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Indonesia's Smart City Diplomacy Through ASEAN Smart Cities Network Shepherdship (2023-2025)

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Abstract

The Indo-Pacific's position as an epicenter of the global economy generates complex, multi-aspect challenges of urbanization for Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries. In this context, the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) was launched as a multilateral, non-state effort to share knowledge on building sustainable technology-based urban areas. This article analyzes Indonesia's role as the ASCN 'Shepherd' for the 2023–2025 term, examining it as a case study of middle-power leadership and Smart City diplomacy. Employing a qualitative descriptive method with document analysis, this study investigates how Indonesia leveraged its dual roles as Chair (2023) and Shepherd (2023–2025) to pivot the ASCN's focus from conceptual discourse to the implementation of bankable projects. The findings indicate that Indonesia's shepherdship was not only incremental in making the ASCN more inclusive and practical, but also allowed Indonesia to employ smart city diplomacy to strengthen its position as a major power in the ASEAN and the broader Indo-Pacific. This leadership, which garnered commendations from the ASEAN Secretariat and active participation from member states, provided crucial continuity and solidified Indonesia's regional leadership through pragmatic, solution-oriented diplomacy. This study concludes that Indonesia's shepherdship has manifested as an effective exercise in smart city diplomacy, bridging the gap between planning and implementation and providing a critical institutional legacy for future urban development in ASEAN.

Keywords: ASEAN Smart Cities Network, Regional Leadership, Smart City Diplomacy, Indonesia, ASEAN

1. Introduction

The Indo-Pacific's position as the epicenter of the global economy generates complex, multi-aspect challenges of urbanization for ASEAN countries, similar to those faced by China and Korea decades earlier. Projections indicate that an additional 90 million people will move to urban areas by 2030, with "middleweight" cities driving 40% of this expansion (ASEAN, 2018b). However, this rapid growth has precipitated profound challenges, including traffic congestion, environmental degradation, and socioeconomic disparities (The Jakarta Post, 2023). In response, the "smart city" paradigm has emerged as a promising solution, leveraging technology and innovation to enhance the quality of life, economic competitiveness, and environmental sustainability.

Therefore, anticipation of rapid urbanization should be prepared to support sustainable economic growth based on industrialization in ASEAN countries. In this regard, the percentage of the ASEAN population living in urban areas has consistently increased over the past decade. Starting at 47.6% in 2015, the region crossed the 50% threshold in 2020. This upward trajectory is not slowing, with recent data from 2023 showing an increase of more than 53%. Between 2019-2023, ASEAN's total population, urban rate percentage, and urban population steadily increased, as shown in **Table 1**. Projections indicate that this trend will continue, with the urban population share expected to reach 55.6% by 2030 (Seifcar, 2024). This relentless demographic shift towards cities is a primary driver of regional initiatives such as the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN), as member states collaboratively seek sustainable solutions to manage the opportunities and challenges of urban transformation.

Table 1: ASEAN population, urbanization rate, and urban population (Asian Development Bank, n.d.)

Year	Total population (in million)	Urbanization rate (percentage)	Urban population (In million)
2023	680,800	51.8	352,654
2022	674,200	51.2	345,190
2021	668,100	50.7	338,726
2020	662,800	50.2	332,725
2019	655,600	49.5	324,522

In this regard, ASEAN recognized this urgency and launched the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN) initiative in 2018 as a multilateral, non-state effort to share the vision and knowledge of building sustainable, high-technology-based urban areas (ASEAN, 2018a). The ASCN was conceived as a collaborative platform to harmonize smart city development efforts, catalyze bankable projects, and secure funding from external partners (ASEAN, 2018b). However, the network's early years revealed a persistent gap between the formulation of Smart City Action Plans (SCAPs) and the capacity to access the financing required for their realization, as 50% of Southeast Asian cities struggled to identify suitable suppliers, partners, and consultants (ASEAN Secretariat & Australian Government, 2022; Clark & HSBC BrandConnect, 2019).

The ASCN's governance structure represents a unique institutional innovation designed to address the inherent discontinuity of ASEAN's annual rotating chairmanship. This dual-leadership model comprises a yearly 'Chair' and a multi-year 'Shepherd' (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019). The Shepherd role, first held by Singapore (2019–2023) and subsequently by Indonesia (2023–2025), was instituted to provide strategic stability and institutional memory, ensuring that long-term initiatives are not derailed by annual leadership transitions (ASEAN Secretariat, 2019; Feisal, 2024). The role of the shepherd is different from the ordinary chairmanship position in the ASEAN nomenclature; it acts as a facilitator that empowers and allows smart city projects across ASEAN to collaborate on developing aspects of smart cities by providing models of various related aspects (PACIS Unpar, 2024).

For Indonesia, a nation often regarded as the natural leader of ASEAN, the 2023-2025 ASCN shepherdship presented a strategic opportunity. This allowed Indonesia to employ smart city diplomacy to address these practical, shared challenges, thereby translating its latent leadership into tangible influence and strengthening its position in the ASEAN and Indo-Pacific regions (Aung, 2023; Hutagalung, 2025). Indonesia's tenure as a shepherd commenced at a critical juncture when the ASCN needed to transition from a conceptual framework to tangible, funded implementation.

This context provides a compelling case for examining Indonesia's regional leadership. Regional leadership is not merely a function of a state's material power but is also contingent on its ability to mobilize consensus, provide regional public goods, and shape the regional agenda (Pempel, 1999). Owing to its size and strategic location, Indonesia is often regarded as a "natural leader" within ASEAN (Anwar, 2023; Heiduk, 2016). However, this status must be actively performed and legitimized by the government. Middle power theory offers a useful lens, suggesting that states like Indonesia pursue influence not through coercion but through coalition building, norm entrepreneurship, and niche diplomacy (Cooper et al., 1993). An essential function of a middle power is the provision of regional public goods—tangible resources or frameworks that benefit the entire region and might otherwise be undersupplied. Indonesia's foreign policy has been characterized as a "hedging-plus" strategy that seeks to persuade and accommodate multiple great powers by appealing to their pre-existing interests and beliefs

(Anwar, 2023). Within ASEAN, this translates into a commitment to upholding ASEAN Centrality and institutional processes as a means of managing great power rivalry and advancing collective interests (Choiruzzad, 2022; Indraswari, 2022).

Therefore, Indonesia's shepherd position in ASCN 2023-2025 has a wider spectrum and is not only limited to technical aspects of advancing the development of smart cities in ASEAN but also as an arena for Indonesia to apply its smart power to navigate the common issues of ASEAN in the aspects of smart cities. In this regard, this research perceives that an investigation of how Indonesia managed to transform the opportunity of being a shepherd of the ASCN into an actual smart cities diplomacy strategy is required to broaden the understanding of smart city diplomacy in ASEAN. For instance, Indonesia must develop a strategy of pilot cities to tackle the problem of population diversity and funding issues to transform the shepherd position of the ASCN into actual smart city diplomacy (ASEAN Secretariat & Australian Government, 2022). Nevertheless, this issue has not been widely discussed, considering its importance and recency.

Furthermore, this study uses the concept of paradiplomacy, which is defined as the involvement of non-central governments in international relations (Duchacek, 1990; Soldatos, 1990). This phenomenon challenges the traditional state-centric view of diplomacy by recognizing that subnational units, such as cities, engage in cross-border cooperation to promote trade, investment, and cultural exchange (Kuznetsov, 2015). Smart city diplomacy is a specific modality of paradiplomacy that leverages urban innovation and technological advancement as foreign policy tools (Mursitama & Lee, 2018). It operates at multiple levels of abstraction.

1. International Branding and Investment: Cities market themselves as innovative, technology-driven hubs to attract foreign investment, global talent, and tourism (Urban Technology Alliance, 2024).
2. Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building: Through transnational networks, cities exchange best practices, policy models, and technical expertise, accelerating learning and avoiding common pitfalls (Urban Technology Alliance, 2024).
3. Norm setting and agenda shaping: By showcasing successful local solutions to global problems (e.g., climate change and public health), cities can influence international norms and policy agendas, often acting with greater agility than national governments (Marchetti, 2021; Pluijm, 2007).

Indonesia's shepherdship of the ASCN can thus be analyzed as a strategic deployment of smart city diplomacy, where the actions of its pilot cities and its leadership within the network serve as instruments of its broader regional leadership ambitions. Therefore, this study poses the following research question: How does Indonesia's shepherding of the ASCN from 2023 to 2025 manifest as an exercise in smart city diplomacy, and how does this performance reflect and shape Indonesia's broader regional leadership strategy within ASEAN? Considering the data availability, most of which are qualitative data in the form of official releases and documents, news articles, and academic articles, this research uses a qualitative approach to investigate the research question.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive-analytical research design to facilitate an in-depth examination of Indonesia's role, actions, and impact on the ASCN's development. This approach is optimal for interpreting Indonesia's performance through the theoretical lens of regional leadership and smart city diplomacy. This research relies on document analysis, drawing on primary and secondary data sources. Primary data include official documents from the ASEAN Secretariat, such as the ASEAN Smart Cities Framework and ASCN Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Reports, and official press releases from ASCN annual meetings. The secondary data comprise scholarly articles on middle power diplomacy and smart cities (e.g., Anwar, 2023; Mursitama & Lee, 2018), reports from partner institutions, and credible regional news sources. Data triangulation was performed by cross-verifying information across these diverse sources, for instance, by corroborating government statements with official ASEAN reports and independent media coverage to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

3. Results And Discussion

3.1 Strategic Continuity and Evolution: A Comparative Analysis of Shepherdship

Indonesia's shepherdship is best understood in comparison to its predecessors, particularly the inaugural Shepherd, Singapore, and the immediate past Chair, Cambodia. Each leader shaped the ASCN's trajectory, creating conditions for Indonesia's strategic pivot. Singapore's tenure as the first Chair (2018) and Shepherd (2019-2023) was foundational. Its primary focus was architectural, establishing a conceptual blueprint for networks. Key achievements include the creation of the ASEAN Smart Cities Framework (ASCF) and the formulation of initial Smart City Action Plans (SCAPs) for 26 pilot cities (Kong & Woods, 2021; Somasundram et al., 2018). Singapore has leveraged its global reputation as an innovation hub to attract high-level partners and legitimize the network, acting as a resource provider and facilitator of knowledge exchange (Kong & Woods, 2021). Its focus was on defining the what and why of smart cities in the ASEAN context.

Following this, Cambodia's chairmanship in 2022 introduced strong thematic ambivalence towards environmental sustainability. By championing an "ASEAN Green Deal," Cambodia steered the network's discourse towards building "smart and green cities" with more efficient resource use (Khmer Times, 2022). This has created a demand for tangible green projects, inadvertently highlighting the persistent challenge of the network: the gap between planning and financing. As the ASCN Chair for 2023-2025, Indonesia is responsible for transforming the technical foundation from the shepherding of Singapore and the new focus of the ASCN Chair of Cambodia on smart and green city concepts into an effective guideline not only for smart cities in Indonesia but also in all ASEAN countries. Cambodia's notion of the development of ASEAN's smart cities added a new complexity to its implementation, as Thailand's chair in 2019 focused on building external partnerships and economic catalysts for smart cities. Brunei Darussalam's chairmanship in 2020 provided a more nuanced focus on smart cities to adapt to the new environment during Covid-19 and digital resilience, which became the main tools during the pandemic (ASEAN Secretariat 2024).

Indonesia's shepherdship (2023-2025) represented a deliberate strategic pivot from framework and theme to pragmatic implementation and investment. While Singapore built the architecture, Cambodia set a green theme, Thailand focused on external partnerships, Brunei Darussalam on digital resilience, and Indonesia focused on building the engine. The core difference was a shift in priority from conceptualization to capitalization. Indonesia's agenda, centered on "Industry and Innovation," was designed to directly address the implementation gap by focusing on creating bankable projects and mobilizing investments (Kementerian Dalam Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2023). This was a crucial evolution, ensuring that the network did not stagnate but moved decisively towards tangible urban development. In addition, Indonesia proposed inclusive smart city development that not only opens multi-channel funding but also facilitates local elements in smart city development in ASEAN. The focus has shifted from creating ideal smart cities to how the idea can work.

Regardless of the shifting focus of each ASCN shepherd, the ASCN maintains continuity by incorporating the focus of the previous shepherd into a new framework. In this regard, Indonesia focuses on a more pragmatic approach to implementation that can balance local cultures, the technical guidelines of the ASCN as a legacy of Singapore's shepherdess, instructions from the chairs of the ASCN, such as Cambodia's Green Deal, and the unique characteristics of each ASEAN smart city. In this regard, I perceive that Indonesia realizes that effective smart city development in ASEAN cannot be based on a single, fit-for-all guideline but should be based on the cities' unique characteristics and local values to ensure its effectiveness and relevance in tackling diverse complex urbanization-related issues.

In this regard, Indonesia has enacted a strategic pivot from a framework to functions. Recognizing that the primary obstacle was no longer a lack of plans but a lack of implementation and funding, Indonesia's leadership focused on pragmatism. This represents a critical evolution that ensures that the network does not stagnate at the conceptual stage. Instead of imposing a single model, Indonesia practiced a form of leadership rooted in diversity, actively showcasing its four pilot cities—DKI Jakarta, Makassar, Banyuwangi, and Sumedang—as a portfolio of replicable solutions. This approach, which presents diverse models for metropolitan management (Jakarta), public security

(Makassar), circular economy (Banyuwangi), and data-driven social services (Sumedang), is intrinsically aligned with ASEAN's principle of unity in diversity and is highly relevant to the varied developmental contexts of member states (Feisal, 2024).

3.2 Key Achievements and Regional Reception

Indonesia's most transformative achievement was the operationalization and delivery of the ASEAN Smart City Investment Toolkit (ASCT). While the idea was conceived during Brunei's 2021 chairmanship and noted in the 2022 M&E report (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022; ASEANAccess, 2021), it was under Indonesia's leadership during its 2023 chairmanship meeting in Bali that its development was accelerated and finalized for launch (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023; ASEAN Secretariat & Australian Government, 2022; The Jakarta Post, 2023). This toolkit is a quintessential regional public good that directly addresses the shared challenge of securing funding for Smart City projects. By equipping cities with the knowledge to develop bankable proposals, the toolkit fundamentally enhances the network's capacity and relevance to both municipal governments and private investors (ASEAN Secretariat & Australian Government, 2022).

Indonesia's shepherdesses are distinguished by their proactive engagement with academic and research institutions. Collaboration with entities such as the Parahyangan Center for International Studies (PACIS) and ASECH (Center of Excellence on Smart City) represents an innovative approach to evidence-based policy development in regional governance. Furthermore, the idea was translated into several pilot cities with different areas of focus as a compromise to the existing conditions of each city. The Indonesian approach is inclusive, combining the previous ASCN focus with a more practical and adaptive implementation. In this regard, the approach has departed from the centralized model of Singapore to be based on a network model that maintains its coordination but still accepts diverse implementation to ensure the sustainability and people's characteristics of the smart city (PACIS Unpar, 2024).

This leadership was positively received in the region and the country as a whole. The Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, explicitly commended Indonesia's "unwavering commitment to the development of smart and sustainable cities" during the 2023 Bali meeting (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). This high-level endorsement is a key success indicator for the project. Furthermore, the strong attendance at the Bali meeting by representatives from nine ASEAN member states and key external partners such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia signaled broad regional and international buy-in to Indonesia's agenda (The Jakarta Post, 2023). The consistent growth in the number of ASCN projects, from 77 in 2022 to 108 by September 2024, with a high implementation rate, further attests to the momentum sustained under Indonesia's guidance (ASEAN Secretariat, 2022, 2024).

3.3 Indonesia's Shepherdship as Smart City Diplomacy and Regional Leadership Assertion

Indonesia's shepherding of the ASCN is a sophisticated exercise in smart city diplomacy strategically deployed to assert its regional leadership. This is not merely a passive chairmanship but an active campaign to shape the network's trajectory in a manner that serves both regional needs and Indonesia's foreign policy objectives. This leadership assertion manifests through three interconnected diplomatic strategies: the projection of a unique, human-centric smart city model; deft management of great power interests to reinforce ASEAN Centrality; and the delivery of tangible regional public goods that translate leadership from rhetoric into reality.

First, Indonesia engaged in international branding and norm-setting by showcasing its pilot cities. The case of Sumedang, which successfully reduced stunting rates from 32.2% to 7.89% through a data-driven governance framework, is a powerful example (Mastete, 2024; Yunus, 2024). This was not merely a technical presentation but a diplomatic act that projected an alternative vision of a smart city—one where technology serves tangible human development goals—a narrative that resonates strongly within the developing world. This aligns with the function of city diplomacy in offering practical, ground-level solutions to pressing issues that citizens are passionate about (Hachigian, 2019; Marchetti, 2021). Furthermore, Indonesia appointed other pilot cities with different

development focuses, such as Makassar's advancements in public security infrastructure and Banyuwangi's focus on the circular economy (Kementerian Dalam Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2023).

Diverse pilot cities also represent diversity in ASEAN, allowing city governments to choose the most suitable pilot models based on existing conditions and characteristics. This is essential because every city has different circumstances in many aspects, such as funding, technical, cultural values, demographic, and geography. Rather than presenting a monolithic, top-down vision, Indonesia showcases a portfolio of diverse, context-specific solutions, effectively creating a "menu" of replicable models for the region.

By consistently presenting these successes in regional forums, Indonesia is not only sharing its best practices but also engaging in normative leadership in the region. It projects an alternative, more attainable smart city model that resonates deeply with the developmental realities of many ASEAN member states, offering a compelling counter-narrative to the capital-intensive models often promoted by Western and East Asian nations. This aligns perfectly with the function of smart city diplomacy, which leverages local innovation to shape international discourse and projects national competence.

Second, by driving the Investment Toolkit, Indonesia has played the role of a regional leader in providing essential public goods. This action moved beyond rhetoric and delivered a concrete tool that empowered all member states, thereby legitimizing Indonesia's leadership through tangible contributions rather than mere assertions. This act of "leading by example" is a cornerstone of middle power influence (Nanda, 2023). This approach could also be perceived as Indonesia leveraging its diverse smart city conditions to develop pilot cities as models for other ASEAN nations.

Fourth, Indonesia skillfully used its shepherdship to manage external partnerships and reinforce ASEAN Centrality. The Indo-Pacific is an arena of intensifying geopolitical competition, with the US, Japan, Australia, and the EU all promoting their own smart city partnership programs (Dharmaraj, 2025; UN Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), n.d.; U.S. Department of State, 2018). By hosting high-level meetings, such as the ASEAN-Japan Smart Cities Network Forum, and engaging with a wide array of partners under the ASCN umbrella (Amran et al., 2024; Mastete, 2024), Indonesia has positioned the ASCN as a central and indispensable platform for international engagement. This strategy effectively channels external partners' interests into a framework managed by and for ASEAN, mitigating the risk of fragmentation and demonstrating a deft application of its hedging strategy to maintain regional autonomy (Anwar, 2023; Choiruzzad, 2022; Juned & Sutiono, 2024). This diplomatic maneuvering solidifies Indonesia's role as the "cornerstone" of ASEAN, actively shaping its regional architecture (Heiduk, 2016).

Finally, Indonesia's leadership assertion is cemented by its focus on delivering tangible regional public goods, moving beyond the diplomatic niceties that can sometimes characterize ASEAN processes. The foremost example is the finalization and launch of the ASEAN Smart City Investment Toolkit (ASCT). The difficulty in structuring bankable projects and accessing finance was a critical region-wide bottleneck identified in preceding years. By championing the toolkit's development, Indonesia provided a concrete solution to a shared problem, which is a hallmark of effective regional leadership. This action, combined with the strategic vision to shift the network's focus towards "Industry and Innovation," provided a clear and necessary direction for the ASCN. Such leadership provides a crucial bridge to the future.

4. Conclusion

Indonesia's tenure as the ASEAN Smart Cities Network Shepherd from 2023 to 2025 represents a significant chapter in the network's evolution and serves as a compelling case study of effective leadership by a middle power. By strategically leveraging its dual role as Chair and Shepherd, Indonesia successfully navigated the ASCN from the conceptualization phase to the pragmatic implementation phase. This was not merely an administrative transition but a deliberate act of regional leadership that addressed the network's most pressing need: translating plans into bankable, actionable projects.

The delivery of the ASEAN Smart City Investment Toolkit stands as the principal legacy of this period, a tangible regional public good that enhances the capacity of all member states. Through the sophisticated use of smart city diplomacy—showcasing its diverse urban successes as replicable models and managing external partnerships to bolster ASEAN Centrality—Indonesia reinforced its credentials as a regional leader. This leadership was validated by endorsements from ASEAN’s leadership and active engagement with its peers. While challenges of technical capacity and digital inclusivity persist, Indonesia’s shepherding has undeniably provided the critical momentum and institutional tools necessary for the network’s long-term viability. It has laid a robust foundation upon which the forthcoming ASEAN Smart Cities Network Action Plan (2026–2035) can be built, ensuring that the aspiration for smarter and more sustainable urban futures in Southeast Asia is grounded in a proven capacity for collective action in the region.

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