



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38035/dijemss.v6i6>
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Strengthening ASEAN Centrality in the Indo-Pacific Economic Integration Through RCEP

Safitriyani¹

¹Universitas Indonesia, Depok, Indonesia, safitri.tholib@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: safitri.tholib@gmail.com¹

Abstract: This article examines ASEAN's role in strengthening its centrality in Indo-Pacific economic integration through leadership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Amid intensifying geopolitical competition and shifting material power in the region, ASEAN seeks to maintain its central role as a regional architect through the principle of "ASEAN Centrality." The study explores ASEAN's functions as a regional leader, convener, driver, hub, and platform in the negotiation and formation of RCEP, the world's largest free trade agreement by GDP and population. Employing a qualitative method with a deductive approach, the article applies the analytical framework developed by See Seng Tan (2017) to evaluate ASEAN's five core roles within regional architecture. Findings reveal ASEAN's effectiveness in initiating and steering multilateral economic integration, thereby enhancing its institutional relevance and its capacity to align diverse interests of major and middle powers in the region. The study underscores ASEAN's leadership in fostering inclusive regional cooperation while safeguarding non-interference and consensus-building principles.

Keyword: ASEAN Centrality, RCEP, Indo-Pacific, Economic Integration, Regionalism

INTRODUCTION

The study of conflict and cooperation constitutes a central debate in International Relations, particularly within its diverse theoretical traditions. Realists argue for the primacy of conflict, distrust, and power competition in international politics, limiting the influence of international institutions on peace and stability (Donnelly, 2006). In contrast, neoliberal institutionalists emphasize the likelihood and extent of international cooperation, attributing this to the role of international institutions in fostering collaboration for shared interests and reducing conflict potential (Harvey, 2005).

The Indo-Pacific, spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans, is a dynamic and vital area for ASEAN. It encompasses economic, political-security, socio-cultural, and environmental dimensions. Economically, its large population and rapid growth offer ASEAN significant opportunities for trade, investment, and economic partnership. However, the rise of material power necessitates efforts to avoid deepening mistrust and zero-sum dynamics (ASEAN, 2021). Therefore, ASEAN has an interest in leading and centralizing its role in the regional architecture.

Within this context, ASEAN has articulated a vision to safeguard and strengthen its role through the principle of ASEAN Centrality. Article 1.15 of the ASEAN Charter identifies the maintenance of ASEAN Centrality as a core objective. The Charter states:

“To maintain the centrality and proactive ASEAN as the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent, and inclusive.”

ASEAN Centrality holds a broad significance and is accorded equal recognition by all ASEAN member states. This centrality is predicated on the premise that ASEAN should serve as the primary regional platform for addressing shared challenges (Sunchindah, 2018). This concept is particularly pertinent in the context of relations between ASEAN member states and external powers beyond Southeast Asia. The notion of ASEAN Centrality encompasses several interconnected dimensions. Fundamentally, ASEAN Centrality implies that ASEAN is, and must remain, at the core of regional institutions within Asia or the Asia-Pacific (Acharya, 2017). In a broader context, ASEAN Centrality reflects ASEAN's role as a guardian of regional stability and a key driver in the regional integration process. Given its strategic positioning, ASEAN can facilitate dialogue and cooperation among various states and other regional entities in its vicinity.

Over the past decades, ASEAN has been involved in the development of an inclusive regional architecture, necessitating a consistent strengthening of its leadership and the forging of closer cooperation. In bolstering its centrality within the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN leaders agreed to reinforce the ASEAN-centered regional architecture by launching the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific at the 34th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok, Thailand, in 2019. This initiative views ASEAN Centrality as a fundamental principle for enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region through ASEAN-led mechanisms (ASEAN, 2021). ASEAN also endeavors to develop, where necessary, cooperation with other regional and sub-regional mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions in specific areas of mutual interest to complement existing initiatives.

A concrete example of ASEAN Centrality in action is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was signed in 2020 by 15 countries including all ASEAN members, alongside Australia, China, Japan, South Korea, and New Zealand. RCEP represents the world's largest free trade agreement by GDP and population. It aims to reduce tariffs, harmonize trade rules, and enhance regional supply chain integration. Importantly, RCEP was an ASEAN-led initiative, with its negotiation process tracing back to the endorsement of Guiding Principles in 2012. ASEAN not only initiated and conceptualized the agreement but also played a central role in guiding the negotiations and reconciling the interests of participating countries. This leadership showcases ASEAN's capacity to act as a convenor and norm-setter in regional economic governance.

The initiation of RCEP dates to August 2012, when the Economic Ministers from 16 countries, comprising the ten ASEAN member states and Australia, China, India, Japan, Korea, and New Zealand, endorsed the Guiding Principles and Objectives for Negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. This was followed by the commencement of negotiations in early 2013. While India ultimately chose not to join RCEP, ASEAN's leadership remained consistent throughout the negotiation process. By steering discussions and maintaining a consensus-based approach, ASEAN demonstrated its commitment to regional integration and inclusivity. Its leadership in RCEP reinforced its central position in shaping the regional economic architecture. The agreement reflects ASEAN's strategic vision of fostering open trade while preserving its institutional relevance amid competing regional frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

In examining ASEAN's efforts to reinforce its centrality through economic integration in the Indo-Pacific, its role in RCEP serves as a compelling case study. As a free trade initiative, RCEP not only facilitates trade and investment flows but also symbolically affirms ASEAN's

role in constructing the regional order. It is within this context that the present study is situated. This research seeks to explore the following question: “How does RCEP contribute to ASEAN’s enhanced centrality in economic integration within the Indo-Pacific region?”

By analyzing ASEAN’s leadership in RCEP and its broader implications for regional governance, this study contributes to the scholarly understanding of ASEAN Centrality not only as a strategic objective but also as a functional reality in the Indo-Pacific. It underscores ASEAN’s evolving role in shaping the region’s economic architecture, revealing how ASEAN balances both external and internal pressures to safeguard its central position. ASEAN’s leadership in RCEP highlights its capacity to steer multilateral initiatives, aligning diverse regional players towards shared economic goals while maintaining its non-interference principle. The problem formulation contains article questions that must be explained in the discussion and answered in the conclusion.

METHOD

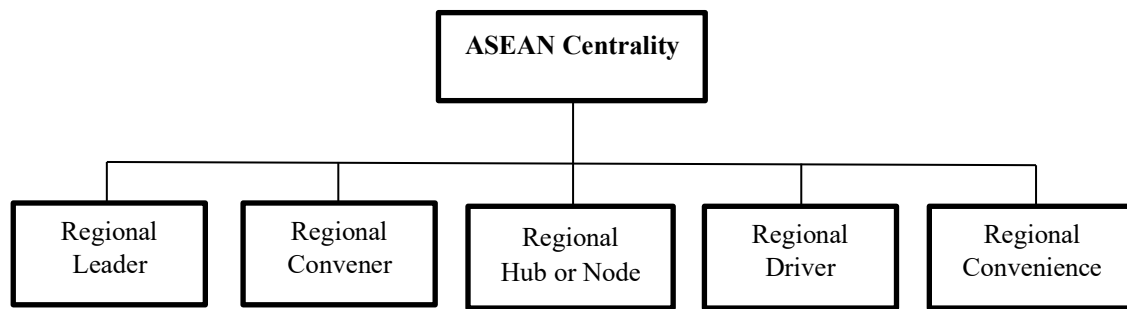
Although frequently invoked in policy discourse, the concept of ASEAN Centrality remains theoretically underdeveloped and lacks clear operational guidelines for long-term implementation (Mueller, 2019). This conceptual ambiguity highlights the need for further elaboration and refinement to enable a more rigorous analysis of ASEAN’s role within the evolving economic and political landscape of the Indo-Pacific. Despite these limitations, a growing body of literature has attempted to frame ASEAN Centrality as an analytical approach rather than a fixed institutional principle.

One such effort is presented by Caballero-Anthony (2014), who interprets ASEAN Centrality through the lens of social network theory. In this perspective, ASEAN’s centrality is explained not by material capabilities but by its structural position within a dense regional network. ASEAN acts as a key node that facilitates interaction, dialogue, and cooperation among diverse actors. Its ability to convene major and middle powers, despite limited hard power resources, reinforces its relevance and influence in regional governance. However, Caballero-Anthony also emphasizes that sustaining this centrality in a shifting regional environment necessitates ASEAN’s ability to overcome internal challenges. These include maintaining consensus-based decision-making, executing collective action, and achieving policy effectiveness in alignment with its stated goals.

To operationalize the analysis of ASEAN Centrality in this study, the framework developed by TAN (2017) will be employed. ASEAN Centrality manifests through five distinct but interrelated roles: regional leader, regional convener, regional hub or node, regional driver, and regional convenience. These roles collectively encapsulate how ASEAN operates not only as an initiator of regional frameworks but also as a coordinator that fosters dialogue, manages regional processes, and sustains its institutional relevance amidst evolving geopolitical and economic landscapes. As a regional leader, ASEAN is expected to articulate visions and set the agenda for regional cooperation. As a convener, it brings together diverse actors and platforms for negotiation and consensus-building. The role of hub or node reflects ASEAN’s function as a central point through which regional linkages are structured. As a regional driver, ASEAN influences the direction and pace of integration, while the concept of regional convenience underscores the practical advantages and accessibility ASEAN offers to its partners as a diplomatic platform. These roles illustrate how ASEAN operates both in leading regional initiatives, coordinating activities among its member states, and ensuring the organization's continued relevance and viability amidst the evolving dynamics of the region.

Subsequently, by elaborating on these indicators and presenting the current state and trends of ASEAN centrality in the domains of trade and connectivity, a more comprehensive understanding of ASEAN's role can be achieved. Furthermore, the analysis will also encompass ASEAN's leadership in the initiation of the RCEP agreement, as well as the dynamics of its relationships with other member states. This approach will contribute to a better understanding

of how ASEAN can sustain and enhance its centrality in navigating the challenges and opportunities within the Indo-Pacific region.



Source: Researcher’s interpretation of Tan’s ASEAN Centrality Concept (TAN, 2017)

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

While Tan's analysis anchors ASEAN Centrality within the dynamics of East Asian regional governance, the underlying principles of his framework offer a valuable lens through which to examine ASEAN's role in the broader Indo-Pacific, particularly concerning economic integration via the RCEP. Within the Indo-Pacific, and specifically within the RCEP framework, ASEAN Centrality is evident in its initiation and leadership of the agreement, which unites a diverse group of Indo-Pacific nations with varying levels of development and geopolitical interests. Just as Tan's concept highlights ASEAN's influence in East Asian forums, we can apply this to understand how ASEAN has shaped the agenda and the outcome of the RCEP negotiations, positioning itself as a pivotal actor in this significant Indo-Pacific economic arrangement. This application allows for an analysis of how ASEAN's established mechanisms for fostering regional consensus and cooperation, identified by Tan in the East Asian context, are being deployed and adapted within the wider Indo-Pacific economic landscape through its stewardship of RCEP.

This article analyzes ASEAN's role in strengthening its centrality through economic integration, with a specific focus on its leadership in the RCEP. To understand the problem comprehensively, the author employs a qualitative research method with a deductive approach. The qualitative method is selected for its flexibility in exploring the dynamics of regional cooperation, institutional behavior, and the political-economic interactions among ASEAN member states and external partners. Qualitative methods refer to data collection and analysis techniques that focus on understanding social phenomena through non-numerical data, such as policy documents, official statements, and expert analysis (Lamont, 2015). A deductive approach begins with theoretical assumptions or prior knowledge and proceeds to test these through the examination of empirical evidence (Bryman, 2012).

The data used in this study comprises two categories: primary and secondary data. Primary data refers to original documents produced by individuals or institutions with direct access to the events or information being described. These materials are typically published or officially released by governments, international organizations, or business entities (Lamont, 2015). The primary data sources in this research include official ASEAN documents such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), RCEP negotiation statements, summit declarations, and joint communiqués. These documents offer insights into ASEAN's institutional discourse, strategic objectives, and its role in driving the RCEP process. Secondary data sources encompass scholarly literature, policy reports, and previously published academic articles relevant to ASEAN Centrality and regional economic integration, as well as digital media content that provides coverage of the RCEP's development and ASEAN’s regional initiatives. Secondary data involves the interpretation and analysis of information derived from primary sources (Lamont, 2015).

This study employs data collection techniques that include archival or document-based research derived from official ASEAN publications, RCEP negotiation records, and relevant policy documents, along with desk research. The researcher gathered data from institutional websites such as the official ASEAN Secretariat portal, the RCEP agreement repository, and government press releases. For data processing, a categorization method is applied. Within the deductive approach, researchers begin by establishing analytical categories based on existing theoretical frameworks and prior understanding of the subject, which are then used to structure and interpret the narrative aligned with expected findings (Lamont, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

ASEAN as Regional Leader in Initiating RCEP

ASEAN played a pivotal and central role in the initiation and formation of the RCEP agreement. Leveraging its robust leadership and intra-member state cooperation, ASEAN coordinated and steered crucial phases of the negotiations that ultimately culminated in the signing of the agreement in November 2020. The genesis of this negotiation process can be traced back to 2012 with formal negotiations commenced in 2013, when ASEAN, with Indonesia notably holding the chairmanship, hosted the ASEAN Summit in Bali. This summit marked the initial milestone of a decade characterized by in-depth discussions and intensive negotiations among all participating states (Adila & Suryadipura, 2023). Through this collective endeavor, ASEAN successfully established a solid foundation for the formation of the RCEP agreement, signifying a significant step forward in regional economic cooperation within the Indo-Pacific region.

The concept of ASEAN Centrality served as a primary driving force behind the establishment of the RCEP agreement. This underscores ASEAN's key role in leading relations and cooperation with external partners, with a focus on creating an inclusive and open regional architecture. ASEAN's vision of its role involves striving to achieve these objectives, including the strengthening of regional economic integration and the promotion of economic cooperation among its member states. The organization's persistence in pursuing these aims is evident throughout the entire RCEP negotiation process.

ASEAN's persistence over nearly a decade of RCEP negotiations demonstrates its long-term commitment to regional integration. Beyond mere rhetoric, ASEAN operationalized its vision through sustained diplomatic engagement, the alignment of national trade agendas, and the careful orchestration of technical working groups. Its leadership was not limited to macro-level diplomacy but extended into the micro-level of rule harmonization, capacity building, and dispute management. This persistence underscores ASEAN's institutional resilience and evolving diplomatic capacity in the face of growing economic complexity and strategic rivalry in the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN's efforts ensured that the RCEP would not be dominated by any single major power, but would reflect a balanced, multilateral framework grounded in mutual benefit and shared ownership.

Moreover, ASEAN's leadership in the RCEP agreement reaffirms its undeniable role in bolstering regional economic integration. Through its organizational perseverance and consistency, ASEAN diligently worked towards advancing regional economic integration, aligning with its long-term vision and goals. This includes efforts to expand digitalization and ensure inclusive economic growth, prioritizing shared interests and equity among its member states. Consequently, ASEAN's role in RCEP not only reflects an ambition to achieve a comprehensive trade agreement but also a commitment to fostering a sustainable and equitable economic environment in the Indo-Pacific region.

The impact of RCEP on regional trade dynamics is profound. Representing roughly 30% of global GDP and population, the agreement has established the largest free trade area in the world. It consolidates existing bilateral agreements into a more coherent multilateral framework and significantly lowers barriers to trade, investment, and services among its 15 signatories.

Importantly, RCEP does not merely represent a quantitative expansion of trade; it also introduces qualitative enhancements by incorporating provisions for intellectual property, e-commerce, and dispute resolution, creating a modern, rules-based trade regime that benefits both developed and developing economies (TAN, 2017). The RCEP thus became not only a tool of economic integration but also a strategic manifestation of ASEAN's aspiration to lead a regional architecture that is open, inclusive, and rules-based (ASEAN, 2021).

In this context, RCEP serves as a strategic manifestation of ASEAN Centrality. It is not simply a trade agreement, but a diplomatic achievement that validates ASEAN's model of consensus-based, inclusive leadership. ASEAN's capacity to steer the RCEP negotiations to completion demonstrates that regionalism in the Indo-Pacific need not be driven solely by great powers. Instead, middle and smaller powers, when institutionally cohesive and diplomatically agile, can successfully shape the rules of regional engagement. As such, RCEP reaffirms ASEAN's dual role as both a driver of economic integration and a guardian of regional multilateralism.

Going forward, ASEAN must continue to build on this success by ensuring the effective implementation of RCEP provisions. There is also a strategic opportunity to use RCEP as a foundation for enhancing ASEAN's global profile, particularly in its engagement with external partners such as the European Union, the United States, and India. If ASEAN can uphold the principles of transparency, inclusivity, and mutual benefit in its post-RCEP agenda, it will not only preserve its centrality but further entrench its legitimacy as the cornerstone of regional governance in the Indo-Pacific.

ASEAN as Regional Convener of RCEP

ASEAN faced significant challenges as a substantive leader in the RCEP negotiations due to the disparities in economic development, political systems, and social structures among its ten member states. These differences created complexities in achieving a sufficiently consensual agreement. Delays in reaching consensus could lead to frustration among FTA partners, threatening the stability and sustainability of the negotiation process. To address these challenges, ASEAN had to enhance dialogue and cooperation among its members, foster constructive compromise, and establish more effective mechanisms for managing differences. Furthermore, ASEAN needed to strengthen its capacity in multilateral diplomacy and improve the negotiation capabilities of its members. By leveraging its successful experience in realizing the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) 2015, ASEAN could reinforce its position as a leader in RCEP by promoting the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and fairness in the negotiation process (Fukunaga, 2015).

ASEAN's central role in RCEP was manifested across multiple dimensions. First, ASEAN functioned as a bridge-builder, actively mediating between the divergent priorities of participating countries particularly between developed economies like Japan and Australia and emerging economies like Cambodia and Laos. ASEAN ensured that all voices were heard and that no single power dominated the agenda. Second, ASEAN played a key role in sustaining momentum throughout the negotiations. In a process that spanned nearly a decade, ASEAN's consistent convening power, organizing over 30 rounds of negotiations and numerous ministerial and summit-level meetings was vital in maintaining continuity and focus. Third, ASEAN consistently championed openness, transparency, and inclusivity within the RCEP framework. These principles were crucial not only in fostering trust among participating countries but also in aligning RCEP with broader global trade norms.

Furthermore, ASEAN's leadership was distinguished by its resilience and strategic patience. It faced moments of uncertainty and pushback such as India's withdrawal from RCEP in 2019 which threatened to derail the process. Yet ASEAN remained committed to finding common ground among remaining members, recalibrating expectations, and re-aligning the terms of engagement. Its perseverance in navigating complex geopolitical dynamics and

managing member sensitivities highlights its evolution from a reactive organization into a proactive regional actor capable of shepherding a large-scale multilateral agreement to fruition.

Acting as a primary facilitator, ASEAN consistently steered the course of the RCEP negotiations through numerous meetings and forums, including rounds of talks, ministerial meetings, and summits. With 31 rounds of negotiations held, ASEAN served as the central platform for participating countries to engage in intensive and collaborative discussions (Rillo et al., 2022). ASEAN's proactive role proved crucial in maintaining the momentum and continuity of the negotiation process, ensuring that all parties were actively involved and that the interests and concerns of each participating nation were considered.

ASEAN efforts in facilitating communication and discussion among participating countries played a significant role in reaching the RCEP agreement, signifying ASEAN's commitment to regional economic integration and cooperation among countries in Southeast Asia and with other regions. ASEAN surpassed external expectations by ensuring the smooth and efficient progression of the RCEP negotiations (Adila & Suryadipura, 2023). This was achieved through the careful management of the diverse interests of the participating countries and the handling of any concerns that arose during the negotiation process. ASEAN's inclusive and solution-oriented approach fostered an environment conducive for all parties to actively engage in discussions. These efforts demonstrated ASEAN's ability to bridge differences and facilitate consensus among member states, reinforcing its position as an effective regional leader in international negotiations.

ASEAN as Regional Hub or Node of RCEP

In the context of economic regionalism in the Indo-Pacific, ASEAN's strategic positioning is that of an integrative node, operating more as a facilitator than a dominant authority. This view characterizes ASEAN not as a regional hegemon, but rather as a functional nexus that enables interaction and integration among various major economic players, notably through institutional frameworks and multilateral agreements (TAN, 2017). This role is tangibly demonstrated by the establishment of the RCEP, which serves as an extension and consolidation of the "FTA Plus One" network ASEAN has cultivated with partners like China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand (ASEAN Secretariat, n.d.). Through RCEP, ASEAN has effectively institutionalized its facilitative function by providing an overarching framework for the diverse economic interests of its partners, thereby reinforcing its centrality within the regional economic architecture.

The implementation of RCEP broadens ASEAN's role within the global value chain ecosystem, presenting new opportunities for member states. The RCEP is also significantly positioned to enhance supply chain connectivity within "Factory Asia." This concept refers to the intricate and interconnected production processes spanning across national borders within the RCEP region, a system that has gained prominence with the rise of global value chains (Ando & Kimura, 2022). For countries such as Indonesia and Vietnam, the implications are particularly salient. As a large, resource-rich nation with a significant manufacturing base, Indonesia and Vietnam stand to gain considerably from enhanced market access for its diverse range of goods and services under RCEP. Furthermore, the agreement presents potential opportunities for the strategic relocation of labor-intensive industrial production from external RCEP partners seeking cost-effective manufacturing locations, which could bolster Indonesia and Vietnam industrial development and create employment. However, realizing these benefits will necessitate strategic policy adjustments and investments in infrastructure and human capital to enhance competitiveness.

Simultaneously, Singapore's strategic positioning as a preeminent super-node within the regional financial and logistics architecture is further strengthened by RCEP. Leveraging its advanced infrastructure and robust regulatory environment, Singapore is well-placed to capitalize on the facilitated flow of goods, services, and capital governed by the comprehensive

RCEP framework. This reinforces Singapore's crucial role as a vital hub for regional economic activity, enhancing its attractiveness for multinational corporations seeking efficient supply chain management, financial services, and connectivity within the expanded RCEP market. While Singapore may not directly benefit from the relocation of manufacturing in the same way as some of its ASEAN neighbors, its role as a critical enabler of trade and investment within the RCEP framework ensures its continued economic significance and influence in the evolving regional economic landscape.

Despite ASEAN's demonstrable success in positioning itself as a central and facilitative node in the Indo-Pacific's economic architecture, its continued effectiveness faces inherent structural limitations. The significant disparities in economic development and capacity among its diverse member states pose an ongoing challenge to internal cohesion and collective action. Furthermore, the reliance of many ASEAN nations on external economic partners for sustained growth introduces a degree of vulnerability and limits the bloc's independent normative power in shaping the broader trajectory of global economic integration. Consequently, while ASEAN has successfully articulated and, through initiatives like RCEP, enacted a role as a strategic integrative node within the complex regional network, the long-term sustainability and impact of this role are highly contingent upon its ongoing ability to maintain internal cohesion and consensus, further strengthen its institutional capabilities, and skillfully navigate the increasingly complex and often competitive geo-economic landscape of the Indo-Pacific region. ASEAN's strength lies in its convening power and its ability to bridge the diverse interests of major players, but its future influence will depend on its capacity to overcome internal fragilities and adapt to the shifting external environment.

ASEAN as Regional Driver of RCEP

The RCEP plays a strategic role in facilitating ASEAN's deeper integration into the global economy, actualizing the broader vision of "ASEAN Global" (Pitakdumrongkit, 2020). This integration is vital for ASEAN's sustainability by providing access to global markets and resources. Consequently, RCEP is not merely a tool for achieving ASEAN economic integration but also a strategic step in fortifying the region's position as a key actor in the evolving global economy. ASEAN's leadership role as the regional driver of RCEP is pivotal in understanding the strategic importance of the agreement. TAN (2017) regional driver as an entity that actively sets the agenda for integration, shaping the trajectory of regional cooperation.

ASEAN's leadership throughout the RCEP negotiations exemplified this role. It was not a passive participant but an active agent that orchestrated the discussions, mobilized political will, and coordinated the diverse economic interests of member states. ASEAN demonstrated remarkable institutional capacity to manage economic asymmetries, from differing levels of development among member states to the contrasting economic interests of external partners. Its leadership ensured that dialogue continued across these divides, and decision-making remained inclusive. ASEAN was not merely a passive intermediary but a strategic agent that provided both momentum and legitimacy to the formation of RCEP (Caballero-Anthony, 2014; Mueller, 2019). ASEAN's leadership role as the regional driver of RCEP is pivotal in understanding the strategic importance of the agreement.

Tan (2016) defines a regional driver as an entity that actively sets the agenda for integration, shaping the trajectory of regional cooperation. ASEAN's leadership throughout the RCEP negotiations exemplified this role. It was not a passive participant but an active agent that orchestrated the discussions, mobilized political will, and coordinated the diverse economic interests of member states. ASEAN demonstrated remarkable institutional capacity to manage economic asymmetries, from differing levels of development among member states to the contrasting economic interests of external partners. Its leadership ensured that dialogue continued across these divides, and decision-making remained inclusive. ASEAN was not

merely a passive intermediary but a strategic agent that provided both momentum and legitimacy to the formation of RCEP (Caballero-Anthony, 2014; Mueller, 2019).

The fact that ASEAN played a key role in driving RCEP's formation also reflects its strategic response to significant changes in the global and regional balance of power. The stalling of the Doha Round of trade talks, the uncertainties surrounding the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) after the U.S. withdrawal in 2017, and the escalating tensions between China and the United States all created a geopolitical vacuum. ASEAN seized this opportunity to promote an alternative, Asia-led economic framework. Despite China's central role in RCEP, ASEAN's institutional leadership was crucial in ensuring that the agreement did not become a bilateral arrangement between China and the other participants. Instead, ASEAN maintained the agreement's multilateral and inclusive character, reflecting the diverse interests of the region. This was particularly significant given the geopolitical sensitivities surrounding China's growing influence in the region, especially concerning unresolved territorial disputes in the South China Sea, which involve ASEAN members like Vietnam and the Philippines. ASEAN's ability to keep RCEP multilateral and inclusive thus prevented it from being perceived as an extension of China's influence, ensuring it remained aligned with ASEAN's vision of regional cooperation and stability.

In addition to promoting economic integration, ASEAN's leadership in RCEP also demands that the organization adopt strategies for sustainable and inclusive growth. As a regional driver, ASEAN must ensure that the economic benefits derived from RCEP are equitably distributed among its members and do not exacerbate existing inequalities. This requires the development of targeted capacity-building initiatives aimed at strengthening the economic and institutional capabilities of ASEAN's less-developed members. Moreover, the implementation of redistributive support mechanism such as investment in infrastructure, human capital development, and social protection becomes crucial to prevent marginalization within the region. Furthermore, RCEP's provisions on trade and investment must be accompanied by stronger regional frameworks for environmental governance and social equity to ensure that growth is inclusive and sustainable. While RCEP offers a structure for economic cooperation, it is ASEAN's responsibility to ensure that this structure serves its long-term goals of resilience, inclusivity, and sustainability, balancing economic progress with social and environmental integrity.

In conclusion, ASEAN's leadership in RCEP highlights its role as a regional driver of economic integration, leveraging its institutional centrality to shape outcomes across the Indo-Pacific. RCEP is not only a tool for economic integration but also a key instrument in fortifying ASEAN's position in the global economy. It demonstrates ASEAN's ability to act as a diplomatic entrepreneur, shaping negotiations, building consensus, and promoting regional cooperation in a manner that aligns with ASEAN's broader goals of peace, stability, and prosperity.

ASEAN as Regional Convenience of RCEP

The conceptualization of ASEAN centrality as a regional convenience offers a compelling lens through which to analyze its role in the formation and implementation of the RCEP. While this perspective highlights ASEAN's pragmatic and adaptive strategies in navigating the complex dynamics of Indo Pacific geopolitics and economic integration, it is important to acknowledge a counter-narrative that views ASEAN's emphasis on its centrality as a means of "clinging to the driver's seat" to avoid marginalization in a rapidly evolving regional architecture (TAN, 2017). Rather than projecting itself as a hegemonic power or a deeply integrationist force, ASEAN's centrality, in this context, stems from its ability to function as a neutral, flexible, and crucially, non-threatening platform that enables dialogue and cooperation among larger, often competing, powers. This interpretation underscores ASEAN's value as a provider of a convenient diplomatic space, facilitating engagement for external actors

who might otherwise find direct bilateral or exclusive multilateral arrangements more challenging. Part of this convenience also arises from ASEAN's unique position as a politically acceptable focal point for broader regional initiatives, even if its "Southeast Asia-centric leadership" has faced some critiques in other contexts like the ARF and ASEAN+3; its consensus-driven approach often makes it a less objectionable convenor for diverse stakeholders.

ASEAN's role in the RCEP negotiations vividly illustrates this pragmatic centrality. Rather than dictating the terms or the pace of the agreement, ASEAN acted more as an indispensable broker and facilitator. Its primary strategic imperative was arguably to avoid marginalization in a rapidly evolving regional economic architecture, particularly with the emergence and progression of initiatives like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), spearheaded by influential nations such as Japan and initially involving the United States. By offering an established and inclusive institutional framework, built upon the existing ASEAN+1 FTAs, ASEAN provided a less politically charged environment for economic rivals, most notably China and Japan, and initially including India, to undertake intricate negotiations. This was particularly salient given the historical complexities and underlying strategic competition within East Asia.

The foundational norms that underpin the "ASEAN Way" namely, consensus-based decision-making, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, and an emphasis on informal and flexible modes of interaction were instrumental in fostering a degree of trust and mitigating potential friction among the diverse RCEP participants. These norms created a comfortable and less confrontational setting for discussions on sensitive issues such as market access, rules of origin, and intellectual property. Furthermore, ASEAN's pre-existing network of FTAs with the prospective RCEP partners provided a foundational structure upon which the broader agreement could be built, streamlining the negotiation process and offering a degree of familiarity to all involved parties.

The eventual signing of the RCEP agreement in November 2020, a significant achievement amidst global economic uncertainties and intricate geopolitical undercurrents, underscores the efficacy of ASEAN's strategic pragmatism. The fact that diverse economies with often divergent interests could coalesce around this agreement speaks volumes about ASEAN's capacity to convene and facilitate. For instance, the inclusion of specific chapters on small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and economic and technical cooperation reflects ASEAN's concern for ensuring that the benefits of the agreement are widely distributed among its member states, considering their varying levels of development. Moreover, the agreement's rules of origin, while complex, represent a compromise that accommodates the existing production networks within ASEAN and its dialogue partners.

CONCLUSION

This study examined ASEAN's multifaceted role in the RCEP agreement, emphasizing its leadership, diplomatic capabilities, and strategic positioning within the evolving Indo-Pacific economic architecture. ASEAN's involvement in RCEP is not merely a result of its centrality in the region but also a reflection of its enduring commitment to fostering regional economic integration, inclusivity, and multilateralism.

The findings illustrate that ASEAN's leadership in initiating and steering RCEP negotiations over nearly a decade was instrumental in creating the largest free trade area globally. ASEAN's persistence, especially in managing diverse interests among its member states and external partners, allowed it to navigate the complex geopolitical and economic challenges inherent in such a wide-ranging agreement.

Overall, ASEAN's successful orchestration of RCEP negotiations underscores its capacity to shape regional economic outcomes while maintaining an inclusive, rules-based approach. Going forward, ASEAN must continue to leverage RCEP as a platform to advance

its vision for a balanced and resilient regional economic order, ensuring that the benefits of integration are equitably shared among all member states. This research reaffirms ASEAN's centrality in the Indo-Pacific, not as a hegemonic power but as a strategic facilitator of regional cooperation, economic growth, and stability.

REFERENCE

- Acharya, A. (2017). The Myth of ASEAN Centrality? *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 39 No. 2, 273–279. <https://about.jstor.org/terms>
- Adila, S., & Suryadipura, D. (2023). ASEAN's Role In The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Formation To Enhance Regional Economic Integration. *Global: Jurnal Politik Internasional*, 25(1). <https://doi.org/10.7454/global.v25i1.1279>
- Andal, E. G. T. (2016). ASEAN centrality amidst economic integration in the Asia Pacific region. *Journal of the Asia Pacific Economy*, 22(2), 273–290. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13547860.2016.1239394>
- Ando, M., & Kimura, F. (2022). *International Production Network in the Next Generation and the Role of RCEP*.
- ASEAN. (2021). *ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)*.
- ASEAN Secretariat. (n.d.). *Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)*. <https://Asean.Org/Our-Communities/Economic-Community/Integration-with-Global-Economy/Regional-Comprehensive-Economic-Partnership-Rcep/>.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press.
- Caballero-Anthony, M. (2014). Understanding ASEAN's centrality: bases and prospects in an evolving regional architecture. *The Pacific Review*, 27(4), 563–584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2014.924227>
- Donnelly, Jack. (2006). *Realism and international relations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Flach, L., Hildenbrand, H., & Teti, F. (2021). The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and its expected effects on world trade. *Intereconomics*, 56(2), 92–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-021-0960-2>
- Fukunaga, Y. (2015). ASEAN's Leadership in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 2(1), 103–115. <https://doi.org/10.1002/app5.59>
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*.
- Indraswari, R. (2022). ASEAN Centrality: Comparative Case Study of Indonesia Leadership *JAS (Journal of ASEAN Studies)*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.21512/jas.v10i1.7906>
- Kim, S. Y. (2025). Centrality and community. In *Routledge eBooks* (pp. 61–87). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032624044-4>
- Kimura, F., S. Urata S. Thangavelu, and D. Narjoko (2022), 'The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership: Challenges and Opportunities for ASEAN and East Asia', in Kimura, F., S. Urata, S. Thangavelu, and D. Narjoko (eds.), *Dynamism of East Asia and RCEP: The Framework for Regional Integration*. Jakarta: ERIA, pp.1-11.
- Lamont, C. (2015). *Research Methods in Politics and International Relations*. SAGE.
- Mueller, L. M. (2019). ASEAN centrality under threat – the cases of RCEP and connectivity. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 8(2), 177–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2019.1691703>
- Pitakdumrongkit, K. (2020). *ASEAN's RCEP and sustainability challenges and achievements*. <https://Eastasiaforum.Org/2020/01/24/Aseans-Rcep-and-Sustainability-Challenges-and-Achievements/>.
- Rillo, A. D., Maria, A., Robeniol, R. D., & Buban, S. M. (2022). *The Story of RCEP: History, Negotiations, Structure, and Future Directions Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Indonesia*.

- Shimizu, K. (2021). The ASEAN Economic Community and the RCEP in the world economy. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 10(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24761028.2021.1907881>
- Sunchindah, A. (2018). *ASEAN-as-the-Architect-for-Regional-Development-Cooperation Nov2018*. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.15408.43524>
- TAN, S. S. (2017). Rethinking “ASEAN Centrality” In The Regional Governance Of East Asia. *The Singapore Economic Review*, 62(03), 721–740. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S0217590818400076>