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Moch Faisal Karim & Tania Quinn Heryanto

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Regional integration and business interest: understanding the role of the ASEAN business advisory council

Moch Faisal Karim^a and Tania Quinn Heryanto^b

^aDepartment of International Relations, Faculty of Humanities, Bina Nusantara University, West Jakarta, Indonesia; ^bCentre for Business and Diplomatic Studies (CBDS), Bina Nusantara University, Jakarta Barat, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC) as a region-wide business representative in strengthening the implementation of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2025. Despite the importance of ASEAN-BAC in regional governance, there is a dearth of literature that systematically discusses ASEAN-BAC and how it contributes to the process. To further understand the Council's role, we interrogate official documents and reports as well as conduct interviews with officials involved with ASEAN-BAC activities. In this article, we argue that ASEAN-BAC contributes to raising the private sector's concerns in regional processes through numerous platforms that engage ASEAN policymakers nationally and regionally. However, given its structure as a regional network, ASEAN-BAC suffers from internal incoherence in voicing its interest, given the different economic agendas of its members. Such internal incoherence reiterates the conceptualization of ASEAN regional economic integration as a fragmented regionalization.

KEYWORDS

ASEAN; ASEAN-BAC; Regional Integration; Business Interest; ASEAN Economic Community

Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Economic Community (AEC) is one of the main pillars of the ASEAN community that seeks to create a more cohesive regional economic integration (ASEAN, 2015). However, this process has so far been dominated by member states' technocratic elites (Collins, 2008). To encourage non-state participation in the regional economic activities, ASEAN has committed to enhancing a deeper collaboration among non-state actors in ASEAN regional mechanisms, including both civil society and business actors (Chandra et al., 2017a).

With regard to its efforts in engaging the private sector, ASEAN has recognized the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC) as one of ASEAN's entities under Annex 2 of the ASEAN Charter (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015b). The Council was formed in 2003 as a result of an agreement between ASEAN leaders regarding the importance of a business representation organization in ASEAN (ASEAN-BAC, n.d.).

ASEAN-BAC was established with the mandate to represent the private sector in ASEAN. The Council's scope includes large companies as well as micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in the regional economic integration process and also provides policy advice to member governments (ASEAN-BAC, *n.d.*). As mentioned in the AEC Blueprint 2025 under article 71, ASEAN-BAC is also recognized as the apex private sector body to assist ASEAN in enhancing private sector engagement (ASEAN Secretariat, 2015a).

Many studies have focused on the role of civil society in ASEAN regional mechanisms and economic integration (Collins, 2008; Gerrard, 2015; Quayle, 2013), yet few aim to examine how business interests partake in ASEAN economic regionalism. For instance, Rüländ (2016) explores how businesses within ASEAN tend to represent only large corporate interests and not MSMEs. This stems from the nature of ASEAN regional corporatism and the lack of grassroots reach within ASEAN governance (Rüländ, 2016). As a result, only selected business actors are represented and involved, especially in the regional decision-making process (Rüländ, 2014b). Al-Fadhat (2019, p. 114) further shows that the involvement of regional business associations has become a political vehicle for strengthening alliances between Southeast Asian businesses with strong access to the regional decision-making policies. These studies depict the role of business interests such as ASEAN-BAC as a continuation of the capitalist interest in ASEAN regional mechanisms.

Despite its official status within ASEAN regional governance as a representation of the private sector, studies and records on ASEAN-BAC's engagement in regional integration are scarce. No serious attempt has been made to unpack the multi-layered engagement of ASEAN-BAC in enhancing ASEAN regional integration. This article aims to fill this gap.

We are interested in examining ASEAN-BAC's work and involvement in the progress of the AEC. The time frame for our analysis begins in 2015 (when the ASEAN Community was commenced) and ends in late 2020. Particularly, we aim to understand how ASEAN-BAC widen their business network, government reach, and inclusivity in deepening the AEC implementation. We then assess to what extent their programmes and projects are effective in enhancing the AEC agenda.

To do so, we utilize insights from the literature regarding the role of business interest in the regional integration process, particularly the work of Greenwood (2017). We argue that ASEAN-BAC is involved in the regional integration process through numerous platforms that engage ASEAN policymakers at national and regional levels. This can be seen from the cooperation between ASEAN-BAC and national governments in implementing legacy projects, as well as annual regional meetings with ASEAN Economic Ministers.

At the regional level, ASEAN-BAC enables the creation of space for intensive lobbying, with the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit taking place annually to bridge the business sector with high-level government participants and initiate dialogue on specific focus areas to extend the private sector's agenda (ASEAN-BAC, 2020). However, given its structure as a network, ASEAN-BAC suffers from internal incoherence in voicing its interest, given different economic agendas among the members it represents. To create business connectivity within the region, ASEAN-BAC annually launches a legacy project based on proposals from representatives of that year's ASEAN-BAC chair. The annual launch of these legacy projects has regrettably led to an apparent inability by ASEAN-BAC to focus on which sector they would like to

push forward; projects tend to be based on Chair's own interests. Moreover, business representation in ASEAN-BAC seems unequal: some industries are well-represented, while others are not. Such internal incoherence reiterates the conceptualization of ASEAN regional economic integration as a fragmented regionalization (Jones, 2016).

This article employs a qualitative methodology to understand the contribution of ASEAN-BAC to the progress of the AEC. Specifically, the research utilizes participant observation where one of the authors is immersed in the participants' day-to-day activities for four months (March-July 2021). This allows us to understand the roles of ASEAN-BAC directly and conceptualizes them clearly. The participant observation method also allows us to collect qualitative data through various types of interviews. We have interviewed key informants from ASEAN-BAC who are in charge of running day-to-day activities of ASEAN-BAC as well as those who liaise with the government. Through our contact with the people in ASEAN-BAC, we were also able to include key informants from the ASEAN Secretariat working on engaging private actors in ASEAN regional integration as well as government officials from the Indonesian Ministry of Trade. Additionally, this article uses official documents and reports to discuss further the contributions of ASEAN-BAC's legacy projects to the AEC.

This article is organized as follows. The next section further elaborates on multi-level governance theory and how it applies in the context of ASEAN-BAC. The third section introduces ASEAN-BAC and its work for AEC. In the third section, the article analyses the role of ASEAN BAC as a network organization at the regional and national levels. Lastly, we assess the progress of ASEAN-BAC with the strategic measures in the AEC Blueprint.

Business interest and multi-level engagement: a theoretical framework

In pursuing ASEAN regional economic integration, the democratization of decision-making is a key policy agenda. This is because the ASEAN decision-making process is elitist and driven by state officials, hindering ASEAN's aspirations to be a 'people-oriented' association (A. Chandra, 2016). This problem has led ASEAN to become more inclusive in the implementation of AEC, including increasing the involvement of non-state actors such as civil society organizations (CSOs) in ASEAN regional integration efforts, especially as such measures have gained more recognition after the commencement of ASEAN Community 2015 (Chandra et al., 2017a)

While some non-state actors, primarily civil society groups, have welcomed the opportunity to engage with the institution, others have limited their engagement with ASEAN due to uncertainty of the framework and the organization's institutionalism (Johnson, 1999). CSOs tend to believe engaging with ASEAN is difficult and time-consuming, mainly due to its slow institutional bureaucracy (Gerrard, 2013). Moreover, some civil society representatives and legislators criticize that the ASEAN Charter does not clearly explain visible guidelines and actions on how to engage more with the community; ironic, considering the ASEAN Way's 'people-oriented' tagline and how often this is referred to by the organization (Rüland, 2014a). This indicates a lack of inclusivity in how the regional community understands ASEAN's identity community (Narine, 2009).

In the case of AEC implementation, studies have shown that businesses as non-state actors tend to see ASEAN as a regional corporatist entity that works in a top-down fashion and lacks grassroots inclusivity (Al-Fadhat, 2019; Rüländ, 2016). When ASEAN-BAC was created in 2003 by the ASEAN leaders, it was designed as a platform to engage non-state actors based on the urgent need for private sector representatives in the organization. The reasoning was that businesses are primary economic actors and play a great role within the regional ASEAN economy (Yoshimatsu, 2007). It was hoped that the creation of the Council would enhance AEC's implementation.

Building on scholarly work on legitimacy and the policy-making process, we posit that there are three aspects to actors' engagement in regional economic integration: facilitating diverse forms of representation, participation, and deliberation (Greenwood, 2007; 2017; Smismans, 2004). In our case, business interests aim to increase their roles as representatives of national private actors within regional organizations. The private sector also aims to increase its participation in regional integration projects and to increase its engagement at the regional level through deliberation. These aspects enable us to highlight private sector engagement within regional integration processes, particularly their engagement at various levels of governance.

Representation

Representation in regional organizations usually focuses on how states are represented. However, the growing trend for non-state actors to push for increased representation has focused primarily on ensuring the involvement of affected parties in national and international decision-making. As explained by Mowell (2018), CSOs may represent interests and values that add diversity and inclusivity to the international and national development agendas.

The representation of non-state actors in decision-making processes can be explored by looking at how public and private sectors cooperate. This can be seen in the European Union (EU), where there is a co-decision-making process between state and non-state actors at several tiers of government to achieve faster and more effective results (Marks, 1993). Making co-decisions in the EU works through two methods: first, interest groups and CSOs are involved as consultants in the relevant sectors. Second, the EU establishes communication platforms between national governments and representatives of non-state actors (Knodt, 2011). As an example, the EU involves the private sector consultants and establishes communication between governments and civil society in projects such as the development of fragmentary planning (Parker et al., 2018), border security policies (Baird, 2018), and urban planning practices (Linovski, 2018).

The involvement of interest groups and CSOs has been widely implemented within the ASEAN regional economic integration process (Allison & Taylor, 2017; Chandra et al., 2017b; Septiyana, 2019). Nevertheless, the result of the integration processes undertaken by ASEAN and by the EU are not the same. While the EU has succeeded in becoming a fully integrated region, the ASEAN regional integration remains limited. This might stem from ASEAN's ongoing fragmentation problem, as the region's economic integration is incomplete, and member states have different regulatory standards.

Moreover, unlike the EU, where national federations of business interests can be represented at the regional level, ASEAN has no such mechanism. ASEAN-BAC is not an

individual state-owned business interest group; it is an independent organization representing all business groups within ASEAN. Thus, ASEAN-BAC was created with the original mandate of representing each of the ten national business communities of ASEAN member states to provide policy recommendations (ASEAN-BAC, *n.d.*).

Participation

Business interest groups aim to amplify the private sector's voice at the regional level by participating in state-created platforms. In participating in the regional integration project, interest groups usually act as advocacy bodies to promote their ideas and initiatives to the state. This allows them to be involved in decision- and policy-making processes (Lundberg, 2017). Moreover, interest groups often wish to raise community awareness on certain issues through campaigns, surveys, and promotions (Pauly et al., 2020). Munene and Thakhathi (2017) explain that factors such as internal structure, coordination, and resources management are essential in determining how powerful non-state actors can participate within the international and national communities. The higher the number of businesses the group represents and the more well-educated and highly experienced they are, the stronger that interest group is in pushing their particular agenda.

Deliberation

Regarding the deliberation process, business interest groups regularly engage with a range of government levels and other parties. As explained by Baird (2018), business interest groups in the EU are able to influence policies through strategic communication, such as through direct communication (formal and informal correspondence with government relations divisions), indirect communication (hiring third-party actors to correspond with the government), conferences, publications, media advocacy, research and development (RnD) projects, public-private partnerships (PPP), expert groups, comitology, and public consultations.

It is crucial to acknowledge that a lack of resources can hinder the deliberation process of business interest groups (Kohler-Koch et al., 2017). While business interest groups must be willing and self-aware to be involved across many sectors and lobby with multiple levels of government, it is undeniable that a lack of resources and funding might slow the pace of advocacy and engagement. Beyers and Kerremans (2007) explained that substantial resources, such as information and research findings, and funding, can have a greater impact on the representation, participation, and deliberation roles of business interest groups.

Business interest groups engage governments through strategic lobbying, where the government seeks consultation or information from communities or implementers (Broscheid & Coen, 2003). The business interest groups can negotiate with the government and other relevant bodies in two possible ways: either they need to compromise or confront their 'opponents' to achieve their goals. Confrontation has a higher risk of defeat, considering that the government might stumble into larger political and regulation hindrances, so they will not be able to side with the business interests, which may then refuse to compromise as well (Paster, 2018). Unfortunately, most dialogue

between the public and private sectors tends to be held with little transparency, especially in sensitive sectors such as trade and policy-making decisions (Jarman, 2011).

Having discussed these three-overarching concepts, the next section will explain how ASEAN-BAC participate in the AEC process.

ASEAN-BAC and engagement in regional integration

In enhancing regional integration within ASEAN, ASEAN-BAC works through multi-level governance. This process allows it to direct its priorities towards a variety of government levels as well as the public, from meetings with high-level government representatives to the implementation of the ASEAN-BAC legacy projects initiative to strengthen business communities (JAIF Management Team, 2019; YCH Group, 2018). ASEAN-BAC thus has two main levels of engagement: regional and national. We argue that the way ASEAN-BAC operates illustrates the implementation of multi-level engagement by business representatives in pursuing regional integration. Nevertheless, there are challenges in achieving regional economic integration in the ASEAN region, involving multiple parties, countries, sectors, and other factors. We further examine challenges faced by looking at the role of ASEAN-BAC through the notions of (1) representation, (2) participation, and (3) deliberation.

Representation

Since its establishment in 2003, ASEAN-BAC has been mandated to represent the business sector in ASEAN. This can be seen through the council members it appoints from each member state. ASEAN-BAC's first Chairman was Rudy Pesik, the founder of PT DHL Express Indonesia. Other initial ASEAN-BAC Chairs were also leading private sector actors from across the region, representing sectors such as banking, MSME development, logistics, and the automotive industry.

Interestingly, according to internal records, Thailand and Vietnam had no representatives during the first two years of ASEAN-BAC's operation. Other countries only had two representatives, despite the regulation allowing each member state to appoint three representatives. ASEAN-BAC reached full membership with 30 representatives from 10 countries in 2005.

The 30 members maximum for ASEAN-BAC (with three representatives from each member state) was developed to give more space for the council to represent key cross-cutting sectors, such as agri-food, logistics, tourism, healthcare, retail and e-commerce, and financial services. The aim was to ensure that all major sectors of the ASEAN economy were included in ASEAN-BAC.

In practice, however, internal documents show that the actual council member representation in ASEAN-BAC is not yet aligned with the initial vision of the organization. It is recorded that from 2003 to 2020, council members were dominated by the representatives of investment companies, logistics companies, MSME development, banks, and food and beverage (FnB) companies. This shows that ASEAN-BAC representation may be biased toward certain business sectors rather than inclusively reaching all sectors.

From the outside, ASEAN-BAC is heavily driven by states. Council members are appointed by their respective national ministries in charge of the ASEAN Economic

Ministers (AEM). ASEAN-BAC's Chairman is also appointed on an annual rotational basis in line with the ASEAN Chairmanship. This shows that there is a government involvement with regard to who and what business sector will be represented in ASEAN-BAC.

Aside from the internal representation, as a representative of businesses in the region, ASEAN-BAC has a role in the ASEAN policy-making process. ASEAN-BAC is mandated to engage with AEM and the leaders of ASEAN Member States (AMS) to report on the state of the business sector throughout the year. Meetings with AEM are held twice a year, while meetings with leaders are held just once a year.

ASEAN-BAC is also an advisory body that provides advice on ASEAN action plans to be taken by the government of each member state, based on the point of view of the private sector. This particular role is what makes the ASEAN-BAC one of the most important regional bodies; their exclusive access to the government representatives is a privilege that is not extended to other interest groups in the region.

Additionally, ASEAN-BAC practices its advisory role through its engagement with smaller working groups of the government. In contrast with its limited annual engagements with AEM and ASEAN leaders, ASEAN-BAC is able to hold events and be invited to participate in government working groups regularly throughout any given year. Such working groups enable ASEAN-BAC to further engage governments on a practical level.

However, as ASEAN-BAC representatives may be biased towards their interest groups, this process affects their engagement with the governments. Along with its mandate to the AEM, engagement between ASEAN-BAC and governments seems limited to several ministries, such as trade, finance, and foreign affairs, despite business activities also having important links to other sectors, such as technology, forestry, and transportation sectors. This can be seen from its organizational website, where ASEAN-BAC only reported to regularly engaging with the AEM and not much of other government bodies (Secretariat, 2021). As a result, the ability of ASEAN-BAC to represent the interests of a majority of regional business actors is limited.

As the ASEAN representative of the regional business sector, in addition to advising the government on the economic issues and establishing communication between the private sector and government, it would be sensible for ASEAN-BAC to expand their reach and begin engaging with other ministries in the region. This would require a high level of coordination with national governments and strong coordination between ASEAN-BAC council members and the secretariat team.

Participation through multi-level governance

The second aspect of ASEAN-BAC's engagement is its participation in the AEC regional integration project. Over the years, ASEAN-BAC has provided information and recommendations to ASEAN governments regarding regional business conditions and how the government should respond. The cooperation between ASEAN-BAC and member states' governments is not only limited to leaders and ministers but also occurs within a smaller working group, nationally and internationally. The bottom-up process of ASEAN-BAC can be seen in the graphic below [Figure 1](#).

ASEAN-BAC's main recommendations result from the council's engagement with national and international government working groups plus ASEAN-BAC's own

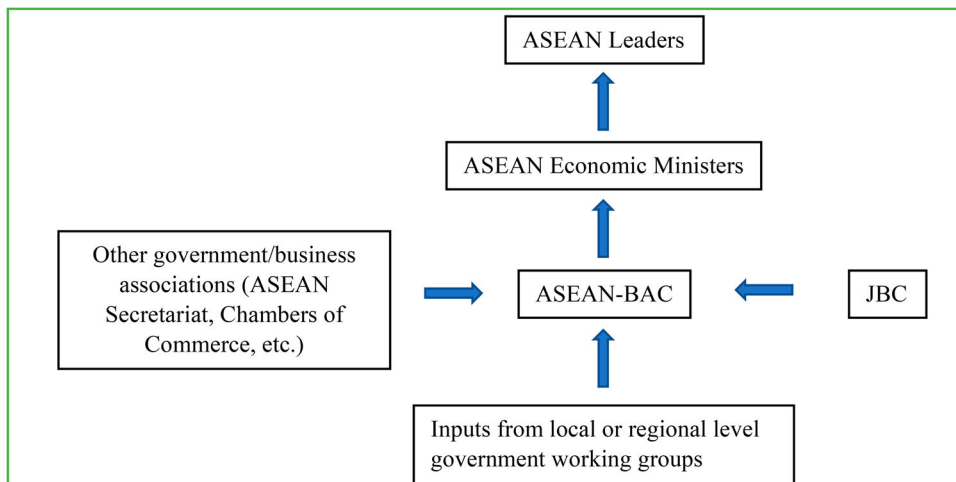


Figure 1. Bottom-Up Process of ASEAN-BAC. Source: Authors.

working groups. The international stage usually involves all thirty council members, or at least representatives of the council members, while the national stage operates separately within each AMS.

Regional level government working groups mainly consist of AMS government representatives, usually the ministries responsible for specific sectors. For example, one of the regional government working groups with which ASEAN-BAC regularly engages is the ASEAN Coordinating Committee on Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (ACCMSME). ACCMSME consists of ministerial representatives from all ten ASEAN member states.

At the national level, ASEAN-BAC representatives from each AMS cooperate with the local government in engaging relevant stakeholders and associations. As stated by one interviewee, this type of engagement is meant as an attempt by the local government to directly introduce ASEAN-BAC as one of the main channels for the business sector to engage with in order to expand their regional reach and help voice their needs.

As a private sector representative, ASEAN-BAC is also highly engaged with business associations and representatives across the region, such as the Chambers of Commerce from each member state. Some council members are also a part of their national Chambers. ASEAN-BAC's focus on Chambers and associations (rather than individual businesses) is key in ensuring inclusivity. On the other hand, this may mean that some companies are untouched by ASEAN-BAC because they are not members of business associations.

In terms of international cooperation, ASEAN-BAC formed a Joint Business Councils (JBC) initiative, involving the members of more than 20 ASEAN+1 business councils and associations. The ASEAN+1 Joint Business Council is the network between the ASEAN business community and the foreign business community outside the region.

JBCs are their entity and operate with little dependency on the Council. They are, first and foremost, an extension body for engagement with countries outside the ASEAN region. Thus, JBCs are driven by each country's respective reasons for engaging with ASEAN as a dialogue and knowledge partner in the business sector.

ASEAN-BAC utilizes JBCs as a way to gain assistance from the business sector outside the ASEAN region. Meetings between ASEAN-BAC and JBCs are held twice a year to ensure stronger cooperation and to provide updates and respond to the initiatives undertaken by the region's JBCs. At these meetings, ASEAN-BAC also updates business councils on the latest ASEAN business situation, including how ASEAN-BAC handles any challenges [Table 1](#).

As illustrated by the list of JBCs with each ASEAN-BAC engages, both JBCs and associations participate in activities. It is important to note that ASEAN-BAC prefers to formally cooperate with associations rather than individual companies to avoid bias. Living up to its name as the apex private sector body, ASEAN-BAC is partnering with the ASEAN+1 Business Councils and working with regional-level associations to expand its reach. The abovementioned associations and companies are considered the champions in their sectors and thus are included in ASEAN-BAC's engagements with JBCs.

From this cooperation, it is clear that there is a mutualism between ASEAN-BAC and regional JBCs. JBCs provide studies and research on specific issues, while ASEAN-BAC acts as the bridge to present said research as part of their advocacy to ASEAN governments. However, ASEAN-BAC's outsourcing method of developing studies, whitepapers, and research via the JBCs shows an overreliance on the external (non-ASEAN) bodies and the inability of ASEAN-BAC to conduct their studies. This is because ASEAN-BAC was only established as an advisory body, not a research body. Nevertheless, internal resource management must be improved if ASEAN-BAC wishes to undertake its own research, such as by forming its own research body, which would require strong internal coordination. ASEAN-BAC also has significant potential to stand on its own to represent the ASEAN and extra-ASEAN sectors, as evidenced by some joint research it has conducted with JBCs.

Table 1. List of the Joint Business Councils (JBCs) and Associations.

No	Name of Joint Business Councils
1	Australia-ASEAN Business Council
2	AustCham ASEAN
3	Canada-ASEAN Business Council
4	China-ASEAN Business Council
5	East Asia Business Council
6	EU-ASEAN Business Council
7	ASEAN-India Business Council
8	ASEAN-Japan Business Council
9	ASEAN-New Zealand Business Council
10	Russia-ASEAN Business Council
11	UK-ASEAN Business Council
12	US-ASEAN Business Council
13	ASEAN Business Club
14	Federation of Japanese Chambers of Commerce and Industry in ASEAN (FJCCIA) / Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO)
15	ASEAN Youth Entrepreneurs Council (AYEC)
16	ASEAN Women Entrepreneurs Council (AWEN)
17	ASEAN CSR Network
18	Food Industry Asia (FIA)
19	ASEAN Food and Beverage Alliance (AFBA)
20	Conference of Asia Pacific Express Carriers (CAPEC)
21	ASEAN Tourism Association (ASEANTA)
22	Confederation of Asia-Pacific Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CACCI)

Source: Internal record of the secretariat as of 2020.

To gain insight from a wider portion of the private sector, ASEAN-BAC appears to feel a need to grasp as many business sectors as possible under its purview. For example, ASEAN-BAC has initiated several working groups that each focus on a specific issue, such as trade facilitation, healthcare, and legacy projects. These working groups comprise qualified and authorized focal points from each AMS. In fact, the ASEAN Youth Entrepreneurship Council (AYEC), a working group created by ASEAN-BAC in 2015, has been so successful that it has grown into its own council.

However, from our interviews, several other working groups are inactive and lack progress due to a lack of commitment from groups’ focal points within ASEAN-BAC. These focal points are assigned by ASEAN-BAC council members. When they do not actively engage with the working groups, it is usually because the groups are not institutionally ready – they lack concept notes, structural plans, group leaders, and meeting systems. Even when working groups are active, the focal points’ engagement relies heavily on the focal points themselves and whether their interests align with those groups.

Participation through legacy project

ASEAN-BAC’s legacy projects are another key activity for the council and are crucial to strengthening its participation in ASEAN. Since 2015, in parallel with the launch of AEC, ASEAN-BAC has been working on expanding its role and function by launching annual legacy projects. Legacy projects aim to initiate progress in interconnected fields to help strengthen and speed up regional integration. As of 2020, new projects have been released every year to be held by the ten member states, each focused on different but interconnected sectors. At the end of 2020, there are six countries currently leading legacy projects: one in Malaysia (AFIS), one in Laos (LLL), two in The Philippines (Maritime Connect and AMEN), one in Singapore (SGConnect), two in Thailand (AHEAD and RDTC), and one in Vietnam (Digital STARS). However, the progress of the two additional legacy projects from The Philippines and Thailand, namely the Maritime Connect and AHEAD, is currently stalled [Figure 2](#).

In general, legacy projects are a way for ASEAN-BAC to contribute tangible results for the AEC instead of being limited to only providing recommendations to the government and leaders. Each legacy project is based on AMS’ domestic conditions and is guided by the expertise of the ASEAN Chair. Each legacy project so far has focused on a different

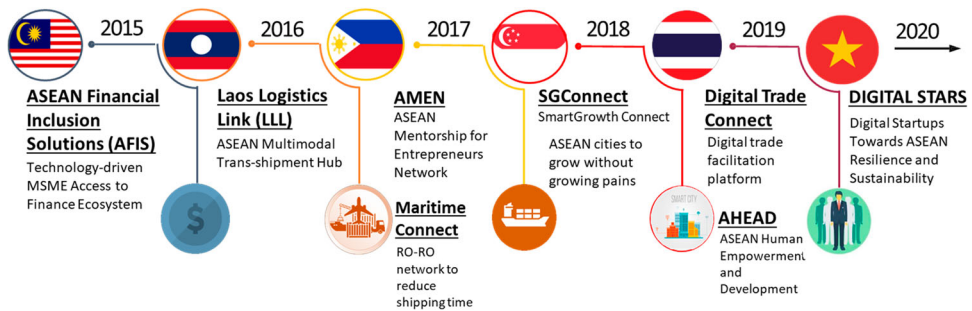


Figure 2. The ASEAN-BAC Legacy Projects. Source: Internal record of the secretariat as of 2020.

sector. For example, the Philippines launched the ASEAN Mentorship Entrepreneurs Network (AMEN) legacy project in 2017 during its chairmanship year.

AMEN aimed to establish a mentorship programme for MSMEs all over ASEAN to help them grow faster and contribute to their countries' economic development. To achieve that goal, ASEAN-BAC works with ACCMSME to expand the national reach of the project to all AMS. Since the members of ACCMSME are MSME ministries, the ministries will raise awareness about AMEN and encourage MSMEs to take part in AMEN's mentorship programme. The mentorship programme itself is developed internally by the ASEAN-BAC Philippines team.

In 2019, the first phase of AMEN was held as a pilot programme in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The pilot programme formally introduced AMEN to MSMEs from the three countries and showed them how the mentorship will be carried out. Mentors were chosen by each national-level ACCMSME, and so were the mentees. In 2020, AMEN evaluated the first phase deemed successful, especially in preparing and training MSMEs on their business survival during the pandemic. Thus, the AMEN team is preparing for the second phase of expanding the mentorship and finalizing the programme and modules to be shared with the seven other AMS (JAIF Management Team, 2020).

From our interviews, we learned that ASEAN-BAC's legacy projects are seen as positive initiatives. Some legacy projects, such as AMEN and the Digital Trade Connect project from Thailand, are progressing well. AMEN has progressed well, likely because the Philippines government is highly supportive of MSMEs due to their significant contribution to the national economy. The Philippines' Council Chair also has specific expertise in MSME development. Thailand's Digital Trade Connect is successful for similar reasons – Thailand's Council Member has personal expertise in banking and digital finance.

Other legacy projects are progressing slowly or not at all. The ASEAN Financial Inclusion Solutions (AFIS) from Malaysia and the ASEAN Human Empowerment and Development (AHEAD), which is Thailand's second legacy project, are so far going nowhere, having had no follow-up from the Council Members who initiated them. As an organization, ASEAN-BAC is unable to compel AMS to work harder on their legacy projects because the projects are mostly managed by each country and the Council Members that launched them. This means that when the Council Member who initiated the project is not actively implementing the project, the project is likely to experience a quiet death. The same will occur if the Council Member retires and no other members from the same country are willing to continue the project. Thus, ASEAN-BAC's legacy projects are fragmented even on the inside, and their success depends on the self-awareness and willingness of the Council Members and their project teams.

ASEAN-BAC legacy projects are also hindered by each AMS' country context. One interview stated that all ASEAN-BAC's recommendations and initiatives must be adjusted to align with each AMS' national regulations. This can take time because the national government must ensure their decisions align with other factors, especially those relating to their national interests. Thus, not all suggestions or initiatives – including legacy projects – can be implemented in all 10 AMS due to each country's different conditions, regulations, and interests.

Most of our interviewees see ASEAN as a platform to connect and strengthen relationships between member states. However, whether suggestions or initiatives will be successfully implemented or not fully depends on the desires of individual ASEAN member states. The key drivers of initiatives are the countries themselves. Yet, each has a different state of economic development and thus faces its own internal struggles, resulting in difficulty reaching true regional economic integration.

Currently, not all AMS have launched legacy projects under ASEAN-BAC. Interviewees opined that after all ten countries have launched projects in the future, ASEAN-BAC should focus on these existing projects and not add additional ones. Interviewees noted that it is better to have only a few initiatives that are highly focused and actively worked on rather than launching and creating more new initiatives that do not progress beyond the initial stages.

As one government official we interviewed asserted:

“I think it is better to have only one ongoing legacy project that is being focused on, so it can be sustainable and impactful, rather than having one released every year, but it ends up stalled and not progressing.” (Interview 3, 2021).

This clearly indicates a need for a deeper evaluation of the legacy project system within ASEAN-BAC and how projects should be implemented. Nevertheless, given the diverse interests of each AMS, ASEAN-BAC should thus focus on the ten legacy projects that will be completed by the year 2026 during Myanmar’s next chairmanship.

Finally, it is also vital for ASEAN-BAC to engage with the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC). It is important to remember that ASEAN and ASEC are not the same: ASEAN is the 10 Member States, while ASEC is the secretarial body that takes care of cooperation between all AMS and other entities. As one of the entities that play a big role in the economic pillar, ASEAN-BAC usually engages with ASEC to prepare meetings, share reports, and as an extension body for communication with stakeholders.

One interviewee stated that ASEC needs ASEAN-BAC as the apex private sector representative for intra-ASEAN business (Interviewee 4, 2021). ASEAN-BAC assists ASEC by obtaining information on regional business sectors through dialogue with its partners. However, ASEAN-BAC is more than just an information-gathering body; it is also crucial in amplifying the voices of the local ASEAN businesses (Interviewee 4, 2021). ASEC’s contribution to this relationship is through holding large events such as the biannual AEC Dialogue and organizing meetings of trade facilitation committees, involving ASEAN-BAC as the representative of the business sector to ensure good progress in achieving the AEC.

Deliberation

ASEAN-BAC plays an important role in influencing and helping governments enhance regional economic integration. Governmental deliberation processes are influenced through both direct and indirect engagement with ASEAN-BAC. Directly, ASEAN-BAC participates in the decision-making process through meetings with the government, but these efforts are sometimes hindered by the government’s own priorities. Indirectly, ASEAN-BAC undertakes internal coordination between country representatives and

strengthens their deliberation by sharing studies and reports among national representatives.

ASEAN-BAC makes annual reports to AEM and the ASEAN leaders. These reports cover all deliberation activities with the government, JBCs and associations, working groups, and ASEC and include insights learned from the legacy projects. ASEAN-BAC meetings are usually held 2–3 times a year, depending on the Chair's decision. They aim to report on initiatives' progress and share each AMS's current business situation. Additionally, the council will hold several additional meetings specifically to prepare for engagement with AEM and/or Leaders.

When a meeting with AEM and/or Leaders is scheduled, the Secretariat compile the relevant recommendations into several themes. However, interviewees stated that the meeting format and the time allocated for it are often inappropriate and lead to ineffective meetings that last for only one hour or less. The meetings usually involve presentations by ASEAN-BAC members, followed by several minutes of response from the AEM or Leaders. This means communication is largely one-way.

Nevertheless, interviewees from the government stated that the recommendations and initiatives from ASEAN-BAC are usually well-received. From our interview, the AEM/Leaders often support the recommendations in their response statement. However, not all recommendations are immediately responded to because the Governments must align their statement with the current countries' situations.

Regarding the private sector, meetings between ASEAN-BAC and government representatives sometimes seem of little use. Interviewees mentioned that following dialogues with the government, the private sector assumes that having a dialogue with the government does not show any result in a short period of time or even receive a response at all. But as one interviewee explained, recommendations taken from the engagement with the private sector are reviewed internally by the government before making a decision, and for the next steps, the government must identify which associations and/or other government bodies are able to contribute to those recommendations. This is a time-consuming process since the government is also handling many other national and international issues simultaneously.

Further complicating deliberations is the activeness of Council Members. Not all Members are vocal; at most meetings, only some Members will comment. Usually, the most vocal are those with a particular interest in the topic. The result is that discussions and agreements do not necessarily reflect all 10 AMS, especially as individual members are appointed by national ministries and may not have any particular agenda.

This information supports the idea from Munene and Thakhathi (2017) that the activeness of the Council Members, along with their capacity to react to certain issues, determines how much influence ASEAN-BAC will have on policy-making decisions and on enforcing their legacy projects. This is also in line with Rüländ's (2014b) assessment that it is difficult for an interest group to be fully heard by the governments of ASEAN. ASEAN-BAC appears to be not as influential as its name infers, primarily due to the overly bureaucratic culture of ASEAN. This could be rooted in the fact that ASEAN has not been fully integrated as a regional intergovernmental organization and is thus prone to problems such as fragmented decisions, unaligned activities, and protectionism. As the interviewee from ASEC stated:

“It needs to be evaluated whether the concept of three council members per country is still relevant today. Do they really represent their chamber of commerce, or do they really represent the collective interests?” (Interview 5, 2021).

Nevertheless, ASEAN-BAC has kept pushing for recommendations and initiatives to match the dynamic progress of AEC as the years go by. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, ASEAN-BAC saw an opportunity to better support sectors such as digitalization and MSMEs empowerment, which have increasing needs to adapt to the situation.

In summary, at one end, this is the issue with ASEAN’s fragmented nature. As ASEAN is not a unitary body like the EU, all decisions are made depending on each member state’s condition and capability. Each AMS has different national laws and regulations, which has become a hindrance to the regional integration process.

ASEAN-BAC and the AEC blueprint 2025 implementation

Analysing the progress of ASEAN-BAC with the strategic measures in the AEC Blueprint, we provide the following comparison:

From [Table 2](#), we can see that overall, ASEAN-BAC has fulfilled its assigned tasks in supporting the growth of AEC. However, there remain needs for improvement, starting from the organization’s core.

First, each council member must become more active in promoting the ASEAN-BAC within their business circles. Through awareness-raising and promotion, it is hoped that ASEAN-BAC can reach even more businesses and associations in need of more support at the regional level.

Second, the council members also need to be more active in engaging with the council, not just through meetings, and prioritizing the ‘think ASEAN’ approach in parallel with their own personal interests. This would increase their contributions to a wider range of sectors. Additionally, interviewees stated that within the internal process of compiling recommendations, sometimes the JBCs are too focused on extra-ASEAN trade instead of intra-ASEAN trade. At times, some council members have even requested to focus solely on intra-ASEAN trade issues, but other members did not respond well to this suggestion. Thus, with most members only focusing on issues relating to their personal interests, ASEAN-BAC’s original mandate of voicing the needs of local ASEAN businesses is not being fully implemented.

Third, as suggested by one of the interviewees, a solid internal secretarial support team must be established, as it appears that ASEAN-BAC suffers from understaffing due to a lack of finances. Each year, the ASEAN-BAC regional secretariat is funded by the previous year’s chair country. The amount of annual funding is agreed upon with all AMS; however, it can be adjusted due to each member state’s situation. It means that funding for the ASEAN-BAC regional secretariat may be insufficient in some years. This aligns with the lack of ASEAN-BAC exposure and related lack of support from other stakeholders, which could be done to difficulties in accessing financial support for staff and researchers. ASEAN-BAC should thus develop an initiative to guarantee internal operations for the sake of sustainability.

Finally, the effectiveness of multi-level engagement does not depend solely on the initiative of ASEAN-BAC. The Council and even the ASEAN Secretariat can only do

Table 2. Comparison of AEC Blueprint 2025 Strategic Measures for ASEAN-BAC and Its Implementation.

AEC Blueprint 2025 Strategic Measures	Implementation in ASEAN-BAC
i. Implement a more inclusive and consultative process involving the private sector	
a. Formulate a set of guidelines to maximize benefits from engagement with the private sector. The guidelines may include criteria for the involvement of private sector entities (e.g. demonstration of value-add to ASEAN, leveraging on core competencies, and a mechanism for involving MSMEs).	No specific guidelines for engagement with private sector entities; however, every official partnership of ASEAN-BAC and other entities such as the JBCs has a Term of Reference (ToR).
b. Relevant ASEAN bodies to institutionalize within each body, a consultative process with lead private sector entities (business associations and business councils) as well as ASEAN-BAC representatives to support the implementation of initiatives under the sectoral work plans.	ASEAN-BAC representatives regularly engage with the relevant ASEAN bodies during meetings and events and provide feedback and recommendation.
c. Private sector groups to initiate cluster groups to engage in specific issues; hold partnership events on key issues, such as trade facilitation, services, investment, connectivity, food and MSMEs to raise issues and provide key inputs on emerging trends and issues.	Creation of working groups for specific issues, though some are quite inactive.
d. With many different bodies and multiple issues, the private sector needs to develop its own platform for networking.	ASEAN-BAC working groups are established as a networking platform for the members.
ii. Enhance ASEAN-BAC's role	
a. Membership to reflect strong linkages with business stakeholders.	Strong linkages are evident; however, the business stakeholders' representatives may be biased towards specific sectors.
b. Build in a more structured engagement with business councils/business entities, and establish its own structure to monitor the progress of key initiatives or priority integration sectors of interest to the private sector to support the implementation and provide feedback.	Engagement with other business councils/entities is monitored by the Secretariat. Still, there is a need to strengthen the Secretariat to enable it to undertake more and bigger engagements and specific issues.
c. Coordination between ASEAN-BAC and the ASEAN Secretariat: Enhance coordination with ASEAN-BAC by providing regular updates of the AEC; providing minutes of consultations with the private sector; and ensuring ASEAN-BAC recommendations feed into the consultative process with sectoral bodies.	The Secretariat has done coordination of ASEAN-BAC and the ASEAN Secretariat.

Source: Authors

so much as a facilitator for the progress of AEC implementation. Ultimately, the most power lies with each AMS. As stated by the interviewees, in terms of communicating with the Government and other stakeholders, ASEAN-BAC has become more active and has expanded its ministerial cooperation in recent years. The biggest challenge is how the governments respond to ASEAN-BAC's initiatives and recommendations, how they facilitate the implementation within their national development progress, and to align the initiatives and recommendations with their national laws and regulations. Some AMS might not be as active as others in the progress of AEC and regional economic integration, but this is not because the member states are ignoring ASEAN. Instead, it is because the state must prioritize their national interest first and foremost. As we recognize the differences in each AMS' development level, it is understandable that countries may try to focus first on their national development and set aside regional economic integration.

Our discussion regarding the role of ASEAN-BAC might provide insights into the broader debate on regional integration in Southeast Asia. First, despite facing constraints

in its role to push regional integration further, ASEAN-BAC has the potential to also enhance ASEAN centrality through its Joint Business Councils (JBCs) and Associations. The ASEAN centrality that emphasizes ASEAN as an anchor for regional integration becomes increasingly important amid the rivalry between China and the US and their allies in the Asia Pacific. The existence of JBCs is essential as a hub to strengthen intra-regional cooperation as well as with countries outside ASEAN. However, JBCs now only function as a place for ASEAN-BAC to outsource economic studies. For this reason, the JBC mechanism must be strengthened to become a framework for making ASEAN the centre of cooperation with major Asian-Pacific countries and beyond. This can be done by providing more voices and platforms for JBCs to engage with ASEAN policymakers.

Second, the limited role of ASEAN-BAC in regional integration shows that the norms underpinning Southeast Asian regional integration is primarily driven by the state. This is because sovereignty has been seen as a critical idea in forming ASEAN's normative framework. The legacy project, a hallmark of each country's role in the ASEAN BAC, shows such state domination where the state is still the dominant actor in proposing what kind of legacy project ASEAN-BAC should implement. Our study also confirms the previous conceptualization that ASEAN-BAC fitted ASEAN's state-corporatist model of interest representation where large conglomerates are facilitated to voice their preferences regarding ASEAN's future direction on economic integration (Al-Fadhat, 2019; Rüländ, 2016).

Third, although the ASEAN regional integration project provides space for business interest to enhance the regional integration process through ASEAN-BAC, it is unlikely that such engagement could resolve the outstanding barriers to ASEAN economic integration, such as the increased Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs). Indeed, ASEAN-BAC has launched a report on the growing NTBs in ASEAN and called for the removal of NTBS. However, such a rhetorical call might not be heard by the government because growing NTBs also serve big conglomerates to maintain dominance in several sectors (Jones, 2016).

Conclusion

This article has shown that ASEAN-BAC has had an impact on the regional integration process between 2005 and 2020, especially since 2015 when ASEAN-BAC began implementing legacy projects to level up its role within the regional economic integration progress. In terms of engagement, initiatives, and legacy projects, ASEAN-BAC has shown a lot of support to ASEAN through the making of working groups, initiatives, and recommendations at the regional level. However, the sustainability of these legacy projects and how effective the projects are remains unclear; most of the projects are still under development and have not yet been fully implemented in all ten ASEAN member states.

Nevertheless, if we compare ASEAN-BAC's progress with the strategic measures of the AEC Blueprint 2025, it is clear that ASEAN-BAC has supported the progress of AEC by representing the private sector but that there are internal hindrances that should be eliminated for more effective results. ASEAN-BAC also faces external challenges beyond its control, such as how governments react and respond to their initiatives

and recommendations. However, ASEAN-BAC clearly needs to mend their internal incoherence issues.

Regarding the ASEAN-BAC Council Members themselves, they must become more actively engaged in all processes and push for increased national engagement in their respective countries. Internally, Council Members need to overcome their personal business backgrounds and recognize that the council has the potential to become an important platform for business growth and development. Externally, through cooperation with national governments, ASEAN-BAC representatives should try for deeper and wider engagement with a wider range of local business sectors. Questions relating to council members also arise: Is it still appropriate for ASEAN-BAC to have three council members from each AMS? Why does the national government nominate members that have experience in only limited business sectors? And how can ASEAN-BAC improve its sustainability in the upcoming years, considering the demand for reorganizing its internal organizational system? These questions should not remain unanswered and open an opportunity for future research.

Finally, ASEAN-BAC should be more focused on its specific goals, regionally and nationally. They first need to refocus on internal ASEAN matters and local ASEAN business instead of being concerned about extra-regional bodies and interests such as extra-ASEAN trade facilitation. As ASEAN-BAC represents the local businesses of ASEAN, they should be more inclusive and aware of the other issues encountered by other business sectors, not just those represented within the council. But if ASEAN-BAC wishes to expand their engagement for inclusivity and stronger deliberation, it must also improve its internal and resource management.

This article limits its focus to a general overview of ASEAN-BAC. As the council currently seems to be tackling both external and internal issues, it is hoped that this research will introduce ASEAN-BAC to a wider audience and promote how ASEAN-BAC can contribute new opportunities and initiatives for ASEAN business sectors to prosper in the process of AEC 2025.

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Notes on contributors

Moch Faisal Karim is a senior lecturer within Department of International Relations, Bina Nusantara University. His research has been published in *Foreign Policy Analysis*, *Third World Quarterly*, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, *Pacific Review*, *Asian Journal of Social*

Science, Journal of Current of Southeast Asia Affairs, European Journal of East Asian Studies, International Area Studies Review, and Journal of International Migration and Integration. He is currently an editor of Journal of ASEAN Studies (JAS).

Tania Quinn Heryanto is research associate at Centre for Business and Diplomatic Studies (CBDS), Bina Nusantara University. Her research focuses on the political economy of regional integration in Southeast Asia. She can be reached at tania.heryanto@binus.ac.id.

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