A-LIST POINT OF VIEW

An Update on ASEAN Smart Cities Network

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Background

On Tuesday, September 3 2019, Borg Tsien Tham, Deputy Director from the ASEAN Directorate in the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Clint Brewer, Foreign Commercial Officer from the U.S. Embassy in Singapore, and Jannik Termansen, Regional Director of Government Affairs & Markets at 3M Asia Pacific, and Governor on AmCham's Board participated in a panel on the latest developments on the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN). Mr Tham provided key updates on the ASCN following the Annual ASCN Meeting in August and Mr Brewer outlined the challenges and opportunities external partners collaborating with ASEAN on the ASCN faced.

Since the inaugural ASCN meeting in July 2018 held in Singapore, ASEAN Member States (MS) have worked actively and used various technologies to improve the lives of ASEAN citizens. ASEAN has estimates that by 2030, 90 million more people will face urbanization, and "middleweight" cities of between 200,000 and 2,000,000 residents will drive 40% of the region's growth.

However, the participating 26 pilot cities across 10 MS currently sit at different stages of development – each with different issues such as city congestion, poor water and air quality, poverty, rising levels of inequalities, increasing urban-rural divide, as well as people's security and safety. ASCN has established a collaborative platform where cities work together towards the common goal of smart and sustainable urban development.

Key Takeaways

- The ASCN's definition of an ASEAN Smart City was laid out in its founding document, the ASEAN Smart Cities Framework, where participating cities will balance three interdependent strategic outcomes for its peoples: (1) A High Quality of Life, (2) a Competitive Economy, and (3) a Sustainable Environment.

- Through the ASCN framework, partner cities and external private partners will work together in implementing any of the six following development areas: (1) Civic and Social, (2) Health and Well-Being, (3) Public Safety and Security, (4) Quality Environment, (5) Built Infrastructure, and (6) Industry and Innovation. These six areas reflect the needs of participating cities, which are at varying stages of development.

- ASCN aims to facilitate cooperation through their national representatives, catalyze bankable projects with the private sector, and secure funding and support from ASEAN's external partners.

- Participation, funding and solutions from external partners, private sector providers and ASEAN MS form a key contributor of the ASCN's progress.

- As the current Chair of ASEAN, Thailand has expressed its continued commitment to the development of the ASCN.

A Period of Consolidation for AMS and Smart Cities

Following the ASCN Annual Meeting held in Thailand this June and August and the geopolitical competition among external partners, Thailand emphasized the importance of the maintenance of institutional continuity for the development of ASCN's current and future initiatives. The ASCN will be exploring rules of engagement between members, interaction with external partners, membership expansion, establishment of a legal framework for sustainable growth, monitoring and reporting of progress, and the rules and responsibility of Chairs of ASEAN. Singapore will continue its active involvement in the ASCN.

Four research projects were commissioned by the Republic of Korea committee to serve as a basis for smart cities project development. In China, a new smart cities cooperation initiative has been negotiated, and Russia also organized a dialogue session focusing on Russia-ASEAN cooperation.

Membership expansion is a key priority, as many other ASEAN cities are interested to become a part of the ASCN. Vietnam has outlined its 2020 objectives for ASCN when takes on the role of Chair, with a view to continue facilitating exchanges between various stakeholders, further establish a legal framework for smart and green sustainable growth, and to promote international investment and the use of domestic resources to further development plans.

Moving the U.S.-ASEAN relationship forward through the Indo-Pacific strategy

The U.S. Embassy in Singapore identified ASCN as a viable network that, with Singapore as an example, provides opportunities within the information and communications sector. Several partnership announcements were made and the U.S. Embassy participated in a 2018 showcase for U.S. companies to exhibit partnership opportunities and smart city solutions for attending ASEAN ministers.

The U.S.' Indo-Pacific strategy indicated that the U.S.-ASEAN Smart Cities Partnership (USASCP) which identifies bankable projects to secure the involvement of U.S. companies will continue to ensure access for U.S. companies to development projects in the future. Ideally, this partnership seeks to gain exclusive access to ASEAN officials.

The longer-term vision for smart cities and projects catering to ASEAN's needs

Besides the current efforts to develop ASEAN cities, participating private sector partners are interested in the longer-term plans in developing and building up these smart cities. There is also a greater emphasis on presenting ASEAN as one united front, and on providing more opportunities for businesses to partner ASEAN governments and develop the region without fragmenting the nations that bear unique cultures and citizen needs.

It is important to note that due to the varying levels of development amongst ASEAN cities, each of the 26 cities has different priorities. For example, while Vietnam is looking to implement intelligent transportation systems, Brunei is currently focusing on improving sanitation to fulfil basic needs, and Singapore is placing greater attention on the e-payments sector. With varied challenges and priorities across different ASEAN cities comes a wide range of opportunities for external partners to contribute in the respective domains and cities.

Moderating expectations and the need for a bureaucratic approach

With expectations of MS to hand over projects to the municipal level for action and the need to implement a more rigid framework without imposing on participating governments, progress has been slower than expected. Many of the projects tabled boil down to addressing the basic needs, with the concern of implementing new technologies and exacerbating the divide between "the enabled and the wanting". Scale and speed of various projects also differ due to regional, cultural, and political sensitivities, with the example of the High-Speed Rail project between Johor Bahru and Singapore. Much of existing efforts from all parties are dependent on the effective financing of these bankable projects with the secured funds.

A-List's Outlook

As an extremely diverse region with bespoke needs between cities, ASEAN requires a reimagining of smart city solutions beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. Contributors from the private sector will also be expected to put forth tailored, yet revolutionary city-level solutions that uplift the quality of life and safety of its citizens in a sustainable manner. It is also incumbent on participating governments to closely study available technologies and its track record, before narrowing their options down for city transformation.

Emerging and existing technologies form one component in the larger picture. A successful smart city implementation relies on conventional policymaking, political relationships, the buy-in of grassroots, and improving of political realities. It is thus crucial to be active yet strategic on the relationship front, and not lose sight of the fundamentals considering technological breakthroughs.