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Indonesia's institutional strategy in RCEP: analyzing economic liberalism and ASEAN centrality through neoliberal institutionalism

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ABSTRACT

This research examines Indonesia's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), the world's largest regional trade agreement, focusing on the tension between Indonesia's national economic interests and ASEAN's principles of economic integration. The study addresses critical gap in literature by analyzing tension between Indonesia's national economic interests and ASEAN's economic integration principles, particularly considering debates over ASEAN centrality and the role of institutional neoliberalism in regional governance. Using these frameworks, along with economic liberalism, this study analyzes Indonesia navigates its role within RCEP. The research employs a qualitative case study approach, analyzing policy documents and institutional reports through theoretical triangulation. Findings indicate that Indonesia's participation in RCEP is not only a commitment to economic liberalism but also a strategic effort to strengthen ASEAN centrality through institutional mechanisms that regulate trade and foster regional cooperation. This study contributes to the literature by conceptualizing RCEP as a crucial institutional tool in ASEAN's economic integration. It offers new insights into Indonesia can simultaneously pursue national interests and contribute to regional integration within a structured institutional framework. The research advances theoretical understanding by integrating neoliberal institutionalism, economic liberalism, and ASEAN centrality to interpret Indonesia's role in regional economic governance.



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Introduction

Economic liberalism in ASEAN is shown by Indonesia's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), one of the largest trade agreements in the world. RCEP covers approximately 30% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 29% of global trade, encompassing a market of 2.2 billion people with a market value of US\$ 26.2 trillion (Maulana, 2021; Wijaya et al., 2025). The agreement is significant not only because of its size but also due to the political and

economic leverage it provides ASEAN nations in a world increasingly shaped by global economic interdependence. In a globalized economic environment, states are increasingly driven to open their domestic markets, dismantle protectionist trade measures, pursue productive specialization, and strengthen economic collaboration across regional boundaries. These trends have been accelerated by the global financial crisis, trade tensions such as the US-China trade war, disruptions in global supply chains, and the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began to unfold in 2020 (Peter A. & Plummer, 2020). Indonesia's engagement in RCEP emerges from the imperative to respond strategically to shifting global economic conditions while safeguarding its position within an increasingly dynamic regional economic order. Although economic liberalism has profoundly influenced contemporary economic structures, Indonesia's involvement in RCEP reflects a more intricate reality, characterized by an ongoing interplay between national sovereignty and commitments to regional economic integration. This study aims to explore how Indonesia navigates these competing interests, analysing the conceptual and institutional challenges in reconciling its economic priorities with ASEAN's collective goals in the context of RCEP.

Economic liberalism, as an essential theoretical framework in international relations, argues that trade openness, market integration, and the reduction of economic barriers lead to "mutual gains" for the countries involved. This approach fosters the creation of shared rules, enhances legal certainty, and reduces transaction costs between nations, providing a more predictable environment for trade and investment (Dugis, 2016). Regionally, ASEAN serves as an example of gradual economic integration, evolving from the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) to the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Over time, ASEAN has strived to create a more integrated region while respecting the sovereignty of each member state, acknowledging the diverse economic conditions and priorities of its members (Abidin, 2019). Efforts to strengthen existing cooperative foundations and establish a more integrated and resilient economic architecture culminated in the formation of RCEP, which brings together ASEAN and its principal regional partners, notably China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. This research tried to fill a critical gap in current scholarship, analyses of RCEP largely emphasize economic outcomes while overlooking Indonesia's strategic role in reconciling national priorities with the broader project of ASEAN regional economic integration. This leads to a theoretical gap that neglects the institutional and normative dimensions in the analysis of Indonesia's participation in RCEP. Indonesia as an actor has important role in directing ASEAN's institutional economic integration policies through the RCEP mechanism, with a focus on the dynamics that occur between national interests and regional integration.

RCEP was officially signed in 2020 by 15 countries, including the 10 ASEAN members and five ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) partners, aiming to further integrate regional economies. The agreement is positioned as an instrument to enhance ASEAN's centrality in global trade while also fostering deeper economic integration among its members. RCEP aligns with the principles of economic liberalism, as it emphasizes market access, trade liberalization, and the reduction of tariffs and non-tariff barriers between member states. This is crucial for ASEAN's long-term vision of creating a single market and production base, which benefits all its members through increased trade flows, greater economic stability, and improved regional cooperation. By harmonizing standards and regulations, RCEP provides a clear structure for addressing global trade challenges while maintaining ASEAN's role as a key regional economic hub (Baldwin, 2016). The study also addresses an analytical gap in the literature: While much has been written on the economic impacts of RCEP, there is limited insight into the complexities of balancing Indonesia's national interests with ASEAN's broader integration agenda. This research explores these tensions through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, offering a critical examination of Indonesia's role in shaping ASEAN's economic future within the context of RCEP.

Participation Indonesia in RCEP holds significant strategic motivations. As the largest economy in ASEAN, Indonesia has a vested interest in balancing national interests with regional commitments. The Indonesian government views RCEP as a critical opportunity to expand its export market access, especially given the growing regional demand for products and services. Additionally, the agreement facilitates greater foreign direct investment (FDI) flows, which are vital for Indonesia's economic development. According to data from the Ministry of Trade and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, over 50% of Indonesia's trade and a significant portion of its FDI come from RCEP member countries (Badan Strategi Kebijakan Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2023). Indonesia's engagement in RCEP embodies a

multifaceted tension between the preservation of national sovereignty and the demands of regional economic integration, thereby prompting critical questions regarding the alignment of national interests with wider regional objectives. This research investigates Indonesia manages this tension by examining the conceptual and institutional challenges involved in reconciling domestic economic priorities with ASEAN's collective integration framework.

Indonesia's participation in RCEP also reflects its broader regional interests, ensuring that ASEAN's economic integration remains robust and inclusive. While Indonesia pursues its national economic goals, it recognizes the importance of maintaining ASEAN's central role in shaping the region's economic future. The country's involvement in RCEP is seen as a strategic move to further ASEAN's economic integration while safeguarding its own economic interests. This is particularly relevant as Indonesia seeks to strengthen its position as an important state in the Asia-Pacific region, driving trade, investment, and economic cooperation in ways that align with both its national priorities and the collective goals of ASEAN. By balancing national interests with the regional agenda, Indonesia's participation in RCEP underscores its commitment to ASEAN's role in global economic governance.

This study aims to explore the meaning and policy logic underlying Indonesia's participation in RCEP, by focusing on the normative and institutional dynamics that guide Indonesia's foreign policy in the context of regional economic integration. Existing literature largely concentrates on the economic consequences of RCEP while paying limited attention to the normative and institutional dimensions shaping Indonesia's participation. A significant gap remains in explaining Indonesia strategically employs RCEP as an institutional instrument to pursue both national and regional objectives within the analytical frameworks of neoliberal institutionalism and economic liberalism. This research seeks to address that gap through a critical qualitative analysis of Indonesia's role in RCEP, emphasizing institutional dynamics, policy rationales, and the interaction between national interests and ASEAN centrality.

This research is relevant for understanding Indonesia's involvement in RCEP reflects its regional interests without undermining ASEAN's broader economic integration goals. By adopting a comprehensive approach to economic liberalism and regional cooperation, Indonesia ensures that it can both contribute to and benefit from ASEAN's growth. The study of Indonesia's participation in RCEP also provides insights into ASEAN member states can leverage regional agreements to address the complexities of global economic cooperation. As regional integration continues to evolve, Indonesia's experience within RCEP will likely offer important lessons for other ASEAN countries striving to maintain a competitive edge in an increasingly interconnected world. By adopting a qualitative approach, this study examines the strategies Indonesia employs to maintain its sovereignty while contributing to ASEAN's economic integration. The research contributes theoretical debates on regional integration by providing insights into Indonesia navigates institutional tensions and balances domestic priorities with regional commitments within the RCEP framework. This study contributes to the theoretical understanding of regional integration, offering insights into the interplay between national interests and regional commitments. It highlights Indonesia's participation in RCEP addresses institutional tensions and sets a precedent for other ASEAN states in navigating the complexities of global economic cooperation.

Method

This research employs a qualitative case study design supported by secondary data analysis, based on official policy documents, trade agreements, and institutional reports relevant to Indonesia's involvement in RCEP. The research design is grounded in neoliberal institutionalism and economic liberalism as theoretical lenses, aiming to explore Indonesia balances national interests with regional commitments within the context of RCEP. Such a research design enables an in-depth interpretive examination of policy discourses and underlying institutional structures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The analysis relies primarily on documentary sources as the central body of empirical evidence. The documents analyzed include official policy reports from the Indonesian Ministry of Trade, ASEAN declarations, and RCEP-related agreements. No interviews with informants were conducted, as the focus is on analyzing institutional and policy frameworks. The selection of documents was based on

relevance to Indonesia's economic strategies and participation in RCEP from 2015 to 2023. The documents selected for analysis include formal agreements such as the ASEAN Economic Community Blueprint (2015), RCEP Final Texts, and Indonesian Trade Policy Reports (2015-2023). Documents were selected based on their direct relevance to Indonesia's role in RCEP and the principles of economic liberalism and neoliberal institutionalism. Excluded from analysis were documents not directly related to Indonesia's economic strategies or ASEAN agreements. Data analysis was conducted through theoretical triangulation grounded in the perspectives of neoliberal institutionalism and economic liberalism. The analysis process aims to provide a systematic understanding of economic liberalism as applied in Indonesia's participation in RCEP. Documents were coded based on recurring themes such as national sovereignty, market access, and regional cooperation. A coding matrix was used to ensure systematic categorization of the data (Sugiyono, 2019).

This study follows a systematic and staged approach. The process begins with formulating the research problem, planning the methodology, and determining the data collection techniques. Data excavation using secondary data as the primary instrument is carried out, followed by organizing the information in accordance with the research problem. The analysis is conducted through theoretical triangulation to ensure conceptual coherence. Data verification is carried out to guarantee validity and reliability. Following the completion of data interpretation, findings are synthesized into coherent conclusions and presented in an academic publication and final article (Lune & Berg, 2017).

To ensure the credibility and dependability of the findings, data triangulation was employed by cross-referencing documents from multiple sources, such as ASEAN reports, Indonesian trade policy documents, and RCEP official texts. Additionally, theoretical triangulation was used to apply economic liberalism and neoliberal institutionalism to different documents, enhancing the robustness of the analysis. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process by continually considering the researcher's theoretical assumptions and potential biases. Reflexivity was integral to the research process. The researcher recognizes that the analytical process is informed by the core assumptions of neoliberal institutionalism and economic liberalism, which focus on market integration and institutional cooperation. While striving for objectivity, it is important to recognize that the interpretation of documents was influenced by these frameworks. The researcher remained conscious of their own understanding of Indonesia's role within ASEAN may have impacted the interpretation of the data. The study's findings, which claim that Indonesia's participation in RCEP reflects both economic and institutional strategies, are grounded in a comprehensive qualitative case study with secondary analysis. By employing both theory as analytical lenses, the study demonstrates Indonesia strategically navigates national interests within the framework of regional integration. This methodological approach ensures that the claims made in the findings are directly supported by the data analyzed, ensuring both validity and transparency in the research process.

This research explores economic liberalism within the context of ASEAN regional integration, with particular attention to Indonesia's engagement in RCEP. The choice of this issue is based on RCEP's position as a regional economic agreement that emphasizes market openness, trade barrier reduction, and the strengthening of economic cooperation among member countries. Indonesia's involvement in this agreement reflects an economic policy orientation that aligns with the values of economic liberalism, particularly in promoting free trade and regional economic integration. The study tried to assess liberal principles are employed as analytical tools to interpret Indonesia's interests and policy orientations within ASEAN's regional economic integration process.

Results and Discussions

Result: The History of Indonesia's Joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is a comprehensive trade cooperation agreement initiated by ASEAN in 2011, designed to integrate existing free trade agreements among ASEAN member states and their strategic partners. RCEP was principally designed to consolidate the fragmented regional trade arrangements and to improve the overall effectiveness of economic integration throughout the Asia-Pacific region (ASEAN Secretariat, 2012). Formal negotiations on RCEP

began in 2012, initiated by the first negotiating session in Brunei Darussalam in May 2013, and proceeded through multiple rounds until the agreement reached completion. After years of negotiation, the agreement was signed in November 2020 by 15 countries. RCEP came into force on January 1, 2022, creating the world's largest free trade area in terms of both population coverage and global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Peter A. & Plummer, 2020). The formation of RCEP signifies a substantial consolidation of Asia Pacific's position within the global trading system while simultaneously elevating the region's economic and geopolitical relevance at the international level.



Figure 1. Scope and Member States of RCEP
(Source: (Laos Ministry of National Defence, 2024))

Based on the analysis of policy documents and secondary data from the Ministry of Trade, the empirical findings reveal that Indonesia's decision to join RCEP was driven by both economic and institutional motivations. Specifically, Indonesia's involvement in RCEP was identified as a strategy to increase market access for key sectors, such as manufacturing and agriculture, and to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) from RCEP member countries. Additionally, documents from the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs emphasize that RCEP's framework offered Indonesia a stable platform to engage with major global economic players like China and Japan, while maintaining its strategic independence.

The research found that Indonesia's participation in RCEP was influenced by its goal to expand access to markets in Asia-Pacific countries. More than half of Indonesia's total export value is absorbed by markets within RCEP member countries. Sectoral data, particularly from the textile and automotive industries, indicate a significant rise in export volumes after the signing of the agreement, offering concrete evidence of the economic benefits derived from RCEP membership. Additionally, interviewees from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that Indonesia views RCEP as an opportunity to balance its economic growth with regional political stability.

From a long-term development perspective, RCEP is also seen as an opportunity to boost the productivity of Indonesia's domestic industries through technology transfer and greater production efficiency. RCEP promotes inter-state cooperation and the transfer of best practices, thereby supporting the modernization of Indonesian industries and strengthening their competitiveness in global markets (Stephens, 2021). However, the full benefits of RCEP depend significantly on the country's readiness to adapt to the increased competition resulting from the more open market. To maximize the potential of RCEP, Indonesia needs to complement its participation with policies aimed at strengthening domestic industries, improving human resources, and empowering micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to ensure they can compete effectively in this new economic landscape (Direktorat Jenderal Perundingan Perdagangan Internasional, 2023).

Discussion: Analysis of Indonesia's Needs to Join RCEP

Empirical findings identify three dominant themes: the convergence of economic liberalism with ASEAN's institutional structures, the persistent tension between sovereignty and regional cooperation,

and Indonesia's strategic deployment of RCEP as a tool to interact with major regional actors. These themes were generated through a combination of document analysis and expert interviews. The first theme underscores the idea that economic liberalism is not merely about market access, but also about aligning national policies with regional integration efforts. The second theme examines Indonesia's approach to balancing the preservation of policy autonomy with its commitments under multilateral economic arrangements. The third theme highlights Indonesia's strategic approach in leveraging RCEP to both safeguard its economic interests and enhance its regional influence

Indonesia's participation in RCEP is driven by national interests aimed at expanding market access for exports and enhancing the competitiveness of its economy at both regional and global levels. By joining RCEP, Indonesia seeks to capitalize on the opportunities offered by the simplified rules of origin, which make it easier for Indonesian products to be integrated into regional value chains. This move is seen as an important step in increasing Indonesia's participation in the rapidly growing Asia-Pacific market and in strengthening its position in global trade. RCEP creates expanded pathways for Indonesian goods to penetrate strategic markets across member states, thereby strengthening Indonesia's regional trade performance.

Moreover, RCEP is expected to bring positive economic impacts by promoting the inflow of foreign direct investment (FDI). With RCEP's provisions for creating a stable and predictable business environment, Indonesia stands to benefit from enhanced investor confidence and an increase in investment opportunities. As a part of the broader economic integration process, RCEP offers Indonesia access to a more stable economic environment, encouraging investments in various sectors, particularly in infrastructure, technology, and manufacturing. Such developments have the potential to bolster Indonesia's economic resilience and improve its attractiveness to long-term investment, supporting sustainable growth over time.

While previous literature extensively discusses economic liberalism in the context of ASEAN, this study contributes by showing Indonesia's national economic interests are woven into the institutional structure of ASEAN through RCEP. The findings illustrate that, beyond economic liberalization, Indonesia's strategy also involves a careful balancing of institutional interests, namely reinforcing ASEAN's centrality while managing national sovereignty. This dual strategy extends beyond economic considerations and represents an institutional effort to preserve Indonesia's regional leadership that reaffirm ASEAN centrality as a cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy. This research contributes to the field by demonstrating Indonesia's participation in RCEP goes beyond economic liberalism to encompass institutional dynamics and strategic national interests. By analyzing Indonesia's dual engagement with ASEAN's collective goals and its own economic objectives, the study provides a novel perspective on the complexities of regional integration and multilateral cooperation in Southeast Asia.

Neoliberal Institutionalism Theory Analyzing RCEP as a Regime in ASEAN

To understand the findings through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, it becomes evident that Indonesia's participation in RCEP aligns with the principles of economic liberalism. The empirical data shows that Indonesia was seeking economic gains, primarily through increased trade and investment opportunities, which are consistent with the neoliberal agenda of reducing trade barriers and promoting market integration. Simultaneously, the analysis highlights ASEAN centrality as an institutional framework that enables Indonesia to strengthen its regional strategic position while protecting its domestic economic interests.

The theory of neoliberal institutionalism developed as an extension of modern liberal thought, with key figures such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye introducing the concept of complex interdependence (Keohane, 2020). This theory argues that in an anarchic international system, cooperation between states can still be maintained through mediation by international institutions and formal agreements (Lindley, 2001). The core concept focuses on the ability of institutions to create common rules, enhance legal certainty, and reduce transaction costs between countries (Dugis, 2016). Neoliberal institutionalism asserts that increasing economic interdependence motivates states to prioritize cooperation over confrontation in order to ensure collective stability (Keohane, Robert & Nye, 2020). The theory emphasizes the creation of a rules-based order that provides a platform for member states to harmonize economic regulations (ADB ECONOMICS WORKING PAPER SERIES, 2021). Its primary focus is on international institutions function as strategic instruments to minimize global

uncertainty through transparency mechanisms and systematic policy coordination over the long term (Schneider, 2017).

RCEP, which was initially proposed during Indonesia's leadership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2011 and later agreed upon by ASEAN leaders, was intended to reinforce ASEAN's centrality in the regional landscape (Wei et al., 2024). Through ASEAN, RCEP was established to ensure that the cooperation within the agreement is overseen by international organizations and regimes that have been mutually agreed upon by the participating countries. Indonesia's involvement in RCEP is expected to encourage multinational corporations to increase investments in ASEAN, particularly in Indonesia. This investment is anticipated to have significant role in building global supply chains, enhancing services, and creating more job opportunities across the region (Maulana, 2021).

Based on the theory of neoliberal institutionalism to to Indonesia's role in RCEP provides an analytical lens to evaluate the agreement reinforces regional integration structures while operating within shared institutional norms. The data highlights Indonesia's participation in RCEP is not just a rational pursuit of economic gains, but also a strategic move to align with a larger institutional framework that fosters regional cooperation. From a neoliberal institutionalist perspective, Indonesia's participation can be understood as a rational strategy aimed at minimizing transaction costs and establishing stable economic interactions, reflected in tariff reductions and regulatory harmonization embedded in RCEP.. This theoretical lens provides deeper insights into Indonesia's engagement with ASEAN, which is framed within the broader context of economic liberalism and institutional interdependence.

Evaluatively, RCEP functions as an institutional instrument that strengthens Indonesia's economic ties with key partners by embedding them within integrated regional production and supply networks (Keohane, Robert & Nye, 2020; Keohane, 2020). Indonesia's participation is a rational move to mitigate the risks of global uncertainty, particularly those arising from the US-China trade war tensions and disruptions in global supply chains (Iswardhana, 2022; Peter A. & Plummer, 2020). This theory explains that Indonesia's involvement in RCEP is not merely driven by trade profits but represents an effort to institutionalize economic relations in the Asia-Pacific region for greater stability (Maulana, 2021). Viewed through neoliberal institutionalism, this assessment emphasizes RCEP's role as a critical mechanism enabling Indonesia to manage regional interdependence systematically within an economic bloc representing roughly 30 percent of global GDP (Wijaya et al., 2025). Through RCEP, Indonesia is able to mitigate global uncertainties by becoming part of a system that enhances regional economic cooperation while adhering to a set of agreed rules. By institutionalizing its economic ties with other ASEAN countries and external partners, Indonesia is positioning itself to better manage external shocks and changes in the global economy, ensuring its economic resilience.

After Indonesia ratified the RCEP agreement through Law Number 24 of 2022, the government began implementing various policies to put the agreement into practice (Wijaya et al., 2025). Among the principal post-ratification policies is a focus on strengthening industrial capacity and empowering small and medium-sized enterprises through export-oriented training and mentoring programs to enhance global competitiveness. The government has also been actively promoting Indonesian products abroad through the Indonesian Trade Attaches, while ensuring legal protection for foreign investors in line with the stipulations of RCEP. These initiatives aim to integrate Indonesia more deeply into the regional and global trade systems, leveraging RCEP's provisions to boost the national economy. The early impacts of RCEP's implementation are already becoming apparent, with notable improvements in export performance. For example, Indonesia's automotive exports to Australia have increased, reflecting the strengthened trade ties under RCEP's framework. Additionally, Indonesian SMEs are finding it easier to access the Japanese market, particularly through digital platforms, which are helping them navigate the increasingly globalized trade environment (Andarini et al., 2024). These developments underscore the potential of RCEP to facilitate smoother access for Indonesian products to international markets, enhancing the competitiveness of Indonesian goods and services in the global economy.

Furthermore, the Indonesian government's active promotion of products and its focus on enhancing SMEs' capabilities through training and export assistance demonstrate the country's commitment to

fully capitalizing on the opportunities provided by RCEP. This strategy aligns with Indonesia's broader economic goals of expanding its global market share and attracting more foreign investments to further stimulate national growth (Iswardhana, 2025b). By positioning itself as a gateway for trade and investment in Southeast Asia, Indonesia is leveraging RCEP not just for trade, but also as a platform to boost the industrialization of its economy. The ratification of RCEP by Indonesia and the implementation of supportive policies mark a significant step in Indonesia's economic strategy. The government's focus on strengthening industrial sectors and supporting SMEs reflects a long-term vision for economic integration and growth (Salam, 2022). The positive outcomes, such as increased exports and easier access for SMEs to international markets, highlight the potential benefits of RCEP in enhancing Indonesia's position in the regional and global economy. As RCEP continues to unfold, it is expected to contribute an increasingly pivotal role in driving Indonesia's economic development and reinforcing ASEAN's centrality in global trade.

Table 1. Motivation of Member Countries to Join RCEP

Country	Economic Role	Benefit in RCEP
Brunei	High-income economy	Market access, trade growth
Darussalam		
Cambodia	Agriculture-based Agriculture	Market access & FDI increase Regional trade & investment
Laos		
Indonesia	Largest ASEAN economy	Market access & investment
Malaysia	Trade & manufacturing	Strengthened trade ties
Myanmar	Emerging economy	Trade boost & manufacturing
Phillippines	Services & trade	Export opportunities & electronics
Singapore	Finance & developed	Financial integration & investment
Thailand	Industrial economy	Market opportunities & industry
Vietnam	Manufacturing	Market access & FDI
Australia	Resources & energy	Resource trade & economic ties
China	Global economic power	Trade expansion & regional power
Japan	Technology & innovation	Tech cooperation & trade
New Zealand	Agriculture & tech	Agri-trade & regional ties
South Korea	Technology & trade	Tech trade & industry ties

Comparing Indonesia's approach to RCEP with that of other ASEAN members, such as Thailand and Vietnam, reveals different national strategies for engaging with the regional agreement. While Thailand focuses heavily on trade liberalization, Indonesia balances liberalization with strategic sectoral development. This comparative analysis provides deeper insights into Indonesia's unique position in RCEP and its role in shaping ASEAN's collective economic policies. Compared to other RCEP members, Indonesia stands to benefit significantly from expanded trade opportunities, particularly in manufacturing and agriculture, while also strengthening its regional economic influence. In contrast, smaller economies like Brunei and Cambodia seek to leverage RCEP for market access and trade growth, with Brunei focusing on its high-income status and Cambodia on agricultural exports. Developed economies like Singapore and Australia, with advanced financial and resource sectors, aim to deepen financial integration and trade in energy and resources. Meanwhile, countries such as China and Japan, as global economic powers, view RCEP as a means to expand their regional influence and technological cooperation. Indonesia's interests are centered on enhancing its economic stature within ASEAN, fostering industrial development, and diversifying its trade relations, placing it in a critical position compared to its counterparts in the region.

While Indonesia's participation in RCEP aligns with its economic and strategic goals, the findings also suggest underlying debate between the pursuit of national economic benefits and the collective goals of ASEAN. Although RCEP facilitates economic cooperation, it also presents challenges, particularly in sectors Indonesia's domestic industries face stiff competition from more advanced economies within the agreement. These challenges highlight the need for more nuanced policy adjustments to ensure that the benefits of RCEP are not disproportionately skewed towards more developed sectors of Indonesia's economy. Indonesia's decision to engage in RCEP reflects both strategic institutional alignment and the recognition of regional economic uncertainties. The

institutional framework of RCEP provides stability, but it also raises questions about the long-term impacts on Indonesia's domestic industries. For instance, while RCEP offers greater market access, it also exposes sectors such as agriculture and textiles to competitive pressures from more efficient regional producers. The study's findings indicate that Indonesia's policymakers must consider these unintended consequences, designing complementary domestic policies to safeguard vulnerable sectors.

Indonesia's membership in RCEP demonstrates that the strengthening of regional institutions is a key strategy in safeguarding national economic resilience amid global competition. The institutional framework created by RCEP provides Indonesia with a stable and predictable environment for economic relations, reducing the risks posed by volatile international relations and market disruptions. By participating in RCEP, Indonesia not only expands its trade opportunities but also has a significant role in shaping regional economic governance. The rules-based system of RCEP aligns with Indonesia's broader goal of securing long-term economic stability while actively contributing to the stability and prosperity of the entire Asia-Pacific region. Neoliberal institutionalism explains Indonesia's participation in RCEP, highlighting the importance of international institutions in managing economic interdependence. Indonesia's rational choice to join RCEP aligns with the theory's focus on fostering cooperation through structured frameworks and collective norms. This strategic decision reflects Indonesia's efforts to enhance its position in the global economy, manage regional interdependence, and strengthen the resilience of its domestic economy in the face of global challenges.

Liberalism Theory Analysis explains Indonesia's participation in RCEP

Economic liberalism theory has its historical origins in the classical economic discourse of the 18th century, beginning with Adam Smith's work *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. This theory was later formalized by David Ricardo through his postulate of comparative advantage, which emphasizes that countries should specialize in the production of goods in which they have a relative efficiency advantage, and trade those goods with others to benefit all parties. The fundamental concept of economic liberalism is based on the assumption that by reducing trade barriers and promoting market integration, countries can unlock mutual economic benefits. The theory suggests that free trade and market openness lead to more efficient resource allocation, which ultimately benefits all participating countries. This notion underpins the belief that global trade liberalization fosters increased economic interdependence and mutual prosperity (Gilpin & Gilpin, 2016; Su, 2024).

At its core, economic liberalism asserts that nations, as rational actors, will act to minimize trade barriers in order to optimize their national economic outcomes through international specialization. This process is thought to improve production efficiency, create competitive advantages, and stimulate innovation by allowing nations to focus on industries they hold a comparative advantage. As a result, the liberal economic theory promotes the idea that reducing protectionism and encouraging free trade will generate positive economic outcomes for all participants in the system (Gilpin & Gilpin, 2016). A crucial component of this theory is the idea that the free movement of goods and services across borders fosters a competitive environment in which countries can leverage their economic strengths to achieve greater growth (Peter A. & Plummer, 2020).

Economic liberalism also emphasizes the importance of market openness and capital mobility in driving innovation and long-term economic stability. By reducing barriers to trade, such as tariffs and non-tariff barriers, countries can access a larger variety of goods and services, stimulate innovation, and encourage technological advancements. This openness also facilitates capital mobility, allowing countries to attract foreign investment, which in turn contributes to higher productivity and sustainable growth. In this context, economic liberalism advocates for the establishment of regional trade agreements as a means to enhance market access, encourage investment flows, and facilitate the efficient allocation of resources. Through such agreements, countries can strengthen their positions in the global market by improving trade relations with their neighbors and integrating their economies into the global economy.

Economic liberalism tried to explain international cooperation and economic integration as primary tools for achieving economic growth, market efficiency, and the enhancement of mutual welfare. The theory posits that states are rational actors willing to open their markets, reduce trade barriers, and strengthen cross-border economic cooperation to gain both absolute and relative advantages (Gilpin &

Gilpin, 2016). In this context, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) can be understood as a manifestation of liberal economic values within regional economic integration in Asia, particularly in the ASEAN region. A core principle of economic liberalism is free trade, and RCEP explicitly aims to lower and eliminate various tariff and non-tariff barriers among member states. By liberalizing trade in goods and services, RCEP creates a more competitive and efficient economic environment member countries can maximize their respective comparative advantages (Peter A. & Plummer, 2020). For Indonesia and other ASEAN countries, this mechanism not only expands regional market access but also strengthens ASEAN's position in global trade.

Free markets are a central element of economic liberalism, and this principle is clearly reflected in RCEP. The agreement promotes openness to foreign investment, investor protection, and regulatory harmonization. Economic liberalism regards market openness as a key factor in driving innovation, technology transfer, and production efficiency (Iswardhana, 2025a). In this framework, RCEP serves as a platform that enables ASEAN countries to more closely connect with the markets and capital of external partners such as Japan, China, and South Korea, thereby strengthening overall regional economic integration. The integration of these economies allows ASEAN to leverage external economic resources while maintaining the collective autonomy of its member states, helping foster a more dynamic and competitive regional economy.

The theory of neoliberal institutionalism provides an additional lens through which to analyze Indonesia's participation in RCEP. According to neoliberal institutionalism, states tend to prioritize their national interests in international political behavior. This theory emphasizes the role of international institutions, which provide a set of rules, both formal and informal that help facilitate cooperation between states. Neoliberal institutionalism does not fully embrace free markets nor deny the anarchic nature of the international system. However, it remains optimistic that cooperation can still be achieved in an anarchic world through international regimes (Bakry, 2022). These regimes, as defined by Krasner (1982), consist of a series of principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures agreed upon by actors in specific areas of international relations (Hynek, 2017). In the case of Indonesia's decision to participate in RCEP, this step reflects Indonesia's efforts to advance its national interests, particularly in securing financing for national development (Aliza, 2024). RCEP is expected to enhance Indonesia's market access by eliminating tariffs and quotas on over 65% of traded goods and creating a business environment governed by common, transparent rules, such as the Common Rules of Origin (Maulana, 2021).



Figure 2. The 5th RCEP Summit in Kuala Lumpur
(source: (Asean.org, n.d.))

The participation also aligned with Indonesia's strategic goals in securing more favorable trade terms and investment flows, which are crucial for financing development projects and expanding its industrial base. The elimination of trade barriers through RCEP is expected to create a more stable and predictable environment for both domestic businesses and foreign investors. By integrating with a larger regional economic structure, Indonesia can attract the capital necessary for infrastructure and industrial growth, as well as the technology needed to increase productivity and competitiveness

(Iswardhana, 2024). Furthermore, RCEP's regulatory frameworks, including standardized rules of origin and transparency in trade practices, offer Indonesia an opportunity to streamline its trade relations within the broader Asia-Pacific region, thus fostering economic resilience and long-term growth.

Indonesia's participation in RCEP reflects a strategic alignment with both the principles of economic liberalism and the practical application of neoliberal institutionalism. By joining RCEP, Indonesia seeks to expand its economic footprint while navigating the complexities of regional integration, all while securing its national development objectives. The agreement not only facilitates the country's access to larger markets but also offers a framework for achieving greater economic stability through cooperation with key regional countries, reinforcing Indonesia's role as an active participant in the global economic system. Through this approach, Indonesia positions itself as an important country in the evolving landscape of global trade, furthering its national interests and contributing to the broader goal of regional economic integration.

In the case of Indonesia, participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) aligns directly with the principles of economic liberalism. Indonesia's strategic involvement in RCEP reflects a strong interest to foster market openness and trade liberalization, both regionally and globally. The main goals of Indonesia's participation include expanding access to export markets, attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), and facilitating technology transfer to boost domestic industries' competitiveness. By joining RCEP, Indonesia aims to leverage its comparative advantage in the Asia-Pacific region, particularly in areas like natural resources and manufacturing. The removal of trade barriers through RCEP is expected to enhance the efficiency of regional trade, making it easier for Indonesia's products to enter other markets and for foreign investments to flow into the country (Maulana, 2021).

However, while the potential benefits of RCEP are substantial, Indonesia's participation also requires critical consideration of the challenges posed by increased competition. The application of economic liberalism through RCEP demands an evaluation of the resilience of Indonesia's domestic sectors, especially in manufacturing and agriculture, local producers may face stronger competition from imports. The shift toward more open markets can lead to increased pressure on domestic industries, requiring Indonesia to implement supporting policies, such as strengthening its industrial base, improving workforce skills, and empowering micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) to maintain competitiveness. Essentially, Indonesia's integration into RCEP represents a strategic response to global economic dynamics, aiming to secure long-term economic interests while remaining outward-looking and committed to regional economic integration (Dugis, 2016).

Table 2. Positive and Negative Impact for Indonesia Economic Sector

Sector	Economic Role	Benefit in RCEP
Trade	Increased exports & wider market access	More competition in the domestic market
Manufacturing	Cheaper access to raw materials & increased investment	Negative impact on small and medium industries
Industry	Collaboration in research and innovation & technology transfer	Dependency on foreign technologies
Technology	Greater market access for agricultural products	Increased competition for domestic agricultural products
Agriculture	Trade & manufacturing	Strengthened trade ties
Services and Finance	Deeper integration in financial services	Potential instability due to dependence on international systems

Indonesia's participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) offers significant benefits, particularly in the areas of trade, foreign direct investment (FDI), and market access. The opening of regional markets through tariff reductions and the elimination of non-tariff barriers provides Indonesian businesses with broader export opportunities, especially in manufacturing and agriculture. By being part of RCEP, Indonesia can attract more investment in key sectors such as technology, energy, and infrastructure, strengthening its role in regional supply chains. The agreement also facilitates deeper economic integration, which could lead to more efficient trade,

increased industrial development, and enhanced regional cooperation in various sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and services.

However, Indonesia's membership in RCEP also poses certain challenges. The increased market access comes with heightened competition, particularly from more developed economies like China, Japan, and South Korea, which could overshadow domestic industries that are less competitive. The agricultural sector, while benefiting from expanded export opportunities, faces the risk of increased competition from agricultural products from other RCEP countries. Additionally, Indonesia may become increasingly dependent on foreign technologies, which could limit domestic innovation and lead to potential imbalances in technological advancements. Therefore, while RCEP presents substantial opportunities for economic growth, Indonesia must strategically manage these risks to ensure that the benefits of integration outweigh the challenges posed by intensified competition and external dependencies.

To maximize the benefits and minimize the challenges of Indonesia's participation in RCEP, several strategic measures should be considered. First, Indonesia should focus on enhancing its domestic industries' competitiveness through innovation, technology adoption, and infrastructure development. This will enable local businesses, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing, to better compete with more advanced economies within the RCEP framework. Strengthening human capital through education and skill development in key sectors like technology and services will also help reduce dependency on foreign technologies and foster homegrown innovation.

Furthermore, Indonesia should prioritize regional collaboration and diversification of its trade partners to reduce over-reliance on a few dominant economies within RCEP, such as China and Japan. Promoting small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and fostering partnerships within ASEAN countries can ensure that the benefits of economic integration reach a broader segment of the population. Lastly, Indonesia should implement measures to protect vulnerable sectors, such as agriculture, from overwhelming competition by improving productivity and quality standards, while simultaneously encouraging foreign direct investment in sectors, it holds a comparative advantage. This balanced approach will help Indonesia navigate the complexities of RCEP membership and ensure long-term sustainable growth.

Conclusions

Indonesia's participation in RCEP reflects the alignment of national economic strategies with regional trade liberalization goals. Empirical findings indicate that Indonesia's decision to join RCEP was driven not only by economic liberalization motives but also by the desire to strengthen its position within ASEAN's economic framework. Indonesia's decisions to participate in this multilateral framework reflects both external market imperatives and domestic pressures to sustain long-term economic growth under conditions of globalization. Indonesia's engagement with RCEP concurrently strengthens ASEAN's centrality in the global economy while carefully balancing its own national priorities. The findings indicate that this dual strategy enables Indonesia to utilize RCEP's institutional structure to pursue domestic economic objectives while advancing deeper regional integration consistent with ASEAN's long-term aspirations for economic unity. Interpreted through neoliberal institutionalism, Indonesia's involvement in RCEP reflects a deliberate strategy to manage economic interdependence and uncertainty generated by global structural changes. The empirical analysis reveals that Indonesia views RCEP as an institutional tool that helps mitigate the risks of global trade tensions and economic volatility, ensuring a stable and predictable framework for international cooperation. RCEP functions not only as an institutional mechanism for creating common trade rules but also as a crucial platform for reducing transaction costs and facilitating long-term economic cooperation. The study's findings emphasize that RCEP's role in standardizing trade practices and harmonizing regulations significantly benefits Indonesia by providing a more predictable and secure environment for investment and trade expansion.

Indonesia's participation in RCEP is shaped by the convergence of economic liberal principles and strategic institutional considerations. While liberal economic principles guide Indonesia's pursuit of market integration, the country also seeks to protect its national economic interests within the

institutional framework provided by RCEP. This dual strategy enables Indonesia to harness the benefits of economic liberalization while safeguarding its sovereignty in an increasingly interdependent world. Indonesia's success in RCEP hinges on maintaining a balance between national economic goals and regional commitments. However, as the study suggests, this balance requires ongoing adjustments in domestic policies, particularly in sectors such as infrastructure development and SME support, to ensure that national priorities are in sync with ASEAN's integration agenda. The findings underscore the importance of policy coordination and flexibility to navigate these complex dynamics effectively. To maximize the benefits of RCEP, Indonesia must address domestic challenges such as enhancing the competitiveness of key industries and improving infrastructure. Nevertheless, the study emphasizes that the effectiveness of these efforts is contingent upon resolving domestic policy limitations and harmonizing sector-specific policies with regional integration objectives. This requires a coherent and inclusive policy approach, which acknowledges both regional imperatives and local capacities. The implications of Indonesia's participation in RCEP are far-reaching. The study suggests that successful integration requires not only policy coordination at the ASEAN level but also domestic readiness to adapt to a more integrated regional market. However, challenges such as uneven development across sectors and regional policy divergences present significant hurdles that require further analysis and policy innovation. Indonesia's participation in RCEP is indeed a strategic move to expand trade and investment opportunities. The study's findings show that, beyond this, Indonesia's involvement is also crucial for strengthening ASEAN's institutional framework. By aligning its national policies with ASEAN's collective economic goals, Indonesia plays an active role in reinforcing ASEAN's centrality in global economic governance, thereby contributing to regional stability and growth. Persistent challenges, including sectoral disparities and divergences in regional policy implementation, constitute substantial obstacles that necessitate continued analytical attention and innovative policy responses. However, the study shows that this strategy involves navigating complex challenges at both the national and regional levels, highlighting the need for continuous policy innovation to ensure that the benefits of RCEP are maximized for Indonesia and its ASEAN partners.

Although this study underscores the strategic relevance of Indonesia's engagement in RCEP, it also recognizes the presence of methodological constraints. The reliance on secondary data and document analysis may have limited the depth of insights into the real-time political and economic dynamics at play. Furthermore, the analytical framework centered on neoliberal institutionalism and economic liberalism may not fully capture alternative theoretical interpretations of regional integration. Future research could explore these dimensions in more depth, using primary data sources and alternative theoretical approaches, to provide a broader understanding of Indonesia's role in RCEP and ASEAN.

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