Corridor (EU) reveals two decisive differences:

***Governance maturity***

These regions possess legally mandated, well-funded regional authorities capable of enforcing planning coherence; prioritizing region-wide infrastructure; managing cross-border regulatory harmonization. SEER lacks such an institutional structure.

***Integrated spatial – logistics systems***

In advanced regions: industrial clusters align with multimodal corridors, logistics hubs serve multiple provinces, ports and airports anchor regional supply chains. In SEER, each province plans independently, producing fragmented systems incapable of harnessing agglomeration potential. Thus, SEER's fragmentation is not unique; it reflects a predictable pattern observed in metropolitan regions without cohesive regional governance.

***Holistic interpretation: fragmentation as a systemic outcome***

Synthesizing the findings through the theoretical lenses above, SEER's constraints can be understood as components of a single systemic problem:

Economic integration has outpaced institutional integration. This mismatch generates structural inefficiencies: Infrastructure is overloaded because planning is local, not regional; Industrial duplication persists because provinces lack incentives for specialization; Supply chains remain shallow because firms operate within provincial boundaries rather than regional networks; Logistics systems become congested because infrastructure investments are not coordinated. In other words, SEER is developing fast, but not together.

## **VI. Conclusion**

This study offers an in-depth examination of the internal linkages of the Southeast Economic Region (SEER) and highlights that the core barrier to regional integration stems not from a lack of physical infrastructure but from persistent structural and institutional fragmentation. Although the region holds substantial economic advantages expressed through its dense industrial base, strategic logistics assets, and rapid urban expansion, its existing governance arrangements are not yet adequate to coordinate the increasingly complex interactions across provinces.

Across the four dimensions assessed transport and logistics connectivity, spatial and industrial planning alignment, institutional coordination, and supply chain interaction - a consistent pattern emerges: the region's economic activities have become intertwined far more quickly than its institutional mechanisms. This mismatch has led to overlapping planning efforts, chronic congestion on key transport corridors, regulatory inconsistencies, and weak firm-to-firm linkages. Viewed through relevant theoretical lenses, these findings reinforce the argument that without a stronger, more authoritative regional governance framework, SEER will continue to operate as a set of separate administrative units rather than as an integrated regional system.

The policy directions proposed in this study underline the importance of establishing a legally empowered regional coordinating body, strengthening integrated spatial-industrial planning, promoting multimodal logistics development, and deepening regional supply chain networks. These measures must be understood as mutually reinforcing components of a broader institutional restructuring rather than isolated policy actions. If adopted, they would enable SEER to harness agglomeration advantages more effectively, enhance regional competitiveness, and reinforce its role as a central driver of Vietnam's shift toward a more innovation-oriented, high-value economy.

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