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ASEAN'S ROLE IN THE REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP (RCEP) FORMATION TO ENHANCE REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Shofiya Adila

Padjadjaran University, shofiya19002@mail.unpad.ac.id

Dadan Suryadipura S.Ip., M.Ipol.

Padjadjaran University, suryadipura@unpad.ac.id

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ASEAN'S ROLE IN THE REGIONAL COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP (RCEP) FORMATION TO ENHANCE REGIONAL ECONOMIC INTEGRATION

Shofiya Adila & Dadan Suryadipura

Padjajaran University

Email: shofiya19002@mail.unpad.ac.id, suryadipura@unpad.ac.id

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ABSTRAK

Perjanjian RCEP merupakan perjanjian perdagangan bebas terbesar saat ini yang meliputi sepuluh negara anggota ASEAN dan negara mitra dagangnya dengan mencakup sekitar 30% dari total PDB dunia. Sebagai organisasi internasional di kawasan Asia Tenggara, ASEAN memiliki keinginan untuk meningkatkan integrasi ekonomi regionalnya, salah satunya melalui perjanjian RCEP. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk membahas bagaimana upaya ASEAN untuk meningkatkan integrasi ekonomi regional melalui peran-peran yang dilakukannya dalam proses pembentukan perjanjian RCEP. Penulis menggunakan teori peran oleh Lisbeth Aggestam (2006) yang mengemukakan empat konsep peran, yakni role expectation, role conception, role performance, dan role-set. Penelitian dilakukan dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif yang dilakukan melalui penelaahan dokumen, termasuk buku, jurnal, dan data pendukung lainnya. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa ASEAN telah memenuhi berbagai peran yang dimilikinya sebagai organisasi internasional selama proses pembentukan RCEP untuk memungkinkan berjalannya perjanjian ini, termasuk memenuhi harapan dari pihak eksternal, merealisasikan tujuan dari ASEAN, responsif dalam kondisi yang berubah-ubah, dan mewujudkan konsep sentralitas ASEAN. Melalui penelitian ini, dapat diketahui bahwa ASEAN berhasil memenuhi peran-perannya sebagai organisasi internasional untuk meningkatkan integrasi ekonomi regional melalui terbentuknya perjanjian RCEP.

Kata kunci: *perjanjian perdagangan bebas; integrasi ekonomi, organisasi internasional, ASEAN*

ABSTRACT

The RCEP agreement is currently the largest free trade agreement involving ten ASEAN member countries and their trading partners, comprising around 30% of the world's GDP. As an international organisation in the Southeast Asian region, ASEAN has the desire to increase its regional economic integration, one of which is through the RCEP agreement. This article aims to discuss how ASEAN attempts to enhance regional economic integration through its roles during the RCEP agreement's formation process. The author uses role theory by Lisbeth Aggestam (2006), which elaborates on four role concepts: role expectations, role conception, role performance, and role-set. This research uses qualitative methods of analysing documents, including books, journals, and other supporting data. Through this research, we found that ASEAN has fulfilled its various roles as an international organisation during the RCEP formation process in order to make this agreement possible, including meeting external expectations, actualising ASEAN's goals, its responsivity in fickle conditions, and implementing the ASEAN centrality concept. This research shows that ASEAN has succeeded in fulfilling its role as an international organisation to enhance regional economic integration by establishing the RCEP agreement.

Keywords: *Free Trade Agreement (FTA), economic integration, international organisation, ASEAN*

INTRODUCTION

The signing of the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020 has been a huge milestone for economic integration in the ASEAN and East Asia region. The RCEP is a mega Free Trade Agreement (FTA) that consists of the 10 ASEAN member states—Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam—and their dialogue partners, Australia, China, Japan, Republic of Korea, and New Zealand. Indonesia first initiated this agreement through the ASEAN Summit in Bali during its chairmanship in 2011. Spending almost a decade of discussion, the RCEP negotiations portrayed the persistence of efforts that ASEAN made in pushing its regional market integration and ASEAN's economic relations with external partners with the rest of the world (Rillo, Robeniol, & Buban, 2022).

The RCEP agreement is an important achievement in regional economic integration led by ASEAN. This agreement began its conceptualization in November 2012 to reach a comprehensive and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement. After eight years of negotiations among the parties involved, the RCEP was legally signed on 15 November 2020 (Asian Development Bank, 2022). By involving the world's major economies and 30% of global GDP, this agreement certainly has objectives and regulations that meet each country's needs and interests.

The RCEP agreement will facilitate the expansion of regional trade and investment and contribute to the growth of the global economy, which is in line with the objectives of the RCEP itself—to create an economic partnership that is: (1) modern, which means that the RCEP will upgrade the scope of the pre-existing ASEAN+1 agreement and make adjustments to changes in the world economy (including the era of electronic commerce, the potential of SMEs, and improving regional supply chains) as well as complementing WTO rules; (2) comprehensive, both in terms of coverage and in terms of level of commitment, RCEP covers areas that were not previously present in ASEAN+1, such as e-commerce, competition, and SMEs; (3) high quality, where RCEP takes into account the level of development and economic needs of each member and facilitates economic development activities and encourages regional supply chain expansion among RCEP member states; and (4) mutually beneficial, as the RCEP unites countries with different levels of economic development so that the benefits created will be impactful to all members involved (ASEAN Secretariat, 2020).

The agreement covers three important aspects of its substance. These aspects are divided into (1) market access, both for trade in goods, trade in services, and investment; (2)

regulations, including but not limited to trade remedies, rules of origin, and intellectual property; and (3) cooperation, namely cooperation with SMEs and cooperation to assist in the economic and technical fields (Clarissa & Gandara, 2020).

During the formation process of the RCEP agreement, ASEAN played various roles in facilitating and supporting the overall negotiation process. One main motivation for persistently proposing the RCEP agreement is its desire to play a central position in the region's economic integration (Fukunaga, 2015). ASEAN is also, in a way, experienced in building cooperation with external parties. ASEAN is no stranger in terms of regional cooperation as ASEAN has been promoting regional cooperation since 1967 (Parna, 2017).

As an international organisation in an attractive region, ASEAN has roles to fulfil with an aim to prosper the region and build external relations in this globalised world. Role refers to patterns of behaviour or actions that are expected or viewed as appropriate to be carried out. Roles are determined by the actor himself or by the expectations that arise from other actors (Elgström & Smith, 2006). As the significance of a non-state actor grows, the roles of international organisations in the international system continue to strengthen in importance. This shift can be seen in ASEAN and how it plays a vital role in building relationships among countries worldwide, including during the RCEP formation process. RCEP, currently the largest free trade agreement, is considered to significantly impact world trade beyond Southeast Asia. ASEAN's ability to form the world's largest FTA through its successful role executions perfectly captures how international organisations affect the dynamics in the international system and precedents a vision of how international organisations could play the main role in the future. Therefore, the author considers it beneficial to understand further the roles played by ASEAN in the RCEP formation to understand how crucial ASEAN's position is in the structure of world trade. By analysing the roles of ASEAN as an international organisation in the process leading up to the establishment of the RCEP agreement, this paper attempts to answer the question: what role did ASEAN play in the formation of the RCEP agreement?

There has not been an abundance of research regarding ASEAN's role during the formation process of RCEP. However, Fukunaga (2015) expressed that the ASEAN centrality concept served as the main desire of ASEAN in leading the RCEP agreements and contributing multiple roles that align with the ASEAN centrality concept during the negotiation process. Similarly, Kim (2022) elaborated on the roles of ASEAN in the RCEP by highlighting the ASEAN centrality concept. Kim (2022) then examined the relationship between RCEP and ASEAN's regional integration project, ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). On the other

hand, Shimizu (2021) discussed the East Asia economic integration projects, including the signing of RCEP and its position in the world economy. Additionally, Thu (2022) attempted to demonstrate the roles of ASEAN member states, specifically the more active role of individual members, in forming regional economic integration.

To provide novelty to research on the role of international organisations, this research will focus on the various actions and activities carried out by ASEAN as an international organisation in establishing the RCEP agreement to enhance regional economic integration. ASEAN's activities range from manifesting external expectations, actualising ASEAN goals, and ASEAN's responsivity in handling problems, to further understanding ASEAN centrality.

In the following sections, this paper will first better understand ASEAN's dynamics as an international organisation and the RCEP agreement as a regional economic integration. Second, this paper aims to discuss the early economic cooperation in the region, including the ASEAN plus-one agreements and other considered economic integration blocks. The following part of this paper will explore the nearly decade-long negotiation journey of the RCEP agreement from 2013-2020. Lastly, this paper will attempt to analyse the roles that ASEAN has played during the RCEP formation process, from the early introduction in 2011 to the signing of the agreement in 2020, using role theory as a guide in elaborating the activities done by ASEAN during the RCEP formation process.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Role Theory

With the ever-developing political world, actors in action are also constantly developing. The state is no longer the only actor with power in establishing international relations, as non-state actors have also started to emerge in various global activities, including international organisations. Wolfram Hanrieder defines the international organisation as an institutional arrangement between members of an international system that is built to achieve goals based on systematic conditions and by taking into account its members' attributes, aspirations, and interests (Hanrieder, 1966). Apart from Hanrieder, Clive Archer also made efforts to contribute to defining international organisations, in which he defined it as a continuous formal structure formed based on agreements between members, both governmental and non-governmental, from at least two sovereign countries with the aim of pursuing the common interests of its members (Archer, 2001, p. 35).

By being involved in worldwide activities, international organisations have goals to be met and roles to fill. The term role refers to patterns of behaviour or actions that are expected or deemed appropriate to be carried out and determined by the actor himself or by expectations that arise from other actors (Elgström & Smith, 2006, p. 5). There are a number of experts with their views regarding the roles of an international organisation. For this research, the author will use role theory as elaborated by Lisbeth Aggestam (2006). Aggestam differentiated the role of international organisations into four concepts: role expectation, role conception, role performance, and role-set.

Role expectation is formed based on expectations from other external actors (alters) that influences international organisation as a role beholder (ego) in taking action to determine their roles to be carried out. Role expectations can also be understood as how other actors (alters), especially international actors, determine the most suitable behaviour played by international organizations. On the other hand, role conception is the normative expectations expressed by role holders towards themselves. Generally, role conceptions will reveal the intentions and motives of the policies carried out by the actors. Aggestam further elaborated on how these actors conceive of various roles with different levels of importance depending on the situation. Therefore, there will always be an element of role-playing to give actors room to adapt to their multiple roles according to the situation and context at hand.

Role performance is a concept used to describe the behaviour of an international organization that forms patterns of character regarding decisions and actions in certain situational contexts. The characteristics of role performance are behaviour related to actions in the field and determine direct outcomes. Lastly, the role-set conception is interpreted as a series of roles owned by an international organization that can represent the overall characteristics of the organization (Aggestam, 2006, p. 21). Out of the various roles an international organization holds, role-set is the most dominant role applied in its approach. Role-set combines various roles adopted by an actor (role beholder) to be able to represent the total of the roles of an international organization. Role-set usually consists of a number of roles originating from different contexts, both domestic and international.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research will use a qualitative approach in elaborating the roles played by ASEAN during the RCEP agreement formation process by sourcing data from document archives, both primary and secondary data, including documents released by official institutions and other supporting

documents such as books, media, news, and articles; interview with experts related to the topic of ASEAN and its roles in the RCEP formation; and internet-based research, including official websites from government bodies or other authorised institutions, such as ASEAN or governmental websites of countries participating in the RCEP agreement. The data collected for this research will further be analysed using discourse analysis as defined by Christopher Lamont (2015). Lamont defines discourse analysis as a method that focuses on interpreting linguistics in forms of communication. Lamont (2015) demonstrates that the first step of discourse analysis is to determine the scope of analysis that will be conducted, followed by identification and justification of the data gathered to ensure its relevance to the topic. Lastly, the author connects the research problem with the information from the data gathered to form a conclusion.

DISCUSSION

ASEAN's Role in the Formation of RCEP

Meeting the Expectations of External Parties

Role expectations are roles determined by other actors (alter) that are expected to be performed by the role-beholder (ego) (Aggestam, 2006, p. 18). Role expectations can also be seen as how other actors (alters), particularly international actors, determine what behaviour is appropriate for a particular actor to perform (Aggestam, 2006, p. 19). In this context, the role-beholder is ASEAN, and the 'alters' are the non-ASEAN countries.

One example of an external actor who expects ASEAN's behaviour is China. With China's pro-market government policies and low labour wages, China became a production hub for the Asia Pacific region—more specifically for East Asia—where in order to maximise that potential, China started using FTAs as its key economic strategy (Yunling, 2022, p. 4). Therefore, the emergence of the RCEP is major progress in line with China's plan to implement its FTA strategy.

Furthermore, ASEAN is a strong trading partner for China, so China expects to deepen its trade ties with the region. China's Prime Minister, Li Keqiang, also expressed his persistence to deepen regional economic integration during the 8th East Asia Summit in 2013:

"... we need to deepen economic cooperation and promote regional integration. I proposed at yesterday's ASEAN-China Summit a [...] wide-ranging, in-depth, high-level and all-round China-ASEAN cooperation in

the next decade [...] China holds the view that regional economic integration should follow the principles of openness, inclusiveness, and transparency...." (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 2013).

Through this statement delivered by Li Keqiang, it is clear that China plans further strengthen trade relations with ASEAN and build an inclusive, open, and transparent regional economic integration. The establishment of the RCEP agreement is aligned with China's interest in forming a broad, deep, and high-quality free trade agreement (Yunling, 2022).

Like China, Japan also has expectations in building a relationship with ASEAN. Japan's former Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, announced an 'ASEAN diplomacy' after he visited Southeast Asian countries. The ASEAN diplomacy consists of five principles, one of which is to "further promote trade and investment, including flows of goods, money, people and services, through various economic partnership networks, for Japan's economic revitalisation and prosperity of both Japan and ASEAN member states;" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2013).

The ASEAN diplomacy proves that the Japanese government has interests in the Southeast Asia region and desires ASEAN member states to encourage deeper relations with Japan by expanding the network of economic partnerships. As the RCEP agreement was formed to deepen economic relations with major economic players in the East Asian region, including Japan, ASEAN's decision to encourage the establishment of the RCEP agreement is also in line with what Japan (alter) expects of ASEAN (ego), namely promoting a network of economic partnerships in various fields for the prosperity of both parties.

Another example of how ASEAN fulfils the expectation of external actors is mentioned during an interview, in which the key informant expresses how the non-ASEAN countries, including Australia, Japan, and New Zealand, expect ASEAN to be more proactive in handling various issues, including international trade matters. This interview noted that during the RCEP formation process, some ASEAN countries were still sensitive and unprepared for some ideas from external countries. However, in the negotiations for this RCEP agreement, expectations from external parties that ASEAN should be more proactive in responding to a number of related issues were successfully implemented. RCEP participating countries managed to compromise on a few provisions contained in the RCEP agreement, such as competition policy and government procurement.

Actualising ASEAN's Goals

According to Lisbeth Aggestam (2006), a role conception is a form of role related to expectations of the role-enactor (ego) towards itself. It is generally a behaviour that expresses the intentions and motives of the policies carried out by the actor who perform the roles (Aggestam, 2006, p. 19).

During the RCEP formation process, ASEAN carried out several activities related to its role conception. One of the objectives of the establishment of ASEAN is to accelerate economic growth, promote active cooperation and mutual assistance in matters of common interest in various fields, including the economy, and increase the effectiveness of collaboration for the growth of its member states in various sectors, one of which is in the trade sector (ASEAN, 2020). Because these interests are one of ASEAN's main objectives, ASEAN's persistence and consistency in building regional economic integration in accordance with its original objectives can be viewed as a form of conception of the role. The conception of role is the expectation of the role-enactor towards himself (Aggestam, 2006, p. 19). In this case, ASEAN—as an ego—has a desire with expectations of itself to establish partnership agreements that suit its interests. Therefore, ASEAN's decision to fight for the establishment of the RCEP agreement can be seen as a form of realisation of ASEAN's ambitions towards itself.

Based on the conducted interview, the author found that ASEAN has a few long-term goals aligning with the RCEP agreement, including digitalisation and inclusive economic growth. Both objectives are established in the RCEP agreement due to ASEAN's persistence. For example, concerns about digitalisation were mentioned in chapter 12 as the RCEP agreement reviews e-commerce matters, including data protection, consumer protection, and encourages improvements in trade administration. The RCEP also regulates Small & Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs), as discussed in Chapter 14, as RCEP supports economic cooperation programs based on SME potential and requires RCEP participants to share information related to regulations and business information with SMEs. In addition, the RCEP agreement also regulates economic and technical cooperation, including capacity building and technical assistance to developing and underdeveloped countries, which can increase public awareness and access to information, as mentioned in Chapter 15 (ASEAN, 2020). Both chapter 14 and 15 supports inclusive growth as one of ASEAN's long-term goals.

Aggestam's further elaborated that in carrying out role conceptions, international organisations generally have various roles that must be fulfilled (Aggestam, 2006, p. 20). As an international organisation, ASEAN, too, has various roles, including being an organisation

consisting of countries with diverse economies and ASEAN being the center of the FTA (Fukunaga, 2015, p. 107). With these roles, ASEAN seeks to carry out various activities that can fulfil its role in the process of forming the RCEP agreement.

This gap between the level of development has brought up certain challenges during the RCEP formation process, specifically during its negotiation process. Due to these challenges, The RCEP agreement has gone through a long and complicated negotiation journey. Since 2012, member states of the RCEP agreement have participated in various meetings, including 31 rounds of negotiations, a number of ministerial meetings, and several leaders' summits. The early negotiation rounds mainly discussed basic topics about the agreement, from establishing working groups and sub-working groups, the scope of the agreement, technical matters, and discussions on new elements incorporated, such as e-commerce, competition, and intellectual property. The RCEP agreement negotiation was carried out even more intensely during the following years. However, although negotiations are progressing rapidly in quantity, substantial development of negotiations is arguably still less effective (Rillo, Robeniol, & Buban, 2022). The large number of participating countries of the RCEP is quite a challenge for the negotiation process to run. With different levels of progress between one member state and another, there are different interests. This issue makes determining consensus in negotiations complex.

As an organisation with member states with unstable economies compared to other regional organizations, ASEAN seeks to provide equal opportunities to encourage increased regional economic integration in these developing countries, namely Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam. ASEAN's efforts for these countries in establishing the RCEP agreement can be seen through the many rounds of negotiations made to gain benefits for its least-developing member states. It can also be seen in the guiding principles that provide special treatment for least developed countries, which state:

"Taking into consideration the different levels of development of the participating countries, the RCEP will include appropriate forms of flexibility, including provision for special and differential treatment, plus additional flexibility to the least-developed ASEAN Member States, consistent with the existing ASEAN+1 FTAs, as applicable...." (ASEAN, 2012).

ASEAN's request to provide special facilities in the RCEP agreement for low-economy countries demonstrates that ASEAN has performed its role as an international organisation with member states with varying economic levels by addressing the needs of all its member states and providing equal opportunities to enhance regional economic integration for each of its member states.

Furthermore, ASEAN is also a hub for free trade agreements. As previously discussed, ASEAN already had agreements with Australia, China, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand before the RCEP agreement. ASEAN is the only party that has economic relations with all other parties involved in the RCEP agreement, which makes ASEAN an important player. ASEAN has become a key actor connected to all the major powers involved in the RCEP agreement, and ASEAN successfully mediates relations among these major powers (Kim, 2022, p. 4). ASEAN played the role of a mediator and connected all the major powers in East Asia and combined them into one free trade agreement.

ASEAN's Responsivity in Handling Certain Conditions

Role performance is described by Lisbeth Aggestam (2006) as the actor's behaviour in making decisions or determining steps when in certain situations (Aggestam, 2006). Through the definition outlined by Aggestam, several actions and decisions made by ASEAN during the RCEP formation can be classified as role performance.

An example of this would be ASEAN's success in ending the debate between CEPEA and EAFTA. The RCEP was, in fact, a middle ground between a debate of two economic integration proposal that was considered in the 2000s. It ended the debate between the East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA) that would consist of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea ASEAN+3, and Comprehensive Economic Partnership in East Asia (CEPEA) consisting of Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea.

The East Asia Free Trade Area (EAFTA) was proposed in 2002 by the East Asia Vision Group (EAVG) and was supported by China and the Republic of Korea (Oba, 2022, p. 9). By 2004, the Economic Ministerial Meeting ASEAN+3 (AEM+3) formed a joint expert group to conduct a feasibility study on EAFTA as proposed by China (Oba, 2022, p. 10). The report was received by 2006, followed by a phase 2 feasibility study at the 10th ASEAN+3 Summit for more in-depth sectoral analysis (Rillo, Robeniol, & Buban, 2022, p. 4). This phase 2 study of EAFTA was eventually formed and announced its final report in June 2009 (Oba, 2022).

During that process, Japan, which proposed the establishment of CEPEA in June 2006, saw the feasibility study for EAFTA and wanted the same treatment for the CEPEA. Japan then suggested a second track study group for CEPEA in August 2006 (Oba, 2022, p. 10). Due to Japan's full support, the establishment of a second track study group for CEPEA was approved by the East Asia Summit (EAS) in January 2007. A phase 1 report was successfully submitted in June 2008, which was then followed by an agreement by the ASEAN+6 Economic Ministers to proceed with the phase 2 study of the second track in August with substance detailing the pillars of economic cooperation, trade facilitation, liberalisation, and institutional development (Rillo, Robeniol, & Buban, 2022, p. 4). In July 2009, the second phase report for CEPEA was successfully submitted (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022).

That same year, it was agreed to have government-level consultations for parallel CEPEA and EAFTA discussions. However, official talks and negotiations only began in 2010, in which leaders stated that they would redouble efforts to enhance broader regional integration, including considering CEPEA and EAFTA (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2022). This regional integration development received attention from the United States. Not wanting to be left behind, the U.S. government began to pay attention to the Asia and Pacific region, including East Asia, through Obama's decision to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in 2009 (Oba, 2022).

On the other hand, the TPP negotiation launch has raised concerns from a few parties, including ASEAN and China. For ASEAN, with the joining of several member states in the TPP negotiations – namely Brunei, Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam – there is a sense of concern that the existence of this TPP will weaken ASEAN's centrality in the region. As for China, given the US-China relationship, it will be a challenge for China to participate in TPP's high-level economic liberalisation (Oba, 2022, p. 12).

These concerns by China led to a change in its attitude toward Japan, making the two countries agree to substantially unify their idea of East Asian economic integration (Oba, 2022). China and Japan proposed an 'Initiative on Speeding up the Establishment of EAFTA and CEPEA, and with the predicted impact of the TPP towards East Asian integration, EAS economy ministers immediately welcomed the initiative in August 2011 (Rillo, Robeniol, & Buban, 2022). This initiative to accelerate the establishment of the EAFTA and CEPEA is, in fact, the path for ASEAN leaders to introduce the RCEP agreement.

At the 19th ASEAN Summit in November 2011, ASEAN leaders began to introduce the RCEP through the 'Framework for Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' (Hsu,

2015). ASEAN introduced RCEP as a free trade agreement spread across the world that will be led by ASEAN, switching references of CEPEA and EAFTA with references of ASEAN FTA Partners (AFPs), in which ended internal debates of an East Asia economic integration (Rillo, Robeniol, & Buban, 2022, p. 5). The decision made by ASEAN to take over the ongoing debate between ASEAN countries and their trading partners can be considered a role performance as it was a decision made in a specific situation.

Another example of ASEAN's activities in forming the RCEP agreement that can be categorised as role performance is ASEAN's efforts to avoid the spaghetti bowl phenomenon with the many existing ASEAN+1 FTA agreements. Before the RCEP agreement, each external country had economic relations with ASEAN through the ASEAN+1 Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). Four ASEAN+1 FTAs in total were consolidated into the RCEP agreement. First, the Australia and New Zealand economic cooperation under the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Area (AANZFTA), signed in 2009, covers trade in goods, services, investments, and intellectual property (Koty, 2022). China also established an FTA called the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), signed in 2002 (ASEAN, 2015) and consolidated into the RCEP agreement.

Likewise, Japan partnered with ASEAN under the name ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP), which was signed in 2008 and regulated trade in goods, services, investment, and economic cooperation (AJCEP, 2014). Lastly, the Republic of Korea also had the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Area (AKFTA), which encouraged progressive liberalisation and promotion of trade in goods and services and established a transparent, liberal, and facilitative investment regime (ASEAN, 2013).

The RCEP Agreement was formed from this ASEAN+1 agreement to strengthen economic relations and to minimise development gaps between the parties, expand and deepen engagement between parties, and increase participation in regional economic development (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, 2018). Further, since the number of existing FTAs may create a spaghetti bowl effect—a negative impact on trade relations due to overlapping provisions from various FTAs—and cost overruns that are very likely to occur with various existing free trade agreements (Fukunaga & Isono, 2013), ASEAN presents a solution by proposing an RCEP agreement that can unify trade regulations and tariff abolition provisions under one regulation to minimise overlaps between agreements.

Another great example of role performance is ASEAN's ability to adjust negotiations during the COVID-19 spread. Based on an interview with a senior economic researcher that

specializes in ASEAN economics, it is described that the spread of COVID-19 certainly brings various impacts to every country in the world, resulting in many rapid changes in every aspect. Continuing the RCEP negotiation was a challenge in itself. Through the interview, the key informant expressed that ASEAN needed to quickly adjust to the changes occurring and bring together participating countries' interests and desires during the shifting conditions. However, at the same time, ASEAN needs to adjust to new conditions due to COVID-19 without reducing the essence of the RCEP agreement. ASEAN succeeded in embracing the positive side of the pandemic by highlighting the importance of cooperation, especially in the economic field, for post-pandemic recovery for each member country involved. ASEAN has shown that with RCEP, ASEAN and its partners can utilize trade as a forum and mechanism to overcome challenges due to the pandemic. During the interview, it is noted that ASEAN's persistence and ability to promote the solution for post-pandemic recovery has become a huge push factor in forming the RCEP.

ASEAN Centrality

Role-set is understood as a series of roles of an international organisation that can represent the overall characteristics of the organisation (Aggestam, 2006, p. 21). A role-set combines various roles adopted by an actor generated from both its domestic and international context (Aggestam, 2006, p. 23). The role-set is a dominant role possessed by an international organisation.

As an international organisation, ASEAN tries to fulfil various roles that it owns. This includes implementing roles during the RCEP agreement formation process. However, ASEAN has a series of roles that has been an important part for the organisation, known as the ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN centrality can be analysed as a role-set as it is able to represent ASEAN as an international organisation. This concept was established by ASEAN and written as one of ASEAN's purposes in the ASEAN Charter (2008). The charter defines ASEAN centrality as "the primary driving force in its relations and cooperation with its external partners in a regional architecture that is open, transparent and inclusive" (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2008).

Aware of its ability and ambition to play a central role, ASEAN played a dominant role in forming the RCEP agreement. An example of ASEAN's efforts to maintain its centrality is by proposing to be chairman of the RCEP meeting. Although the non-ASEAN countries have

approved the concept of ASEAN centrality, ASEAN's role as the leader of the RCEP meeting is not something given, but rather something that must be fought for and even became one of the negotiating issues at the first Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) meeting in May 2013 (Fukunaga, 2015, p. 105).

Through the ASEAN centrality concept, non-ASEAN countries that are members of the RCEP agreement negotiations can see the seriousness of ASEAN in enhancing regional economic integration. Further, through ASEAN centrality, ASEAN has succeeded in showing the world that ASEAN is a diverse organization that has many differences between each member state but is able to have a single and strong voice, which in the end makes external countries believe in the potential and capabilities of ASEAN in leading the journey towards regional integration with world economies.

The concept of ASEAN centrality is a unifier for ASEAN member states. However, at the same time, this concept becomes a role representing ASEAN's internal dynamics to be perceived by external countries when building international relations with various parties. ASEAN's ability to maintain harmony between members through the concept of ASEAN centrality has succeeded in building a positive and strong perception of ASEAN as an international organization from other non-ASEAN countries, including during the process of forming an agreement.

The concept of ASEAN centrality is the most important role held by ASEAN. This concept is also executed by ASEAN during the process of forming the RCEP agreement. Therefore, the ASEAN centrality concept is considered as a role-set as it is a significant factor in determining ASEAN's actions.

CONCLUSION

International organisations play an important role in the international system, including in enhancing economic integration. ASEAN, as an international organisation in the Asian region, also has roles to fulfil in boosting its regional economic integration. In the RCEP agreement specifically, ASEAN has contributed various roles to support establishing this agreement during its formation process.

ASEAN played various roles during the RCEP long discussion process, including meeting the expectations of external parties to be more proactive in raising issues regarding international trade to promote better economic relations with external partners—namely with China and Japan and being involved significantly in the negotiation process, namely by

chairing the RCEP negotiations and the sub-groups within it. In negotiations, ASEAN also succeeded in proposing various adjustments given to ASEAN member countries that are less developed, such as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam.

In addition, by establishing the RCEP agreement, ASEAN has also played a role as a free trade agreement hub and consolidated the existing ASEAN+1 free trade agreement. ASEAN can also respond to various conditions and problems, ranging from internal debates and technical problems to the COVID-19 pandemic. In carrying out these various activities during the RCEP agreement formation process, ASEAN uses the ASEAN centrality concept as the base to carry out activities, aiming to seek and maintain its centrality with the various roles it performed during the establishment of RCEP.

These activities executed by ASEAN have successfully affected the regional economic integration enhancement. The RCEP agreement is currently the biggest free trade agreement consisting of 30% of the world GDP and managed to consolidate East Asia's biggest economy into one trade agreement that offers modern, comprehensive, high quality, and mutually beneficial opportunities to countries involved as a participant. ASEAN's active involvement in the RCEP formation process has proved that international organisation has a significant role in enhancing regional economic integration.

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