

POLICYBRIEF

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From Noodle Bowl to Layered Regionalism: Policy Choices for Governing Overlapping Trade Agreements in East Asia

Upalat Korwatanasakul

Introduction: Governing Overlap Rather Than Eliminating It

East Asia has long been described by the metaphor of a trade “noodle bowl”, a dense web of bilateral, plurilateral, and regional agreements with varying tariff schedules, rules of origin, customs procedures, and cooperation mechanisms.¹ This metaphor captures a real administrative problem, especially for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that lack the legal and logistical capacity to compare multiple trade regimes. Yet it can also lead policymakers to view overlap only as a problem, while overlooking the practical value of overlapping agreements. In East Asia, overlapping agreements have become a practical mode of regional governance.²

Three ASEAN+1 arrangements, including the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), the ASEAN-Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership (AJCEP), and the ASEAN-Korea Free Trade Area (AKFTA), are especially important. These agreements emerged before the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and reflected the political

1 Aggarwal, V. K., & Urata, S. (2006). *Bilateral Trade Agreements in the Asia-Pacific: Origins, Evolution, and Implications*. Routledge.

2 Korwatanasakul, U. (2026). The dynamics of overlapping agreements: Sequencing, layering, and feedback in East Asian regionalism. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*.

Highlights

East Asia’s regional trade architecture is not a simple transition from ASEAN+1 agreements to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). It is a layered system in which earlier comprehensive economic cooperation/partnership agreements (CEPs) continue to coexist with and shape RCEP. RCEP contributes to regional coherence by harmonising rules of origin, customs procedures, standards-related disciplines, electronic commerce, competition policy, and investment rules. However, ASEAN+1 CEPs remain policy-relevant because they provide deeper tariff concessions, partner-specific cooperation, and development-oriented mechanisms. Firms can therefore choose among agreements depending on tariff margins, rules of origin, administrative requirements, and transaction-specific needs. The central policy task is not to eliminate overlap, but to govern it more effectively by aligning selected rules, reducing unnecessary compliance costs, preserving flexibility for less-developed member states, and using CEPs as capacity-building platforms for digital, green, and inclusive regional integration.

economy of their time, such as deepening production networks, competitive liberalisation among Northeast Asian partners, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) interest in anchoring major partners to ASEAN-centred processes, and a preference for flexible and incremental institutional design.³ RCEP later entered this architecture not as a replacement, but as a broader regional layer.

This brief explains East Asian regionalism by tracing how earlier ASEAN+1 agreements shaped RCEP, and how RCEP now influences the upgrading of those earlier agreements. It argues that policymakers should treat the region's trade architecture as an agreement ecosystem rather than a set of isolated legal texts. Earlier comprehensive economic cooperation/partnerships (CEPs) created tariff baselines, rules of origin templates, negotiating experience, and sector-specific cooperation channels. RCEP consolidated several of these elements and added more comprehensive disciplines. It now also creates pressure to upgrade older agreements, including ACFTA 3.0 and targeted revisions to AJCEP and AKFTA.

The policy challenge, therefore, is not how to remove overlap altogether. It is about managing overlap so that firms can use agreements more easily, governments can update rules without excessive duplication, and ASEAN member states can preserve policy space while participating in deeper regional integration.

Analytical Framework: Sequencing, Layering, and Feedback

A useful way to understand East Asian regionalism is to distinguish among three mechanisms, namely sequencing, layering, and feedback. Sequencing refers to the order in which agreements emerge and the way earlier institutional choices shape later options.⁴ ACFTA, AJCEP, and AKFTA were early responses to external shocks, growing economic interdependence, and competitive regionalism. Once adopted, they created institutional precedents that shaped subsequent negotiations.

Layering means that newer agreements accumulate on top of existing ones rather than replacing them. This is central to ASEAN-centred regionalism, which has generally favoured flexible, pragmatic, and incremental arrangements over highly legalistic consolidation. RCEP reflects this logic and overlays

ASEAN+1 agreements, providing broader coherence while leaving earlier agreements in force.⁵ Firms and governments, therefore, operate within a menu of agreements rather than a single hierarchy.

Feedback occurs when newer agreements reshape older ones. RCEP has become a reference point for updating ASEAN+1 CEPs, especially in areas where older agreements had limited coverage or weak commitments, such as electronic commerce, competition policy, customs modernisation, services, investment, and regulatory cooperation. East Asian regionalism, therefore, evolves through a cycle in which initial agreements respond to immediate needs; their limitations generate demand for wider arrangements; the wider arrangement consolidates and upgrades rules; and older agreements are then revised in response.

This framework carries an important policy implication that coherence does not require uniformity. A regional architecture can become more coherent even when multiple agreements coexist and overlap, as RCEP can strengthen regional regulatory coherence, while ASEAN+1 CEPs can continue to provide deeper tariff preferences, partner-specific cooperation, and development-oriented support.

What RCEP Adds and What it Does Not Replace

RCEP's contribution is most visible in rules and procedures. It introduces a more uniform regional framework for rules of origin and diagonal cumulation, allowing firms to count inputs from across RCEP members toward origin requirements. This matters in East Asia, where production networks are deeply cross-border, and firms often source inputs from multiple economies. RCEP also provides more comprehensive customs and trade facilitation disciplines, including transparency, enquiry points, pre-arrival processing, advance rulings, risk management, express consignments, post-clearance audit, and time-release studies.⁶

RCEP also expands the regional rulebook in areas where ASEAN+1 CEPs were more limited. Its electronic commerce chapter includes provisions on cross-border data flows,

5 Urata, Shujiro. 2014. "Managing Asia's Free Trade Agreements." In *The Political Economy of Asian Regionalism*, edited by Giovanni Capanelli and Masahiro Kawai, 59–83. Tokyo: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-4-431-54568-2_4

6 Ha, D. T. T., & Korwatanasakul, U. (2023). Review of ASEAN-Japan economic relations and ongoing initiatives: AJCEP study. In *ASEAN-Japan Economic Partnership for a Sustainable and Resilient Future*. ERIA.

3 Katada, Saori. (2009). Trade and Financial Regionalisms in East Asia: Structures, Sequencing, and Linkages. APSA 2009 Toronto Meeting Paper.

4 Baldwin, R. (2016). The World Trade Organization and the future of multilateralism. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 30(1), 95-116.

data localisation, and tariff-free treatment of electronic transmissions.⁷ Its competition chapter creates a region-wide framework for cooperation and implementation.⁸ Its investment chapter moves beyond several older commitments by using a negative-list approach, incorporating a ratchet mechanism for some members, and disciplining certain performance requirements.

These upgrades matter because trade governance increasingly depends on behind-the-border rules. Tariffs remain important, but regional value chains also require predictable customs procedures, standards-related cooperation, data governance, investment certainty, and dispute-settlement channels. RCEP therefore strengthens the institutional environment for supply-chain trade.

Nevertheless, RCEP does not make ASEAN+1 CEPs obsolete. ACFTA, AJCEP, and AKFTA often offer deeper tariff liberalisation than RCEP for particular products or partners. They also retain developmental functions through technical cooperation, capacity building, sectoral dialogue, and partner-specific initiatives. For firms, especially those trading in products with better tariff treatment under an ASEAN+1 agreement, the older agreement may remain the preferred route. For governments, these agreements remain valuable channels for targeted cooperation with China, Japan, and Korea.

Strengths and challenges of ASEAN+1 CEPs in the RCEP Era

ASEAN+1 CEPs continue to play an important role in East Asia's trade architecture. Their value lies not only in tariff liberalisation, but also in development-oriented and partner-specific cooperation. They contributed to the institutional foundations on which RCEP was built, including tariff baselines, rules of origin templates, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and technical barrier to trade (TBT) cooperation mechanisms, investment provisions, and negotiating experience. In several cases, their tariff preferences also remain commercially attractive for firms.⁹ The developmental value of ASEAN+1 CEPs is particularly

important for ASEAN member states with more limited institutional and regulatory capacities. Existing SPS and TBT mechanisms under CEPs can support regulatory cooperation, technical dialogue, and capacity building. More broadly, CEPs can help ASEAN member states address implementation gaps, strengthen participation in regional value chains, and benefit from technical assistance and technology-transfer opportunities.

However, ASEAN+1 CEPs also face important limitations compared with RCEP. RCEP is more comprehensive in modern trade disciplines, including customs procedures and trade facilitation, services, investment, e-commerce, competition policy, intellectual property, government procurement, SMEs, institutional provisions, and general exceptions. By contrast, older CEPs were negotiated during an earlier phase of regional integration and often contain less detailed provisions in areas that are now central to digitalisation, supply-chain governance, and behind-the-border trade.

The key policy issue is therefore not whether CEPs should be

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replaced by RCEP, but how to preserve their strengths while addressing their weaknesses. ACFTA, AJCEP, and AKFTA can continue to support tariff preferences and partner-specific cooperation, while RCEP provides broader coherence and modern disciplines. East Asia's trade architecture is best understood as a competitive-but-complementary system, where firms strategically choose among agreements based on tariff rates, rules of origin, and administrative requirements. Improving compatibility between RCEP and ASEAN+1 CEPs would make the region more coherent without imposing uniformity across all agreements.

⁷ JETRO. (2020). Think About the RCEP: Research Agendas in Political Science and Economics. Japan: JETRO.

⁸ ASEAN-Japan Centre. (2021). ASEAN-Japan Centre RCEP Webinar Series: Basic Structure (Chapters 1, 18 and 20) and Competition (Chapter 13). Japan: ASEAN-Japan Centre.

⁹ Park, I. (2022). Comparison of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and other free trade agreements. In Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP): Implications, Challenges, and Future Growth of East Asia and ASEAN. ERIA.

Policy Recommendations: Managing RCEP–CEP Complementarity

1. Upgrade ASEAN+1 CEPs Selectively to Improve Compatibility with RCEP

ASEAN and its dialogue partners should upgrade ACFTA, AJCEP, and AKFTA in areas where RCEP has introduced broader or more modern disciplines, including rules of origin, customs procedures, trade facilitation, e-commerce, competition policy, investment, SPS, TBT, and regulatory cooperation. The objective should not be to replicate RCEP in each CEP, but to improve compatibility where misalignment creates unnecessary costs. Selective alignment would allow firms and governments to benefit from both RCEP’s regional rulebook and the practical advantages of existing CEPs.

2. Use CEPs as capacity-building platforms for digital, green, and inclusive regional integration

While RCEP strengthens regional regulatory coherence, ASEAN+1 CEPs should be used more deliberately as platforms for capacity building, technical assistance, and sector-specific cooperation. This is particularly important for less-developed ASEAN member states, which may face implementation constraints in customs modernisation, digital trade, standards compliance, investment facilitation, and SME participation in regional value chains. ACFTA, AJCEP, and AKFTA can support digital, green, and inclusive integration through cooperation tailored to the strengths of China, Japan, and Korea, including e-commerce readiness, paperless trade systems, green manufacturing standards, low-carbon supply-chain upgrading, quality infrastructure, human resource development, and SME support.

3. Strengthen institutional coordination to govern the agreement ecosystem

ASEAN and its partners should shift the policy focus from negotiating more agreements to governing the existing agreement ecosystem more effectively. This requires stronger institutional mechanisms to monitor implementation, identify overlaps, reduce duplication, and support firms’ use of available agreements. Practical measures could include regular RCEP–CEP compatibility reviews, stronger joint committees, dedicated implementation units, and digital platforms that compare tariff schedules, rules of origin,

documentation requirements, and customs procedures across agreements. Such coordination would reduce agreement-use costs, help SMEs navigate overlapping regimes, and ensure that RCEP and ASEAN+1 CEPs operate as complementary instruments rather than fragmented alternatives.

Conclusion

East Asia’s trade architecture should be understood not as a failed attempt to simplify regionalism, but as a layered system that reflects the region’s political economy, production networks, and preference for flexible institutional design. RCEP has strengthened regional coherence by consolidating rules and expanding disciplines in areas such as rules of origin, customs procedures, e-commerce, competition policy, and investment. Yet it has not displaced ASEAN+1 CEPs. ACFTA, AJCEP, and AKFTA continue to matter because they provide deeper tariff preferences in some areas, partner-specific cooperation channels, and development-oriented support for ASEAN member states.

The central policy lesson is that coherence does not require uniformity. A more effective regional trade architecture can emerge when RCEP and ASEAN+1 CEPs are treated as complementary layers rather than competing alternatives. RCEP can serve as a region-wide platform for regulatory coherence and supply chain integration, while CEPs can support implementation, capacity building, technical cooperation, and targeted engagement with China, Japan, and Korea. This division of functions is particularly important for less-developed ASEAN member states and SMEs, which need not only market access but also practical support to navigate rules, comply with standards, and participate in regional value chains.

The next phase of East Asian regionalism should therefore focus less on negotiating additional agreements and more on governing the existing agreement ecosystem. Selective CEP upgrades, stronger compatibility with RCEP, clearer guidance for firms, and better institutional coordination can reduce unnecessary compliance costs while preserving the flexibility that has made ASEAN-centred regionalism politically viable. Managed well, overlap can become a source of resilience and policy choice rather than fragmentation. The task for policymakers is to turn East Asia’s “noodle bowl” into a more coherent, usable, and development-oriented system of layered regionalism.

EDITORIAL INFORMATION

About the Author:

Upalat Korwatanasakul is Associate Professor at the College of Systems Engineering and Science, Shibaura Institute of Technology. He is an international development economist working on regional integration, trade governance, global value chains, sustainability transitions, and development policy. He holds a PhD in International Studies, majoring in Development Economic Analysis, from the Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan. This policy brief is based on and further develops the analysis presented in his work, including Ha and Korwatanasakul (2023) and Korwatanasakul (2026).

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