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*Policy narratives and public policy*

**Title of the paper**

*Integration narratives and large-scale infrastructure development in  
the Greater Mekong Sub-Region*

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## Abstract

**Rationale:** Large-scale infrastructure development with transboundary components or implications typically requires the support of multiple elite actors to be successfully pursued. In the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), a grouping established with help of the Asian Development Bank, it has been common to appeal to policy narratives that emphasize the merits of integration to support such schemes. The mechanisms through which such transboundary policy narratives have influence are not well understood.

**Research questions:** (1) How and under what conditions do integration narratives influence public policy support for large-scale infrastructure development? (2) What are the consequences of such support for impacts on the ground?

**Study Design:** This a comparison of two case studies: transport infrastructure development in the East-West Economic Corridor and water resources development in the Mekong River basin. It uses a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analyses, to explore the story-like features of policy narratives, how they are used, and with what influence.

**Findings:** Regional integration is promoted through the use of stories with powerful imagery. In the ‘energy grid’ covering the GMS Lao PDR is the ‘battery’. The seasonally dry north-eastern region of Thailand is supplied water from the international Mekong River to provision a ‘water grid’. Flood and salinity control structures in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam secure the ‘rice bowl’. Interlinked highways are forming the ‘new silk road’.

The East-West Economic Corridor project – spanning over 1400km from the coast of Vietnam through Lao PDR and Thailand to the coast of Myanmar – has been propped up by a narrative in which ‘shared prosperity’ will come from improved transport infrastructure, together with policies that facilitate the free flow of trade, investment, tourists and labor across borders. The shared prosperity narrative helped maintain a coalition of support from governments in the region for a program that in many other respects (tourism, cargo, investment), failed to live up to promises made.<sup>1</sup>

In the Mekong River Basin arguments for hydropower development have made use of a ‘nexus’ narrative to argue that the interactions between water, food and energy can be synergetic and even optimized. Multi-purpose dams, it is argued, can both generate electricity and provide increased flow for irrigation diversion in drier times of the year. Other actors have used ‘nexus’ narratives to oppose hydropower development because of its impacts on fisheries and thus food security, and to critique expansion of bioenergy crops because of impacts on availability of land grown for food crops as well as high water demands. Despite the prevalence of nexus narratives in expert discourses they have so far had only very modest impacts on policy, plans or operations on the ground in the GMS.

**Conclusions:** The persuasive power of integration narratives lies in their ability to simplify and promise benefits. Integration narratives, because they are difficult to oppose in principle, are also useful for deflecting criticism of negative impacts of individual projects away from

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<sup>1</sup> The working paper which follow focuses on the shared prosperity case. This will be the primary focus of the presentation in this panel. The nexus narrative case is the subject of a separate presentation.

the policy as a whole. The problem is delivery: money is invested, infrastructure is built, but integration remains elusive.

## Introduction

Policy elites have repeatedly generated high expectations from regional economic integration programs in the developing regions of the world as a way to stimulate economic growth, alleviate poverty, and benefit from globalization (Farrell, 2009; Gibb, 2009; Martin-Mayoral et al., 2016). International organizations like The World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations Development Programme are prime sources of regional economic integration narratives with near global reach and clout (Escobar, 1992). In its 2009 World Development Report, the World Bank (2009) for example argues that ‘cities, migration, and trade have been the main catalysts of progress in the developed world over the past two centuries.’ In their narrative spatially uneven development is desirable and followed by welfare ‘convergence’; cultural, social and environmental impacts meanwhile are of little consequence (Rigg et al., 2009).

Within Southeast Asia, Japan has for several decades led the push for regional economic integration, now faces significant competition from China (Teh, 2011), especially given commitments made to the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative (Rolland, 2017). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has likewise promoted trade, foreign investment, standardization of border procedures, and other policy reforms using a storyline of regional integration and connectivity (ASEAN, 2015; Isono and Kumagai, 2016). Loans and overseas development assistance for transport infrastructure projects to improve connectivity have been a particularly popular theme of integration narratives.

Thus, in 1992 ADB helped establish the GMS group. Since 1998, with significant financial support from the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the partners have conceptualized and tried to develop a network of transport infrastructure projects and *economic corridors* which now enmesh the region (Oehlers, 2006; Taillard, 2014). The East-West Economic Corridor (EWEC) is one such example; stretching across four countries, and more than 1,450km long between the Andaman Sea and South China Sea (Fig. 1). Apart from upgrading and building transport infrastructure, the economic corridor also includes other projects; for instance, aimed at simplifying border procedures, cooperation on tourism, and establishing special economic zones in border areas (ADB, 2010). Such transboundary projects require huge financial resources to be built, and the support of many policy elites to be successful.

**Fig. 1 East-West Economic Corridor in mainland Southeast Asia.**



The purpose of this paper is to analyze how transboundary policy narratives have effected support for, and decisions around, the East-West Economic Corridor; in particular, on the policies and practices of the government of Thailand with respect to border areas. This involved four lines of inquiry.

First, was to identify the main transboundary policy narrative(s) present, who articulates them, and how they have changed over time. A policy narrative is a discursive strategy that uses the format of a story to take up a stance with regards to a policy. For this we adopted the structuring concepts of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) to identify problems, the moral of the story, plots, and characters (Jones and McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2011). Studies of contested policy issues within the US have shown that the elements of a narrative and how they are strategically used can influence beliefs, policy processes and outcomes (Shanahan et al., 2013). Less is known, however, about how policy narratives influence beliefs of policy elites or policy outcomes in developing countries with less democratic systems of government.

Second, was to examine how transboundary policy narratives have been used or modified by different actors; for instance, to justify, promote or leverage resources for EWEC projects. Transboundary narratives are applied to the policies and relationships of multiple countries and as a consequence narrative must do work across languages, political systems, cultures, histories, and values (Rigg et al., 1999). Here we paid special attention to what it is about a narrative that makes it persuasive or otherwise useful, introducing analysis of power where appropriate (Reed, 2013).

Third, was to evaluate the impacts of the transboundary narrative on the broad development discourses of Thai policy actors, as well as the specific policies and practices of the government of Thailand in border areas. Here we worked with the idea of policy models as ‘travelling rationalities’ maintained by networks of development professionals, but also susceptible to re-configuration and elaboration once transported into local power structures (Mosse, 2011). For example, by rendering barriers to access to livelihood resources – such as lack of skills or credit – in technical terms, projects could claim to address poverty without confronting the distributional issues that led to barriers in the first place (Li, 2007). By emphasizing benefits and desirable futures, narratives help deflect scrutiny and criticism

regarding potential adverse social and environmental impacts (Käkönen et al., 2014; Molle, 2008).

Finally, we explored how the material consequences such as construction of roads or bridges or agreements on trade, in turn, influenced further elaboration of the narrative. In this analysis we drew on previous work on relationships between discursive and material practices (Escobar, 1992).

## **Methods**

### ***Documents and videos***

Online searches using Google, YouTube, and Factiva for references to EWEC or ‘East-West Economic Corridor’ or ‘East-West Transport Corridor’ were done in English and Thai. Archives of key newspapers in the region were also searched. Searches were also done for selected projects such as specific special economic zones, bridges, ports, and roads. A document text or video was considered a policy narrative item if it included narrative elements (problem, solution, promise, impact, heroes, villains, victims, plot) and adopted a position or stance on the EWEC program. Narrative items could support the EWEC program and contribute to the elaboration of the dominant narrative, or they might critique specific projects and claims of the dominant narrative. Based on the titles and headlines, 953 candidate items were identified and then imported into NVIVO. After elimination of duplicates and documents that had no meaningful information (i.e. documents with no narrative elements to code) this was reduced to 654 items used in the analysis. These were distributed across formats as follows: newspaper articles (69%), reports (13%), videos (5%), journal articles (5%), press statements (4%), chapters/books (3%), and others (1%).

### ***Interviews***

In-depth interviews with 10 key informants were carried out after a first round of document analysis to fill in gaps in knowledge and to gain a deeper understanding of the influence and elaboration of the transboundary policy narrative. Interviewees included: government officials, NGO employees, current and former employees from relevant development agencies, consultants, and, both Thai and foreign academics. Questions revolved around the significance of the EWEC program, benefits and effects, and influences of the EWEC idea on Thai government policies.

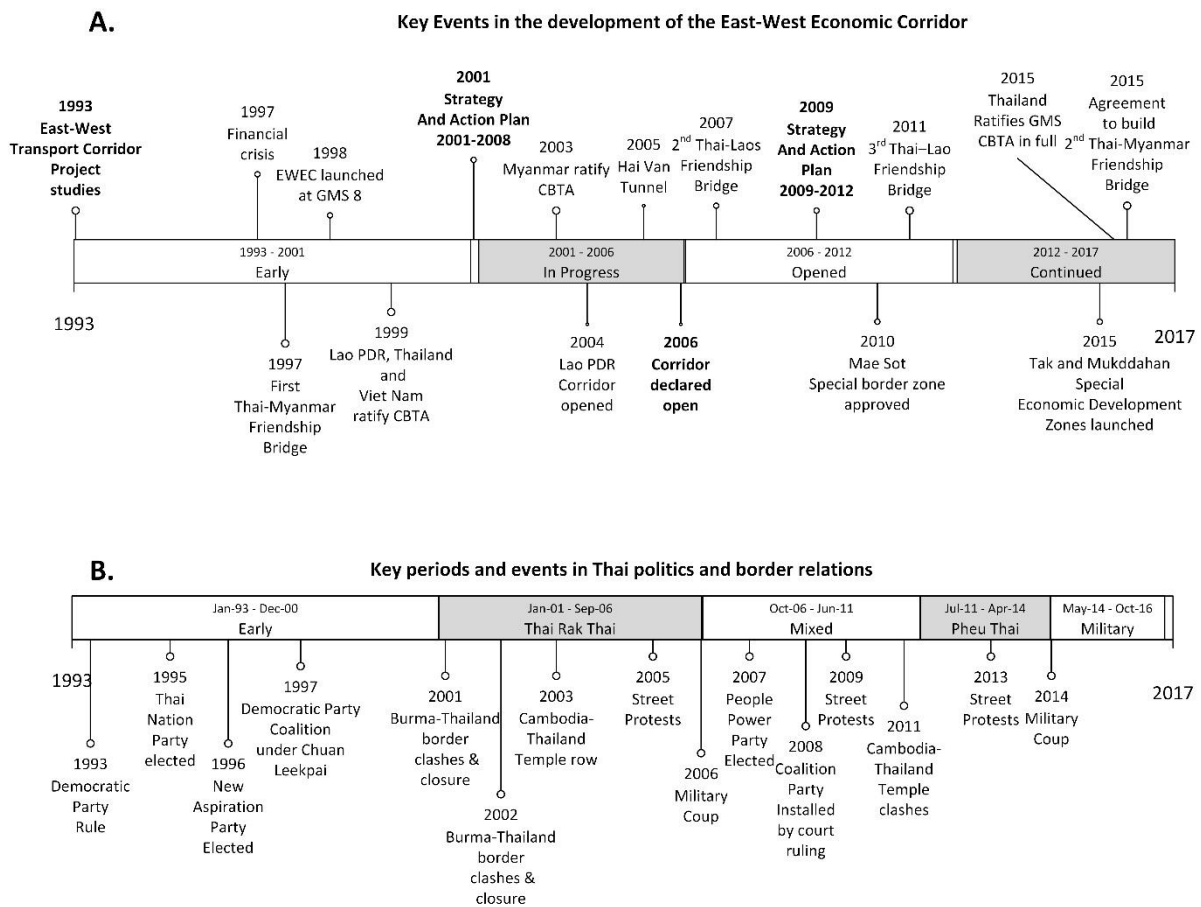
### ***Content analysis***

Our approach combined qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis. Narrative items were coded using NVIVO software according to facilitate cross-classification, extraction of illustrative quotes, and the derivation of statistics. We coded the presence of the following narrative elements: problems or barriers that need to be overcome; solutions as the moral of a story; promises about the benefits if the solution is adhered to; and references to character roles such as heroes, victims or villains. We also noted specific sequences of the above as alternative plots.

Additional attributes or codes were used to classify sources of narrative items, who was speaking and in what context. For example, to investigate changes in policy narratives we divided the timeline into 4 periods based on 3 milestones: release of the strategy and action plan; formal opening of the corridor; and the promised end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> action plan (Fig. 2A). In some analyses we also considered the timeline of major political events in Thailand (Fig. 2B).

To explore the influence of transboundary narratives on decisions or changes in Thai government policy, we focused on the following four areas: investments in transport infrastructure; agreements on cross-border logistics and trade; policy support for special economic zones; and tourism cooperation. These were chosen because they were among the more financially important parts of the EWEC program, and because they represented a diverse mix of physical, financial, institutional and promotional policies.

**Fig. 2 Timeline of key events in the development of the East-West Economic Corridor and key periods and events in (A) Thai politics and (B) border relations. GMS is the Greater Mekong Sub-Regions and CBTA is Cross-Border Trade Agreement.**



### Transboundary policy narratives

In December 1993 the Governments of Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam, gave their support for a priority project known then as the ‘East-West Transport Corridor’ for ports, roads and bridges to link the three countries together. The project was ‘*expected to enhance the flow of goods and services between the three countries and between the latter and markets overseas*’ (ADB, 1994). Thus acting as a sort of prequel to the EWEC storyline; though one without Myanmar and a broader development logic in place. It wasn’t until 1998 that EWEC, with its emphasis on regional economic cooperation and transport connectivity, was formally announced at the 8th GMS Ministerial Meeting (Fig. 2). Reflecting on that agreement, a

former-ADB official involved in the project from the beginning said: *‘The East-West Economic Corridor is probably the single most significant historical thing to hit mainland Southeast Asia since Burma and Indochina were taken over by the colonialists in the late 19th century.’*<sup>1</sup>

### **Storylines**

The dominant transboundary policy narrative around EWEC for the last two decades since its inception has been based on a storyline in which improving transport infrastructure, together with policies that facilitate the free flow of trade, investment, tourists and labor across borders which when combined, will reduce poverty and bring about *shared prosperity* to the region. The return to peace after war and conflict is the historic opportunity the main characters are encouraged to grasp. Economic corridors for this purpose, are portrayed as the ‘backbone’ or ‘arteries’ for regional connectivity, economic integration and development. Border rivers are crossed on ‘friendship’ bridges. At a meeting in 2001, reaffirming commitments to complete the eastern section of the corridor, senior officials from three countries explained the purpose as *‘enhancing the synergy and complementarities for the shared prosperity of the Sub-region and its peoples.’*<sup>2</sup> The specific phrase ‘shared prosperity’ has been applied not only to the EWEC, but also more broadly in vision statements for east Asia at large.<sup>3</sup> The vice-president of ADB explained to the press that *‘the GMS corridors not only have the potential to serve as models for other regional cooperation initiatives elsewhere; they are also already emerging as building blocks of regional connectivity and integration in Southeast Asia’* (ADB, 2011).

In the following sections we look in more detail at the elements of the transboundary policy narratives.

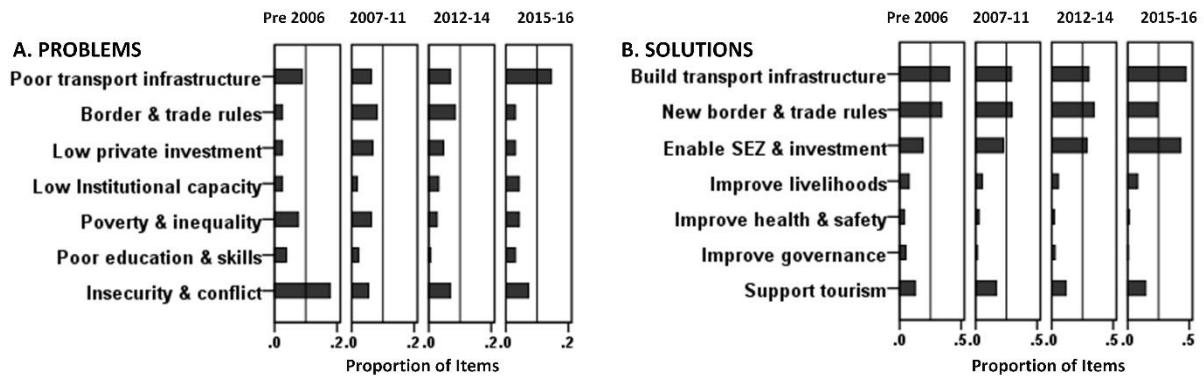
### **Problems and solutions**

Problems of insecurity and poverty were most prominent in the earliest period, whereas references to poor infrastructure were most frequent in the latest period (Fig. 3A). This latter pattern is noteworthy given a decade of investments in infrastructure and claims about the corridor being open and the transport infrastructure largely completed. *‘With good roads and other physical infrastructure largely in place, today’s commitment bodes well for the region’s continued economic development,’* said ADB Vice-President Lawrence Greenwood; *‘Now Mekong nations need to double their efforts to streamline cross-border transactions and transportation costs, to ensure trade between Mekong nations can flourish.’*<sup>4</sup> References to other problems had more complex or unclear patterns over time.

*Shared prosperity* narratives talk more about solutions than problems (Fig. 3). This may help explain their popularity. Most solution references were related to infrastructure or business activities, whereas there were relatively few references to interventions that would directly address poverty or support institutional development (Fig. 3B). Solutions that referred to enhancing private investment and business activities – for instance, establishing special economic zones – have grown more prominent over time. Poverty is addressed indirectly: *‘the proposed Vision for the EWEC is to transform it into a full-fledged economic corridor that will provide pro-poor economic growth and development and bring widespread prosperity to the EWEC area’* (ADB, 2010).

*Shared prosperity* policy narratives linked problems, solutions and promises. Thus, after arguing that access to markets was poor, the solutions proposed were to upgrade roads and build bridges, and promise shorter travel times and lower travelling costs. Complex border procedures that hinder business logistics were to be improved through supporting the negotiation of agreements.

**Fig. 3 Proportion of narrative items in which different classes of problems (A) and solutions (B) were referred to in four time periods.**



### Characters

*Shared prosperity* narratives were much more likely to refer to hero characters (37%) than villains (6%) or victims (6%). This is consistent with the focus on solutions as noted above, and may help explain why the *shared prosperity* narrative has helped build and maintain a coalition of supporters. International organization heroes were very important in the earliest period (Fig. 4A), with most mentions being ADB or the GMS group. References to EWEC country governments in hero roles were higher in later periods than early ones; whereas the opposite was true with regards to villain roles (Fig. 4B).

In many *shared prosperity* narratives, ADB, GMS, and Japan act together as the initial heroes who come to the aid of the region by building roads and removing barriers to trade. Indeed, ADB has often referred itself as the ‘*honest broker*’.<sup>5</sup> JBIC provided around 80% of the 900 million USD financing for transport infrastructure in EWEC. In contrast, ADB provided around 10%, and mostly in the form of technical support and coordination (ADB, 2010). The commitments to leverage or directly provide financial support is undoubtedly another reason why the *shared prosperity* narrative – and by extension, the EWEC project – have been supported by governments in the region. By ‘providing’ finance – political rhetoric for ‘loaning’ money – Japan is seen as a hero; albeit, one with some self-interests in that it simultaneously ‘*promotes investments by Japanese firms in the region*’.<sup>6</sup> Critical characterizations of Japan in narratives declined with time (Fig. 4B).

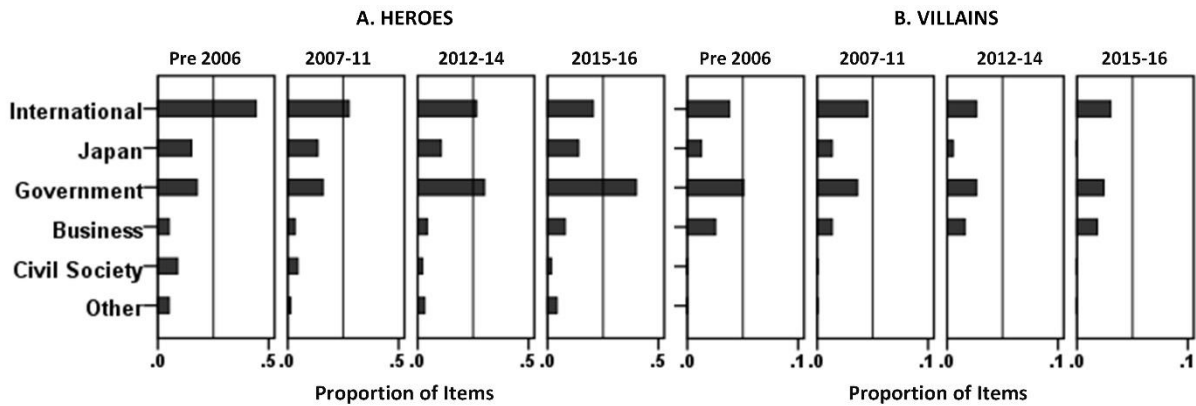
The hero characters when discussing cooperation on tourism, tended to include both governments and businesses: ‘*for the transformation into an economic corridor to occur... the private sector must become the engine of growth for the corridor*’ (ADB, 2010). In the case of special economic zones and other forms of support to business, national and sub-national governments were typically portrayed as heroes. An ADB consultant observed ‘*you see a lot more private sector coming in. But my problem is, with the private sector, you always have vested interests. They’re mostly doing it for themselves, which means that those that are in the various groups may not really be helping the industry as a whole.*’

With regards to road works in Myanmar, ADB and the government of Myanmar were portrayed as villains, whereas with respect to special economic zones on the borders, the government of Thailand was the main target of criticism. The poor and ethnic minorities were often identified as victims. Statements about risks or concerns around the EWEC program were relatively uncommon and were distributed over many categories. Those expressed in 1-2.5% of items included: human rights abuses; lack of information or participation; increased



spread of disease; problems related to increased migration; higher land prices or land appropriation; forest degradation and wildlife impacts; insufficient benefits to the poor; and other routes more suitable. Poverty traps, in short, received little attention.

**Fig. 4 Proportion of narrative items in which different types of hero (A) and villain (B) characters were referred to in four time periods. Note five-fold difference in scales.**



## Narrative use and consequences

The power to generate narratives around the EWEC project clearly lies with ADB and JICA, as they could commission studies using expert knowledge and models unavailable to other actors. Moreover, they could also turn these feasibility studies and technical assistance projects into finance for large-scale infrastructure development. In its first phase (2001-2008) about 0.9 billion USD was provided for infrastructure (ADB, 2010). The action plan for 2008-2012 anticipated a need for a further 1.5 billion USD in finances.

In the following four sections we look at the evidence for shared prosperity narratives in Thai political discourse, as well as changes in policy and impacts on the ground in four policy areas: financing transport infrastructure; cross-border trade and logistics; special economic zones; and tourism cooperation.

### *Financing transport infrastructure*

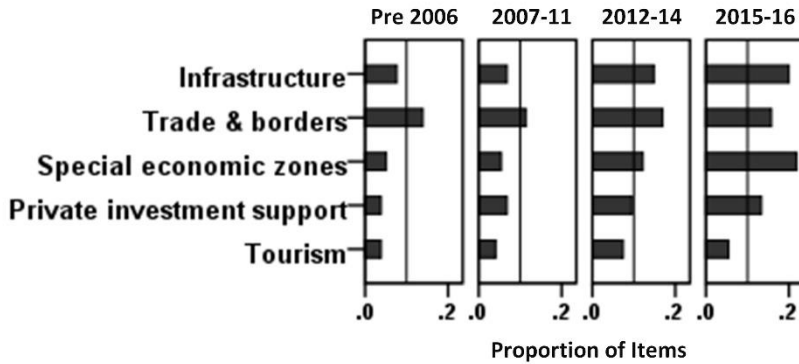
Cross-references by the Thai government to EWEC's and elements of the *shared prosperity* policy narratives have become relatively more frequent over time, and across most policy categories (Fig. 5). Seemingly, '*there has been no let down in Thai interests in the EWEC by the successive governments of Thailand,*'<sup>1</sup> despite Thailand's turbulent political history during the last decade (Fig. 2B). The emphasis and patterns of change for Thai government responses (Fig. 5) are similar to those espoused in policy narrative items as solutions (Fig. 3B).

There were a few important differences in the details between the narratives of the international organizations and the discourse of policy actors within Thailand, with respect to public investment in transport infrastructure in border areas and in neighboring countries.

First, Thai policy actors focused on the benefits for Thai business, particularly in terms of improved logistics, trade, tourism and investment opportunities; whereas international narratives, while also referring to these, paid relatively more attention to poverty alleviation and employment opportunities.<sup>7</sup> Second, Thai policy actors reasoned that their support of EWEC demonstrated regional leadership. The international narratives, in contrast, were framed in collaborative and equitable terms, careful not to inflame rivalries within the region;

if heroes were needed in the story they were Japan (an external player) or the GMS (all of us). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was nevertheless careful in explaining the country’s role in regional initiatives: ‘*Thailand is of the view that shared prosperity can only be sustained when each partner can participate fully and plays its significant role in regional integration.*’<sup>8</sup>

**Fig. 5 Proportion of items that refer to initiatives, decisions and other policy responses by Thai government related to development of the East-West Economic Corridor.**



The engagement did not stop at rhetoric. Direct references to the transboundary policy narrative were backed by financial assistance to build bridges and roads in neighboring country territories. As early as 2007, the Thai government agreed to provide soft loans and grants to upgrade the road from Myawaddy through Mawlamyine in Myanmar. An early critique of road projects in Myanmar was that, ‘*while the military regime remains in power it is impossible to implement development projects in Burma without widespread earth rights abuses also occurring.*’<sup>9</sup> Since 1986 ADB had not provided direct loans to the Myanmar government out of human rights concerns; instead, ADB supported participation of government officials in meetings through technical assistance grants.<sup>10</sup>

In 2012, Prime Minister Yingluck allocated 77 million USD to support infrastructure and provide technical support to its neighboring countries; she further proposed to work closely with Japan in developing the EWEC into an economic corridor, including links to the Dawei sea port, which was not yet part of the corridor, and establishing industrial zones. Speaking of the Dawei sea port, one ADB consultant credited it as a good PR exercise, but dismissed the notion that the government could realistically move forward, invoking monetary limitations as a reason for this opinion.<sup>11</sup> In 2015, the Thai Government agreed to provide 3.9 billion THB to build the 2<sup>nd</sup> Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge, road construction and border checkpoints between Mae Sot and Myawaddy. According to the Thai Department of Public Relations, the project will stimulate trade, investment, labor mobility, and tourism along the border, reproducing the key elements of the *shared prosperity* narrative.

It should be underlined that in terms of improving physical infrastructure within Thailand, ‘*there has been no major benefit from the East-West Economic Corridor...[because] we already have a good road network.*’<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Thai policy actors have sometimes used the *shared prosperity* story around EWEC transport infrastructure to address domestic issues. For instance, after the devastating floods of 2012, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) released a ‘reconstruction and future development strategy’ which argued that ‘*the government will need to hastily push forward the development of land*

transport including road and rail networks to connect the nation with the main border economic zones along the East-West Economic Corridor...<sup>12</sup> The Government of Thailand also pushed for inclusion of routes No.8 and No.12 in Lao PDR into EWEC program, and the GMS CTBA at a meeting in 2013.<sup>13</sup>

Thailand and Japan have often worked directly together, both drawing on the EWEC policy narratives to rationalize their support for investments in infrastructure near and across borders. One of the reasons for the collaboration is that the transport routes would help reduce regional shipping costs for Thai and Japanese firms (Chachavalpongpan, 2011). At the same time, as it has cooperated with Japan on EWEC, Thailand collaborated with China to develop the North-South Economic Corridor (Masviriyakul, 2004). Based on its own financial contributions, it also lobbied ADB to finance related road upgrades in Myanmar and Lao PDR. An ADB official summarized it thusly: *‘Thai government has consistently played a proactive role: enthusiastic supporter for the corridor concept when it first came out; steady investment in the parts of the corridor which go through Thailand; assistance to Lao PDR and Myanmar for completion and development of the corridor.’*<sup>1</sup>

### ***Cross-border transport, logistics and trade agreements***

International organizations realized early that economic corridors were not just about infrastructure. *‘Building international-standard roads was an important start, but not enough by itself,’* said an ADB official; *‘Governments also had to slash the bureaucratic red tape that restricted the cross-border flow of goods and people.’*<sup>14</sup>

In broad policy statements, the National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB), which represents the Thai government in EWEC negotiations and plays a key role in GMS matters, has emphasized the importance of developing logistics nationally as a way to improve transport systems regionally.<sup>15</sup> This is in line with the ADB narrative: *‘in an advanced regional cooperation program like GMS, very often regional is national and national is regional.’*<sup>16</sup> In an interesting move, the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is typically concerned only with ASEAN matters, highlighted in its 2013 annual report, the government’s *‘efforts to address cross-border transportations difficulties on this vital corridor, including repairing damaged roads and improving and streamlining cross-border process such as document inspection and other logistical procedures.’*<sup>17</sup> Different parts of the bureaucracy, it should be underlined, typically engage with different international initiatives. Hence, it is significant when they align.

Thai governments have supported the EWEC program so that Thai firms can gain access to cheap labor, resources, and consumer markets in neighboring countries. The *shared prosperity* narratives have been a useful tool to this end, as it promises positive outcomes for both big business and residents. For big business, improved border procedures would save time and money associated with easier transport of goods. For those living on the border, there are the promises of improved access to markets and social services, enhanced livelihoods and stronger local economies. Thus, an ADB official noted that EWEC *‘has effected Thai policies since the corridor plays a key role in interacting with the booming economies of Myanmar, Lao PDR, and Vietnam; border town strategy; and movement of uncompetitive Thai industry to neighboring countries with lower labor costs.’*<sup>1</sup>

The strong emphasis on cooperation and mutual benefits in speeches by Thai officials regarding trade and border procedures fits closely with transboundary policy narratives; however in practice, negotiations have often been slow and difficult. The initial Cross Border Trade Agreement (CBTA), for instance, came out in 2003, but it took several more years of negotiation before all annexes and protocols were agreed to and finally ratified, with Thailand

being the last to do so in 2015. The agreement is comprehensive, covering movement of people and goods, border and custom procedures, as well as rights for road vehicles to be driven in other countries. In the end, after a lot of effort, the agreement on logistics only allowed each country a quota of originally 400 then 500 trucks to travel in and out of any one country along the corridor, which Thailand initially had a lot of difficulties allocating anyway. Logistic experts observe that EWEC is not the preferred route due to its high operating costs, poor road conditions, and risk of accidents. Moreover, it does not include major centers of production or key ports in the region, like Laem Chabang for example.<sup>11</sup> At a 2012 joint Thai-Vietnam cabinet meeting both governments acknowledged that land transport use of Route No.9 was less than expected.<sup>18</sup>

While it is true that domestic political turmoil in Thailand has disrupted policy-making in many areas including international relations, the complexity and declining relevance of CBTA is generally thought to be due to other factors. According to one logistics engineer, *‘the CBTA is not the way to move forward. The problem of the CBTA is that it’s like a Frankenstein agreement. It takes from various conventions, it takes from UN conventions, it’s a cocktail.’*<sup>11</sup> Perhaps a simpler reason for this lack of CBTA enthusiasm, according to an ADB representative, is because there are just too many other transport agreements in the region aimed at opening markets.<sup>19</sup> Either way, complex border procedures and constraints on trucks driving across borders, for instance, persisted long after physical infrastructure was built and upgraded.

While the transboundary policy narrative was important for getting roads and bridges built, it did not immediately yield the level of improvements in logistics or trade that was promised. Institutional changes in Thailand seem to have been harder to influence through transboundary policy narratives than leveraging financing for infrastructure.

### ***Special economic zones***

The establishment of special economic zones (SEZs) is one form of pro-business policy intended to facilitate private investment. In the shared prosperity narrative, SEZs are seen as a *‘complementary initiative’* to economic corridors which *‘generate new jobs and strengthen linkages with regional and international production networks.’*<sup>20</sup> ADB and Japan have provided technical support for the establishment of SEZs along EWEC.<sup>19</sup> Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra in a 2011 statement, put emphasis on using regional connectivity to develop provinces on borders and along corridors: *‘Utilize regional connectivity within the ASEAN region and sub-regions in order to expand the economic base in terms of production and investment, prioritizing the development of provinces and groups of provinces situated along the economic corridors and border areas.’*<sup>21</sup> This policy position is consistent with earlier national policies and plans to develop border towns as *‘trade points’* and then *‘economic gateways’* (Laine, 2014).

Authorities in Mukdahan and Mae Sot believe SEZs *‘will serve as gateways’* to the corridor, with the Thai Chamber of Commerce predicting that SEZs *‘would boost Thailand’s border trade by at least 20% a year.’*<sup>22</sup> In this spirit, Mae Sot and Myawaddy had talks to become sister cities and *‘plan to designate the border areas as trading cities in accordance with the future formation of the East-West Economic Corridor.’*<sup>23</sup> In 2014, the National Council for Peace and Order invoked Article 44 of the 2014 interim constitution to exercise special power to acquire land for the SEZs at both ends of the EWEC in Thailand. Naturally, not all local residents in Mae Sot were on board with this scheme; however, those that opposed the land acquisition were not allowed to assemble or protest when the military Prime Minister visited the area.<sup>24</sup> A government spokesman, commenting on the Mae Sot SEZ, simply noted that *‘the government might need to revoke the protected forest status of some areas to allow*

*development to go ahead.*<sup>25</sup> The side-stepping of normal procedures by the government has been criticized by NGOs fiercely, because it ‘*not only fast-tracks such projects, but also denies the people their right to manage natural resources.*’<sup>26</sup> Ten years earlier, a similar bill proposed by the Thaksin government also met resistance over concerns it would give too much power to zone administrators.<sup>27</sup> Migrant workers also expressed concerns about land acquisitions and livelihood security.<sup>28</sup>

References to special economic zones, especially in border areas, appear to be relatively more commonly mentioned in Thai discourse than that of international organizations promoting the EWEC.<sup>29</sup> In some ways, this may reflect the historical policy interest of the national government in being seen to develop regional hubs and impoverished borderland areas of the country distant from Bangkok for political security of policy elites in the capital (Glassman and Sneddon, 2003).

In a reference to zones in Vietnam and Lao PDR, NESDB Secretary General said ‘*Thais should think about investing in the zones, which offer attractive investment incentives, tax privileges and one-stop services,*’<sup>30</sup> underlining the interest of Thai policy elites in SEZs both sides of the national border. One contributing factor for recent high interest in across the border SEZs may be because after the Thai government raised the minimum wage substantially in 2013, this became an incentive for Thai and other firms to invest in neighboring countries. To counter this however, the Board of Investment of Thailand (BOI) promised incentives for companies that established themselves in SEZs.<sup>31</sup> The Thai government has already delivered some of these promises, providing basic infrastructure and making it easier for migrant workers to cross the border for daily work.

The consequences of investments by various parties on the ground in Lao PDR have been significant. To the relief of many stakeholders, Savannakhet’s integration into EWEC – in particular, following the completion of the bridge – seems to have paid off. Trade has increased, international companies have established factories, border crossings have risen, and tourists streaming in and out has doubled. Poverty has also decreased, and is expected to continue to do so (Laine, 2014).

Although some concerns about risks from polluting industries in SEZs have been raised by some NGOs, they have not had much impact on Thai government policy support for SEZs. A more significant criticism has been the recognition that the best locations for production in the growing international network of potential sites will often not be in these border areas. This realization does not yet appear to be explicitly acknowledged in Thai policy narratives or policy decisions, though it has long been understood by big business and logistics firms.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Cooperation on tourism***

Tourism has from the start been a significant component of the *shared prosperity* narrative trinity: trade, tourism, and investment. Cooperation was intended to lead tourists – such as the ‘Three Countries, One Destination’ campaign – to visit several places in different countries on the one trip, as is often done in travels across Europe.<sup>32</sup> Arjun Thapan, the Director General of ADB’s Southeast Asia Department said: ‘*Because of the progress these countries have made, trade and tourism will prosper further. You can now set out from Thailand, do business in Laos, and arrive in time for dinner in Da Nang in Vietnam, all in a single day.*’<sup>33</sup> Be that as it may, policy changes that would make multi-country tourism simpler have proven difficult to negotiate. To this end, simplifying entry-exit procedures and issuing a single visa have been regularly discussed in political dialogues, and if implemented, would be expected to cut travelling time considerably.<sup>34</sup> As of early 2016 however, the ASEAN single visa pact had not yet been implemented.

Promises made about the benefits of such cooperation on tourism along EWEC in regional policy narratives are often high. Thus, in 2007, as the road upgrades in EWEC neared completion, the industry at large was encouraged to prepare for an influx of tourists travelling through the region via the corridor.<sup>35</sup> Tourism officials urged local authorities to upgrade tourism sites along the route. A tourist center opened in the Mae Sot – the ‘gateway’ to EWEC – aimed to ‘*create jobs and employment, spread wealth, encourage production, change the local economic landscape, raise local livelihood standards, improve social development, promote the preservation of culture and environment, and reduces migration.*’<sup>36</sup> Analysis of spatial information suggest that along most of the routes within Thailand, tourism probably provides more opportunities than trade or investment (Panbamrungkij, 2012).

Given the high importance of tourism in the Thai economy, it is not surprising that the Thai government and private sector follow closely (and exploit) opportunities related to EWEC. The Tourism Authority of Thailand, for instance, regularly cross-references EWEC – and other regional integration initiatives – in its campaigns to promote tourism in Northeast Thailand.<sup>37</sup> Levels of tourism in Mukdahan, however, remain low and almost entirely from domestic sources; across the border in Savannakhet, international tourists, in particular from Thailand, are more common (Laine, 2014).

Nonetheless, despite heavy promotion, the number of tourists passing through EWEC remains modest.<sup>38</sup> Thai tourism policies and practices appear to have been only very modestly influenced by the *shared prosperity* narrative. Countries still seem to be competing with each other as much as cooperating. For the Thai tourist industry, EWEC is not a high priority. Thus, a salient question to ask is whether or not the promotion of cooperation has been worth it.

## Discussion

The story of a connected and prosperous Mekong Region crisscrossed by economic corridors was created by Japanese aid experts, scripted by ADB, and the roles acted out by government and big business. The theme of roads bringing investment, trade and wealth to remote places is of course older and a cornerstone of the lexicon of the World Bank (e.g. Black, 1952). In the Mekong Region, transport infrastructure was the initial priority, and created opportunities from the start for Japanese banks, construction firms, and later for the industry at large. Japan and ADB are close; it is the main donor and has provided all of ADB’s presidents (Kilby, 2006). Meanwhile, ADB as the self-claimed ‘honest broker’, steered the ministers of the GMS towards agreements on cross-border transport, foreign direct investment, trade and tourism (Fig. 2). The transboundary policy narrative of *shared prosperity* was reiterated in technical assistance programs and numerous meetings, and then endlessly reproduced by a business-oriented media.

The power of narratives, like those promising *shared prosperity*, lies in the way they simplify complex realities (Robertson and Colic-Peisker, 2015); making it appear like there are no victims, burdens or risks. It is not easy to be against ‘better roads’. A storyline promising *shared prosperity* is hard to argue against in terms of vision; the issue of course lies in actual distribution of benefits and burdens, and whether or not the costs are justified. The *shared prosperity* narrative examined here was successful, in part, because it focused on positive messages – solutions, promises, and heroes. The international coalition behind EWEC made an ‘angel shift’ (Shanahan et al., 2013) in promoting the corridor: calling the GMS and themselves heroes while being careful not to criticize governments as villains or blame the

victims. A certain level of ambiguity with respect to how *economic corridors* were supposed to come about was also useful for building a supporting coalition, because there was not much common understanding or agreement on this key point. It also made it hard to criticize as it is easy to be accused of not seeing ‘the bigger picture’. A lack of clear targets and indicators for evaluation also made it difficult to criticize program performance.

This elaboration of the transboundary policy narrative helped maintain a coalition of support from governments in the region for a program that in many respects, failed to live up to its promises – a phenomenon Johns (2015) calls ‘failing forward’. Transboundary policy narratives like *shared prosperity* remain coherent as they cross national boundaries because they are a part of ‘travelling rationalities’ (Mosse, 2011); whereby in the case of EWEC, this is a professional network of logistics and road construction experts who work as consultants and advisers for ADB, Japanese and various GMS Governments. Such narratives also propagate shared norms and core beliefs, for example, regarding the roles of trade and investment in economic development, standardization as illustrated by border agreements, and role of governments, firms and international organizations in governance. And although the *shared prosperity* narrative is two decades old now, periodical diplomatic visits and name-dropping the acronym into interviews by politicians has helped sustain its relevance throughout the years.

Transboundary policy narratives supporting EWEC were important to maintaining wide support for key border and international relations decisions within the government of Thailand; for example, related to financing roads in other countries, establishing SEZs, cooperation on tourism, and the negotiation of cross-border transport agreements. At the same time, discourses of Thai policy actors did not always place the same emphasis as that of ADB or Japan; nor did they always translate into significant actions. Negotiating agreements and adjusting domestic regulations related to border logistics, for example, were slow. The influence of the *shared prosperity* narrative on the ground, in these latter areas, were harder to trace.

In Lao PDR or Myanmar, the support by policy elites for EWEC can be explained by money. On the other hand, in the case of Thailand, there has been little direct monetary benefits; thus, reasons for accepting the transboundary policy narratives for EWEC must be more indirect. Subnational authorities, for example, drew on policy narratives around EWEC to elevate the significance of otherwise modest transport or city development projects. National authorities found the scaling-up of issues to regional scale using the *shared prosperity* narrative as a way to claim a leadership role in regional economic development (Bunyavejchewin and Thepsida, 2015; Busbarat, 2012). As a set of initiatives, the GMS corridor programs and cooperation were also seen as useful for the economic development of Thailand, and if engaged with strategically, could stimulate valuable competition for influence with other regional initiatives such as AEC or bilateral ones with China.

Narratives and infrastructure are in a dialectical relationship. This study shows that policy narratives may influence the decisions which lead to roads, bridges, and border posts being financed and built. Policy narratives have material effects. But there is also a causal mechanism that flows in the opposite direction: once built, these border crossing roads and friendship bridges become material evidence of the truth (efficacy) of the story that drove their construction, reinforcing the persuasive power of the *shared prosperity* narrative. Material artefacts have narrative effects. Moreover, the accumulation of material infrastructure assets may also influence power relations, if for no other reason than that their presence creates demand for further links and maintenance, implying future budget

allocations. The benefits of projects from the perspective of certain officials may be leverage and associated power over how money is spent.

While this study focused on transport infrastructure, we believe our key findings related to coalitions, criticism, and leadership roles are relevant to examining large-scale water, energy and telecommunication infrastructure projects in the Mekong and other regions where economic integration is promoted or pursued. In market-led regional development, the individual states give up some of their power to the private sector and banks. National security is downplayed as international cooperation turns ‘battlefields into marketplaces’ and borders grow more porous. Transboundary agreements are reached by representatives of states not local residents or farmers whom reap the consequences. As private actors take on larger and larger roles, it is less clear where accountability lies. *Shared prosperity*, poverty reduction, and economic growth are fine objectives in theory; but what guides or policies ensure fair distribution of benefits, burdens and risks?

This issue is particularly significant where an agenda of regional economic integration is pursued by countries with political histories dominated by centrally planned, single party or military governments; including histories of poor transparency and human rights abuses. In the Mekong, as in Southern Africa (Gibb, 2009), elite interests have defined how states engage in international negotiations, but also individual political or business interests. Transnational civil society has a crucial role in identifying these narrow interests in transboundary situations, given that local NGOs may not have good access to information or be able to freely articulate concerns (Middleton et al., 2015).

The present study is one of the first applications of the policy narrative framework to a transboundary policy issue. The analysis of the structure and content of policy narratives, including references to characters and typical plots, was shown to be useful for understanding the tactics of key policy actors. Systematic coding of the content of publically available documents allowed the significance of patterns in narratives to be explored; such as how plots were elaborated and scope expanded to allow new types of development projects and partners be included. Interviews with experts and policy actors helped better understand the influence of narratives on decisions and coalition formation. The methods adopted in this study also had important limitations. First, counts of text and film items were treated all equally; which is a gross simplification when considering that these ranged from key reports by funders or statements by political leaders, through to short mentions on the business page of a newspaper. Second, attributing national policy decisions or changes to the influence of a transboundary policy narrative because there is evidence of cross-references to it, requires making the assumption that those actions were not going to take place anyway or may have been driven by another factor that varies with the narrative – like the promise of loans.

Large-scale infrastructure which cuts across multiple borders is not easy to coordinate as it requires support from multiple policy actors. In these situations, transboundary policy narratives can play an important role by increasing the apparent significance of individual projects, when they are included as part of a grander vision of *shared prosperity*. This narrative successfully built a coalition of elite actors in several countries that could articulate one coherent story – albeit, one to be continued.

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