

Southeast Asian Studies at the  
University of Freiburg (Germany)

Occasional Paper Series

ISSN 2512-6377

[www.southeastasianstudies.uni-freiburg.de](http://www.southeastasianstudies.uni-freiburg.de)

Occasional Paper N° 42 (December 2018)

## **Governing Regional Connectivity in Southeast Asia – The Role of the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN’s External Partners**

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# Governing Regional Connectivity in Southeast Asia – The Role of the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN’s External Partners

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## *Series Editors*

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## Abstract:

The establishment of the connectivity agenda of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was supposed to mark a watershed moment for physical, institutional and people-to-people linkages in the Southeast Asian region. But little progress was initially made following the introduction of the first Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC) in 2010. A new master plan was introduced in 2016, reframing the connectivity agenda and introducing governance reforms within ASEAN. Even though the institutional reforms include a strengthened ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC), ASEAN’s intergovernmental processes have remained unchanged. Implementing the connectivity agenda therefore faces the challenge of intra-ASEAN coordination. With the introduction of the master plan came significant interest in engagement by external partners at the regional as well as the member state levels. External partners are attempting to engage with ASEAN’s connectivity agenda throughout the policy process, from setting the agenda regionally to funding its implementation nationally. Taken together, ASEAN’s internal and external challenges in governing connectivity are exacerbating old challenges and creating new opportunities for the region. This paper explores the emerging governance dynamism involving the ASEAN member states, the ASEAN Secretariat and ASEAN’s dialogue partners.

## Keywords:

*ASEAN, Connectivity, Regionalism, Interregionalism*

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This paper emerged based on field work conducted in Jakarta, Indonesia, from January to March 2018, while I was a fellow at the Centre of Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). I am very grateful to all the people who supported this research, particularly Jürgen Rüländ who provided comments on various drafts.

## 1. Introduction

Through the release of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity in 2010 and the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025 in 2016, ASEAN has managed to put its concept of connectivity not just on the regional (Das 2013), but also on the global agenda. Given the wide-ranging diffusion of the concept, connectivity may be the most resonant idea to come out of Southeast Asia and ASEAN since the establishment of the ASEAN Charter. The concept of connectivity first transcended the Southeast Asian region to include partners in the West Pacific neighborhood such as Australia,<sup>1</sup> China,<sup>2</sup> Japan,<sup>3</sup> and Korea,<sup>4</sup> which have all adopted connectivity as part of their regional strategies in recent years. Beyond this, the concept has attained almost universal engagement, with concerned parties including the US<sup>5</sup> as well as the European Union (EU)<sup>6</sup> and India.<sup>7</sup> Connectivity made it to the top of the agenda of the most recent Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), where the concept has played a key role in the past two iterations of the forum. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) released a Connectivity Blueprint of its own in 2014, which mirrors the same three pillars of ASEAN's model: physical, institutional and people-to-people. China, perhaps most notably, has put connectivity at the top of its rhetoric in Southeast Asia with regard to its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its five pillars of connectivity partly overlap with those of the ASEAN master plan. This reverse diffusion of norms and ideas from ASEAN to its external partners challenges mainstream norm diffusion research, which is mainly concerned with the transfer (Allison 2015; Jetschke & Murray 2012; Risse 2016) and adaption (Acharya 2004) of external ideas to ASEAN. Against this backdrop of diffusion of the connectivity concept from ASEAN to its external partners, it is high time to reassess the internal governance processes of the ASEAN connectivity agenda as well as the dynamics of external partner engagement.

What will matter in the historical assessment of the connectivity agenda is not just the rhetorical spread of the concept in competing or complementary plans, but the implementation of concrete connectivity policies and projects. Looking at ASEAN's current track record, progress on connectivity looks fairly limited. Following the emergence of the first Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, few projects were actually implemented. The priorities of the first plan were widely considered too broad and of a “*wish-list character*.”<sup>8</sup> This was indirectly acknowledged in the recently published second Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. It listed only thirty-nine out of 125 projects from the first plan as completed (ASEAN Secretariat 2016c), many of which may not be considered to have been key deliverables of the plan. This lack of progress was due to issues of intra-ASEAN coordination and ownership, as well as insufficient resource mobilization. ASEAN continues to depend heavily on external partner engagement to implement its various regional agendas. For this reason, increased partner engagement with the aim of resource mobilization is considered a major priority in the current connectivity master plan.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Straits Times*, 18 March 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Xinhua*, 14 November 2018.

<sup>3</sup> *The Japan Times*, 9 September 2016.

<sup>4</sup> *The Straits Times*, 14 November 2018.

<sup>5</sup> *The Straits Times*, 17 March 2016.

<sup>6</sup> *The Jakarta Post*, 14 September 2016.

<sup>7</sup> *The Straits Times*, 26 January 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Interview information, 13 February 2018.

The first MPAC was accompanied by some institutional changes within ASEAN and the ASEAN Secretariat. The first master plan, drafted by the High-Level Task Force on Connectivity, established the ASEAN Connectivity Coordination Committee (ACCC), which is basically another iteration of various member state-driven intergovernmental decision making bodies within ASEAN. In addition, as part of the envisioned strengthening of the ASEAN Secretariat, a dedicated connectivity division was established within ASEC. The establishment of this division has possibly been the greatest change within ASEC in the past ten years, as it was endowed with a novel mandate of cross-pillar coordination and project preparation. Apart from overseeing the first MPAC, the Connectivity Division was also instrumental in supporting the drafting process of the second master plan. Consequently, the second plan contained calls for additional strengthening of the role of the division, creating an unprecedented mandate for coordination within a central ASEAN institution. Little research exists on whether the reforms engendered by the connectivity agenda have had a meaningful impact on ASEAN as an institution.

This paper addresses three questions:

- (1) How do the ASEAN states in cooperation with the ASEAN Secretariat govern the connectivity agenda?
- (2) How do external partners engage with the connectivity agenda on the regional level?
- (3) How do partners support implementation at the level of ASEAN member states?

Why are two research questions dedicated to external partners in a paper about a policy issue emerging from within a regional organization? ASEAN is one of many regional organizations in the world that is strongly dependent on external partner support to carry out not just selected but even core mandates of the organization, such as the convening of meetings and the implementation of agreements. Various dialogue partners, the official term used by ASEAN, have been involved with ASEAN at the regional as well as national levels for many decades. The introduction of the connectivity agenda has seen renewed partner interest in regional processes as well as increased engagement at various high-level meetings. At the same time, ASEAN has also emphasized partner engagement, dedicating significant space in both editions of the master plan to resource mobilization strategies. Changes from the first to the second MPAC were decided in close coordination with external stakeholders and two partners have seconded advisors and technical staff on connectivity to the ASEAN Secretariat. Perhaps most notably, the drafting of the second master plan was financed by the Australian Fund to ASEAN.<sup>9</sup> Given the high importance of the connectivity agenda for the envisioned regional integration process in Southeast Asia, external involvement should be seen as highly controversial.

## **2. The State of Play of ASEAN Connectivity**

The first connectivity master plan introduced a three-pillar structure of connectivity, consisting of physical, institutional and people-to-people aspects. Under these three headings, the plan identified a set of key strategies, seven under the physical pillar, ten under the institutional pillar, and two under the people-to-people pillar. Apart from spelling out the deliverables for each of these strategies, the master plan also addressed resource

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<sup>9</sup> Interview information, 5 March 2018.

mobilization strategies as well as implementation of the connectivity agenda (ASEAN Secretariat 2011). The second master plan is a radical departure from the first version. While the plan acknowledges that many of the priority projects of the first master plan remain unfinished, it does not reiterate much of the first plan's agenda but introduces a completely novel framework. The plan includes five strategic objectives, which are all related to multiple ASEAN pillars. These are: (1) Sustainable Infrastructure, (2) Digital Innovation, (3) Seamless Logistics, (4) Regulatory Excellence, and (5) People Mobility. Between two and four initiatives are subsumed under each of the five strategic objectives. The novel framework building upon the first MPAC was created for two reasons. First, because the previous connectivity projects will remain on the agenda of the various intergovernmental bodies tasked with implementation,<sup>10</sup> and second, to narrow down and clarify the connectivity agenda. Most representatives of the ASEAN Secretariat as well as the ASEAN dialogue partners consider the second master plan a much-improved document due to its condensed nature, focusing on five priority areas and tying its connectivity priorities in Southeast Asia to global megatrends.

Given that ASEAN has strategic blueprints in the economic, political and socio-cultural pillars, it is to be expected that most integration commitments derive from those three strategic plans. Still, some external partners seem to understand that the connectivity master plan is a larger integration agenda in disguise.<sup>11</sup> As far as ASEAN is concerned, the blueprints in the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), Political-Security Community (APSC), and Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) continue to reign supreme. So what is the added value of MPAC? Its purpose is to complement the community blueprints as well as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI), which aims to narrow the development gap between the six founding members of ASEAN and Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV countries).<sup>12</sup>

The second MPAC was drafted based on a lessons-learned process from the first MPAC, which encountered challenges related to funding, coordination and ownership.<sup>13</sup> These coordination issues are addressed by five strategies contained within the most recent MPAC: Additionality, Breadth, Coordination, Depth, and Emphasis, which refer to the following: Additionality: *“MPAC 2025 may create new initiatives (not in the sectoral plans) that are considered crucial for improving physical, institutional, or people-to-people connectivity.”* Breadth: *“[...] may expand the coverage of initiatives in existing sectoral plans so that they include the areas identified to be important from a connectivity perspective.”* Coordination: *“MPAC 2025 can help ensure effective coordination of initiatives that cut across multiple working groups to maximize the likelihood of successful implementation.”* Depth: *“For those initiatives that are considered important for connectivity, MPAC 2025 aims to maximize the likelihood of successful implementation by helping to detail out the initiatives and how to deal with potential barriers to success.”* Emphasis: *“For initiatives that are considered important for connectivity, and for which a clear action plan is already in place, MPAC 2025 will seek to highlight the importance of these initiatives”* (ASEAN Secretariat 2016c). These functions are slated to be carried out at least partly by the Connectivity Division within the secretariat.

Given the prominence of intergovernmental processes within the organization, the proposition of such a coordination unit within the secretariat is unconventional to say the

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<sup>10</sup> Interview information, 9 March 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Interview information, 14 February 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Interview information, 9 March 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

least. The ability to coordinate across pillars, to emphasize existing strategies and to create new initiatives are uncommon activities for ASEAN Secretariat divisions. Still, representatives of ASEAN are careful to say that the MPAC is not in any way “*above the blueprints*.”<sup>14</sup> Instead, they see their role mainly in improving stakeholder engagement, particularly stakeholders relevant to resource mobilization. The responsible division is therefore tasked with project preparation in order to facilitate funding and partner matchmaking, making projects “*bankable*.”<sup>15</sup>

Tellingly, the first year since the conception of the new master plan has mainly been spent on improving stakeholder engagement. Infrastructure financing gaps in the region remain large, with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) releasing documents on the investment required for continued economic growth of the region every year. Most recently, the investment need was estimated to amount to a staggering US\$184 billion annually from 2016 to 2030 (Asian Development Bank 2017). Some efforts have been undertaken to mobilize resource within the region as well. The first MPAC resulted in the simultaneous establishment of the ASEAN Infrastructure Fund (AIF) in collaboration with the Asian Development Bank,<sup>16</sup> which is also mentioned in the current MPAC. The fund, set up to mobilize investments from ASEAN member states and co-funding by the Asian Development Bank, has only played a marginal role in connectivity investment so far. The aim of the fund was to provide funding of US\$300 million by ASEAN member states annually, matched with US\$150 million from ADB (Ministry of Finance of Malaysia 2015). The ADB website, however, only lists ten projects the fund has been involved in between 2013 and 2017 (Asian Development Bank 2018). Being the largest fund established by ASEAN ever, the AIF may be called a modest success. But given the massive connectivity needs in the region, the fund falls well short, being dwarfed by the annual investment gap by a factor of 409(!). Mobilization of external resources therefore has been and remains a key feature of ASEAN’s connectivity strategy as well as the new MPAC.

### **3. Governing Connectivity – Triangular Relations between the ASEAN Secretariat, the Member States and the Dialogue Partners**

Organizations are not isolated entities subsisting on their own resources but instead are involved in exchanges of resources with other organizations in their environment. This is especially true of organizations such as ASEAN, which are loosely integrated groups of states with varying levels of coherence as a regional bloc or caucus (Nguitragool & Rüländ 2015). This paper operates under the perspective that relations between organizations have repercussions beyond the relationship itself and that organizations are driven as much by their external relations as by their internal structure (Biermann 2008, 2016). This is in opposition to much existing research on regional organizations, which mainly sees these organizations as driven by internal inter-state bargaining (Börzel 2016). Instead, relations between organizations have a profound effect on the institutional development of the entities involved, through dynamics of resource exchange, organizational networking and

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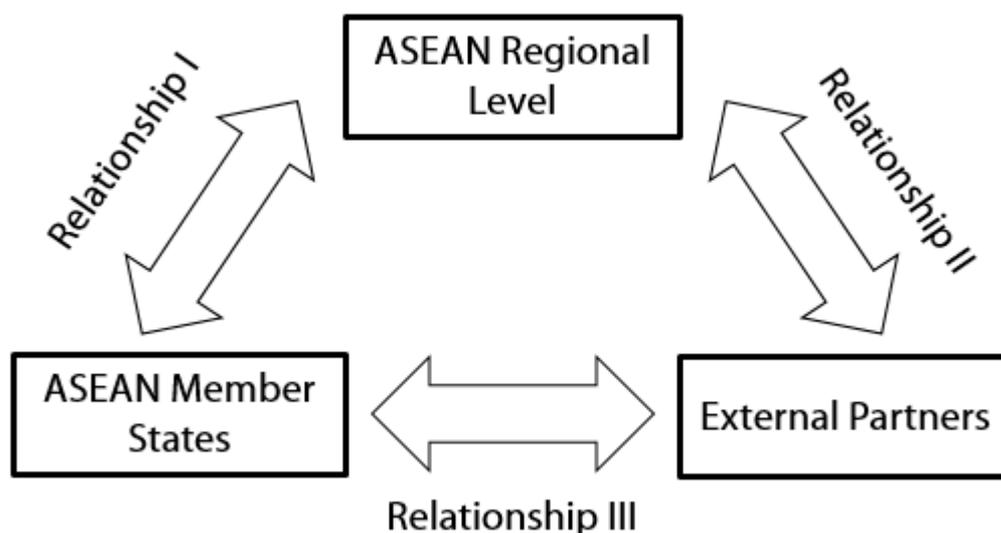
<sup>14</sup> Interview information, 9 March 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *The Jakarta Post*, 8 May 2011.

processes of institutional socialization. This is particularly notable when inter-organizational relations occur at multiple levels, as in the case investigated in this paper. The theoretical point of departure in this analysis is the inter-organizational concept of resource-dependence (Biermann & Harsch 2017), which is appropriate for the analysis of both the relationship of ASEAN member states and its central regional institutions to their external partners (Relationship II and III, see Figure 1 below). Due to the intergovernmental nature of ASEAN, best exemplified by the relationship of the secretariat and the sectoral bodies, which represent the member states, even regional governance within ASEAN itself may be conceptualized as an inter-organizational relationship. This is reflected in Figure 1 below, which highlights the three inter-organizational relationships that this paper seeks to analyze. Relationship I: The governance relationship between the ASEAN Secretariat and the intergovernmental processes involving the member states. This relationship consists of the regional formulation of strategic plans and their uptake by the member state-driven sectoral bodies. Relationship II: The engagement of dialogue partners with ASEAN at the regional level during the agenda-setting and formulation stages of the policy process. This relationship consists of institutional support to the ASEAN Secretariat as well as engagement with and contestation of the connectivity master plan. Relationship III: The relationship between the dialogue partners and the individual ASEAN member states. Given ASEAN's intergovernmental nature, implementation of policies plays out at the national level, with partners involved through their development cooperation projects.

**Figure 1:** Inter-Organizational Relations between External Partners and ASEAN at two Levels of Governance  
(Source: Author's elaboration)

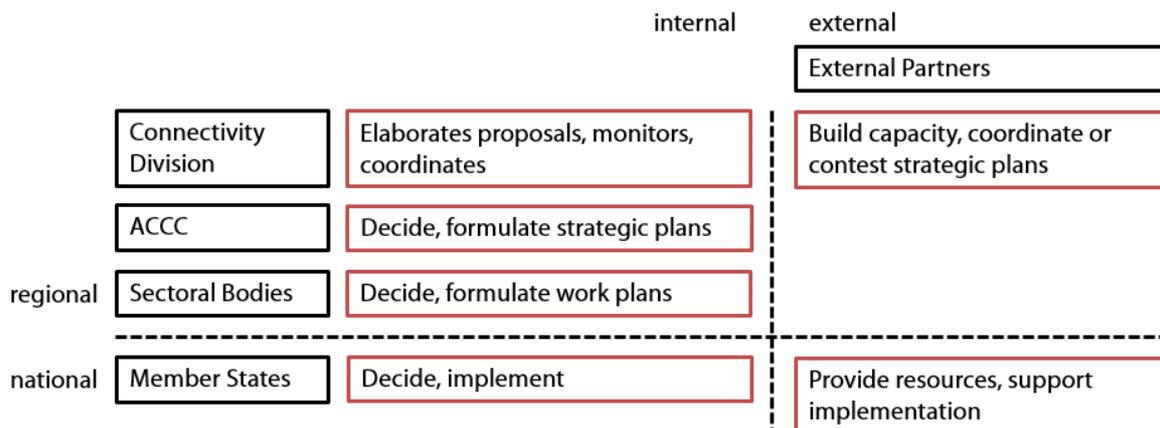


The inter-organizational perspective on the three key agents in connectivity and their respective relationships allows us to answer the three research questions this paper addresses. Analyzing relationship I between the member states and their secretariat allows us to illuminate how ASEAN states govern the connectivity agenda in cooperation with their secretariat (Research Question 1). Of particular importance in this relationship is the issue of the intergovernmentality of ASEAN and to what degree coherent agreements can be made and competences may be transferred to the regional level. Relationship II helps illuminate how dialogue partners engage with the connectivity agenda on the regional level, involving the ASEAN Secretariat and strategic documents (Research Question 2). Many dialogue partners support the Connectivity Division and all of them have some engagement with or a

position towards the connectivity master plan. On the opposite side, the secretariat manages the varying priorities of the partners at the regional level, potentially conducting a type of organizational hedging. Finally, investigating relationship III answers the question of how partners support implementation at the level of ASEAN member states and how their national-level approaches match ASEAN’s regional-level strategies (Research Question 3). With the exception of Singapore and Brunei, external partners have ongoing development activities in all ASEAN member states. Often, these relationships differ from the regional ones in focus and depth. Therefore, a dynamic of external support to connectivity projects is present in each individual ASEAN member state. There is also an aspect of competition inherent in the engagement of several member states with external partners. Given their level of development, many of the states compete over the same external resources from bilateral as well as multilateral development partners.

Given ASEAN’s dependence on external resources in almost every aspect of its operations, but particularly in the implementation of the connectivity agenda, relations with external partners are extremely important. It is therefore highly concerning that the current constellation of connectivity governance along those three relationships highlights a problematic dynamic of resource dependence on ASEAN’s side. Given that one relationship runs within an organization (Relationship 1 between the ASEAN regional and member state levels), two relationships highlight resource dependence between ASEAN and external partners. Given that two relationships have external agents as the source of resources on one side and ASEAN as the recipient on the other, this exacerbates relationship asymmetry and gives external partners the potential to intentionally or unintentionally affect connectivity governance within ASEAN. Figure 2 gives an overview of the actors involved in the connectivity governance process and their respective activities.

**Figure 2:** Regional, National, Internal, and External Involvement in Connectivity Governance; Actors in Black, their Activities in Red (Source: Author’s elaboration)



#### 4. Governing Connectivity – Engagement between the ASEAN Member States and the Secretariat on the Connectivity Agenda

This section addresses the first research question of this paper, analyzing the responsibilities and challenges inherent in governing connectivity between the ASEAN member states as well as their primary central regional institution, the ASEAN Secretariat (Relationship I). As ASEAN remains a profoundly intergovernmental organization, regional governance processes remain firmly in the hands of the states, the regional body being tasked only with

administrative and networking functions (Jetschke 2009; Nair 2016). This is also the case in the field of connectivity. The driving force behind the connectivity agenda is the ASEAN Connectivity Coordination Committee,<sup>17</sup> which consists of representatives of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), delegates from the member states' missions to ASEAN. The MPAC lays out the role of the secretariat as “*monitoring and assisting the implementation of the Master Plan*” (ASEAN Secretariat 2016c). This vague phrasing, however, masks the deeper impact that the connectivity agenda may potentially have on ASEAN's institutional structure and the support it may lend to the secretariat as a key agent in the connectivity implementation process.

At the intergovernmental level, connectivity has not led to the creation of new institutional structures. No separate sectoral bodies have been created to implement the connectivity agenda. Instead, connectivity is supposed to diffuse through the ASEAN institutional architecture by way of the sectoral bodies that are under the political, economic and socio-cultural pillars of ASEAN (as noted in Annex 1 of the charter).<sup>18</sup> These sectoral bodies consist of experts from the national governments or government-related agencies of the ASEAN member states, who meet to deliberate on policy issues within their area of responsibility and expertise. This process of “*absorption*” of the connectivity agenda within the sectoral body structure in ASEAN led to some frustration within the partner community.<sup>19</sup> While the new MPAC was hailed as an “*agenda for implementation,*” it now looks increasingly like an “*agenda for drafting.*”<sup>20</sup> Several features are worth highlighting in the governance of ASEAN connectivity: (1) The member states remain firmly in charge of the agenda and its progress along the policy cycle through the involvement of the coordination committee and the sectoral bodies. (2) Implementation of the agenda can only occur in cooperation with the states and based on initiatives that are agreed upon by sectoral bodies and included in their work plans. (3) The Connectivity Division nonetheless has a particular place within the secretariat as the only policy-focused division not subsumed under the three-pillar structure and endowed with the mandate to engender cross-pillar cooperation.

While the intergovernmental structure of ASEAN has not undergone any changes, significant innovations have occurred within the secretariat. As a part of an organizational reform approved by the ASEAN Coordinating Council in 2008, the Connectivity Division was established as an entity reporting directly to the Secretary General. In the past, there had been other divisions outside of the three-pillar structure. All organization charts from 2008 to 2014 included a Strategic Planning Division, with the Connectivity Division first emerging in 2011. In 2014 it was suggested that connectivity be a part of a proposed Cross-Pillar Coordination Directorate, which was supposed to include both the Connectivity Division and the Narrowing the Development Gap Division, also known as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration, which is now under the Economic Pillar. The Strategic Planning Division disappeared from ASEAN's organizational chart in a reform of the organization in 2016. In the last available narrative organizational structure of the secretariat, this division was described as having the following functions: “(1) *Establish and coordinate the process of corporate planning and oversee management systems, procedures and policies;* (2) *coordinate project development by being the repository for project methodology, coordinate the project approval process,*

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<sup>17</sup> Interview information, 16 February 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

and coordinate project implementation for cross-pillar projects; (3) coordinate cross-sectoral linkages within and across the three pillars, monitor high level progress of each community (e.g. AEC scorecard), service and provide high level policy advice to Community Councils and related bodies, support development of larger scale projects and programmes, and identify research needs” (ASEAN Secretariat 2008). Both the Strategic Planning and Connectivity divisions existed side-by-side from 2011 until (presumably) 2016, when the structure was reformed to omit Strategic Planning, retaining only connectivity. Given the strategic outlook of the MPAC, it is fair to say that the Connectivity Division has taken over tasks from the second and third functions of the previous Strategic Planning Division. Functions two and three fall clearly into the current portfolio of Connectivity as defined in the MPAC (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3:** Extract from MPAC on the evolution of the Connectivity Division (Source: ASEAN Secretariat 2016b)

		From...	To...
1	Monitoring of performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited to receiving progress reports from national coordinators and sectoral implementing agencies</li> <li>Metrics often poorly defined so difficult to accurately assess progress or impact on end outcomes, and data often not available in timely manner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Detailed monitoring of progress at 3 levels: input, output, and outcome</li> <li>Tracking of changes in performance every 6 months</li> <li>Report progress internally and externally (on website)</li> </ul>
2	Problem solving and coordination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited to updating ACCC of risks to implementation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Actively problem solve, resolve bottlenecks, and propose course corrections along the way</li> <li>Facilitate work across organisational boundaries including between ministries and with key agents</li> <li>Bring in external expertise as and when needed</li> <li>Give ACCC representatives early warning of risks and recommended actions</li> </ul>
3	Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Resource constraints mean that limited capacity to support ACCC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active outreach strategy, including:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying list of priority events / forums for sharing Connectivity progress and approach</li> <li>Proactive engagement with business groups and other groups (e.g., regular briefings)</li> <li>Supporting ACCC representatives in communicating progress to external stakeholders and media</li> <li>Regular updating of materials on website, including semi-annual results on implementation progress</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
4	Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited to facilitation of some specific infrastructure-related initiatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ASEAN Connectivity Division will facilitate and coordinate the implementation of many of the Sustainable Infrastructure initiatives.</li> </ul>

Coordination between the Connectivity Division and various sectoral bodies appears to remain a challenge. Staff in other divisions responsible for policy areas related to connectivity within the AEC noted that the sectoral agendas and the connectivity agenda are “*basically the same.*”<sup>21</sup> From the vantage point of the ASEAN sectoral bodies, the MPAC may not be seen as a significant innovation as the existing agendas of several sectoral bodies have simply been integrated into the master plan.<sup>22</sup> The prospect of cross-sectoral coordination within the secretariat must also be called into question. While some closer engagement with entities from the socio-cultural community pillar may yet occur, inquiries regarding present engagement between the Connectivity Division and bodies from the political pillar were answered in the negative.<sup>23</sup> Statements from ASEC staff suggest that connectivity may have an impact on the cross-coordination of policy issues between the ASEAN economic pillar and the political-security and socio-cultural pillars in the future, but the content and meaning of potential political or social connectivity concepts is not completely clear. Another issue is

<sup>21</sup> Interview information, 27 February 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Interview information, 9 March 2018.

that of sectoral monitoring. The three monitoring directorates within the secretariat were set up as a part of the last institutional reform, tasked with the monitoring of their respective pillars. Currently, the most sophisticated monitoring system is to be found in the Economic Pillar while others remain under development. But connectivity monitoring is not carried out as a priority by the responsible ASEAN Integration Monitoring Directorate.<sup>24</sup> It is unclear what cross-pillar monitoring by the Connectivity Division will look like and how the progress of the connectivity agenda, slated to occur within the pillar structure, will be monitored.

This exemplifies the internal challenge facing ASEAN. Given the fairly rigid pillarization of the organization at both the administrative and intergovernmental levels, carrying out any of the described coordination tasks is not trivial by any means. In addition, given the primacy of the ASEAN sectoral bodies and the Committee of Permanent Representatives, any and all of these processes require significant cooperation from the ASEAN member states as no other body within the organization has the power to engender institutional change. In practical terms, this means that if no sectoral body exists for a particular policy area, one must be created. But there are indications that the central regional institutions of ASEAN are gaining more weight in these processes. The current MPAC calls for a continued strengthening of the Connectivity Division to better deal with the coordination aspects of the agenda. Plans for an expansion of division competences can be seen in Figure 3.

How much have the envisioned activities from the MPAC diffused within ASEAN's intergovernmental structures so far? The most direct insight we have on the diffusion of the connectivity agenda within the ASEAN statutory process are references made to connectivity within the work plans of the sectoral bodies under the AEC. Work plans are the key policy documents in which ASEAN member states formulate their objectives for regional cooperation efforts. Given the limited progress of monitoring in the APSC and the ASCC, there are not yet comparable documents from those sectoral bodies, nor is there a public timeline on when these documents may be conceived. For this reason, we cannot yet fully assess how far diffusion of the connectivity agenda has progressed in those two pillars. This is representative of ASEAN as well as the connectivity agenda, which has emphasized the economic dimension at the detriment of the political and socio-cultural dimensions. Given the strong focus of the connectivity agenda on economic aspects and the acknowledgement that engagement with the political and socio-cultural bodies has been scant, it is fair to assume that the AEC work plans represent an extreme case (Seawright & Gerring 2008), meaning that if diffusion of connectivity concepts is likely to occur anywhere within the ASEAN statutory process, it is within the Economic Pillar.

In the current list of AEC work plans, we find only ten references to the connectivity agenda, which suggests some diffusion. Table 1 shows a complete overview of connectivity-related references in the work plans of the ASEAN economic sectoral bodies. There is only one specific reference to the MPAC, to “*Establish a rolling priority pipeline list of potential ASEAN infrastructure projects and sources of funds.*” This reference to the master plan within the Consolidated Action Plan highlights the issue with the MPAC. It is acknowledged as “*not being under the AEC,*” (ASEAN Secretariat 2017a) which suggests that the sectoral bodies may see the connectivity agenda as not being under their purview or as having a secondary priority below

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<sup>24</sup> Interview information, 22 February 2018.

the AEC Blueprint 2025. This is consistent with other views expressed within the institution, giving further support to the concern that cross-pillar coordination may prove difficult.

**Table 1:** References to connectivity in the ASEAN Economic Community 2025 Consolidated Strategic Action Plan (Source: ASEAN Secretariat 2017a)

Promote ASEAN Connectivity through the implementation of the ASEAN Customs Transit System along the North-South and East-West Corridor.
Enhance ASEAN capital market connectivity to support more cross-border activities: Enhance trading linkage for ASEAN stock markets. Make available benchmarks at regular intervals (list of benchmark tenors), Make available post-trade (or end-of-day) bond prices, Adopt ASEAN Disclosure Standards for Debt Securities, Have suitably wide range of securities eligible for central bank liquidity.
Greater focus on connectivity, lessening the trade restrictive effects and costs of NTMs and domestic regulatory reform.
Promote programs that enhance ASEAN participation in global and regional value chains and production networks, including programs and joint promotions that attract leading technology firms to set up shop in region, develop industrial clusters and support industries, and improved physical and institutional connectivity within the region and with the rest of the world.
Enhance connectivity within ASEAN including through multilateral electricity trade under the framework of the ASEAN Power Grid and greater liquefied natural gas (LNG) cooperation under the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline.
To move towards greater connectivity, efficiency, integration, safety and sustainability of ASEAN transport to strengthen ASEAN’s competitiveness and foster regional inclusive growth and development.
To create a strong ICT infrastructure with pervasive connectivity in ASEAN and to facilitate the creation of a business environment that is conducive to attracting and promoting trade, investment and entrepreneurship.
Improve ICT infrastructure and connectivity especially in the rural areas, and develop measures to enhance the resilience of ICT infrastructure.
To enhance energy connectivity and market integration in ASEAN to achieve energy security, accessibility, affordability and sustainability for all.
Enhance connectivity within ASEAN for energy security and accessibility via pipelines and regasification terminals.

The state of the internal governance of the connectivity agenda highlights ASEAN’s challenges following the introduction of the ASEAN Charter. While institutional structures have advanced, true regional-national coordination appears to remain elusive. While regional coordination occurs on the agenda setting stage of strategic documents, the sectoral bodies are in control of policy formulation, with implementation happening at the national level. Sectoral bodies also have unique arrangements on how they report on the implementation of activities. There is currently no indication of how much relevance the ASEAN regional level will have in coordinating the implementation of connectivity projects at the national level or even in monitoring them. This risks increasing the agenda setting-implementation gap because the ASEAN governance superstructure outlines a strategy that the member state bodies may not carry out. Apart from the governance of strategic processes, funding of the agenda is carried out in coordination with external partners at both the

regional and member state levels. The work of the sectoral bodies is also key here because partners' regional-level support mainly connects to the existing sectoral body work plans. The lack of coherence between the ASEAN member states and the regional level (Relationship I) therefore transfers to other relationships of the organization.

## 5. Contesting Connectivity – External Partner Engagement in the Connectivity Agenda at the Regional Level

In dealing with its external partners on the regional level (Relationship II), ASEAN has to reckon with contesting definitions of connectivity, both in the partners' relations to ASEAN and in an increasing number of external partners' plans addressing connectivity. The concept of connectivity as espoused by ASEAN may be one of the most resonant ideas emanating from the organization since the establishment of the ASEAN charter. In fact, the widespread adoption of the concept in various fora involving partners related to ASEAN appears to support the view that the Southeast Asian conception of connectivity has in fact diffused throughout various fora, a case of south-north diffusion which has not previously been noted. A notable aspect of the ASEAN connectivity concept is its strong economic focus, which many external partners have judged as being too limited,<sup>25</sup> prompting norm contestation, for instance by the EU. This section addresses the second research question of the paper, outlining how external partners support and engage with the connectivity agenda at the regional level.

Given ASEAN's multi-tier structure consisting of the ten dialogue partners (Australia, Canada, China, the EU, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Russia, and the United States; coordinated by a rotating ASEAN member state), four sectoral dialogue partners (Pakistan, Norway, Switzerland, and Turkey; coordinated by the secretariat), and one development partner (Germany; coordinated by the secretariat), cooperation with external partners is highly formalized and transparent through agreed-upon plans of action (PoAs), which contain the priority areas for the respective partner. Only dialogue partners have action plans, as cooperation with the sectoral dialogue partners was, as of 2018, under discussion and the cooperation with Germany falls under a separate category given the existing dialogue partnership with the EU.

All of the partners' action plans contain connectivity chapters separate from the activities involving the three ASEAN pillars. Interestingly, given the supposed cross-cutting nature of the connectivity agenda, all references to connectivity outside the connectivity chapters themselves occur in the chapters on the economic pillar, further underlining the outsized focus that has been placed on connectivity as an economic concept.

The distribution of connectivity references within the action plans (Table 2) is puzzling given the supposed engagement of the partners at the regional level. Canada, India, and the Republic of Korea are usually not seen as particularly deeply involved at the ASEAN regional level. A qualitative analysis of the connectivity references contained in the action plans fortunately clarifies the focal areas of the references contained in these documents. In the case of Canada, for instance, most connectivity commitments are related to the area of energy. In the case of the EU and the US, the references made to connectivity are so broad as

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<sup>25</sup> Interview information, 14 February 2018.

to enable a wide scope of potential connectivity engagement for both partners.<sup>26</sup> In all cases, it must be noted that the creation of the plans of action is a dynamic process based on negotiations between the external partners and the ASEAN states. External partners have highlighted the fact that the action plans are considered the blueprints for what is possible and not possible for each partner's engagement with the organization. Plans of action should therefore be understood as an indicator of ASEAN and partner priorities within the relationship.

**Table 2:** Number of references to connectivity agenda within Plans of Action by partners (excluding Japan)<sup>27</sup>  
(Source: ASEAN Secretariat 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2015e, 2015f, 2016a, 2017b)

Dialogue Partner	Number of References to Connectivity in PoA
India	12
China	11
Canada	10
Republic of Korea	9
Russia	6
Australia	5
New Zealand	5
European Union	4
United States	3

Partners clearly have different interests in the connectivity agenda and become engaged at different points of the policy cycle. Australia, through its hiring of a consulting firm, has financially supported the drafting of the current connectivity master plan and has facilitated a working relationship between the secretariat and the World Bank on project development.<sup>28</sup> Germany has recruited an advisor to be seconded to the Connectivity Division, with Australia supporting two additional staff.<sup>29</sup> But only limited support can be given at the identification, agenda setting, and formulation stages. Most support from partners is sought at the implementation stage and both MPACs dedicate significant space to discussing how external partners can assist ASEAN member states in implementing their commitments under the MPAC. The usual procedure within ASEAN is that the sectoral bodies themselves approach partners for support for their activities, through ASEC desk officers. But connectivity is a special case in that support was sought at a higher level of the hierarchy, presumably to signify the particular breadth and importance of the connectivity agenda. The Connectivity Division is closely involved with partners and has a mandate to facilitate matchmaking between interested stakeholders and activities contained in the master plan. But more significant still is the engagement at the summit level. At regional summits following the adoption of MPAC 2025, so-called ACCC+1 meetings were held in order to extract financial commitments from ASEAN partners. The first of a series of such meetings was held with Chinese counterparts, then with representatives of Japan and the Republic of

<sup>26</sup> Interview information, 14 February 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Japan is excluded from this quantitative assessment due to the different structure of the relevant plan of action.

<sup>28</sup> Interview information, 22 February 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Interview information, 5 March 2018.

Korea.<sup>30</sup> While it is unclear how much funding was actually committed through these meetings, they nevertheless highlighted one thing: ASEAN appears to utilize the competitive relationship between the Northeast Asian states in order to extract commitments. Sometimes, ASEAN appears to be quite capable of managing relationship II.

The process of engaging various partners in the connectivity agenda is part of a larger ASEAN strategy that may be described as regional hedging. Given the large investments required to satisfy Southeast Asian infrastructure needs, estimated to be in the billions annually, no single intra- or extra-regional actor may be expected to bear connectivity costs alone. When looking at the connectivity agenda and the projects actually carried out by dialogue partners at the regional level, it is notable how segmented involvement in the connectivity agenda actually is. Australia, the EU, and the US mainly focus on institutional and people-to-people connectivity.<sup>31</sup> Northeast Asian countries appear to have a preference for physical infrastructure development, which mainly takes place at the national level. The secretariat appears conscious of these preferences and the need to manage them. What looks like a hedging strategy from the outside has also been described as such from inside the secretariat, at least at the regional level.<sup>32</sup> Given the scholarly interest in hedging as a concept (Goh 2006; Kuik 2008; 2016), it is important to note at this point that hedging may function differently in the realm of connectivity than it does in security matters, from where the concept originates and is more commonly applied (Goh 2008). In connectivity, keeping multiple partners involved may be easier than in the security sector because of the possibility for segmentation, enabling partners to get engaged in similar but not necessarily competitive aspects of connectivity. Competition may still emerge, however, which is particularly notable in the infrastructure projects envisioned by the Northeast Asian partners, particularly China and Japan.

Given the different priorities of the partners involved, we can observe different intensities of their engagement on the regional level. Most regional-level connectivity processes are still supported by the traditional development partners such as the EU, the US, and Australia. These partners place a particular emphasis on the value for money ratio of their connectivity-related projects. For the EU, regional-level processes are a chance to ensure that national programs do not overlap too much. An existing people-to-people connectivity project based in Singapore (EU-ASEAN Migration and Border Management Project) has led to a readjustment of the priorities of another regional project based in Jakarta (E-READI) in order to adapt to the breadth of the connectivity agenda.<sup>33</sup>

The aforementioned interest of Northeast Asian partners in physical infrastructure development means that China, Japan, and South Korea appear to be more involved at the national level. As of 2018, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) was still lacking a regional agreement with ASEAN.<sup>34</sup> Given the inter-organizational perspective on ASEAN and its partner engagement, this approach may lead to mismatches in objectives and a lack of complementarity between projects at the regional and national levels due to the involvement of different partners with divergent agendas and levels of engagement. Given

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<sup>30</sup> Interview information, 16 February 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Interview information, 14 February and 15 February 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Interview information, 5 March 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Interview information, 2 March 2018.

<sup>34</sup> Interview information, 8 May 2018.

the apparent interest of dialogue partners in steering the connectivity agenda in various directions, ASEAN centrality may be increasingly challenged. ASEAN centrality has been a particular feature of the East Asian regional institutional architecture, and has been widely investigated in the literature (Amador 2010; Caballero-Anthony 2014; Goh 2011; Kim 2012). However, it has previously been questioned how much longer ASEAN can maintain its central position given the great power interests in the region as well its organizational constraints, namely its divergent member state interests and strategic priorities (Jones 2010). Given the current engagement of external actors in the region, first and foremost China, ASEAN may find it increasingly difficult to take up a neutral position in the future, depriving it of the ability to hedge against great power influence in the region in the future (Kuik 2018).

When comparing the various connectivity plans that circulate in the region, one must question how they may merge into a coherent whole. While some writers have emphasized the potential for coordination between external partners engaged in the region,<sup>35</sup> there is clearly a risk of competitiveness. This competitiveness could result in various scenarios: (1) Cooperation between various partners under the guidance of the connectivity master plan, preserving ASEAN centrality, (2) Overlaying of the ASEAN connectivity agenda by one single powerful actor, challenging ASEAN centrality, (3) Competition between external partners and their respective visions of connectivity, creating redundancies and overlaps and challenging ASEAN centrality. As if now, most signs appear to point towards the third scenario.

Since the solidification of the Southeast Asian connectivity agenda, we can observe increasing competition over connectivity in the strategic plans and actions of external actors engaged in the region. While the 2014 APEC Connectivity Blueprint more or less mirrors the first ASEAN master plan, focusing on the same three pillars, other more recent partner strategies are less coherent with the Southeast Asian connectivity agenda. The China-Japan conflict of interest on connectivity and infrastructure within the region has, of course, existed for some time (Hong 2018b). Japan has distinguished itself as a developer primarily of east-west links in Southeast Asia as well as maritime infrastructure, both chiefly aimed at making the region accessible to Japanese multinational companies (Hong 2018a). China appears to favor north-south links, particularly focusing on railways. This conflict has become more pronounced since China's establishment of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, its five pillars consisting of enhancing monetary circulation, improving road connectivity, promoting unimpeded trade, stepping up policy communication, and increasing understanding between people and nations.<sup>36</sup> While there is considerable overlap with the ASEAN agenda, there are differences in degree such as increased focus on financial integration. The compatibility of the Belt and Road Initiative cannot be completely assessed due to the opaqueness and ambivalence of the strategy. When it comes to physical infrastructure, there is a much-discussed risk that China may attempt to integrate its neighborhood into a hub-and-spokes type physical infrastructure framework based on Chinese value chains, which may jeopardize intra-ASEAN integration,<sup>37</sup> although some observers are cautiously optimistic (Das 2015; Kuik et al. 2017).<sup>38</sup> The Japanese strategy appears to be closer to the connectivity vision of ASEAN, proven by high profile speeches as

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<sup>35</sup> *The Diplomat*, 29 March 2017.

<sup>36</sup> *The Diplomat*, 31 October 2017 and World Economic Forum, 10 November 2015.

<sup>37</sup> *The Straits Times*, 16 July 2015 and *Asia Times*, 20 April 2018.

<sup>38</sup> *The Diplomat*, 26 March 2015.

well as public project development cooperation roadmaps (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2016). But the effects of the new Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy remain to be seen.

Other external partners have added to this fundamental conflict on connectivity in the region, with Korea's New Southern Policy and India's Act East policy having potential effects on Southeast Asian connectivity.<sup>39</sup> The introduction of the Korean-led Connectivity Forum in 2013<sup>40</sup> potentially complicates the situation even further. The conclusion of the ASEAN-China Strategic Partnership Vision 2030 at the 2018 ASEAN-China summit, which addresses synergies between the Belt and Road Initiative and the connectivity master plan, may be seen as a move by ASEAN to defuse some of the tension inherent in the competitive visions on regional connectivity (ASEAN Secretariat 2018). But to which degree ASEAN is capable of managing the tensions at the regional level (Relationship II) is unclear at this point.

Western partners have voiced concerns over getting involved with the connectivity agenda in the past but have mobilized significant political and financial capital to increase their ability to invest in Southeast Asian connectivity in 2018. In early 2018, EU representatives noted in response to the connectivity master plan that the organization was happy to see its priorities in soft connectivity reflected in the plan. Previously existing EU projects such as the SHARE (Education), ARISE+ (Trade facilitation), and COMPASS (Economic monitoring) projects (European Commission 2016) were seen as broadly if not specifically supporting the objectives of the master plan.<sup>41</sup> There did not appear to be a large appetite to launch new projects in response to the connectivity master plan,<sup>42</sup> although an EU-ASEAN Connectivity Dialogue had been held in 2014. Additional movement became apparent in the EU position in 2017, when the EU Transport Commissioner and ASEAN Ministers agreed to launch a high-level transport dialogue (European Commission 2017). Over the past year, a sea change has taken place in the EU's public stance on connectivity. In May 2018, on the occasion of the ASEAN-EU Transport Dialogue, the EU Director General for transport and mobility reaffirmed EU commitment to the master plan, highlighting existing programs and the soft dimension of connectivity. At the same event, however, he hinted at the fact that the EU was developing a strategy on EU-Asia connectivity.<sup>43</sup> This strategy was launched in the run-up to the 2018 Asia-Europe Meeting, through a joint communication between, among others, the European Parliament, the Council, and the European Investment Bank titled "*Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy*" (European Commission 2018). Establishing a European concept of "*sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity*," the document makes several references to Asian investment needs and the ASEAN master plan. The document also explicitly ties the new EU strategy to the next edition of the multiannual financial framework (2021-2027), which sets the agenda for future EU external action funding. While the plan does not yet mention specific funding amounts, it proposes a resource mobilization mechanism built on the European Fund for Sustainable Development, which is part of the European External Investment Plan. The mechanism, which has been used to finance development projects in Africa and the EU neighborhood, includes a US\$70 billion fund to guarantee

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<sup>39</sup>A good visual comparison of the various connectivity frameworks can be found at <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/competing-visions/>.

<sup>40</sup> *The Straits Times*, 14 November 2017.

<sup>41</sup> Interview information, 14 February 2018 and *The Jakarta Post*, 14 September 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Interview information, 14 February 2018.

<sup>43</sup> *The Nation*, 3 May 2018.

private sector and other investment.<sup>44</sup> Despite references made to the ASEAN master plan, it is not clear that the EU strategy should be seen as a direct response. A more appropriate perspective may be to see the efforts made by the EU as a way to counter the Belt and Road Initiative. The EU strategy was endorsed at the 2018 Asia-Europe Meeting, following the adoption of a joint definition of connectivity adopted at the same forum in 2017, to be discussed below.

Similar to the EU, the US did not appear to have a large appetite to engage with the connectivity agenda in early 2018, also voicing a reluctance to launch projects in reaction to the master plan.<sup>45</sup> More similar still, the US has also set in motion significant changes to increase its ability to engage with the connectivity agenda. The recent passing of the Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development (BUILD) Act and the establishment of a new US development agency, the U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (USIDFC) with a US\$60 billion spending cap, has been interpreted as a direct response to China's Belt and Road Initiative and should enable the US to get more deeply involved in connectivity financing in Southeast Asia (CSIS 2018).<sup>46</sup> But US engagement with the connectivity agenda goes back even further. APEC was one of the first organizations outside ASEAN itself to come up with a connectivity plan of its own. Previously, the US institutional framework to deepen US-ASEAN engagement, launched by President Obama in 2016, was attentively named US-ASEAN-Connect. The US also prominently supports connectivity in other fora, most significantly through its support to the Lower Mekong Initiative, which has the promotion of sub-regional connectivity as its primary objective (Lower Mekong Initiative 2018).

The process inside the Asia-Europe Meeting deserves closer attention. As mentioned previously, a common connectivity definition was adopted at the 2017 meeting. Comparing the European suggestion for connectivity and the definition ultimately adopted by ASEM (Table 3) highlights that connectivity remains a contested concept. European states may not be satisfied with a purely economic interpretation of the connectivity concept as seems to be preferred by some external partners and possibly even ASEAN itself. Representatives of the EU have said that the connectivity agenda is a promising inroad for ASEAN, but that they consider the MPAC lacking in substance in terms of policy objectives.<sup>47</sup> The EU therefore launched a so-called Sustainable Connectivity Portal at the 2018 Asia-Europe Meeting, which includes a composite indicator purportedly measuring sustainable connectivity between Asian and European states.<sup>48</sup> Taken together with the new EU Asia connectivity strategy and its distinctive connectivity definition, Europe can be expected to stay involved in the agenda setting of the connectivity agenda, further undermining ASEAN's centrality in setting the connectivity agenda.

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<sup>44</sup> Reuters, 19 September 2018.

<sup>45</sup> Interview information, 16 February 2018.

<sup>46</sup> South China Morning Post, 20 October 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Interview information, 14 February 2018.

<sup>48</sup> <https://composite-indicators.jrc.ec.europa.eu/asem-sustainable-connectivity/>.

**Table 3:** Comparison between the connectivity definition suggested by the European group to the 13th ASEM Foreign Ministers’ Meeting 2017 (Joint Research Centre 2017), and the adopted definition by the 13th Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, unique features bold and underlined (Asia-Europe Meeting 2017)

European Proposal	ASEM Definition
<p>“Connectivity is about bringing countries, people and societies closer together. It facilitates <b>free</b> access and is a means to foster deeper economic and people-to-people ties.</p> <p>In the ASEM context, Connectivity must be defined broadly – in both a geographic and functional sense – covering all three pillars of ASEM (economic, political/security and people-to-people contacts). Thus ASEM Connectivity covers both the ‘hard’ and the ‘soft’ aspects of linking Europe and Asia, including all modes of transport (land, sea and air) but also energy and digital links, higher education and research, as well as customs and trade facilitation.</p> <p>All Connectivity activities in ASEM must be in line with key principles and agreed international standards (<b>including labour, social and environmental standards</b>), <b>full</b> transparency, <b>market principles</b>, a level playing-field, <b>equal treatment and equal access</b>, with mutual benefits based on <b>consultations on an equal footing</b>.</p> <p><b>Sustainability is of paramount importance to all ASEM Partners who are all committed to the implementation of the SDGs.</b> Therefore sustainability (<b>environmental, fiscal, social</b>) should be a quality benchmark for all Connectivity initiatives in the ASEM context.”</p>	<p>“Connectivity is about bringing countries, people and societies closer together. It facilitates access and is a means to foster deeper economic and people-to-people ties. It encompasses the hard and soft aspects, including the physical and institutional social-cultural linkages that are the fundamental supportive means to enhance the economic, political-security, and socio-cultural ties between Asia and Europe which also <i>contribute to the narrowing of the varying levels of development and capacities</i>.</p> <p><b><u>Bearing in mind the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF) 2000, ASEM connectivity aims to establish the sense of building ASEM partnership of shared interests. It upholds the spirit of peace, development, cooperation and mutual benefit.</u></b> It will also adhere to and effectively implement relevant <b><u>international norms and standards as mutually agreed by ASEM partners.</u></b></p> <p>ASEM Connectivity covers all modes of transport (aviation, maritime, rail and road) and also includes, among others, <b><u>institutions, infrastructure, financial cooperation, IT, digital links, energy, education and research, human resources development, tourism, cultural exchanges</u></b> as well as customs, trade and <b><u>investment</u></b> facilitation.</p> <p>ASEM connectivity covers all the three pillars of ASEM - economic, political and sociocultural. It should be result-oriented, and in support of the following key principles: level playing field, <b><u>free and open trade</u></b>, market principles, <b><u>multi-dimensionality, inclusiveness, fairness, openness</u></b>, transparency, <b><u>financial viability, cost-effectiveness</u></b> and mutual benefits. It should also contribute to the materialisation of the principles, goals and targets of The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Sustainability is one of the important quality benchmarks for the connectivity initiatives in the ASEM context.”</p>

Intra-partner coordination on connectivity appears to remain elusive at this time. Representatives from ASEAN noted that they consider the ASEAN+3 forum an important venue to find common ground on connectivity with their Northeast Asian partners. The East Asia Summit could play a similar role with a wider set of external stakeholders. But, tellingly, the most recent ASEAN agreement with China contains no reference to partner coordination mechanisms (ASEAN Secretariat 2018). It remains to be seen how large the potential for these fora to consolidate regional views on connectivity actually is, as discussions and membership overlap only partly. The ASEAN Connectivity Coordination Committee has held meetings with varying partners, but it is not yet clear to what degree ASEAN is capable of organizing a

true connectivity dialogue with ASEAN at its center as the proper management of relationship II would require.

## 6. Implementing Connectivity – External Partner Engagement in the Connectivity Agenda at the National Level

This section will address the third research question of this paper, identifying challenges inherent in national-level implementation of the connectivity agenda. While agenda setting and formulation of the connectivity agenda as well as the monitoring of progress occurs at the regional level both within ASEC as well as the sectoral bodies, no regional body is involved in the implementation of connectivity projects. First of all, this means that it is the ultimate responsibility of each ASEAN member state to make sure the connectivity agenda is implemented at the national level. Secondly, given the involvement of external partners in funding regional connectivity, they are called upon to comply with regional-level objectives in their national-level development cooperation programs. This exemplifies the fundamental challenge of managing relationship III, which highlights ASEAN member states' need to coordinate connectivity implementation with external partners. Given ASEAN's patchy progress in attracting private sector investment in infrastructure development,<sup>49</sup> member states still rely on development partners to contribute resources as well as expertise to connectivity implementation.

The analysis of relationship I has already called into question whether ASEAN can coherently coordinate regional and sectoral body strategies on connectivity. Based on this, we should also question the ASEAN member states' ability to execute coherent country strategies to ensure implementation of the regional connectivity agenda. This does in fact appear to be an emerging challenge of the connectivity agenda, and is compounded by external partners' national engagements. While all partners discussed previously are active across the region, their engagement in the ASEAN member states is uneven and not always coherent with the regional blueprint. While the conflict on the connectivity supply side has been much discussed, the conflict on the demand side has not gotten sufficient attention. It has been observed, for instance, that ASEAN member states appear to compete with one another for projects within the Belt and Road Initiative. Project commitments for various states have often been answered by requests for similar commitments in the quest not to be outdone by neighbors.<sup>50</sup> Many projects established in ASEAN member states, such as ports and special economic zones, also increase economic competition as opposed to simply enhancing inter-state connectivity.<sup>51</sup> All ASEAN countries obviously have national infrastructure and connectivity plans, not always coherent with the regional connectivity vision. Ultimately, each ASEAN member state has its unique way of attracting and carrying out connectivity-related projects,<sup>52</sup> which may jeopardize regional coherence.

The main fault line for connectivity within ASEAN member states is the pervasive conflict between Japan and China over infrastructure investment (Hong 2018a; Nicolas 2018). Both China and Japan are involved with massive infrastructure programs in all ASEAN member

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<sup>49</sup> *The Diplomat*, 27 June 2015.

<sup>50</sup> Interview information, 22 February 2018.

<sup>51</sup> I am indebted to Jennifer Stapornwongkul for this point.

<sup>52</sup> *The Jakarta Post*, 9 November 2016.

states, with a strong “*build it*” focus.<sup>53</sup> China has been seen as being more engaged in its neighbor countries in the past (Kuik 2008; Kuik et al. 2012), but has since expanded the reach of its Belt and Road Initiative across the region. Already high Japanese investment in the region has been challenged by an increase in Chinese investment flows to the region,<sup>54</sup> which Japan has countered by emphasizing the quality of their infrastructure projects.<sup>55</sup> This has tied in with rising local criticism of Chinese-led projects, particularly their implementation modalities and funding arrangements.<sup>56</sup> Additional concerns have been voiced over economic profitability, with Chinese port projects such as Kyaukpyu, Myanmar, and Koh Kong, Cambodia, and the special economic zones attached to them being labelled as white elephants (Nakamura 2018; Thorne & Spevack 2017).<sup>57</sup> But China and Japan are not only distinguished by the type of projects on offer, but also in the regional views they embody. As mentioned earlier, China appears to propagate a regional vision of north-linkages between Southeast Asia and its Southern provinces, while Japan is working towards an east-west corridor through the Mekong region as well as focusing on maritime connectivity.<sup>58</sup> In addition, both countries fund various bilateral projects, ranging from energy infrastructure, through road construction, petrochemical factories, to hydroelectric power plants.<sup>59</sup> Some ASEAN states appear to be capable of balancing Chinese and Japanese infrastructure projects, thereby hedging both powers in the pursuit of an independent connectivity agenda. One example is Cambodia, which is currently involved in constructing both a Chinese-funded north-south axis and a Japanese-funded east-west corridor.<sup>60</sup> Despite announcements on increased coordination between Japan and China,<sup>61</sup> the Mekong region has emerged as the place where Japanese-Chinese connectivity conflicts are coming to a head.<sup>62</sup> At the 2018 Japan-Mekong Summit, more than 100 development projects were agreed with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> China has recently held its first sub-regional summit with the same five countries, the so-called Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, which was first held in 2016 as “*an important platform for the Belt & Road Initiative.*”<sup>64</sup>

While the Asian partners have a continuing focus on physical infrastructure, the European partners, the US, and Australia see their comparative advantage more in the soft connectivity aspects, including institutional connectivity such as trade facilitation, competition policy, and logistical systems. While these issues require regional coordination, projects often have national components. ASEAN is aware of these partner priorities and works accordingly. Work plans in sectoral bodies often already contain suggestions for potential partners when it comes to national-level activities, suggesting partner segmentation. While Northeast Asian partners are approached for physical infrastructure projects, the EU or the US are

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<sup>53</sup> Interview information, 15 February 2018.

<sup>54</sup> *The Japan Times*, 9 September 2016.

<sup>55</sup> *The Straits Times*, 9 March 2018 and *The Diplomat*, 29 March 2017.

<sup>56</sup> *Business World*, 12 November 2018.

<sup>57</sup> *The Guardian*, 2 August 2018.

<sup>58</sup> *The Japan Times*, 9 September 2016.

<sup>59</sup> The most comprehensive overview over the various projects can be found at <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/map/>

<sup>60</sup> *The Diplomat*, 12 March 2018.

<sup>61</sup> *Nikkei Asian Review*, 27 October 2018.

<sup>62</sup> *The Diplomat*, 21 November 2018.

<sup>63</sup> *Nikkei Asian Review* and *The Japan Times*, 9 October 2018.

<sup>64</sup> *The Diplomat*, 21 November 2018.

approached on soft connectivity issues.<sup>65</sup> Some external partners, however, see a bias in ASEAN for the hard connectivity aspects. This is potentially due to the larger financial incentive posed by these projects for the member states.<sup>66</sup> Western partners' moves towards more hard connectivity projects may be seen in line with this observation. Nevertheless, there remains the question of ASEAN countries' capacity to appropriately engage the dialogue partners and articulate projects in line with regional priorities. For this reason, some partners are increasingly designing capacity-building projects with concurrent regional and national components, where the regional processes within sectoral bodies are used to accompany implementation at the member state level. This is a coordination task that ASEAN itself could and should deliver.

While ASEAN member states have a questionable relationship to the regional connectivity strategy, ASEAN's dialogue partners are also showing some inertia in adapting to the regional agenda. While China's support of the connectivity master plan has been questioned from the outset, Japanese infrastructure projects at the national level are also not always aligned with the MPAC. While Japan tries to contribute to the objectives of the master plan and the sectoral plans, national-level connectivity projects result from negotiations with individual countries and the respective Japanese country project portfolio.<sup>67</sup> One of Japan's flagship projects, for instance, is a vessel traffic service project. This was closely aligned with the objectives of the first master plan, but is no longer mentioned in the current master plan. For Japan, however, it is one of the main ways of supporting the connectivity agenda at the national level.<sup>68</sup> The same is true for China's flagship project: The Kunming-Singapore rail with two axes through Laos and Thailand as well as Myanmar, which were a key feature of the first MPAC.<sup>69</sup> This project has encountered various delays, with Thailand rerouting the planned railway line and suspending parts of the project in 2016 (Kuik et al. 2017). At least, this Chinese-funded project remains in the annex of the current master plan. But there are other Chinese-funded and connectivity-related projects that go against the regional vision. One such example is the large-scale construction of hydropower facilities in Laos, which has never been part of the regional connectivity vision and is having massive repercussions for other states along the Mekong.<sup>70</sup> These examples illustrate how the dual engagement between partners and ASEAN through two independent relationships may enable the external partners to set intentional or unintentional priorities in connectivity in ASEAN's place. Figure 4 sums up the process of connectivity project implementation, highlighting ASEAN's problematic position in setting the agenda for national connectivity implementation.

The way the connectivity agenda is implemented at the national level will be a key determinant of which aspects of inter-state connectivity will be emphasized. As partners contribute to divergent projects, they also solidify divergent views of connectivity, potentially driving a wedge between national and regional connectivity visions. The dragon in the room is obviously how much leeway China is given to integrate the region through its Belt and Road Initiative and to which degree ASEAN can manage to integrate potential projects into its own regional vision. With ASEAN centrality in mind, successful coordination

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<sup>65</sup> Interview information, 14 February 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Interview information, 26 February 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Interview information, 7 March 2018

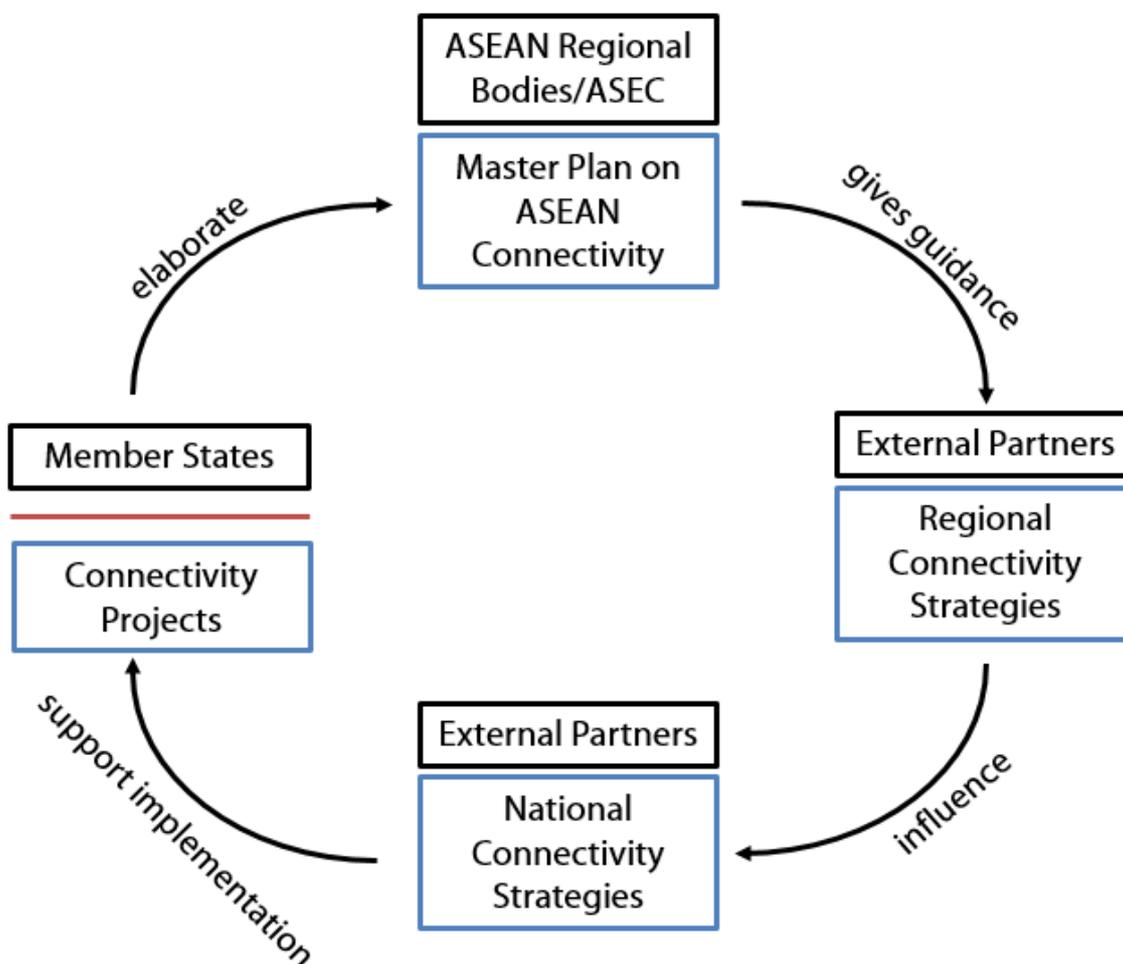
<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Interview information, 26 February 2018.

<sup>70</sup> *The Diplomat*, 20 April 2018.

of national-level implementation with external partners (Relationship III) ultimately depends on a resolution of the governance constraints described in the section on relationship I.

**Figure 4:** Tracing the Process of Connectivity Project Implementation, Actors in Black, their Activities represented by the Arrows, Outcomes of Activities in Blue (Source: Author's elaboration)



## 7. Conclusion

What is clear from the analysis of the impact of MPAC 2025 is that its concepts have diffused more broadly in the community of external partners than within ASEAN itself, at least with regard to strategic documents. This is perhaps because of ASEAN's pillar structure and the role played by the blueprints of the ASEAN economic, political-security and socio-cultural communities as well as the intergovernmental structure of ASEAN. But additional blame can be put on the fact that the connectivity master plan remains a document strongly focused on economic integration, leaving much of the potential for cross-pillar cooperation untapped. The introduction of the MPAC has also highlighted continuing internal governance issues within ASEAN and the challenge of achieving coherence between regional strategy and national-level processes and implementation. These challenges are increasingly transferring themselves to ASEAN's external relationships, adding multiple levels of strategic incoherence.

While we can assess that partners have reacted more directly to the MPAC than parts of ASEAN itself, it is less clear what conclusions arise from this. Some signs point towards the fact that partners may become exasperated by the slow progress of ASEAN's integration and

the inability to execute and implement the strategies that the various plans outline. On the other hand, partners are themselves overlaying the connectivity agenda with ideas of their own, as highlighted by the strategies of the EU, Japan, Republic of Korea, the US, as well as the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Given that connectivity implementation is national and depends strongly on external partner funds, partners are in a unique position to engage with the process regionally and assist implementation nationally. Combined with the weak internal governance processes of ASEAN, this raises questions about ASEAN centrality and the ability to effectively maneuver the organization vis-à-vis outside interests.

ASEAN is managing these constraints as it has in similar cases in the past: by hedging multiple partners and utilizing numerous dialogues. But given the importance attributed to the connectivity agenda and the contestation of the agenda by multiple partners in various fora, the question of whether ASEAN will be in the driver's seat for its own connectivity agenda remains up for debate.

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## Glossary

ACCC	ASEAN Connectivity Coordinating Committee
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
AIF	ASEAN Infrastructure Fund
APSC	ASEAN Political-Security Community
ARISE+	Enhanced ASEAN Regional Integration Support from the EU
ASCC	ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEC	ASEAN Secretariat
ASEM	Asia-Europe Meeting
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BUILD Act	Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development Act
CLMV	Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam
COMPASS	EU-ASEAN Statistical Capacity Building Project
CPR	Committee of Permanent Representatives
E-READI	Enhanced Regional EU-ASEAN Dialogue Instrument
EU	European Union
IAI	Initiative for ASEAN Integration
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MPAC	Master Plan for ASEAN Connectivity
PoA	Plan of Action
SHARE	Support to Higher Education in the ASEAN Region
USIDFC	US International Development Finance Corporation



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