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Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as Geopolitical Strategy

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Abstract

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a ground-breaking free trade agreement that encompasses fifteen Asia-Pacific nations, including significant economies such as China, Japan, South Korea, and Australia. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which was signed in 2020, is one of the most significant free trade agreements in the world. It is comprised of 15 nations, including the ASEAN countries. The primary objective of the paper is to investigate the RCEP as a geopolitical strategy, examining its formation and significance, as well as elucidate on the issues and challenges associated with its implementation in order to effectively promote global trade and regional stability. This article also examines the strategic benefits that are crucial to RCEP member's interests and the motivations that underlie their participation. The paper employs a doctrinal legal approach to analyse the strategic significance, implications, and formulation of the RCEP. The results indicate that the RCEP substantially improves regional economic integration, reduces economic dependencies, and decreases susceptibility to external trade conflicts. China's leadership in RCEP, which establishes it as a central participant in regional trade and counters Western influence, supports the Belt and Road Initiative. The agreement enhances intra-regional trade, reduces Western leverage, and cultivates a collaborative framework that transforms the geopolitical landscape of the Asia-Pacific region.

Keywords: Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Geopolitical Dynamics, Economic Integration, Counterbalance, Trade.

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1. Introduction

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) represents a watershed moment in the realm of global trade agreements. Signed on November 15, 2020, RCEP is the most significant free trade agreement in the world, covering approximately 30% of global GDP and one-third of the world's population (World Economic Forum,2021). This trade bloc comprises 15 countries, including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the ten member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Flach, L., Hildenbrand, H., & Teti, F., 2021). The primary objective of RCEP is to facilitate free trade and investment among its members, but its implications extend far beyond economic considerations. RCEP is a strategic tool that will reshape regional power dynamics, enhance China's influence, and offer gains for ASEAN. This article explores RCEP as a geopolitical strategy, examining its formation and significance as well as broader implications for global trade and regional stability.

Furthermore, RCEP was conceived as a response to the shifting economic landscape in the Asia-Pacific region. The agreement aims to reduce tariffs, standardise trade regulations, and promote investment among its members, creating a more integrated and efficient economic bloc (Petri and Plummer, 2020). The negotiation process for RCEP began in 2012, driven by the desire to create a comprehensive trade agreement that includes both developed and developing economies in the region. The formation of the RCEP is seen as a strategic move to counterbalance the influence of Western-dominated trade agreements and economic policies, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

Moreover, RCEP was established as a result of a variety of economic conditions, which were bolstered by a number of critical considerations that underscored the need for a comprehensive regional trade agreement when viewed through the lens of economic history. The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 dealt a significant blow to the global economy since it impacted economies worldwide, including those in the Asia-Pacific area. During the crisis, flaws in the global financial system were exposed, putting the world economy in the red zone. The crisis has taught many Asia Pacific countries valuable lessons about diversifying trade partnerships and reducing reliance on Western markets (Park,2011).

Before the establishment of the RCEP, trade tensions were developing, particularly between the United States and China. This has resulted in an unpredictable global trading environment. The introduction of tariffs and punitive measures has disrupted supply networks and trade flows, forcing regional countries to seek more stable and predictable trade agreements (Bown,2020). The presence of a wide range of economies in the RCEP, from highly industrialised markets to emerging markets, demonstrates the agreement's broad appeal and capacity to promote regional cooperation. RCEP aims to streamline supply chains and increase economic interdependence among member countries by standardising trade systems and rules while reducing barriers. This increased connectivity is projected to increase economic growth, create jobs and offer consumers a wider choice of goods and services at lower rates (Lin,2011).

Beyond its economic benefits, RCEP has significant geopolitical implications. RCEP allows China to strengthen its regional economic leadership, mainly due to growing trade tensions with the United States. By entering the RCEP, China can improve its economic relations with neighbouring countries and strengthen its political and geopolitical power (Tan and Soong,2021). For ASEAN, RCEP represents an opportunity to increase collective bargaining power and attract more foreign investment, thereby contributing to regional stability and development. In a situation where RCEP is seen as a new force in global trade, the success of RCEP will depend on ensuring compliance and managing differences among members.

This article analyses the RCEP as a geopolitical strategy, outlining its background and significance while elucidating the issues and challenges related to its implementation to effectively enhance global trade and regional stability. This study is important to understand the influence of RCEP by analysing its economic and geopolitical aspects. An analysis can be undertaken to establish that this action is a geopolitical strategy by collecting and identifying these characteristics.

2. Methodology

The study is doctrinal research, which has been tailored to gather data from library-based sources (Althabhawi,2023). A doctrinal method is used in articles that discuss the RCEP's impact on International Trade. It utilises the qualitative approach as a proper approach to explore the RCEP as a geopolitical strategy (Dazulhisham and et al.,2023). The study relies on a dissection of literature review to gather comprehensive and multi-faceted

insights into the formation, implications, and strategic significance of RCEP. The qualitative nature of this research allows for an in-depth exploration of the motivations and impacts of RCEP, which are often intertwined with political, economic, and strategic factors that quantitative methods might overlook. The research aims to reveal the underlying mechanisms and strategic considerations that shape RCEP and its role in the global economic order by focusing on qualitative data. The study applies content data analysis as a method of data analysis, which is suitable for examining state policies (Azmi and et al.,2023). A careful data analysis will be undertaken utilizing the available resources (Althabhawi,2022). Hence, this article derives an outcome from this research methodology, offering a pertinent reference for the study. Tan and et al (2022) suggest that content analysis can be employed to examine the data obtained from the sources included in this paper.

3. Concepts of Geopolitics and Political behaviours of Governments

The concept that connects geopolitics and the political behaviour of one government is important in understanding the dynamics of international relations and regional cooperation. By examining the geopolitical landscape and the behaviour of governments, an insight into how these factors influence the formation of multilateral agreements and their effectiveness in promoting regional stability, cooperation and common interests can be made, which, in the end, will set the stage for examining the RCEP as a geopolitical strategy, considering the interplay between geography, politics and regional integration.

3-1. Understanding of Geopolitics

Geopolitics is an analysis of international relations and conflict from the perspective of geography, and it establishes a connection between geographic space and international politics (Ardakani,2024). The study of geopolitics may encompass numerous facets. For example, Shoeibi and et al. (2023) examined the geopolitics of the city, while various studies have examined the geopolitics of specific regions, including Akbari (2023), which addressed the obstacles and challenges in the formation of nations in Central Asia and the Caucasus regions, Ahmadian and Mohseni (2024) focused on Arab revolution in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and Najafzadeh and Talebian (2024) investigated the geopolitics of crises in Russia.

In understanding political shifts, geopolitics is often viewed as a formula or principle that explains historical events. From this standpoint, geopolitics highlights how all political changes are fundamentally tied to the concept of territory (Bayat,2009). To further explain, geopolitics examines the influence of geographic factors on politics and history. By considering geopolitics as a guiding principle, one can see that political changes are deeply connected to territorial realities, meaning that geographical considerations often drive shifts in power, borders, and governance. Attempts to analyze historical events and present disputes in geopolitics indicate that the volition of people and leaders is not the exclusive factor influencing history. However, the location and geography of a country have the most influence on its fate (Park,2023).

Even though societies are advancing technologically, natural factors influence politics less now than in ancient times when governments relied more on geography. However, in theory, the belief in the impact of geography on politics has changed the focus of geopolitics (Bayat,2009). Theoretically, countries with geographical symmetry often form bilateral and multilateral relations between themselves. Furthermore, their foreign policies are often related, giving each other benefits while gaining some advantage for their countries. If the countries have more geographical symmetry, such as mutual relations, interests, political and cultural similarities, and economic policies, the effectiveness of their agreements will be much better.

Geographical symmetry is not limited to just a simple physical geography; rather, it also encompasses other dimensions such as political systems, cultural values and economic interdependence. This symmetry creates an environment and chain that is conducive to cooperation between countries with similar characteristics that may share the same challenges or opportunities. Countries with geographic symmetry often find it easier to form alliances, engage in regional integration, and pursue similar foreign policy goals (Acharya,2012). The presence of geographical and political similarities means that these countries often face common strategic concerns, which leads to coordinated political behaviour in the international arena. For example, the countries in ASEAN share the same regional identity, similar economic development trajectories and share common economic security concerns. This geographical symmetry has led to a framework of cooperation in foreign policy, promoting regional stability and economic integration through the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and

security frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (Capie and Narine,2003). In this matter, due to this geographical symmetry, similarities between regional countries can be shared together, and foreign policies can be built collectively to take care of their respective economic security concerns.

The significance of geographical features in shaping regional alliances must be considered. These features often determine the natural infrastructure that encourages regional convergence, such as shared waterways, mountain ranges, or resource-rich areas. However, the internal dynamics of these regions can vary greatly. When regional power centres are fragmented or lack cohesiveness, it opens the door for external powers to assert their influence. This can lead to a scenario where external actors play a significant role in the regional cooperation model, potentially overshadowing local interests and priorities (Omidi,2006). For instance, in regions with rich natural resources but weak political cohesion, external powers may step in to fill the leadership vacuum, leveraging their resources and strategic interests. This external involvement can shape the economic and political landscape, often leading to dependency or influence that may not align with the region's long-term goals. Consequently, while geographical features lay the groundwork for regional integration, the actual effectiveness and direction of regional cooperation often hinge on the interplay between internal unity and external influence.

In discussing geopolitics, the concept of globalisation should be defined. McGrew defines globalization as enhancing relations and mutual communication, which extend beyond states to establish a new world order (Held and McGrew,1998). In the globalization era, relationships between nations are crucial in determining the future of their respective nations. Mutual communication is one of the primary characteristics of globalization. Conversely, mutual interdependence pertains to the probability of dependence (Akhbari and et al,2011). The connection between geopolitics and globalization is evident in how global economic networks and political alliances shape state behaviour. As states become increasingly interconnected, issues such as trade, security, and environmental challenges require collaborative approaches, often blurring traditional geopolitical boundaries. Globalization also facilitates the spread of ideas and norms, which can alter political landscapes and contribute to the rise of new power centres. Globalization encompasses not only economic dimensions but also social, political, and cultural factors that collectively influence global governance (Bartelson and Scholte,2002). Consequently, it is conceivable to

infer that globalization is a significant factor in shaping the development of geopolitics, which will subsequently affect the political behaviour of the government.

3-2. Political Behaviours of Governments

Governments operate within a multifaceted landscape where various elements, including economic conditions, cultural dynamics, historical contexts, and international relationships, interact in intricate ways. These elements collectively shape a government's foreign policy, which can be seen as its stance and actions toward the global community. Scholars have discussed the foundational principles that shape the political behaviour of governments, focusing on factors such as national interests and objectives, national security, national sovereignty, and nationalism. Essentially, national interests embody the political behaviours of the government, encompassing diverse dimensions such as economic well-being, territorial integrity, and strategic security (Morgenthau,1948). Scholars also highlighted the significance of the realist tradition, which prioritises national interests and the balance of power as fundamental components of foreign policy decisions. This perspective underscores the importance of security and national objectives in shaping state actions.

A hypothesis on foreign policy has been developed to investigate the relationship between two levels of minor and significant analysis (Soltani Nejad,2006). A minor analysis suggests that three factors are significant: the international environment, the function of the government and the social environment, and the individual personality of the decision-makers. These variables are indispensable for the effective formulation of foreign policy. The spiritual and mental characteristics, the orientations and inferences of individuals from events and phenomena, and the influential beliefs and values of individuals in decision-making are all included in the personality variables. Social variables, such as ideology, the degree of political culture in a society, and the degree of ethnic unity and convergence, are influenced by culture and history, which in turn influence the political orientation of a nation (Soltani,2006).

Hence, these two facets of geopolitics and the political conduct of the government are of great importance in examining the matter of RCEP as a geopolitical strategy in the following section.

4. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

4-1. Background Information about RCEP

Generally, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is China's strategic initiative in Southeast Asia to challenge the previous policy of the United States (Pomfret,2021). By 2030, RCEP could boost global incomes by 209 billion dollars and the trading market by half a trillion. Hence, it explains the partnership's importance to the region and the world. The USSR was an eyesore to the strength of the United States of America during the Cold War since the former was the only global force to confront the latter on every front. As the former Soviet Union declined and eventually broke apart, the status quo shifted. With no other nation able to contest its power and dominance, the United States of America emerged as the only superpower in the world. Similar to international politics, the emergence of a rival with comparable or greater potential is constantly opposed, and every effort is made to control the peak of its power. The pinnacle of the zero-sum game is perceived in international politics (Yu, 2019).

One prominent characteristic of the bloc is the reduction of trade tariffs among the nations that have signed it (Petri and Plummer,2020). It is essential since the reduced tariffs should invite more companies to look into local suppliers and productions within the RCEP domain without fearing tariffs. Purchasing organisations frequently objected to the products being created partially in other nations for the same reason tariffs were introduced. Some things are made in other nations in part, or, to put it another way, gadgets and parts are imported from other nations and bear their markings. Even though these items had free trade agreements, they were all subject to duties. The FTAs did not protect their interests, and the items were not infallibly shielded from tariff imposition.

When companies in a particular region focus on local trade and production, they reduce their dependence on foreign companies. This shift means they will rely less on imports and business partnerships outside the region, especially from the United States and other Western countries. As a result, the influence of Western countries and the economic power traditionally exerted in that region will be lessened (Herzer and D,2006). This loss of dominance occurs because the region becomes more self-sufficient and less vulnerable to external economic pressures and political influences from the West.

4-2. Mechanism of the RCEP

The fact that the United States does not participate in the RCEP highlights China's increasing global influence and signals the end of American global leadership. A kind of intergovernmental economic cooperation known as RCEP will prioritise political goals above economic ones. While the majority of ASEAN members joined for philanthropic trade purposes, leading economies like China are primarily interested in establishing the norms and dictating the agenda. China serves as the face of the RCEP by using the diplomacy of numbers.

In addition, RCEP encompasses the following scopes: tariff elimination for commodities trade, as well as the related chapters of rules or origin, customs procedures, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, standards, technical regulations, conformity assessment procedures, and trade remedies. It will facilitate the movement of natural persons, telecommunications services, and financial services. Furthermore, it will encourage, facilitate, safeguard, and liberalize investment. Additionally, it covers competition policy (countries have the authority to enact national laws regarding state-owned enterprises), intellectual property rights, electronic commerce, and government procurement (promotion of transparency measures and information exchange, but no market access). It will also address matters concerning legal and institutional issues, as well as economic and technical cooperation and SMEs (ASEAN,2020).

Progression in eliminating tariffs on over ninety per cent of goods and streamlining customs procedures contribute to better trade. The uniformity of origin rules across nearly all of Asia will also improve the regional value chain. Through diversification, an enhanced regional value chain will help the region's industrial industry. It is essential to highlight that, in contrast to previous free trade agreements like the CPTPP, the RCEP resists protectionist policies against third-party countries and instead focuses solely on promoting commerce within the region. The comprehensive framework and the strengthening of intellectual property protection substantially expanded the scope of trade and investment liberalization. The market can be expanded by partner countries without the assistance of Western countries, such as the United States, through the RCEP.

4-3. Key Players and Their Interests

As previously indicated, the RCEP comprises a diverse group of 15 countries with economic and strategic interests. The agreement comprises a combination of emergent markets, including China and the ASEAN

countries, and advanced economies, including Japan, South Korea, and Australia (Flach and et al,2021). This diversity is both a strength and a challenge for RCEP, as it must balance its members' interests and developmental stages (Wen,2022). As the largest economy in the bloc, China seeks to enhance its market access and influence over regional trade policies (Wei,2024). Likewise, Japan and South Korea, both advanced economies, aim to strengthen their economic ties with ASEAN and other RCEP members (Petri and Plummer,2020). For ASEAN, RCEP offers a platform to reinforce their collective bargaining power and maintain their centrality in regional economic affairs (Armstrong and Drysdale,2022). Each member's interests are shaped by their economic goals and strategic considerations, making RCEP a complex and multifaceted agreement.

Further, RCEP transforms global trade dynamics by significantly increasing intra-regional trade and investment, thereby reducing the dependence of its member countries on Western markets. This trade agreement, which encompasses diverse economies, promotes greater economic integration within the Asia-Pacific region (Islam,2021). By facilitating the reduction of tariffs, standardising trade regulations, and improving market access, RCEP creates a more cohesive and efficient economic bloc (Petri and Plummer, 2020). The agreement sets a new standard for regional economic cooperation, encouraging other regions to pursue similar trade frameworks. The success of RCEP in bringing together advanced economies, such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, and emerging markets, like China and the ASEAN countries, showcases the potential benefits of inclusive economic agreements (Al Jazeera,2020). This model of cooperation can inspire other regions to adopt similar agreements, aiming for enhanced economic integration and collective growth.

This shift in trade patterns not only strengthens the economic resilience of RCEP members but also diminishes the leverage of Western powers in global trade negotiations. By diversifying their economic partnerships and reducing reliance on Western markets, RCEP countries enhance their economic stability and reduce vulnerability to external economic shocks (Wei,2024). This collective strength allows RCEP members to exert more significant influence in setting global trade norms and standards, challenging the traditional dominance of Western economies in global trade governance.

5. Analysis of the Geopolitical Strategy of RCEP

The RCEP framework is crucial for enhancing and stimulating the economies of member states. The significance is evident in two aspects: first, counterbalancing Western dominance, and second, enhancing the trade power of the East Bloc.

5-1. Counterbalancing Western Dominance

Historically, many Asia-Pacific economies have relied heavily on trade with the United States and Europe. Therefore, one of the primary ways RCEP counterbalances Western dominance is by reducing the dependence of its member countries on Western markets. The formation of RCEP promotes more significant intra-regional trade and investment, fostering economic interdependence among its 15 member countries (Wen,2022). The sheer economic scale and integration presented by RCEP are transformative forces. Covering nearly 30 per cent of the global population and approximately 30 per cent of global GDP, RCEP forms one of the world's largest trading blocs (Banh and et al,2024). This substantial economic footprint allows member countries to facilitate increased regional trade and investment, significantly reducing reliance on Western markets. By creating a cohesive economic area, RCEP can streamline economic activities, encouraging regional growth and development that are less dependent on external influences (Bank,2022). This shift not only diversifies the economic engagements of these countries but also enhances their collective economic resilience against external shocks from Western economies (Wen,2022).

Equally important, RCEP brings together diverse countries, including developed economies like Japan, South Korea, and Australia, as well as emerging markets like China, Indonesia, and Vietnam (Flachand et al, 2021). By harmonising trade rules, reducing tariffs, and standardising regulations across this broad economic spectrum, RCEP creates a more integrated and efficient regional market and can stimulate intra-regional trade, making the economies of member countries less dependent on Western markets and supply chains (Flach and et al,2021). This unified economic bloc can leverage its combined economic weight to exert more significant influence in global trade negotiations, thereby diminishing the unilateral influence of Western powers in setting international trade norms and standards (Francois and Elsig,2021).

It is important to note that another critical outcome of RCEP is enhancing economic resilience. By fostering closer economic ties and cooperation, member countries can bolster their economies against external shocks such as global financial crises or pandemics (Kimura and et al,2022). This reduced dependency on Western economic systems can shield member countries from the volatility and uncertainties of global markets dominated by Western influences, allowing them to maintain stable growth and development. RCEP also mitigates these disruptions by fostering greater economic interdependence within the Asia-Pacific region. By reducing tariffs and streamlining trade regulations, RCEP enables member countries to find alternative markets within the bloc, reducing their vulnerability to external trade conflicts. Besides, the framework of RCEP promotes economic collaboration among its diverse member states, providing a platform for collective response to external economic pressures (Mohamad, and Cheng,2020). Moreover, RCEP also presents an alternative economic model that allows member countries to design policies that best suit their specific economic and social contexts, promoting a more inclusive and adaptable economic framework. This alternative model can attract countries seeking a more balanced approach to economic integration, offering a viable option outside of Western-dominated systems.

5-2. Strengthening the Power of East-Bloc in Trades

It is worth noting that the strategic position of China in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond is substantially enhanced by its leadership role in RCEP. The agreement offers China an alternative platform to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), from which it is excluded (Kuo,2020). By championing RCEP, China can shape regional economic policies and standards in line with its interests, countering Western-led economic initiatives (Wen,2022). This strategic positioning allows China to expand its economic influence, secure critical supply chains, and promote its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), further embedding its leadership in regional and global economic structures (Entin and et al,2022). RCEP is critical in securing China's supply chains, particularly in rising global trade tensions. By fostering closer economic ties with RCEP members, China can diversify its supply chains and reduce dependence on any single market, particularly those outside the region (Islam,2021). This diversification is crucial for mitigating risks associated with trade conflicts, such as those experienced during the US-China trade war (Wei,2024). Secure and diversified supply chains enhance China’s

economic resilience and ensure the stability of its manufacturing and export sectors (Petri and Plummer,2020).

The strategic objectives of China under RCEP align closely with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which aims to enhance infrastructure connectivity and economic cooperation across Asia, Europe, and Africa (Petri and Plummer, 2020). In fact, RCEP complements the BRI by promoting regional trade and investment, creating synergies that support China's broader geopolitical ambitions (Islam,2021). Through RCEP, China can facilitate the implementation of BRI projects, leveraging the agreement to enhance infrastructure development and economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region (Hamanaka,2014). RCEP includes provisions for digital trade and intellectual property protection, where China seeks to expand its influence. By setting standards and promoting digital economic policies within the agreement, China can enhance its competitive edge in technology and innovation (Wei,2024). This leadership in digital trade supports China's economic ambitions and positions it as a leader in the global digital economy, promoting its technological standards and innovations (Razzaq, 2023).

Additionally, RCEP is a crucial mechanism for the ASEAN member states to maintain their centrality in regional economic affairs. The agreement reinforces ASEAN's role as a critical driver of economic integration in the Asia-Pacific, allowing these countries to collectively negotiate and engage with larger economies on a more equal footing (Islam,2021). This collective strength reduces the individual vulnerability of ASEAN countries to external economic pressures from the West, ensuring that their economic growth and development are driven by regional rather than extra-regional dynamics (Wen,2022).

Notwithstanding its significance, the implementation of RCEP may encounter issues and obstacles that may hinder its efficiency and effectiveness, which will be addressed in the next section.

6. Issues and Challenges

Despite the benefits of RCEP, it is confronted with some substantial challenges and obstacles that undermine its effectiveness as a geopolitical strategy. Among the issues and challenges are: (1) China's dominant position within the agreement, (2) the withdrawal of India, (3) the internal economic disparities, (4) the competing trade agreement complicates RCEP, (5) the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China, and (6) the diverse governance systems among members.

6-1. The Dominant Position of China Raises Concerns on Economic Dependence and Political Leverage

One of the most significant criticisms of RCEP is China's dominant position within the agreement. As the largest economy in RCEP, China's influence is substantial, raising concerns about economic dependence and political leverage among smaller member states (Khan and Ali,2022). This dominance could lead to a situation where these smaller economies become overly reliant on China for trade and investment, thus compromising their economic sovereignty and ability to make independent policy decisions (Lee,2020). Furthermore, China's assertive geopolitical strategies, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its activities in the South China Sea, exacerbate these concerns. Such dominance may shift the regional power dynamics in favour of China, potentially marginalising other members and creating an imbalance within RCEP (Capannelli,2021).

In this regard, the economic dependence on China is particularly concerning for smaller RCEP members who might lack the economic resilience to withstand potential coercive measures. For instance, China could use its economic leverage to influence political decisions or extract concessions on strategic issues, thus undermining the sovereignty of smaller states (Lee, 2020). This dynamic is not merely hypothetical; there are precedents where China has used economic tools to achieve geopolitical goals, such as restricting imports or investments to exert pressure on countries in territorial or political disputes (Khan and Ali,2022).

6.2 The Exclusion of India Weakens the Effect of RCEP

One of the weaknesses is India's decision to withdraw from RCEP negotiations. India mentioned concerns over potential trade imbalances with China and the adverse impact on its domestic industries as primary reasons for its withdrawal (Acharya,2021). The absence of India, a significant economy in the region, limits RCEP's ability to act as a comprehensive counterbalance to China's influence. This exclusion reduces the overall market size and economic potential of the partnership, which could affect its attractiveness and effectiveness as a trade bloc. Furthermore, India's absence weakens the strategic balance within RCEP, making it less representative of the broader Asia-Pacific region and reducing its geopolitical weight (Panda,2020).

It was expected that with India’s participation, significant strategic value could be brought by diversifying the economic and geopolitical dynamics within RCEP (Acharya,2021). Without India, RCEP lacks the weight needed to fully counter China's economic and political influence. This is

because India's market would have provided a significant counterweight to China with its vast population and growing economy. This can create a more balanced and competitive economic environment within the region (Petri and Plummer,2020). In addition, the withdrawal of India signals to other regional players about the potential limitations and risks associated with joining RCEP, which could affect the agreement's long-term stability and success.

6-3. The Internal Economic Disparities Exist in RCEP Pose Challenges to Integration Efforts

The disparities of different levels of economic development in RCEP pose challenges to integration efforts. Notably, the RCEP encompasses countries with vastly different levels of economic development, from highly developed nations like Japan and South Korea to developing countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar (Petri and Plummer,2020), regarding issues occurring in harmonising regulations, standards, and practices across such a diverse group. This is because it requires considerable effort, where mistakes can lead to uneven implementation and benefits. The less developed members might need help to meet the higher standards of more advanced economies, potentially leading to inequalities within the agreement (Capannelli,2021). This uneven development can also potentially cause friction and slow the decision-making process within RCEP, making it difficult to achieve its objectives effectively.

Furthermore, internal disparities are not just economic but also institutional. The variation in governance structures, legal systems, and regulatory frameworks means that implementing and enforcing RCEP's provisions will be uneven (Capannelli,2021). In this regard, less developed countries may need help upgrading their systems to comply with RCEP standards, leading to potential delays and disputes. This will also lead to a situation where the benefits of RCEP are disproportionately off-centre towards the more developed members, exacerbating existing economic inequalities within the region (Petri and Plummer,2020).

6-4. The Competing Trade Agreement Complicates RCEP

The RCEP complexities operate within a multifaceted framework of intersecting trade agreements, particularly the CPTPP, which encompasses several RCEP countries (Wilson,2020). These overlapping commitments can create challenges in harmonising trade policies and regulations, potentially leading to conflicts and complications in implementation. Managing the coexistence of RCEP and CPTPP, along with numerous

bilateral agreements, requires significant diplomatic and administrative effort. These complexities can weaken the effectiveness of RCEP as a singular, cohesive trade bloc and complicate its geopolitical strategy (Acharya,2021).

The existence of competing trade agreements like CPTPP presents a dual challenge. On the one hand, countries involved in both RCEP and CPTPP must navigate different sets of rules and standards, which can lead to regulatory confusion and increased compliance costs (Wilson,2020). On the other hand, the higher standards of CPTPP in areas such as labour rights, environmental protections, and intellectual property could highlight the relative weaknesses of RCEP's provisions, putting pressure on RCEP members to enhance their commitments or risk losing competitive advantage (Acharya,2021). This scenario can create internal divisions and complicate the broader goal of regional economic integration.

6-5. The US-China Rivalry Creates Uncertainties for RCEP

The geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China further complicates RCEP's strategic landscape as tensions between the United States and China undoubtedly complicate the strategic environment surrounding the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). While the United States is not part of RCEP, its rivalry with China heavily influences the member countries, particularly as they manage trade ties and economic interdependencies across Asia. The United States has actively promoted regional economic initiatives, such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, to counterbalance China's influence. This competition creates a challenging environment for RCEP, as member countries may be caught between aligning with the US or China (Lee,2020). This pushes RCEP members to carefully balance their relationships, as aligning too closely with one of the countries potentially strains ties with the other. Trade wars and economic sanctions between these two major powers can disrupt trade flows and economic stability within the RCEP framework, making it difficult for the partnership to achieve its economic and geopolitical goals (Petri and Plummer,2020).

The US-China rivalry impacts RCEP in several ways. It creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, where member states must constantly navigate the shifting dynamics of the two superpowers' economic and political strategies (Lee,2020). In addition, the rivalry could lead to direct economic disruptions, such as tariffs and sanctions, affecting intra-RCEP trade and investment flows (Petri and Plummer,2020). Lastly, the strategic

competition might push RCEP members to prioritise bilateral ties with either the US or China, potentially undermining the collective cohesion and effectiveness of the partnership (Wilson,2020).

6-6. The Governance and Compliance are challenging

The governance and compliance of RCEP is not uniform among the parties. It is a fact that effective governance and compliance mechanisms are crucial for the success of any trade agreement, and RCEP is no exception. Ensuring that all members adhere to the agreed-upon rules and standards is particularly challenging, given the diverse legal and governance systems among RCEP countries (Khan and Ali,2022). Dispute resolution mechanisms must be robust and impartial to maintain trust and cooperation among members. Additionally, varying levels of development and governance can complicate compliance enforcement in areas such as intellectual property rights, labour standards, and environmental protections (Acharya,2021). With effective governance, RCEP risks becoming a cohesive and effective agreement that delivers on its economic integration and growth promises.

The disparity in governance and legal systems among RCEP members means that uniform implementation of the agreement's provisions is challenging (Capannelli,2021). Furthermore, enforcing standards related to intellectual property, labour, and the environment requires solid institutional frameworks, which may be lacking in some member states (Acharya,2021). These challenges highlight the need for capacity-building initiatives and technical assistance to ensure that all members can effectively participate and benefit from RCEP.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, RCEP is a landmark trade agreement with profound geopolitical implications. Its role extends beyond economic integration to encompass strategic objectives, which include counterbalancing Western influence, enhancing China’s leadership, providing strategic gains for ASEAN, and fostering regional stability. We can see the future trajectory of RCEP and its potential to reshape the global economic and political order. Meanwhile, ASEAN countries, including Malaysia, face both opportunities and challenges with the RCEP. Being reliant on exports, Malaysia could benefit significantly from easier market access and fewer trade barriers within RCEP. This could potentially boost economic growth and attract more foreign investments. The agreement also aims to simplify trade

processes and align regulations, which could help businesses operate more efficiently across the region.

However, member states of RCEP should address challenges such as increased competition from producers within RCEP and adjust local regulations to international standards. Moreover, the geopolitical impact of RCEP, especially China's influence, requires ASEAN, including Malaysia, to carefully manage its economic strategies to maximise benefits while protecting its sovereignty and independence. RCEP could elevate the member state's role as a more integrated player in the Asia-Pacific economy, provided it navigates these challenges effectively and harnesses the opportunities within the agreement.

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