

Toward a new growth pole for the world: Rethinking the strategies for Huaihua International Inland Port in China

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Abstract: This article aims to analyze the existing Huaihua International Inland Port studies and regional economic development. On this basis, the strategic positioning of the port is redefined, and its impact on the economic growth of China and the world is examined. Furthermore, the article explores the port's main challenges under the Belt and Road Initiative and proposes sustainable and healthy development strategies. It demonstrates that in the era of globalization, the importance of international trade and logistics has become increasingly prominent. As the world's second-largest economy, China's solid internal logistics infrastructure and well-developed transportation systems are vital to maintaining and expanding its economic vitality. It finds that the Huaihua International Inland Port is integral to China's Western Development Strategy and has become an essential hub connecting Western China with international markets. The port profoundly impacts the economic vitality of Huaihua and surrounding areas, promoting employment and improving residents' living standards. However, it also faces many challenges in its development. It suggests that the port administrative team needs to improve operational efficiency, efficiently coordinate various modes of transportation, attract more industries, and balance economic development and environmental protection. Based on the in-depth analysis indicates the strategic orientations and recommendations for the future development of the port. At the same time, it is expected to provide a reference for other regional economic development projects.

Keywords: *International inland ports, Strategic positioning, The Belt and Road Initiative, Western Development Strategy.*

1. Introduction

This paper analyzes the existing studies on Huaihua International Inland Port and regional economic development. On this basis, its strategic positioning is redefined, and its impact on the economic growth of China and the world is analyzed. Furthermore, it explores the port's main challenges and proposes setting it up as China's first international inland port special zone to ensure long-term sustainable development. In recent years, China's inland ports have shown some variations in their development paths depending on their geographic location, influenced by different institutional and regulatory frameworks. While the central government has an established regulatory framework for dealing with related matters, local-level decision-making is controlled by municipal bodies. It provides ample space for officials to interpret central governance intentions. At the same time, the absence of well-defined policy guidelines poses many challenges to inland ports (Beresford et al., 2012).

In today's globalization, international trade and logistics are increasingly important. As the world's second-largest economy, China has an internal logistics infrastructure and transportation system critical

to maintaining and expanding its economic vitality. Huaihua International Inland Port, an integral part of China's Western Development Strategy, has become a key hub connecting West China to international markets. In addition, with the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative and the entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Huaihua International Inland Port has become even more strategically relevant.

In recent years, China has witnessed a boom in the construction of inland ports to adapt to the development trend of economic globalization. Remarkable results have been achieved in such international inland ports as Xi'an, Chongqing, Urumqi, and Huaihua. These ports have formed the strategic layout of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. They have expanded the scope of import and export of products from the neighboring regions and driven the rapid economic development of the affected regions. Huaihua is located in the center of the border areas of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Guizhou, and Guangxi. The unique geographic location makes Huaihua a bridgehead for Central China to enter South Asia through Southwest China.

At the same time, it is also an influential node city in China's Belt and Road Initiative, connecting Europe and Asia in the north and ASEAN in the south. The construction and development of Huaihua International Inland Port has promoted the rapid social and economic development of Huaihua. Its spillover effect has dramatically driven the economic development of the neighboring regions. In addition, Huaihua is a node city for the freight trains between China and Europe, China and ASEAN, and China and Central Asia. Huaihua is also the starting point of the China-Thailand freight trains and the first city in central China for the two-way operations of the China-Laos and China-Vietnam freight trains. Developing the port's economy can fully transform Huaihua into China's transportation hub to Europe and ASEAN. By exploring the relationship between inland ports and regional economic development, Liu et al. (2021) found that inland ports positively correlate with trade volume. Compared with the cities without inland ports, the trade volume of cities with inland ports will increase by 0.099 times. Thus, inland ports are crucial to the regional economy.

Regarding China's macroeconomic development strategies, the completed Huaihua International Inland Port is one of the critical nodes for implementing the Belt and Road strategy. After several years of development and initial operation, the port has increasingly demonstrated its important strategic position, attracted many investment enterprises and introduced cooperative projects. The port has become a strategic base for foreign economic and trade cooperation in Central and Western China. It has long exceeded its strategic position as a critical economic development project in Hunan Province. Therefore, it must be elevated to a new position as a vital project in the macroeconomic development strategy of Central China and China.

In August 2019, China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) identified the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China as a national strategy in the Master Plan of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor. The plan identifies Huaihua as a vital node city on the eastern route of the main channel of the corridor. From China's macroeconomic development perspective, the port is a vivid practice of implementing Chinese leaders' strategic thinking of building a new development pattern and creating a high ground for inland reform and opening up. It is the most critical node project for building the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China and connecting the Belt and Road. Furthermore, it is a successful model of experience as a national-level international inland port. It can provide a strategic reference for building and developing other international inland ports in China. It is of great practical significance and high operational feasibility for China's long-term stable macroeconomic development.

As mentioned earlier, Huaihua is located in the southwestern Hunan Province, at the center of the border areas of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Guizhou and Guangxi. The geographical advantage makes it an important hub linking the south to the north and the east to the west. The electrification of the second additional line of the Chongqing-Huaihua Railway and the Huaihua-Liuzhou section of the Jiaozuo-Liuzhou Railway has been completed. Subsequently, the Huaihua International Inland Port opened a cargo corridor for the Chengdu-Chongqing urban agglomeration and ports in southern China.

Connectivity between ports can significantly stimulate regional economic growth in the long run. Port infrastructure expansion is a potential channel to realize the stimulating effect (Li et al., 2023).

With Huaihua International Inland Port, the transportation condition of the area has been improved, and it also brings new opportunities for the economic development of Huaihua and the surrounding areas. Hou et al. (2023) conducted an empirical study on the economic spillover effect of the development of Huaihua International Inland Port. The results show that the construction and development of the port will inevitably produce positive economic spillover effects on the neighboring areas. In the strategic layout of Hunan Province, Huaihua International Inland Port is positioned as a strategic gateway city to the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. The port serves the logistics needs of the region and serves as a platform for international trade and cultural exchange. Its construction and development align with China's strategic goal of promoting regional economic integration and globalization. It is intended to link western China with Southeast Asia and the broader international market by building an efficient logistics network.

Huaihua International Inland Port has a far-reaching impact on the local and national economy. It boosts Huaihua's and its neighboring regions' economic development, improves enterprises' competitiveness, creates more jobs and improves residents' living standards. Its construction and development enable Huaihua to attract more investments from China and abroad and advance high-tech industries and high-value-added services. However, it also faces many challenges. Specifically, it needs to enhance its operational efficiency, link multiple modes of transportation, attract more industries, and strike a balance with environmental protection. These challenges must be addressed through scientific planning, innovative management and forward-looking strategic decisions. This paper aims to indicate the strategic direction and propose specific strategies for developing Huaihua International Inland Port under its new strategic positioning. At the same time, it can also provide a reference for other similar regional economic development projects.

2. Huaihua International Inland Port's Current Development Strategies

2.1. Development Status

Since its establishment, Huaihua International Inland Port has become an essential logistics and transportation hub for Hunan Province and Southwest China. The port's current status can be described from the perspectives of infrastructure development, operational efficiency, industrial accumulation, and its role in the regional economy. The infrastructure development of Huaihua International Inland Port is the core of its development. The port owns Huaihuaxi Railway Station, a national railroad marshaling yard. It is one of the nine railroad marshaling yards approved by China State Railway Group Co., Ltd. Huaihuaxi Railway Station is an essential node for railroad cargo transportation and a center for cargo distribution. The railroad network of Huaihua International Inland Port has been greatly strengthened with the completion of the electrification of the Huaihua-Liuzhou section of the Jiaozuo-Liuzhou Railway and the construction of the second additional line of the Chongqing-Huaihua Railway. It strongly supports the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. In addition, the port's highway network is also well developed by connecting several highways, forming an efficient land transportation system. Adolf and Jose (2013) argue that constructing inland ports can improve transportation efficiency and stimulate economic development in inland areas by reducing tariffs on road and rail freight. As a result, transportation costs can be reduced, and foreign trade can be promoted.

Huaihua International Inland Port has excelled in operational efficiency, successfully realizing the rapid development of multimodal transportation. It is well-equipped and has achieved remarkable results in improving customs clearance efficiency and simplifying administrative procedures. Implementing the one-stop service and single-window customs clearance model has significantly shortened the customs clearance time for goods and enhanced logistics efficiency. At the same time, it actively promotes e-commerce and informationization and utilizes advanced information technology to manage logistics and freight forwarding operations, ensuring efficient and transparent operations.

The development of Huaihua International Inland Port has led to the clustering of industries in the surrounding areas, especially in the manufacturing and agricultural products processing industries. The port has several specialized logistics and industrial parks, attracting many enterprises from China and other countries to invest and set up factories there. These enterprises enjoy convenient logistics services and benefit from the various supporting services provided by the port, such as warehousing, processing and distribution. In addition, it boosts the export of local agricultural products, such as tea and bamboo. These products can be sold to various markets in China and globally through the port's platform. By investigating the inland port industry in North India, Adolf and Ismail (2011) found that establishing distribution centers in specific locations is crucial to the regional economic development of developing economies. It can effectively integrate the related industries of the regional economy and accelerate the development of the regional economy.

Huaihua International Inland Port plays a crucial role in promoting regional economic development. As a vital node of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China, it is a necessary logistics and transportation hub and an essential platform for regional economic integration. Its construction and development have produced some positive economic spillover effects on the neighboring regions. It significantly promotes the economic integration of Hunan province and even Southwest China and enhances the region's economic competitiveness (Hou et al., 2023). The port strengthens the connection between Huaihua and markets in China and abroad, especially with the ASEAN market, providing local enterprises with broader market space and more business opportunities. The current state of the port is multifaceted. It has made remarkable achievements in infrastructure development and operational efficiency.

Moreover, it has accelerated the urbanization of the Huaihua region by facilitating industrial agglomeration and promoting regional economic development. Xiao (2023) suggests that building international inland ports can drive the overall development of local economies and societies. It can also encourage population concentration and accelerate the urbanization of inland areas. With the continuous improvement of the port's functions and the in-depth implementation of relevant policies, it is expected to play a more critical role in the future, becoming an essential impetus for local economy and regional integration.

2.2. Current Development Strategies

Huaihua International Inland Port's existing strategies focus on the following aspects. Firstly, it strengthens infrastructure development. With Huaihuaxi Railway Station as the core, the railroad network is improved. Meanwhile, it develops the highway network to form an efficient land transportation system. Secondly, it enhances operational efficiency and realizes the rapid development of multimodal transportation. One-stop service and single-window customs clearance mode improve customs clearance efficiency and promote e-commerce and informationization to ensure efficient and transparent operation. Thirdly, it promotes industrial agglomeration and drives the development of manufacturing and agro-processing industries in the neighboring areas. It attracts enterprises to invest and build factories and utilizes supporting services to expand markets. Finally, it reinforces regional economic integration, facilitates economic integration, improves regional competitiveness, and strengthens links with markets in China and abroad (Girish and Adolf, 2019).

However, Huaihua International Inland Port's established strategies are subject to many limitations. The most common factors affecting the development of the port are infrastructure, land use, environment and regulations. State-of-the-art intermodal terminals must be integrated into a complex system, where infrastructure must be in place (Roso, 2008). The port may be under pressure to continue to invest in construction, as large-scale infrastructure development and maintenance require substantial financial support. Railroad and road networks may have capacity bottlenecks or need to be upgraded in response to growing freight demand. All of these require large amounts of capital. Local government support alone is a drop in the bucket.

Regarding operational efficiency improvement, the one-stop service and single window clearance model may have problems such as poor coordination or technical failures in actual operation, affecting stability and efficiency. Informatization construction may face challenges such as data security and system compatibility (Chang et al., 2015). These probable problems must be addressed by professionals, such as highly qualified software and hardware development engineers and experienced operators.

Regarding industrial agglomeration, the port relies excessively on specific industries, with a higher risk of having a homogenous industrial structure. After attracting enterprises, it may suffer from insufficient synergies among enterprises. It may experience fierce competition with other regions regarding regional economic development, and maintaining its advantages is a great challenge. Past studies have also shown that the sustainability of inland ports has become one of the critical issues in future research on inland ports (Miraj et al., 2021). Dependence on a single ASEAN market may also affect Huaihua International Inland Port when the international economic situation changes.

3. Strategic Positioning of Huaihua International Inland Port

3.1. Huaihua's Strategic Status

As one of China's critical regional economic centers, Huaihua's strategic position has been significantly enhanced in recent years. Especially with the deepening of the Belt and Road Initiative and the entry into force of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Huaihua's geographic and economic advantages have been further magnified. As mentioned above, Huaihua is located at the intersection of Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Guizhou and Guangxi. Moreover, it is an essential hub connecting these regions, making it a strategic corridor linking the south to the north and the east to the west. Promoting the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China is crucial.

First, Huaihua is one of China's national logistics hubs. As a national railroad station, Huaihuaxi Railway Station, together with the electrification of the second additional line of the Chongqing-Huaihua Railway and the Huaihua-Liuzhou section of Jiaozuo-Liuzhou Railway, constitutes the pattern of "Two Lines and One Station." It strengthens the connection between Huaihua and the Chengdu-Chongqing urban agglomeration and opens up a significant freight transportation channel for its connection to the southern seaports. Implementing these railroad construction projects has dramatically increased Huaihua's freight throughput capacity.

Moreover, they have opened the way for Huaihua's international trade in the Belt and Road Initiative and its deep integration into the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. Second, Huaihua's international cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative has also increased. Taking advantage of its unique geographic location, Huaihua has actively connected to the ASEAN market by building the Huaihua International Inland Port. It facilitates trade with ASEAN countries in agricultural products, electronic information, apparel and garments. In addition, Huaihua International Inland Port provides numerous logistics and warehousing facilities for the region. It has further improved the related infrastructure and introduced new technologies. All these measures have enormously strengthened the development of Huaihua's open economy.

Huaihua is also strategically positioned as a critical node of China's southbound corridor. With the entry into force of the RCEP, Huaihua has served as a bridge to promote trade between China and ASEAN countries. Huaihua International Inland Port is a logistics transit hub and platform for converging information, capital and technology flow. It provides vigorous support for regional economic integration. The strategic position of Huaihua lies in its geographic centrality and role as a critical platform for regional economic development and international cooperation. In the national strategic layout, Huaihua is vital in connecting markets in China and abroad and facilitating regional economic integration. Huaihua's strategic position will be further reinforced as the port's construction progresses, the transportation infrastructure is further improved, and international cooperation deepens. Huaihua's role in China and the global economic arena will also be more prominent.

3.2. Strategic Positioning in Hunan Province

Huaihua International Inland Port was first proposed as a strategic project for the economic development of Hunan Province. It is strategically positioned in Hunan Province as an important hub for regional economic growth, a vital node of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China, and an essential platform for international trade. It is a comprehensive and multi-layered regional development project. With the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative and RCEP, Huaihua International Inland Port's strategic significance has become increasingly prominent. It has become a new high ground for Central and Western China to open up to the outside world and a new growth pole for economic development.

Huaihua is the strategic gateway city of Hunan Province to the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. Huaihua International Inland Port is intended to accelerate regional economic integration by optimizing the transportation and logistics network. It functions as a distribution center for goods and a key node for promoting local industrial upgrading and economic restructuring. The construction and development of the port enable Huaihua to attract more investments from China and abroad and facilitate the development of high-tech and high-value-added industries. Moreover, it will help to enhance the economic strength and competitiveness of the entire Hunan Province.

Huaihua International Inland Port is strategically positioned in Hunan Province as an integral part of Huaihua as a national comprehensive transportation hub. The port effectively reduces logistics costs and improves logistics efficiency by upgrading the multimodal transportation capacity of railroads, highways and waterways. In particular, implementing the "Two Lines and One Station" project has made Huaihua a freight transportation channel connecting the Yangtze River Economic Belt and the Pearl River Delta Economic Belt. Furthermore, it enhances the connectivity between major cities in Hunan Province and Chinese and international markets.

Huaihua International Inland Port has become a platform for developing emerging industries. Given the port's logistic advantages and policy support, Huaihua can attract and cultivate emerging industries such as electronic information, biotechnology, and new materials. These industries will bring new economic growth points to Huaihua and the whole Hunan Province. In addition, the port also provides a broader market for local agricultural products such as tea and bamboo products. Through modern trade methods such as e-commerce, it will introduce local specialty products to regional and international markets.

In conclusion, Huaihua International Inland Port is vital to Hunan Province's development strategies. It is a crucial driver for local economic development and an essential platform for regional economic integration and comprehensive opening. With the continuous improvement of the port's functions and the in-depth implementation of relevant policies, it is expected to play an even more critical role.

3.3. Strategic Positioning in Central China

As mentioned earlier, Huaihua International Inland Port is located in Huaihua, southwestern Hunan Province, and has a favorable geographical position. The port has become a crucial transportation and logistics hub in central China by connecting the east to the west and the south to the north. In the context of building the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China, the port enhances intra-regional logistics capabilities and promotes economic integration and regional cooperation. The integration of these functions significantly elevates the port's strategic positioning in Central China. Located at the junction of Hunan with Guizhou, Chongqing, Guangxi and Hubei, it has become a significant transportation hub connecting Southwest China with Central and South China.

Due to the electrification of the Chongqing-Huaihua Railway and Jiaozuo-Liuzhou Railway and the construction of the Huaihuaxi Marshalling Yard, Huaihua has become a key node for the logistics transshipment from Central China to West and South China. Because of this, Huaihua International Inland Port occupies a central position in Central China's economic circle and logistics network. It is

significant in promoting the coordinated development of the regional economy and the efficient allocation of resources. According to Adolf et al. (2013), the construction of inland ports has eased the congestion of the seaport and significantly improved the efficiency of regional resource allocation.

Huaihua International Inland Port is also strategically positioned to promote the economic development of Central China. It offers a robust economic growth point and a platform for industrial upgrading for neighboring provinces and cities. By improving the quality and efficiency of logistics services, the port has attracted many manufacturing and processing enterprises and boosted high-tech and modern service industries. In addition, its international trade function opens up Chinese and global markets, especially the ASEAN market, for local products. It strengthens the position of Central China in supply chains in China and globally. The port has also demonstrated the importance of its strategic positioning in terms of environmental protection and sustainability. The port has integrated green logistics and low-carbon technologies into its operation and management, striving to realize a win-win result for economic benefits and environmental protection. Its green development strategy aligns with China's requirements for advancing ecological progress. It also enhances the region's sustainability and sets a model for the green development trend in Central China and the rest of the country.

Huaihua International Inland Port is also strategically positioned as a platform for international cooperation. The port is an integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative. The port facilitates international trade between China and other countries through its advanced logistics and transportation facilities. It actively contributes to further developing the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA). Nguyen and Notteboom (2016) argue that vigorously increasing investment in the inland port industry can promote the region's economic development and influence during foreign cooperation. The development of Huaihua International Inland Port enhances Central China's international influence and competitiveness. It also provides a new impetus and platform for opening up the regional economy and international cooperation.

In conclusion, the port has a well-defined and vital strategic position in Central China. It acts as a transportation and logistics hub, promotes regional economic development, serves as a platform for international cooperation, and serves as a model for green and sustainable development. These roles have shaped the port's strategic position in Central China and the country. As the port's functions continue to improve and deepen, its influence in the future regional economic landscape is expected to increase.

3.4. Position in China's National Strategy

The construction of Huaihua International Inland Port fulfills local development needs and is an integral part of China's national strategy. The Belt and Road Initiative is essential to China's plan to utilize international resources and accelerate national development. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Huaihua International Inland Port, as the open door of Hunan Province, has the unique location advantage of connecting the east to the west, the north to the south, and the rivers to the sea. It has strengthened China's economic ties with ASEAN and South Asia and has become a practical platform for promoting the upgraded version of the CAFTA. Because of this, the port can play a more significant role in regional economic cooperation and build a more open internationalized economic operation mechanism through the land-sea linkage.

The new strategic position of Huaihua International Inland Port is becoming increasingly prominent under the framework of China's Western Development Strategy and Belt and Road Initiative. Huaihua is a national logistics hub and an important node city of Western China's New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor. Huaihua International Inland Port serves regional development and aims to connect western China with Southeast Asia and the broader international market. It is an inland component within the seaport system and has become crucial in shaping its container performance and competitive strategy. Similarly, due to intermodal logistics and distribution networks, integrating inland freight distribution systems is essential for an efficient containerized seaport system (Jeevan et al., 2019).

Huaihua International Inland Port is a vital node of Western China's New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor. It strategically connects western China with the Beibu Gulf of Guangxi, southern China and ASEAN countries. The corridor is an integral part of China's Belt and Road Initiative. It aims to accelerate the pace of opening up and economic development of West China by enhancing the land-sea intermodal transportation capacity. Its operation can effectively reduce logistics costs, improve cargo transportation efficiency, and create more direct access to the sea for inland provinces. It is of great significance to promote China's Western Development Strategy.

Huaihua is strategically positioned in China's transportation network as a critical comprehensive transportation hub due to Huaihua's predominant geological location and transportation development. Huaihua's transportation network covers railroads, highways, waterways and airways. Railroad transportation especially occupies an essential position in China's national railroad network. Huaihuaxi Railway Station, as a national railroad marshaling yard, is a vital hub connecting Central China with South and Southwest China. Huaihua's railroad network serves the local economy and is an essential part of China's national southbound corridor, facilitating the transportation of goods across the country.

Huaihua International Inland Port is also strategically positioned as an open platform for international trade. Syahchari et al. (2021) argued that through the construction and operation of inland ports, the region can further attract domestic and foreign investment and promote the clustering of high-tech and high-value-added industries. The Huaihua International Inland Port strengthens links with other areas of China. It also facilitates international trade and cultural exchanges by enhancing direct connections to international markets such as ASEAN. The construction of this platform helps the products and services of Huaihua and its neighboring areas to go global and enhance their international competitiveness.

Huaihua International Inland Port also plays a significant role in supporting regional economic integration. The port strengthens the economic ties between Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Guizhou and Guangxi through effective logistics and supply chain management. It promotes the optimized allocation of regional economic resources and industrial upgrading. It enhances the comprehensive competitiveness of local industries and provides practical support and service platforms for regional economic integration. Huaihua International Inland Port is strategically positioned as a regional transportation hub and economic center in China, a national open platform and an important node for international trade. Its development can efficiently promote the integration and development of China's domestic and international trade and advance the in-depth implementation of China's Western Development Strategy and Belt and Road Strategy.

4. New Ideas for Huaihua International Inland Port's Development Strategy

In the current era, exploring Huaihua International Inland Port's development strategy requires innovative thinking and strategic perspectives. It is crucial to Huaihua's development and will significantly affect the economy of the surrounding areas. By tapping the potential and advantages of the port and continuously enhancing its functions and influence, it can promote higher-quality and more sustainable development and provide a new impetus for regional economic growth.

4.1. Increasing Policy Support to Build the Inland Port Special Zone

Huaihua has specific geographic advantages and development potential. The idea of making it the first international inland port special zone in China is significantly innovative and forward-looking. Moreover, it is highly likely to be highly regarded and favored by the Hunan Province and Huaihua City governments. From an academic perspective, analogous to the development of Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Shantou and other special zones, one of the critical factors for their impressive achievements is the strong support of national policies related to their independent development. To achieve the goal of building an international inland port special zone, Huaihua urgently needs all-round policy support from the Chinese government.

The Chinese government can formulate targeted industrial policies, guide the rational allocation of resources, and promote the accumulation and development of related industries. The Ministry of Finance can apply flexible fiscal policies to secure sufficient funds for infrastructure development and scientific and technological innovation in Huaihua. The Chinese government can stimulate the enthusiasm and vitality of the port's market players by introducing preferential tax policies for the Huaihua region. The government can enhance trade facilitation and expand the space of international markets through efficient trade policies.

With the solid support of national policies, Huaihua will fully unleash its inherent potential. Driven by innovation and led by opening up, Huaihua can gradually build up a complete system of the international inland port special zone, thus promoting the rapid development, transformation and upgrading of the regional economy. Therefore, it can set a new model and benchmark for the open development of China's inland areas. This process requires the local government's active efforts, national strategic layout and policy inclination. Only through the synergy of the two can this development vision of significant significance be accomplished.

4.2. Consolidating the Asian Markets

While consolidating the Southeast Asian market, Huaihua International Inland Port must shift its attention to the more complicated South Asian market and the promising West Asian market. In doing so, it will enjoy the benefits of the following three aspects:

Firstly, it can address the risk of over-dependence on specific industries and the risk of a unitary industrial structure. It can obtain market information through an in-depth understanding of the needs and trends of the South and West Asian markets by conducting market research and participating in international exhibitions. It can adjust its product and service strategies in response to market demand. Thus, it can further expand its product range according to the demands of South and West Asian markets and meet the needs of different customers. On the one hand, the port can strengthen the cooperation with local enterprises and jointly develop products suitable for the local market. On the other hand, it also solves the problem of Huaihua being overly dependent on specific industries.

Secondly, the port must take a differentiated route to avoid fierce competition with other regions and maintain its advantages. At present, the neighboring areas of Huaihua are also in full swing in building international inland ports, causing fierce competition for Huaihua International Inland Port. However, the adjacent regions focus on the Southeast Asian market and pay little attention to the South and West Asian markets. Therefore, South Asia and West Asia markets are blue ocean markets for the region. Huaihua International Inland Port has a first-mover advantage in entering this market, which is conducive to accelerating the formation of a moat against competitors.

Finally, avoiding dependence on a single ASEAN market prevents the Huaihua International Inland Port from being significantly affected by changes in the international economic situation. Currently, the international situation is volatile, and China's relationship with Southeast Asian countries is not stable. Reducing dependence on a single market helps enhance the port's business stability and risk resistance, expanding the scope of trade and gaining more business opportunities and room for growth.

4.3. Cross-regional Strategic Cooperation with Hainan Province

Increased maritime freight traffic leads to increased inland freight traffic, which in turn affects the ability of the intermodal transportation system to accommodate the growth of international trade. Inland ports are also developed to support seaport operations and the overall operation of the intermodal transportation system (Bask et al., 2014). Through cooperation with Hainan Province, especially the Yangpu Economic Development Zone, Huaihua International Inland Port can further strengthen its role as a critical node in Western China's New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor. Based on this, it can give new impetus to local economic development. The cooperation covers many aspects, such as information exchange, investment cooperation, industrial linkage and deep logistics cooperation, aiming at realizing regional economic synergy, mutual benefit and win-win results.

First, information exchange is the foundation of cross-regional cooperation. The strategic collaboration between Huaihua City and Yangpu Economic Development Zone should emphasize the importance of information sharing. First, information exchange is the foundation of cross-regional cooperation. The strategic collaboration between Huaihua City and Yangpu Economic Development Zone should emphasize the importance of information sharing. It enhances the transparency and mobility of information and increases the competitiveness of the two places in the local and international markets.

In particular, the Yangpu Economic Development Zone has actively integrated into the construction of the Single-Window New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. Because of this, Huaihua can make better use of this platform to enhance the overall effectiveness of the corridor economy. Second, in terms of investment promotion, the cooperation between Huaihua and Hainan Province can be further deepened. Both sides jointly promote investment promotion and inspection activities and establish a joint investment mechanism. Such collaboration enables resource sharing and complementary advantages and attracts more investors to follow the industrial development of the two places through joint promotion. The two places can establish a regional cooperation mechanism for investment promotion primarily through regular communication between chambers of commerce and civil organizations. Thus, it can ensure the introduction of high-quality projects.

In addition, industrial linkage is one of the critical components of cooperation between Huaihua and Hainan. With the advantages of the Yangpu Economic Development Zone in petrochemicals and port logistics, the two places have realized synergistic development in extending the industrial chain and connecting the upstream and downstream industries. With the policy advantage of a 30% value-added tariff exemption for imports in Yangpu Port, Huaihua's port-related enterprises, such as grain and oil processing enterprises, can set up sub-bases in Yangpu Port. Huaihua can also be used as a production and processing base for Yangpu Port enterprises. It reduces enterprises' tax costs and makes enterprises in Huaihua more competitive in the international market through the policy advantage of the bonded port.

Logistics cooperation is an essential part of cross-regional cooperation. Huaihua International Inland Port and Yangpu Port can cooperate intensively to build an international container hub port. They can jointly promote the coordinated development of global logistics parks along the corridor. As Hainan has deepened reform and opened up on all fronts, the two places can make significant progress in customs clearance facilitation, logistics information sharing, and business synergy. Especially in promoting the "Huaihua-Yangpu-ASEAN" two-way supply chain path, the two places can further deepen the economic and trade cooperation between the corridor and ASEAN countries through multimodal transportation and water-to-water transshipment logistics mode.

Policy synergy and linkage guarantee smooth cooperation (Li et al., 2015). Huaihua and Hainan jointly explore the feasibility of tax rebates at ports of departure at inland ports on the "Huaihua-Yangpu" route. They promote cross-border cooperation and supervision facilitation reforms in cargo transshipment and movement for foreign trade at customs offices along the "Huaihua-Qinzhou-Yangpu" route. These measures improve logistics efficiency and enhance the competitiveness of the two places in international trade.

In summary, the cross-regional strategic cooperation between Huaihua International Inland Port and Hainan Province provides new opportunities and paths for the development of Huaihua City. It also injects new impetus into constructing the Hainan Free Trade Port and developing the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. The cooperation realizes the synergistic development of the regional economy, mutual benefit and win-win results through information exchange, cooperation in investment promotion, industrial linkage and in-depth logistics cooperation. At the same time, it also strongly supports the economic development and internationalization of the two regions.

4.4. Promoting the New Progress of Huaihua International Inland Port by IPO

It is common for ports to conduct IPOs (Initial Public Offerings). On May 19, 2006, Tianjin Port Development Holdings Limited launched its IPO in Hong Kong and was warmly welcomed by investors. According to its sponsor, Tianjin Port's listing price was set at RMB 1.88 per share, expected to raise US\$139 million (about HK\$1,084 million).

After the IPO, Tianjin Port acquired substantial funds to construct port infrastructure, and it could invest billions of dollars in terminal expansion and upgrading equipment. It greatly enhanced the port's comprehensive strength and operational efficiency. Subsequently, the port attracted more attention in China and abroad, and its reputation increased dramatically, becoming a famous port brand. As a result, it has attracted many talents with rich capital market experience and professional management ability to join, like financial experts and strategic consultants. It has promoted the innovation and optimization of the port's management mode. For the region's development, it boosts a series of related industries through IPO, with Tianjin Port as the core. Logistics, shipping, trade and other industries achieve tens of billions of yuan of added value yearly, and their contribution to Tianjin's economic growth continues to rise. Expanding the port business and implementing new projects have created many jobs directly and indirectly. Every year, tens of thousands of new jobs are created for the local community, stabilizing local employment.

Following the IPO, Tianjin Port has been continuously upgraded in the national port ranking, and its competitiveness has been significantly enhanced. It has become a major shipping center and logistics hub in North China, generating a robust driving effect in neighboring regions.

There is also a precedent of IPO for international inland ports in China. Hebei Port Group Co., LTD Handan International Inland Port. Co., Ltd. was successfully listed on July 24, 2015. Handan International Inland Port. Co., Ltd. is the first modernized logistics enterprise of Hebei Port Group Co., LTD, listed in China. Jointly founded by Hebei Port Group Co., LTD and Handan Municipal People's Government, it is the "No.1 Project" of the Hebei Provincial People's Government. After Handan International Inland Port is completed, governmental bodies such as the Handan Customs and Quarantine Department will be stationed there. It can offer container dismantling and consolidation, container distribution, storage, customs clearance and other services.

Import and export declaration, customs clearance and other work in the port completed at once, without having to perform commodity inspection, animal and plant quarantine and sanitary and phytosanitary work in the coastal customs. Goods coming into the port go through customs, and goods going out of the port are cleared by customs, and the cargo transportation time to the seaports has significantly been shortened. The company's successful listing has extended the functions of coastal ports and border ports to the inland area of China. Moreover, it is strategically significant for the port and city to adjust the structure and change the mode, integrate into the opening up and development of Hebei with a new attitude, and serve the regional economic development.

The success of Hebei and Tianjin ports' IPOs proves that Huaihua International Inland Port's IPO is feasible. Following the IPO, the Huaihua government can obtain substantial capital from the capital market for infrastructure construction, business expansion, and technology upgrades at Huaihua International Inland Port. It can accelerate the development of Huaihua International Inland Port. Its debut in the capital market can increase the popularity of Huaihua International Inland Port and even Huaihua in China and the world and attract more cooperation opportunities and resources. In addition, the IPO requests that the inland port standardize and improve the governance mechanism and enhance the operation and management standards. It has, in turn, promoted the optimization of the governance structure of Huaihua International Inland Port. The IPO is a great help in promoting the linked development of related industries in Huaihua and neighboring areas and enhancing the vitality of the regional economy. At the same time, it promotes the optimization and upgrading of Huaihua's regional trade and logistics industry. Thus, Huaihua will become a more attractive economic center and enhance its competitiveness.

5. Conclusion

Huaihua International Inland Port plays a crucial role in globalization and regional economic integration. This paper analyzes its existing development strategies, reassesses its strategic positioning, and explores its new strategic directions in China and the international arena. Some constructive recommendations are made. Huaihua should be identified as an international inland port special zone. Firstly, Huaihua International Inland Port is an essential node connecting West China with the whole country and even the Southeast Asian market. Its strategic position supports the opening up and development of Hunan Province, Central and Western China. Its growth has further deepened the connection between Huaihua and the international market. Especially since the Belt and Road Initiative was introduced and the RCEP came into effect, the status and role of Huaihua International Inland Port have been significantly enhanced.

Secondly, the development of Huaihua International Inland Port boosts the vitality of the local economy and promotes employment and social stability. It also significantly increases the competitiveness of enterprises within and outside the region through its efficient logistics services and optimized operational efficiency. Huaihua can attract more investment from China and abroad and accelerate the concentration of high-tech and high-value-added industries through the port's international cooperation platform. The port plays an irreplaceable role in promoting regional economic integration. It strengthens the economic ties between Hunan, Hubei, Chongqing, Guizhou and Guangxi. Besides, the port integrates regional resources, optimizes industrial structure, and enhances the region's economic efficiency and market competitiveness through its multimodal transport capability.

In addition, Huaihua International Inland Port faces many challenges and problems in its development. It must balance economic development and environmental protection, deal with uncertainties in international trade, and improve operational efficiency and service quality. These issues need to be addressed through more scientific and systematic strategic planning. Therefore, this paper suggests that Huaihua International Inland Port should continue reinforcing its strategic position as the critical node of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in Western China. It should engage in more international cooperation and technological innovation to enhance its competitiveness. At the same time, it should strengthen collaboration with high-tech and high-value-added industries in China and abroad and make good use of markets and resources in China and the international community. In this way, it can realize sustainable development and contribute to further opening up and integrating the regional economy.

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