

Negotiating RCEP: The Role of ASEAN in Middle-Power Diplomacy

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The members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) engaged with each other and their five major neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, namely China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand, to develop the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a comprehensive free trade agreement streamlining all previous agreements among the participating countries. This article applied the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) method in assessing the RCEP and the key role played by the ASEAN in the negotiation process through middle-power diplomacy. The RCEP's strengths in economic integration and weaknesses in certain policy areas encapsulate ASEAN centrality and its strategy of hedging on China, the sole great power in the agreement. The opportunities and threats to the RCEP posed by the increasing geopolitical tensions between China and the US amid the COVID-19 pandemic, meanwhile, demonstrate the complex regional and global geopolitical situation that ASEAN should navigate to ensure the success of the RCEP and maintain centrality in the process.

Keywords: ASEAN, Free Trade Agreement, Middle-Power Diplomacy, RCEP, SWOT Analysis

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I. INTRODUCTION

The idea of free trade agreements (FTAs) in the Asia-Pacific region is not new. Since the 1990s, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been engaged with 191 bilateral and 71 plurilateral FTAs among member states and with its regional neighbors, particularly China, India, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand¹. These resulted in multiple free trade rules in need of regional harmonization, considering that these countries represent about 30 percent of the world's population, at 2.2 billion people, and account for around the same percentage in the global gross domestic product (GDP), amounting to USD 29.7 trillion.² Thus, the idea of a Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was introduced during the 2011 ASEAN Summit in Bali, Indonesia, to the ten members of ASEAN and its six major partners. The negotiations on the RCEP among the 16 countries began during the following year's ASEAN Summit in Cambodia.³ The hope then was that the RCEP would be the key not just in harmonizing the disparate agreements among the participating countries, but also in deepening regional integration in the Asia-Pacific region. The agreement was eventually forged against the backdrop of recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic and was signed virtually by 15 of the participating countries on November 15, 2020. India withdrew from the RCEP negotiations in the previous year.⁴ The ratification of the agreement by most of the signatories was done on January 1, 2022, with the Philippines being the only remaining holdout in the ratification process due to concerns on liberalization and the lack of safety nets within the RCEP regime.⁵

While the negotiations were ongoing, estimations have been largely positive, especially on the projected economic gains from the RCEP. However, major geopolitical concerns have also been leveled against the RCEP, especially in view of India's withdrawal from the agreement. Despite such criticisms, the RCEP was signed and came into force. This event depicts the important role of ASEAN as an actor in middle-power diplomacy. On one hand, the strengthening of economic ties with major economies such as the five accessing neighbors presents a great opportunity for greater development within each member state of ASEAN. On the other hand, this regime may present a pathway for China to strengthen its strategic position in the Asia-Pacific region, especially considering that the US is not part of

the agreement and nowhere to be found in the negotiations.⁶

The RCEP as an ostensibly economic agreement also has diplomatic and geopolitical angles to it. China's inclusion in trade relations with ASEAN is part of the latter's strategy of middle-power diplomacy, by enmeshing China in "a complex web of regional economic interdependence and institutional frameworks" and hedging against economic and geopolitical risks from China through relations with external powers such as the US and Japan, all of which are designed to check China's ambitions to dominate regional affairs.⁷ Through this lens, the RCEP can be seen as an ASEAN play on middle-power diplomacy that simultaneously enmeshes and hedges China and the other four middle powers – Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand – through the agreement.

This study tries to understand the RCEP through the lens of ASEAN middle-power diplomacy by way of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis. This article is divided into four parts: first, it discusses the concept of middle-power diplomacy and how its link to the RCEP; second, it examines the strengths and weaknesses of the agreement, connecting them to the role of ASEAN in weaving together the economic and geopolitical concerns within the region; third, it explores the opportunities and threats to the RCEP with reference to the current situation of the ASEAN member states; and finally, it provides concluding remarks and recommendations regarding the agreement, particularly on how well ASEAN, as a regional bloc, engages in middle-power diplomacy.

II. THE RCEP, ASEAN, AND MIDDLE POWER DIPLOMACY

The RCEP focuses mainly on reducing or eliminating tariffs and other trade barriers, the choice of goods to be included in its program of preferential tariff treatment, and better facilitation of trade among the participating countries through streamlined customs, administrative, and technical measures.⁸ It further aims to consolidate the FTAs that ASEAN signed with each of the other partner countries, streamlining the level of ambition found in the previous FTAs and covering trade and trade-related commitments absent from the previous FTAs.⁹ Despite the

objective of streamlined trade ambitions, however, disparate economic capacities of participating countries has precluded strict streamlining, necessitating instead more flexible arrangements, commitments, procedures, and policies to ensure a viable agreement.¹⁰ A further issue is the lack of standardized rules on labor and the environment, as well as its reticence in committing to opening services and “other vulnerable areas” of each participant's economy.¹¹

ASEAN deploys middle-power diplomacy with special references to China and other nations in the Asia-Pacific region. This is highlighted by ASEAN's leadership in establishing the conditions for economic integration in East Asia through the RCEP. ASEAN's role lies in the rulemaking process, the reduction of policy risks, and the formation of a pro-trade middle-power coalition. The RCEP compares favorably with the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), another FTA which counts Brunei, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand as members.¹² The RCEP would have been impossible without the initiative of ASEAN in mediating the agreement, considering neither China nor Japan were expected to spearhead the process.¹³ Still, the RCEP greatly benefitted China in terms of strengthening its relations with neighbors, as well as rewarding its patience with the consensus-based negotiations typical of ASEAN-led diplomatic initiatives.¹⁴ On the other hand, the RCEP and TPP have been exercises by the dominant powers in establishing exclusive spheres of influence and regional frameworks with the possibility of future inclusion of other parties.¹⁵ Such an argument, peddled further to the public by news media, however, discounts the central role of ASEAN in the agreement.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the Chinese claims of “victory of multilateralism and free trade” have arguably good credence. Spurred by the national economic recovery efforts from the COVID-19 pandemic and the increasing geopolitical and economic tensions between the US and China, the RCEP proves that rules-based, plurilateral trade is still possible.¹⁷

ASEAN has accomplished a form of middle-power diplomacy called “neo-middle-power diplomacy.” This approach mainly differs from traditional ones in its emphasis on a proactive program of policy aimed at actively contributing towards the shaping of the regional political and economic order not only through the alignment of the capabilities and capacities of middle powers, but also through issue-based and normative advocacies in which areas of cooperation are actively

pursued.¹⁸ This is a consequence of being a middle power that strategically navigates global and regional orders, conflicts, and processes, especially considering that they do not have the political and economic capabilities great powers have in shaping political outcomes.¹⁹ Levels of pragmatism, commitment, and caution, as well as guiding visions and perspectives, can vary across middle powers within the Indo-Pacific region, but all sought to influence global and regional geopolitics.²⁰ The current rise in middle-power diplomacy can be attributed to the focus on multilateralism through the UN, bursts of activism for particular concerns and advocacies, and the informal institutionalization of the Group 20 (G20), so that middle powers are now exploring new partnerships and institutional arrangements.²¹ ASEAN has been managing its relations with the US and China, as well as Japan, through the ASEAN Regional Forum, which actively tries to achieve its security objectives while hedging against subservience to the major powers.²²

The central role of ASEAN in the RCEP has provided many opportunities, if not the impetus, for the other participant middle powers to contribute further to the agreement and move forward with it to enmesh and hedge on China. For example, Japan views the RCEP as part of its geopolitical strategy “to protect and increase the interests and advantages of Japanese business and retain Japan’s political leverage” within the Asia-Pacific region. At the same time, it remains committed to establishing, maintaining, and improving a “rules-based liberal economic order” within the region, especially considering the competitive relations between US and China.²³ Meanwhile, an argument has been raised for South Korea to consider its contributions and commitments to the RCEP in the face of the sluggish economic recovery from the pandemic and increasing geopolitical tensions, as well as its determination to join its fellow members to prevent RCEP from being used by China to dominate the region.²⁴ South Korea is much more interesting not only because of its geographic location between China and Japan, but also due to its membership in the RCEP and its guest role in the Group Seven (G7), creating opportunities for the country to further develop its economic and diplomatic capacities to weather as much of the shocks resulting from the rivalry between the two great powers.²⁵ Even individual members of ASEAN have engaged successfully in middle-power diplomacy, as evidenced by Indonesia that, together and along with South Korea, has promoted and maintained regional peace and

stability through good relations with both China and the US.²⁶

ASEAN has made much effort to leverage its status and capabilities as a collective institutional middle power through the initiation, formation, and ongoing institutionalization of the RCEP. Through the lens of neo-middle power diplomacy, ASEAN has seemingly succeeded in further enmeshing and hedging on China with the other partners not just to temper its economic and geopolitical ambitions, but also to advance common advocacies in trade and economic affairs. The proof of the diplomatic successes and failures of ASEAN with RCEP, however, lies in the agreement's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

III. STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Earlier analyses have pointed out that the greatest strength of the RCEP lies in the economic benefits on offer. A conservative estimate has put the potential collective economic gains at about USD 438 billion by 2030, although trade diversion may account for as much as USD 48 billion for non-RCEP countries in the same time frame.²⁷ These benefits would accrue not so much from the system of preferential tariff reduction within the RCEP as from the mechanisms for deep regional integration provided by the agreement.²⁸ Further estimations suggest that ASEAN members such as the Philippines and Vietnam would gain the most in terms of GDP growth, rated at around 2 percent, while opting out of the agreement may result in a projected decrease in GDP by 0.3 percent.²⁹ Positive trade creation and improved post-production trade are expected, especially if maritime transport and trade networks among member countries could be developed.³⁰ In the Philippines, the RCEP is expected to reduce tariffs and other barriers, as well as increase exports among all members of the agreement, leading to a reduced poverty rate by 1.6 percentage points.³¹ Productivity and wages are also estimated to increase, with regional trade in nondurable and durable goods manufacturing sectors anticipated to gain the most out of the agreement.³²

Beyond direct benefits for member countries, the RCEP allows a more gradual and phased transition towards greater trade liberalization across a wide range of goods and services, which would be important considering the different capabilities of the members of the agreement.³³ Furthermore, the RCEP would, through its

provisions on SMEs and on e-commerce, enable the internationalization of SMEs from member countries and greater accumulation of foreign direct investments between member states, thereby strengthening regional value chains (RVCs) and regional production networks.³⁴ More narrowly, the RCEP is expected to enhance women-led SMEs engaged with cross-country trade through social media and online commerce platforms that has been adopted in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁵ Meanwhile, the RCEP provides opportunities for member countries to expand their participation in global value chains (GVCs) within the agreement itself.³⁶ Human resources and infrastructure development would also present opportunities for further advancement through the RCEP, while resolving the challenges from market access and limited national treatment.³⁷ Finally, through the emerging international division of labor arising from the agreement, trade in global innovation services would increase, and the RCEP would be important in trade policy risk reduction and the preservation of the regional rules-based trade regime.³⁸

Arguably, all of the abovementioned so far have been made achievable by ASEAN's commitment, through the RCEP, in incentivizing regional supply chains while, at the same time, catering to the different political concerns and sensitivities of the member countries.³⁹ This could be further bolstered by its provision of trade liberalization, investment development, and the subsequent significant reduction of country-specific trade risks.⁴⁰ These are results of consensus-based negotiations shepherded by ASEAN. By ensuring that governance and economic issues were treated carefully, ASEAN has ensured that both benefits and commitments are fairly distributed among the member states, while simultaneously being engaged in enmeshing and hedging on China. By focusing more on the economic aspects of intra-regional trade, ASEAN was able to put forward a rules-based trade network and advance some of its most salient advocacies, such as rules-based and consensus-driven trade.

The RCEP also demonstrated mechanisms and characteristics that focus more on the regional geopolitical order. The fact that it has successfully enabled economic cooperation created the potential to enable political cooperation among members, with ASEAN's ability to pull together partners, as well as the provisions on economic and technical cooperation, being at the forefront of such opportunity.⁴¹ Furthermore, the agreement has given ASEAN an important

interceding role in mediating tensions among China, Japan, and South Korea, while also opening the doors for Australia and New Zealand to help moderate the perceived Chinese leverage.⁴² ASEAN has become more ambitious than expected, especially considering that its “desire to promote centrality” has been one of the factors and motivations for the RCEP.⁴³

This further solidified ASEAN as a neo-middle power as the Association invested the necessary efforts to actively pursue its geopolitical and economic objectives and advocacies considering its limited capabilities. This is a substantial achievement considering that ASEAN had to overcome the lack of readiness among the participating countries to exercise flexibility, the need for comprehensive and balanced trade outcomes, and the introduction of other issues by some of the same participants, which distracted much of the negotiations.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, India’s withdrawal from the RCEP and the Philippines’ reticence to its ratification may be indicative of the weaknesses of the agreement. On the issue of India’s withdrawal, intellectual property was one of the major sticking points during the negotiations, with India wanting less stringent rules which could affect its capability to provide cheap generic medicines and educational materials to the rest of the developing world.⁴⁵ However, the more serious area of contention for India is the extensive tariff reduction schedule and the country’s already rising trade deficit, coupled with fears around cheap imports, which could lead to the reduction in India’s GDP and widespread opposition among major Indian industries.⁴⁶ For the Philippines, meanwhile, the origins of its reticence could be traced to its policy over FTAs, given that before the RCEP, it had signed only one bilateral agreement, that is with Japan.⁴⁷

The opposition to the RCEP is grounded on concerns over liberalization and safety nets, especially during surges in importation specifically of critical agricultural goods and services.⁴⁸ The caution over alternative cheap imports over local production and fears over perceived unfettered liberalization form the common foundation for India’s withdrawal and the Philippines’ reticence. India was particularly explicit in taking issue with China’s inclusion in the RCEP, ostensibly on issues concerning cheap imports, but there are also geopolitical dimensions considering the long-standing tensions between the two countries.⁴⁹ Both countries can still rejoin the agreement and initiate the process to amend the RCEP, which would benefit not just them but everyone else in the agreement. For

India, the RCEP has explicitly provided for a fast track to accession, in recognition of its initial participation in the negotiations.⁵⁰ For the Philippines, it needs only ratification, which seemed more likely due to the expression of renewed support by President Ferdinand Marcos, Jr and his cabinet.⁵¹

Aside from the concerns raised by India and the Philippines, there are discussions regarding the costs associated with the agreement. One simulation estimated that ASEAN would deteriorate in its collective balance of trade with the non-ASEAN members at an annual rate of six percent, while tariff revenues would be gradually lost especially considering the ongoing post-pandemic economic recovery efforts.⁵² Trade balance is a key issue for the Philippines, although it can be mitigated by the possible increase in trade and investments especially with the non-ASEAN partners.⁵³

Another significant weakness is that the RCEP lacks any substantial provisions on standardizing trade rules on labor and the environment.⁵⁴ Such weakness is by design, as ASEAN includes less-developed countries such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, facilitating the need for acceptable forms of institutional flexibility and special treatment.⁵⁵ Aside from the two major areas of substantial policy limitations, the agreement also lacked some policies and standardization guidelines on state-owned enterprises, consumer protection, government procurement, competition policy, and the Internet, as well as provisions and mechanisms in answering the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and contingencies in case of similar crises, and provisions on intellectual property rights beyond affirmations on the rules already set by WTO.⁵⁶ In terms of the environment, it was found, for example, that improvements in exportation, renewable energy supplies, and political stability could form the basis for reducing consumption-based carbon emissions among members of the agreement.⁵⁷ It may have been covered by possible improvements in technical cooperation over the production of renewable energy goods,⁵⁸ but further rules and commitments on environmental protection are needed.

The weight of demands and commitments imposed by the RCEP is less than that of the CPTTP, and the RCEP has greater room for accommodation and flexibility on account of the differing development capabilities among its members.⁵⁹ The RCEP also lacks more comprehensive coverage over certain major issues, especially on labor rights and environmental protection, despite the

enormous economic and demographic size of member countries.⁶⁰ The failure to resolve these deficiencies sooner would create difficulties among members, especially in resolving disputes involving those areas of concern, even when the codified policy flexibility and special national treatment is applied.

In sum, the RCEP's strengths primarily lie in providing freer trade and consolidated patterns of rules-based trade in the region. Meanwhile, the RCEP is found lacking in certain areas, especially regarding labor and environment provisions. Both reflect ASEAN middle power diplomacy as the strengths found in the RCEP showcase ASEAN's proactive commitments towards free trade and its centrality in the regional integration process. Meanwhile, the weaknesses expose the limits of ASEAN diplomatic capabilities, as it must carefully navigate the needs, concerns, and aspirations of each member to come up with the RCEP.

IV. OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

The RCEP certainly has opportunities to be used for its formation. Also, it has the potential to enable it to achieve its stated vision and goals. One such opportunity is the sectoral value-added convergence among the participant countries prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sectoral per capita income levels among the members align along national income categorical lines for advanced, upper middle, and lower middle economies.⁶¹ Of course, COVID-19 has placed such sectoral convergence on hold as every economy was adversely affected by it, but even the pandemic became an opportunity to accelerate the RCEP into fruition. The eventual effects and lessons from the pandemic should also be seen as opportunities to renew talks and even push for amendments not only to inculcate safeguards within the agreement in case of similar crises, but also to constantly review the agreement provisions to better suit the evolving regional and global social, geopolitical, and economic situation, ensuring a sustainable and future-proof RCEP.

The RCEP came along at a time when economic and geopolitical uncertainties pushed countries to seek stability in collective projects such as those of deep regional integration. Even before the pandemic, the US' withdrawal from the original version of the CPTTP and the failures of the multilateral investment agreement by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

(OECD) paved the way for the RCEP to potentially set the bar for regimes of international investment and, perhaps, even deep integration to come.⁶² The tensions between the US and China have unexpectedly given ASEAN both the opportunity and the impetus to hasten the process of regional integration through the RCEP.⁶³ The pursuit of the agreement could not have been a reaction to more recent geopolitical shifts as the process started in 2011, sometime before tensions started to intensify. Instead, ASEAN's move to push for the RCEP must be seen as an exercise in harmonizing the multitudes of bilateral and multilateral FTAs. Its members have signed with each other and with the other partner countries that coincided first with ASEAN's stated mission and vision of deeper regional integration, and then with the rising global geopolitical tensions. Even the previous FTAs can be considered opportunities for RCEP's inception and foundation, as free trade relations among the participating countries have already been established precisely through the previous FTAs.

The tension between the US and China can be considered threats to the RCEP in their own ways. In the case of the US, it is more precise to point toward the country's possible accession and participation in the agreement as an unexpected threat. As most of ASEAN and all the other participant middle powers are allies of the US, the latter's participation in the RCEP would create imbalances for all in terms of regional trade relations among members, as well as increase further the current geopolitical tensions between the US and China.⁶⁴ Such tensions may also be exacerbated by the relatively low confidence that the East Asian countries have in the US due to the reputational and economic damage that the foreign policies of the former Trump administration had wrought to the country and to the region.⁶⁵

American accession is not precluded from ever happening, especially considering that the RCEP has a relatively simple accession procedure, which is open 18 months after the agreement went into force for any country or separate customs territory to join, and only requires the consent of the full ratified membership and any other conditions agreed upon by the members and the applicant state.⁶⁶ For China, it can use the RCEP to strengthen and enlarge its sphere of influence to include the rest of the member countries, especially ASEAN. It is hoped, however, that either the centrality of ASEAN or Japan's potential move to leverage its status within the CPTTP would serve as a check on China.⁶⁷

Interestingly, the tensions between China and the US can be used as an

opportunity by ASEAN to further its neo-middle-power agenda by mediating between the two major economies, especially in the scenario of the US deciding to join the RCEP. This would test ASEAN's capabilities in forging partnerships with widely differing partners and its determination in keeping ASEAN centrality in the agreement. ASEAN would not want to further complicate or exacerbate the existing tensions between the two major powers to the point that it would lead to irreversible damage to, even dissolution of, the agreement.

Perhaps, a more prescient threat to the RCEP is the potential rebound of the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, negotiations continued into the early 2020 in the early stages of the pandemic. The agreement was signed virtually, and considerations for post-pandemic economic recovery became one of the driving forces in the acceleration and eventual conclusion of the negotiations.⁶⁸ However, there are fears that a new strain of the coronavirus may emerge due to the surge in China after it abandoned its strict zero-COVID policy and the easing of its mobility restrictions and health safety protocols.⁶⁹ Already, the estimates in December 2022 suggest a daily additional unrecorded caseload of 37 million.⁷⁰ The surge has already affected China's economy as the manufacturing sector and the consumer market fell to historic lows, going so far as to see voluntary seizures on both production and mobility in certain areas and sectors.⁷¹

These developments may push China to reconsider its membership for any number of reasons, but most probably for the need to prop up and protect the economy from further liberalization of trade while battling a resurgent pandemic. It may also be the case that China's productivity has debilitated, reducing goods and exports at par or even below pre-RCEP levels. At any rate, ASEAN must work harder in shepherding support for new talks and, if necessary, renegotiations of the RCEP to ensure its ability to withstand a rebounding pandemic, especially considering that member countries are still in the process of recovery. Success in this endeavor would depend on how well ASEAN would handle the differing concerns of its members and their partners in the agreement, especially China, as well as its ability to bring everyone together into discussion and renegotiation.

The RCEP finds itself amid a global pandemic and increasing geopolitical tensions that offer both opportunities and threats to the agreement. The COVID-19 pandemic has given urgency and further motivation to the formation of the RCEP, and the lessons from the pandemic can be absorbed to make the agreement

sustainable and future-proof. At the same time, the risks remain with China experiencing the worst surge of cases since it relented on its zero-COVID policy, endangering both Chinese and regional health and economic security, which may spill over to the RCEP. Meanwhile, the economic and geopolitical tensions between China and the US provide an opportunity for ASEAN, through the RCEP, to better engage in middle power diplomacy. However, it should carefully consider its role and strategy given the ambitions and objectives of both countries. The RCEP could become the standard for future FTAs, given the failures and limitations of previous ones. ASEAN, therefore, should remain vigilant and strategic in its ensuing diplomatic maneuvers to maintain its role as a middle power.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Looking at the RCEP's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, vis-à-vis ASEAN's roles and aspirations as a middle power, an argument can be made to establish ASEAN as having played the critical mediating and facilitating role in forming and institutionalizing the agreement. The strengths and weaknesses of the RCEP reflect greatly on how ASEAN managed to bring together 15 countries of differing economic and diplomatic aspirations, capabilities, and capacities, some of which having conflicts with each other. Meanwhile, the weaknesses can indicate the careful balancing act ASEAN has to do for the agreement to come into fruition, as well as the limits of its capabilities. Leaving certain policy areas such as labor and environment off the negotiations suggests that these elements are too contentious to be included even with all the persuasion and diplomacy that ASEAN could muster. Even those issues tackled were found to be either somewhat lacking or mere affirmations of existing regional and global commitments, which caused controversies leading to India's withdrawal from the process and the Philippines' reticence in ratifying the agreement.

The opportunities and threats to the RCEP elucidated the complex global and regional context in which ASEAN finds itself. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing tensions between China and the US serve as both opportunities and threats to the RCEP and continue to contribute to the evolving context. These

present clear challenges and opportunities for ASEAN to test its diplomatic skills and strategies. It has proven that it has the capacity to do so with the signing of the RCEP but maintaining and sustaining it without being dominated by any one country is the next step and challenge for the RCEP and ASEAN.

The RCEP also provides a good picture of ASEAN as a neo-middle power, actively pursuing its advocacies and geopolitical objectives with much skill and care considering its limited economic and political power. The ASEAN centrality here and elsewhere lies not in the power to demand concessions like how the US and China can. Rather, this centrality revolves around ASEAN's role as a mediator and facilitator in the inception, negotiation, and establishment of the RCEP even in the most challenging of circumstances. Likewise, ASEAN has achieved its strategy of enmeshing and hedging on China through the RCEP by offering China a clear and substantial stake in regional affairs, as well as including other middle powers such as Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand into the agreement. Of course, not all went the way of ASEAN: the RCEP's weaknesses, India's withdrawal, the Philippines' reticence on ratification, and the accusations of the agreement being "China-led" can all attest to that.

Although the RCEP is now in effect, how well it would deliver on its promises and how sustainable it would be remained to be seen. Furthermore, the ASEAN strategy of enmeshing and hedging on China could be studied not just within the confines of ASEAN-China relations, but also about ASEAN's relations with the US. Finally, the concept of ASEAN centrality needs further exploration to understand how this operates and how it affects its interactions with other countries and international institutions.

As for the RCEP, this study recommends a renewed discussion, perhaps renegotiation, on its missing and lacking policy areas, with special references to labor, environmental protection, intellectual property, and contingencies in cases of pandemics and similar emergencies and crises. Labor rights and environmental concerns in trade are becoming more prescient considering the increasing need for equitable and sustainable development across the world. Resolving issues in intellectual property may not only entice India back to the agreement, but also provide clearer guidance for all parties involved, while resolving issues on contingency may finally convince the Philippines to ratify the RCEP.

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