

ERIA Discussion Paper Series**No. 462****The Role of the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) in Promoting the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**

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Abstract: *This paper aims to understand how the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), an international organisation established under the East Asia Summit framework in 2008, contributed to negotiations for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement. Previous international relations studies have analysed the functions of international institutions, such as providing specialist information, skills, and knowledge, and helping states with international policymaking. In light of the functions of international institutions that the previous studies identified, we examine ERIA's activities in support of the RCEP and their changing characteristics at each phase of the negotiating process: (i) before the launch of negotiations, (ii) during the early stage of negotiations, (iii) during the later stage of negotiations, and (iv) during the implementation phase after conclusion of the agreement. We show that ERIA studied the economic impact and feasibility of implementing the RCEP in the 16 countries participating in the RCEP negotiations before the negotiation launch phase, providing a rationale for establishing the RCEP. In the early stage of negotiations, ERIA promoted ASEAN centrality, which is the key concept of the RCEP negotiations, through research asserting the importance of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) and the significance of the RCEP in realising the AEC. In the later stage of negotiations, ERIA expanded its scope of contribution to include more policy-oriented engagement with policymakers in the countries participating in the RCEP negotiations, exemplified by the establishment of ERIA's Policy Design Department in 2016. The Policy Design Department provided technical support for preparing rules of origin and trade facilitation negative lists through capacity building programmes for RCEP negotiators in Cambodia and the Lao PDR. Even after the end of the RCEP negotiations, ERIA conducted capacity development programmes on RCEP issues in various fields (harmonised tariff nomenclature, rules of origin, and e-commerce). Throughout the four phases of the RCEP negotiating process, ERIA provided information-providing and decision-supporting functions. In line with the need for finalizing and implementing the RCEP, ERIA expanded its mission to include the specialist technical-providing function in the last phases.*

Keywords: International institution; Information-sharing; Regional integration; RCEP

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1. Introduction

This paper analyses how international institutions or non-governmental entities can support free trade agreements (FTAs). To fulfil this objective, it studies the role of the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), an international organisation established in 2008, before, during, and after the negotiation process for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

The RCEP is a mega FTA which aimed to unify the existing Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)+1 FTAs – the ASEAN–China Free Trade Area, ASEAN–Korea Free Trade Area, ASEAN–Japan Comprehensive Economic Partnership, ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand Free Trade Area, and ASEAN–India Free Trade Area. The launch of the RCEP negotiations was announced at the 21st ASEAN Summit in November 2012, and negotiations were completed in November 2020 by 15 participating countries, following India’s withdrawal. The process of the RCEP negotiations was based on the principle of ‘ASEAN centrality’, which was clearly stated in the Guiding Principles and Objectives for Negotiating the RCEP (RCEP, 2012). ASEAN has also proceeded with ASEAN-wide high-level economic integration, known as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). The formation of the RCEP and the creation of the AEC are considered as the same regional policy challenges for ASEAN, and ERIA’s main role is closely involved with these ASEAN challenges.

The East Asia Summit (EAS) Leaders agreed to establish ERIA at the Third EAS in 2007 (ASEAN, 2007). ERIA was officially inaugurated as a full-fledged international research organisation in June 2008 at its first governing board meeting at the ASEAN Secretariat in Jakarta (Nishimura, 2017). Its establishment was first proposed because of the need for an ‘East Asia version of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)’ in ‘the Global Economic Strategy’ by the Ministry of Economy Trade and Industry (METI) of Japan in August 2006 (METI 2006: 4), together with the initiative for the East Asia Economic Partnership Agreement, later known as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia (CEPEA). One of ERIA’s expected functions was to promote regional economic integration by providing intellectual input. The East Asia Economic Partnership Agreement proposed forming a region-wide economic area composed of

the ASEAN+6 member countries – i.e. the 10 ASEAN Member States (AMS); the Plus Three countries (China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (henceforth, Korea)); Australia; India; and New Zealand. As Terada (2013) mentioned, the idea of establishing ERIA differentiated Japan’s proposal from China’s proposal for an East Asia FTA with ASEAN+3 membership. Japan promoted East Asian regional integration under the framework of ASEAN+6 (which had the same members as the EAS at that time). Since the establishment of ERIA, the RCEP agenda has been closely related to ERIA’s research and policy activities supporting regional economic integration in ASEAN and East Asia.

Looking back on the history of ASEAN, the ‘track two mechanism’, mostly developed by think tank scholars and at academic workshops or meetings in the region, has played a significant role in building regional trust (Acharya, 1998; Jones and Smith, 2007).² The track two mechanism provides a testing ground for ideas which are too sensitive to be placed on the inter-governmental agenda (Acharya, 1998: 76). As this paper mentions below, ERIA’s involvement in the RCEP was similar to the track two mechanism; however, it also encouraged the decision-making of the ASEAN+6 member countries to start the RCEP negotiation process.

In this paper, we touch upon ERIA’s role in supporting the RCEP launch and negotiations. Although ERIA was not an official party to the negotiations, it was involved in the RCEP process by providing specialist capacity and knowledge. We describe ERIA’s activities related to the RCEP, and their changing characteristics at each phase of the negotiating process: (i) before the launch of negotiations, (ii) during the early stage of negotiations, (iii) during the later stage of negotiations, and (iv) during the implementation phase after the conclusion of the agreement. We investigate ERIA’s contribution to the RCEP negotiations and, more generally, the role of international institutions in supporting the negotiation of economic partnership agreements. We conduct this research by using the official documents and website information of the ASEAN Secretariat, relevant ministries of the RCEP participating countries, and ERIA. We also conduct interviews with officials related

² The track two mechanism refers to the non-governmental and informal discussion process used to build confidence and promote mutual understanding and cooperation. The track two mechanism usually consists of scholars and experts on specific issues. The track one mechanism refers to intergovernmental discussion.

to the RCEP negotiations and ERIA activities to enrich the research results.

2. Review of Previous Studies and Research Design

International Institutions from the Perspective of International Relations

In the field of international relations, scholars have studied international institutions such as international organisations (IOs) and international non-governmental organisations from the viewpoint of what roles non-state actors play in global governance (Barnet and Finnemore, 1999; Keohane, 2011; Nasiritousi, Hjerpe, and Bäckstrand, 2016). A vast amount of research analyses the role of non-governmental institutions by ‘understanding why these phenomena exist, how they function, and what effects they have on world politics and other outcomes of concern’ (Martin and Simmons, 2013: 326). Moreover, Gutner and Thompson asserted that studies of international organisations in international relations need to focus on ‘why states create institutions, how they pursue their interests through institutions, and whether and how IOs “matter”’ (Gutner and Thompson 2010: 228). Furthermore, Barnet and Finnemore (1999) pointed out that international organisations are autonomous from their member states and can have independent effects on the world.

International institutions are generally considered to play agenda-setting and normative roles through discussions amongst state representatives (Cogman, Hurd, and Jonstone, 2016: xii). To support the setting of global agenda and norms, an important function of international organisations is gathering and providing information (Coicaud and Le Blanc, 2016).³ Furthermore, the functional approach of international institutions emphasises the provision of specialist abilities and knowledge to develop international policymaking (Nasiritousi, Hjerpe, and

³ Coicaud and Le Blanc (2016: 665–69) listed nine categories of mandates related to the information-gathering functions of international organisations: (i) gathering and using information for compliance and enforcement; (ii) information related to international norm-setting; (iii) production and dissemination of raw data and information; (iv) production and use of information for reviewing, monitoring, and reporting; (v) production of information aimed at providing the basis for international action; (vi) information produced and disseminated by international organisations as conveners of international discussions; (vii) information produced for knowledge generation and capacity-building functions; (viii) public information; and (ix) production and use of information relating to the international organisation’s own actions and performance. They also propose six criteria for international organisations’ information dissemination: legitimacy, economic efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and participation, relevance, and adaptability (ibid: 679).

Bäckstrand, 2016). The epistemic community – the concept by Haas (1992: 2) about the role the network of knowledge-based experts plays in ‘articulating the cause-and-effect relationship of complex problems, helping states identify their interests, framing the issue for collective debate, proposing specific policy, and identifying salient points for negotiation’ – also encourages the international field’s decision-making process.

General Background of ERIA in East Asia Economic Integration

Some researchers have studied ERIA from the viewpoint of East Asian economic integration and development. Katada (2020) highlighted the Japanese initiative of regional development cooperation through research think tanks – the Asian Development Bank Institute and ERIA – to make ‘visible intellectual contributions to regional development and economic efforts’ (Katada 2020: 150). Yoshimatsu (2014) pointed out the importance of ERIA’s information provision function, which contributes to the development of FTAs in ASEAN and East Asia. He claimed that ERIA contributed to overcoming ‘a major hurdle to the formation of a regional FTA in East Asia’, which ‘was how to coordinate the diverse contents of the existing ASEAN+1 FTAs into a unified FTA’ (Yoshimatsu, 2014: 60). Terada (2013: 69) pointed out the importance of the utilisation of ERIA for economic cooperation and technical assistance by referring to the CEPEA study group report (CEPEA, 2009).

ERIA has conducted extensive research related to the ASEAN and East Asia region. It formed the Research Institutes Network, which consists of the 16 research institutions of each ERIA member country (ERIA, n.d.-b). To conduct ERIA research projects, the Research Institutes Network helps conduct country research and obtain information and research findings from individual member countries (Yoshimatsu, 2014: 61). Therefore, the network function helps enrich the scientific research outcomes and create a consensus amongst the researchers of member countries for desirable policy directions through the research activities. This function is consistent with the discourse of the epistemic community mentioned above.

As a general history of ERIA, Nishimura (2014, 2017) covered the development of ERIA holistically. However, these studies do not cover ERIA’s

relationship with the RCEP negotiations. To the best of our knowledge, our study is the first research that provides a case study of ERIA and the RCEP negotiation process.

3. Timeline of RCEP Negotiations and ERIA's Contribution

Here, we describe ERIA's role in the RCEP negotiations by examining what ERIA did in the context of the RCEP timeline. Although ERIA's activity was not directly involved in the negotiating process of the RCEP agreement, ERIA provided the functions of gathering and providing information and supporting member states' decisions at each stage of the RCEP negotiation process – including the launch of negotiations, the progress of the specific chapters, and the implementation phase after the negotiations concluded.

The leaders of the 16 participating countries launched the RCEP negotiations on 20 November 2012 through a joint declaration. The declaration mentioned ASEAN centrality, as well as achieving 'a modern, comprehensive, high-quality and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement establishing an open trade and investment environment in the region to facilitate the expansion of regional trade and investment' and contributing 'to global economic growth and development' (ASEAN, 2012a). Before the leaders' declaration, the economic ministers of the RCEP participating countries agreed on the 'Guiding Principles and Objectives for Negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' in August 2012, which contained the direction and contents of the negotiation process (ASEAN, 2012c; RCEP, 2012a).

The negotiation process started with the first round of negotiations and other working group meetings in Brunei Darussalam in May 2013. The first RCEP ministerial meeting was held on 19 August 2013 at the ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting. From the beginning of the negotiation process, 31 Trade Negotiation Committee meetings, eight Ministerial Meetings, seven Intersessional Trade Negotiation Committee Meetings, 11 Intersessional Ministerial Meetings, and four RCEP Summit meetings were held over almost 8 years.³ During the negotiation process, one of the critical moments was establishing the ASEAN Community at the end of 2015; another was the withdrawal of India from the RCEP negotiations in

November 2019. The end of 2015 was the initial target for concluding negotiations, and the Indian withdrawal in 2019 was one of the consequences of the extension of the negotiation process.⁴

In this section, we divide the RCEP negotiation process into four parts: (i) before the launch of negotiations, (ii) the early stage of negotiations, and (iii) the period of deepening negotiations, and (iv) the implementation phase after negotiations. The launch phase relies on the rationale of economic benefits emanating from the RCEP agreement. The later stage of negotiations requires more technical support for advancing the negotiations. The implementation phase also requires information and technical inputs for the smooth implementation of the RCEP, particularly in Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR), Myanmar, and Viet Nam.

3.1. Before the launch of RCEP negotiations

During the launch phase, the important issue was how the RCEP was going to create economic benefits. As mentioned above, one of ERIA's roles is to support regional economic integration in East Asia. Since its establishment, ERIA has conducted extensive research on FTAs in the region. One of the most significant agenda items is to support the implementation of the AEC Blueprint 2015 and promote further economic integration in the ASEAN and East Asia region. The AEC is one of the pillars of the ASEAN Community, together with the ASEAN Political-Security Community and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and it aims to accomplish 'a single market and single production base' through various liberalisation and regulatory harmonisation in the ASEAN region. The RCEP aims at East Asian economic integration through an ASEAN-centred approach.

ERIA has worked to develop the AEC Scorecard, the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint 2015 (ERIA, 2012c), and input for the blueprint of the AEC beyond 2015 (Intal et al., 2014). The RCEP is an important pillar of the policy recommendations for establishing the AEC in 2015 to strengthen regional production networks and economic activities in the East Asia region rather than within ASEAN

⁴ According to media reports, bilateral relations between China and India were one of the reasons for making early agreements difficult (India TV, 2017; Palit, 2019).

(ERIA, 2012c: 19). In the following subsection, we investigate ERIA's contributions to the development of the RCEP. The research on establishing the AEC and the RCEP is one of the important pillars of the policy recommendations to strengthen the regional economic architecture and ASEAN centrality.

ASEAN+ FTA Mapping Studies

ERIA started conducting FTA research based on a request by the ASEAN Secretariat in 2009 (Nishimura, 2014: 124). The FTA mapping study (2009–2011) analysed the difference between ASEAN+1 FTAs and ASEAN++ FTAs (later the RCEP). The results of the comprehensive mapping studies were reported at the 43rd ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting and Informal EAS Economic Ministers' Consultations (ASEAN, 2011a).

According to Nishimura (2014), before the launch of RCEP negotiations, ERIA presented the results of its analysis to four ASEAN Plus Working Groups including the Economic and Technical Cooperation Working Group (ETCWG). ERIA also presented the results of its research to the working group on rules of origin (ROO) and made policy recommendations to the High-Level Task Force on ASEAN Economic Integration in July 2011 (Nishimura, 2014).

The overlapping of FTAs in an uncoordinated way may cause a higher business and administration cost, creating a phenomenon known as the 'spaghetti bowl effect' (Bhagwati, 1995). ROOs are at the centre of such complexity, as they determine the country where a product is produced (Lee and Okabe, 2011). A producer in the ASEAN region has to decide which FTA's ROOs govern its international transactions with its customer company in the region. If multiple ROOs are uncoordinated, the producers need to pay high costs to determine which ROOs they should choose.

Based on requests from the ASEAN Secretariat, ERIA developed two FTA mapping studies (Findlay, 2010; Lee and Okabe, 2011). These studies concluded that the ASEAN+1 FTAs were uncoordinated, and that ASEAN should take a central role in forming a more comprehensive regional economic agreement by combining the existing ASEAN+1 arrangements.

Another significant FTA study was Fukunaga and Isono (2013), which emphasised the importance of the RCEP in realising a fully liberalised region. The

study pointed out that the existing ASEAN +1 FTAs (at that time) created a ‘noodle bowl’ situation because of the difference in tariff rates, definitions of ROOs, service and investment limitations, and protection standards, which business operators absorb as costs (Fukunaga and Isono, 2013: 2). Although this was released after the start of the RCEP negotiations, the results of this study were reflected in ERIA’s policy recommendations and other projects.

It should be noted that ERIA published these two reports when the heads of AMS agreed on the ASEAN Framework of the RCEP at the 19th ASEAN Summit in 2011 (ASEAN, 2011a) and officially decided to launch the RCEP negotiations in 2012 (ASEAN, 2012b).

Mid-Term Review of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) Blueprint

ERIA contributed to improving the AEC Scorecard and developing the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint (ASEAN, 2010, 2011a, 2011b).⁵ It participated in a preparatory meeting of the ASEAN Economic Ministers in November 2011 and made a presentation on the ‘ERIA Study to Further Enhance the AEC Scorecard Phase II’, which provided a new scoring method for applying evaluations from the business and academic sectors (Nishimura, 2014: 122; Aldaba et al., 2010; ERIA, 2011). ERIA developed the original scorecard mechanism for assessing AEC measures, including business sector evaluations. This research became the basis for developing the AEC project’s mid-term review. The mid-term review report reviewed the roadmap implementation for the AEC Blueprint requested by the ASEAN Economic Ministers.

At the 41st ASEAN Economic Ministers’ Meeting in 2009, the ministers requested ERIA to assist the ASEAN Secretariat in reviewing the AEC Blueprint 2015. After that, ERIA also worked to develop the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint 2015, based on requests from the ASEAN Economic Ministers (ERIA, 2012c). The AEC Blueprint provides concrete actions to achieve ASEAN’s transformation into a single market and production base by 2015.

⁵ We appreciate ERIA’s support in undertaking the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint and the improvement of the AEC Scorecard Monitoring System and Mechanism to facilitate the timely establishment of the AEC by 2015.

Through the process of the Mid-Term Review of the AEC 2015, ERIA contributed to the RCEP. ERIA's engagement in the mid-term review project began when it received a letter from the Indonesian Minister of Trade, Mari Elka Pangestu on 15 April 2011. The mid-term review (i) assessed the effectiveness of the measures adopted from the AEC Blueprint as well as the contribution of those measures to economic growth, employment, competitiveness, and social welfare within ASEAN; and (ii) provided recommendations to enhance the implementation of the AEC Blueprint (ERIA 2012c: 1). Although the AEC and the RCEP came from a different context, as Kim (2022) analysed, these elements overlapped.

The mid-term review showed the RCEP's economic impact on the ASEAN region quantitatively using a dynamic Global Trade Analysis Project (GTAP) model. The simulation revealed that broad and deep integration of the ASEAN and East Asia region is more beneficial than limited ASEAN-wide integration. Tariff reductions in the ASEAN+6 benefit the AMS more significantly than tariff reductions limited to ASEAN. Moreover, the economic impacts of service sector liberalisation and improved trade facilitation are much more significant than tariff reduction. These results suggest the importance of the RCEP. The mid-term review also recommended deepening ASEAN integration with East Asia and ensuring ASEAN centrality by achieving a high-quality regional FTA under the RCEP (ERIA, 2012c: x).

The completion of the RCEP negotiations by 2015 was listed as one of the priority measures of the AEC for 2015, together with tariff and non-tariff measures (NTMs); trade facilitation; services liberalisation and domestic reform; investment liberalisation and facilitation; connectivity and transport facilitation; SME development; and the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (ERIA, 2012c: 18). The Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, stated that the RCEP negotiations were part of the effort to establish the AEC by 2015 and that ASEAN economic integration should be comprehensive to promote trade diversification in the region (Hun, 2012).

ERIA participated in the 8th AEC Council Meeting in August 2012 and the 44th ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting, and presented the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint (ERIA, 2012b). The joint ministerial statements expressed their appreciation for the contributions of both the Mid-Term Review of the AEC and the comprehensive mapping studies to the implementation of the AEC Blueprint

(ASEAN, 2012d, 2012b). The ERIA delegation participated in the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit in 2012 and officially distributed the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint Executive Summary (ERIA, 2012a). The completion of the RCEP by 2015 was proposed in the 10 preferential agenda of the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint.

At the 21st ASEAN Summit on 20 November 2012, the ASEAN+6 declared the launch of negotiations for the RCEP (ASEAN, 2012b). The completion of the RCEP was proposed by the end of 2015 – the same as the deadline for the ASEAN Community.

3.2. Early Stage of Negotiations and the Establishment of the AEC

The Guiding Principles of the RCEP were agreed and the negotiation process started in 2012. The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), another mega FTA negotiation, was launched by 12 countries (Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States (US), and Viet Nam) in 2013. Some countries engaged with both the TPP and the RCEP, and used their resources to promote the TPP rather than the RCEP in the early stage of negotiations.⁶ The TPP also challenged ASEAN centrality because not all AMS participated in it. ERIA demonstrated the centrality of ASEAN and the importance of steadily implementing the AEC, or ASEAN-wide economic integration. In this context, it performed an information-sharing function that positioned the promotion of the RCEP as an important part of this effort.

One of the continued contributions was the economic and technical cooperation (ETC) chapter of the RCEP. ERIA (2015) noted that its experts participated in the ETCWG in 2014 and made presentations (ERIA, 2015: x). The draft version of the study on ETC under the RCEP was submitted to the ETCWG in 2014, forming the basis of the final document (ERIA, 2015). The report suggested priorities for ETC activities and recommended providing the necessary capacity building for

⁶ Oba (forthcoming) pointed out that Japan prioritised the TPP over the RCEP because ‘it aimed to create a high-level, comprehensive set of rules for trade and investment liberalisation and facilitation, which would more directly contribute to Japan’s economic recovery and technological innovation’.

participating countries, particularly for Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam.⁷

ASEAN Rising

Based on the research conducted to develop the Mid-Term Review of the AEC Blueprint, ERIA started to contribute to the intellectual inputs of the Blueprint of the AEC beyond 2015 in 2013 (ASEAN, 2013b). The basic concept of the AEC beyond 2015 was compiled in the ‘Jakarta Framework on Moving ASEAN Forward Toward 2015 and Beyond’, which was noted during the ASEAN Summit in Bali in 2011.⁸ The 8th EAS Chairman’s Statement also highlighted ERIA’s contributions to East Asia’s economic integration, including the RCEP negotiations (ASEAN, 2013a).⁹

ERIA published *ASEAN Rising* in January 2014, stipulating the remaining issues that ASEAN needed to tackle after completing the AEC in 2015 (Intal et al., 2014).¹⁰ The book highlighted the importance of the RCEP in ASEAN centrality because of ASEAN’s role in facilitating negotiations under the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM), and stated that it ‘mitigated the rivalry of China and Japan’ on East Asian FTAs and the CEPEA by acting as a facilitator (ibid.: 294). *ASEAN Rising* valued the importance of the RCEP in achieving a Global ASEAN and ‘a successful conclusion of the RCEP negotiations that effectively raise the regional integration initiatives in East Asia to a higher level while at the same time taking great

⁷ The ETC priorities that ERIA (2015) mentioned were (i) helping to build awareness and support for the RCEP; (ii) facilitating technical working group efforts to identify and address bottlenecks in implementing the RCEP commitments, and sharing regional experiences and good practices related to implementing the RCEP commitments; (iii) facilitating the institution building and policy reform processes (especially in the lower income countries) that would be needed to help reduce regional development gaps; and (iv) monitoring and evaluating the RCEP implementation and periodically reviewing ETC needs and priorities.

⁸ ERIA held a workshop for the AEC beyond 2015 for researchers and ASEAN Secretariat representatives (ERIA, 2013).

⁹ ASEAN (2013a: para. 34) stated that ‘We also emphasised the importance of deepening economic integration through trade liberalisation initiatives such as RCEP aimed at narrowing the development gaps and maximising mutual benefits. In this regard, we appreciated analytical works and policy recommendations by the ERIA for maximising benefits of economic integration through coordinated cooperation among all EAS participating countries’.

¹⁰ *ASEAN Rising* used more than 30 pages to explain why the RCEP was important for the achievement of the AEC 2015 and beyond, and how to implement the RCEP. It stated that ASEAN and the AEC could contribute to trade facilitation, services liberalisation, and the lowering of non-tariff barriers (NTMs) with ASEAN Dialogue Partners. To implement the RCEP properly, it recommended a dispute settlement mechanism, the possibility of trade policy reviews, and an open accession clause to the implementation mechanism.

consideration of the inclusiveness of RCEP given the wide gap in development levels of AMSs will be a major challenge for ASEAN' (ibid.: 109).

The book also highlighted the importance of the open accession clause, which was also mentioned in the Guiding Principles of the RCEP, as the open accession clause (i) minimises the risks of trade diversion in the medium and long term, (ii) achieves the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific through the pathway of the RCEP and the TPP, and (iii) increases the attractiveness of FTAs (ibid.: 301–2). By using the open accession clause, ASEAN can maintain ASEAN centrality (ibid.: 302).

ASEAN Rising was submitted to the ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting and the High-Level Task Force on ASEAN Economic Integration in 2014 for developing the post-2015 vision (ERIA, 2014). The foreign ministers' and summit statements expressed their appreciation of ERIA's contribution to realising the AEC and its support for the RCEP negotiations (ASEAN, 2014a, 2014b).

The matter of the AEC beyond 2015 was realised as the AEC Blueprint 2025 (ASEAN, 2015b). The blueprint took into account the recommendations of ERIA studies (ibid: 1). The RCEP is listed under the FTA and comprehensive economic partnership policies in the Global ASEAN pillar (ibid: 35). One of the critical concepts of the *ASEAN Rising* proposals was a 'responsive ASEAN' as the basis of the four AEC pillars – (i) single market and production base, (ii) competitive economic region, (iii) equitable economic development, and (iv) integration into the global economy – and the concept of responsiveness was reflected in the FTA section of the blueprint (Intal et al., 2014: 321).¹¹

To summarise the process of the RCEP negotiations and the contributions made by ERIA, we can evaluate that ERIA's contributions are closely related to the decision-making at the inception of RCEP negotiations (mapping studies) and promoting ASEAN centrality in terms of the realisation of the AEC (Mid-Term Review), and further regional economic integration and the importance of the AEC and RCEP (*ASEAN Rising*) through the function of information-sharing. These research results were frequently delivered to the policymakers and officials of

¹¹ ASEAN (2015b: 36) stated that one of the agreed strategic measures to further integrate the AEC into the global economy is to 'Continue to review and improve ASEAN FTAs and CEPs to ensure that they remain modern, comprehensive, of high-quality and more responsive to the needs of businesses operating the production networks in ASEAN.'

ASEAN and East Asia through ASEAN working groups, Senior Economic Officials' Meetings (SEOMs), and ministerial meetings.¹²

3.3. Later Stage of the Negotiations Process: Anti-Globalisation and the Importance of Regional Integration

At the 2015 RCEP ministerial meeting in August, 'the Ministers emphasised that the RCEP Trade Negotiating Committee should expedite the negotiations to substantially conclude the negotiations by the end of 2015 with the remaining technical issues to be resolved as soon as possible in 2016' (ASEAN, 2015a). However, no chapter working groups had concluded by the end of 2015 and it took an additional 5 years to finalise the RCEP negotiations. An important element at this stage was the anti-globalisation sentiment led by the Trump Administration in the US in 2017. The completion and collapse of the TPP and the US–China trade conflict underlined the importance of strengthening regional FTAs in the countries participating in the RCEP. When the negotiations began, ERIA considered that technical support was necessary for the sectoral negotiation agenda. In addition to the research activities on the RCEP, technical support to the negotiations through capacity building programmes and frequent communications with policymakers were implemented.

Establishment of the Policy Design Department

ERIA's cooperation expanded not only the research but also the dialogue with ASEAN trade negotiation officials. The establishment of the Policy Design Department (PDD) within ERIA in 2016 became the starting point for strengthening communications with the policymakers and officials of member countries of ERIA, particularly during the RCEP negotiations.¹³ The SEOM of the EAS Economic

¹² Based on an interview with retired ERIA officials (11 December 2020, online).

¹³ The PDD was proposed at the Extraordinary ERIA Governing Board Meeting in Tokyo in March 2016 to bridge the gap between ERIA's research and policy support to the member countries of ERIA (ERIA, 2016a). Dr Rebecca Sta. Maria, former Secretary General of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry of Malaysia, became the first head of ERIA's PDD (Senior Policy Fellow).

Ministers' Meeting and ERIA held a dialogue to discuss the AEC and mega FTAs in the East Asia region.¹⁴

The technical support that ERIA provided to the RCEP negotiations included holding a track 1.5 roundtable discussion amongst prominent academics in the region and RCEP negotiators on the sidelines of the Kobe RCEP roundtable negotiations (Nishimura, 2017).¹⁵ In line with the discussions at the Kobe roundtable, ERIA participated in informal ASEAN–METI consultations in Osaka in April 2017 and provided input as to how the academic research could contribute to the RCEP negotiations.¹⁶ ERIA introduced the concept of the two 'I' initiatives – an 'inclusive' and 'innovation-oriented' initiative – as a new model of regional economic partnership (METI, 2017).¹⁷

At the EAS Economic Ministers' Meeting in August 2017, the ministers acknowledged ERIA's contribution to the RCEP in terms of connectivity, small and medium-sized enterprises, and digital development (ERIA, 2017c). The statement of the ASEAN Summit and EAS commended ERIA's support to the RCEP negotiations, and agreed upon the NTM, ASEAN Seamless Trade Facilitation, and the Master Plan of ASEAN Connectivity 2025 projects (ASEAN, 2017a; 2017b).

ERIA's PDD provided capacity building programmes for Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Viet Nam for the RCEP negotiations based on requests from these countries, such as the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce's request in May 2017 to understand the issues of the RCEP negotiations (ERIA, 2017d). A follow-up programme was held in September 2017, and the capacity building programme listed the contents of customs procedures and trade facilitation, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and ROOs (ERIA, 2017a). These capacity building programmes helped develop the skills of Cambodian negotiators and contributed to a smooth negotiation process.¹⁸

¹⁴ SEOM leaders expressed their need for policy recommendations to contribute to the mega FTAs (ERIA, 2016b).

¹⁵ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2017).

¹⁶ The ERIA representative, Dr Rebecca Sta. Maria, said that 'We must strike while the iron is hot. We need to keep the growth momentum in East Asia. This is about the next fifty years – our negotiators must not look through the narrow lens of what's in it for me today'. She added that the TPP had many good elements that should be considered for the RCEP (ERIA, 2017b).

¹⁷ ERIA's presentation concepts were reflected in the joint media statement (ASEAN, 2017c).

¹⁸ Based on the authors' written interview to a RCEP negotiator conducted in December 2021.

Research on Regional Economic Integration

Another important contribution of ERIA was research on regional economic integration in East Asia. One of ERIA's flagship projects was the NTM database project (ERIA, n.d.) in ASEAN (Ing, Córdoba, and Cadot, 2016) and East Asia (Doan and Rosenow, 2019). While the tariff rates in ASEAN are decreasing due to the efforts of the AEC, NTMs are increasing dramatically; harmonising NTMs within the region is therefore crucial for trade facilitation. In line with the NTM project, ERIA contributed to developing the ASEAN Seamless Trade Facilitation Indicators since 2017 (ASEAN, 2017b) and calculating and reducing the trade transaction costs in ASEAN (ASEAN, 2020).

The importance of the RCEP to the regional integration process has been analysed from an academic perspective. Kimura and Chen (2016) insisted that deepening global value chains inevitably requires mega FTAs, and that AMS and their Dialogue Partners should accelerate the RCEP negotiations.¹⁹ This research on trade issues in ASEAN and East Asia directly and indirectly supported the development of the RCEP negotiation process.

The ASEAN@50 project, a five-volume set of publications, was released in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of ASEAN in 2017 (Nishimura, 2017). Volume 5 of this project is the AEC 2025 and beyond. Sta. Maria, Urata, and Intal (2017: 37) pointed out that the 'RCEP was designed to be a comprehensive and mutually beneficial economic partnership agreement that would involve broader and deeper engagement between ASEAN and its dialogue partners by significantly improving on their existing FTAs'.

¹⁹ Kimura and Chen (2016) insisted that AMS and their Dialogue Partners should accelerate RCEP negotiations. At the time of publication, the negotiations had already lasted 4 years. This report pointed to the trend in mega FTAs, including the TPP, which resulted from global value chain governance in the world economy. Trade in the 21st century comprises trade in goods, trade in services, trade in parts and components, and more unrestrained cross-border movement of factors. This is mainly driven by international production fragmentation, characterised by an increasingly complex and widespread international production sharing network. Against this backdrop, mega FTAs aimed to realize at-the-border liberalisation (including free trade in goods, trade in services, and foreign investment) and beyond-the-border economic reforms (including intellectual property rights enforcement). This report concluded that AMS benefitted from participating in international production networks and global value chains, and that they must accelerate the pace in concluding the RCEP negotiations to maximise the benefit.

The ASEAN Vision 2040 project, which was based on a request from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand, was a future-oriented project to reveal the aspirations and expectations of the people of ASEAN in terms of regional, global, and technical development. The contents highlighted key areas of collective leadership and ASEAN centrality, harnessing the emerging Industry 4.0 to transform the ASEAN economies and enhance ASEAN resilience and developmental sustainability, realising a seamless ASEAN, engendering greater inclusivity and a more profound sense of community and belonging, and strengthening the ASEAN institutional ecosystem (ERIA, 2019). The core theme of the external relations – ASEAN centrality and collective leadership – was the basis for the guiding principles of the RCEP negotiations. The anchor role of ASEAN is critical to the success of the RCEP. It is crucial to succeeding in the multilateral cooperation amongst ASEAN and its external partners (ERIA, 2019: 4). ‘The successful conclusion of RCEP strengthens ASEAN centrality and credibility as a platform for pushing forward the open and predictable multi-lateral trading environment upon which ASEAN’s progress depends’ (ibid.: 21).

Although neither the ASEAN@50 nor the ASEAN Vision 2040 projects directly analyse and highlight the importance of the RCEP negotiations, these publications state that a successful RCEP is the core of further ASEAN integration towards the AEC 2025 and for maintaining the significant role of ASEAN for the dialogue and external partners.

In conclusion, during the later stage of negotiations, ERIA expanded its scope of contribution to policy-oriented engagement with policymakers in the countries participating in the RCEP negotiations, in particular the establishment of the PDD in 2016 (ASEAN, 2016). The NTM database and ASEAN Seamless Trade Facilitation Indicators became good tools to understand the regional integration process, including the AEC 2025. Capacity building programmes were also used to encourage the negotiation process. The two flagship projects of this period (ASEAN@50 and the ASEAN Vision 2040) stressed the importance of the RCEP through the history and future perspectives of ASEAN and East Asia regional integration.

3.4. Post-Agreement Implementation Phase

ERIA's contributions to the RCEP negotiations continued until the conclusion of the negotiation process, and were acknowledged at the ASEAN Economic Ministers' Meeting (ASEAN, 2019, 2020). With regard to the RCEP, ERIA conducted a capacity building programme for ASEAN officials in the service sectors (ASEAN, 2020). Even after the end of the RCEP negotiation process in November 2020, ERIA conducted capacity development programmes on RCEP issues in various fields on harmonised tariff nomenclature, ROOs, and e-commerce.²⁰ Therefore, the function of information-sharing changed to technical support through capacity building in this phase. Through technical cooperation, ERIA continues to contribute to implementing the RCEP smoothly even after the RCEP entered into force in 2022.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper analysed how international institutions engage in inter-governmental negotiations using the case study of ERIA with regard to the RCEP over more than 10 years of activities. Through the various economic analyses of regional economic integration in ASEAN and East Asia, ERIA has contributed to collaboration between regional policymakers and researchers, such as the Research Institutes Network, to understand the importance of realising deepening economic integration in the area, as the various ministerial and summit statements mentioned.

ERIA's contributions during the negotiation launch phase can be credited with analysing the economic impact and feasibility of implementing the RCEP in the 16 participating countries, which contributed to providing a rationale for establishing the FTA. The description of the RCEP in *ASEAN Rising*, which was reflected in the preparation of the AEC Blueprint 2025, shows that the RCEP is an important element in the creation of a Global ASEAN and confirms the centrality of ASEAN. In addition, *ASEAN Rising* performed the function of providing legitimacy to political messages within and outside ASEAN in terms of confirming the centrality of ASEAN.

²⁰ See ERIA (2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d). The capacity building programmes are mainly conducted with the Lao PDR and Cambodia.

As it proceeded to the later stage of negotiations, ERIA expanded its role to include technical support. The PDD supported the negotiations and provided technical support for preparing ROOs and trade facilitation negative lists through capacity building programmes for RCEP negotiators in Cambodia and the Lao PDR, as well as facilitating negotiations amongst negotiators. The organisation of the track 1.5 dialogue also facilitated the function of encouraging discussion of the aspirations for and ideas of the RCEP amongst negotiators and academia. Unlike the ASEAN Secretariat, which performed the secretariat function for the negotiations, these activities can be evaluated as fulfilling the functions of providing information and technical support from a third-party perspective. ERIA served mainly as a forum to promote the basic premise of maintaining economic integration and free trade regionalism by encouraging both academia and officials in each member country to share their ideas with the ASEAN Secretariat (similar to the function of epistemic communities (Haas, 1992)).

The mapping studies, Mid-Term Review of the AEC 2015, and *ASEAN Rising* were directly reflected in the official documents of the RCEP and the AEC Blueprint. ERIA's engagement may be evaluated as the think tank of East Asia's regional economic integration to encourage the track two mechanism for the RCEP (e.g. use of the Research Institutes Network (Yoshimatsu, 2014)).

This case analysis not only provides examples that support the role of international organisations to which previous studies have referred, such as information-providing and decision-supporting functions, but also reveals changes in the specialist technical-providing function required at different stages of the negotiation process over a period of about 10 years – the launch of negotiations, progress in specific negotiations, and operational aspects after the negotiations are concluded.

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