

ACI Research Paper #03-2026

**Research Conference on
Assessing the Impact and Future Directions of the
Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership:
Summary of Discussion**

Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)

April 2026

Please cite this summary as:

Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI), “Research Conference on Assessing the Impact and Future Directions of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership: Summary of Discussion”, Research Paper #03-2026, *Asia Competitiveness Institute Research Paper Series (15 April 2026)*

Abstract

The Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI) organised the Research Conference on “*Assessing the Impact and Future Directions of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)*”, held from 9–11 February 2026 at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore. The Conference was convened in collaboration with the RCEP Support Unit (RSU), under the guidance of Singapore’s Ministry of Trade and Industry. It brought together 15 research centres from 12 RCEP Participating Countries (RPCs).

The Conference provided a timely platform to inform reflections ahead of RCEP’s first General Review in 2027. Through 29 research papers covering trade and investment, value chains, services and digital trade, intellectual property, non-tariff measures (NTMs), and sustainability, participants developed an initial evidence base to assess RCEP’s impact and potential.

While economic cooperation among RPCs continues to deepen, RCEP has largely reinforced existing trade, investment, and production linkages rather than generating new patterns of integration. Concurrently, important shifts are emerging. Services trade has expanded following RCEP’s entry into force. Digitally deliverable services trade has grown rapidly, with scope for more advanced provisions. FDI inflows have also increased, driven by Northeast Asia’s manufacturing sector investments.

Tariff liberalisation is broad but remains phased and uneven across members. It also tends to be less comprehensive than under agreements such as ATIGA and ASEAN+1 FTAs. Low utilisation rates and the continued prevalence of NTMs may limit the full realisation of benefits. Technology collaboration has strengthened, as seen in rising patent activity and intra-regional co-invention. However, deeper intellectual property commitments under existing bilateral FTAs may temper RCEP’s impact in this area. Environmental provisions could also be further advanced, and current trade patterns in environmental goods largely reinforce existing linkages rather than creating new flows.

Looking ahead, the Conference emphasised the need for RCEP to evolve in line with emerging economic and technological developments. Recent upgrades to ASEAN-wide and ASEAN+1 FTAs provide useful reference points for more ambitious commitments. The 2027 General Review presents a timely opportunity to advance these efforts. To ensure effective and timely outcomes, the review should be prioritised, with preparatory work beginning at the earliest opportunity.

To support the 2027 General Review, the Conference proposed targeted measures across key themes. These include strengthening institutional capacity, improving tariff implementation and utilisation, enhancing supply chain connectivity and resilience, advancing digital economy integration and modernising environmental commitments. Detailed recommendations are set out in the sections that follow.

The Conference noted the depth of analysis and the innovative use of data, and agreed to strengthen research collaboration among participating centres. The findings in this Conference Summary aim to inform policymakers, researchers, and stakeholders as RCEP continues to evolve.

Conference Summary

Research Conference on Assessing the Impact and Future Directions of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

1. A Research Conference on 'Assessing the Impact and Future Directions of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership' was organised from 9 to 11 February 2026 by the Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI), in collaboration with the RCEP Support Unit (RSU) and under the guidance of the Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore. Research centres nominated by RCEP Participating Countries (RPCs) were invited to participate.
2. The Conference was held at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, with some participants attending virtually. Research centres from the following 12 RPCs were nominated: Australia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. A total of 15 research centres participated in the Conference.
3. A total of 29 research papers were presented at the conference. The topics ranged from the impact and future directions of RCEP across trade and investment, value chain integration, digital and services trade, intellectual property and innovation, non-tariff measures (NTMs), and environmental and sustainability issues.
4. The Conference observed that 2026 was an opportune time to provide an initial assessment of RCEP's impact and future directions ahead of the first General Review scheduled for 2027. As the world's largest free trade agreement (FTA) to date, the RCEP was heralded as a modern, comprehensive, high-quality, and mutually beneficial economic partnership. Four years after the RCEP's entry into force in 2022, the region has faced the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, persistent economic and trade uncertainties, and upgrades to other regional FTAs. The recent signing of the upgrades to the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand FTA (AANZFTA), the ASEAN-China FTA (ACFTA), and the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA) could also warrant a critical reflection of RCEP's distinct impact. These developments underscore the relevance of the Agreement's review process, while injecting complexity into efforts to assess its evolving impact.
5. The Conference recognised that the 29 research papers, taken together, provided an initial framework to assess the impact of RCEP, consider its future directions, and potentially inform the discussions for its first General Review. The Conference welcomed the research centres' commitments to conduct additional research on the impacts of RCEP. It encouraged greater collaboration among the centres to deepen the analysis and explore emerging issues.

6. The Conference expressed its willingness to serve as a technical forum through a series of meetings to continue discussing the impact and future directions of RCEP. It could serve as a platform to bring together researchers from the RPCs, facilitate evidence-based dialogue, and support RCEP's overall mission.

Research Findings

7. The Conference took note of the initial research findings, which point to strengthening economic cooperation among the RPCs, while noting that RCEP has thus far primarily reinforced existing trade and investment linkages rather than generated new patterns of integration. A summary of the key findings discussed during the Conference is presented below:

Trade and Investment Impact

a) Intra-RCEP trade is robust and substantial, with trade flows between Northeast Asia and ASEAN remaining the largest and most stable component within the region. Since RCEP's entry into force, tariff cuts have generated modest trade creation within the region and limited increase in the share of intra-RCEP exports and imports in total trade of RPCs, indicating little trade diversion from non-RCEP partners toward intra-RCEP trade. Gains have been most evident in intermediate inputs and processed goods, highlighting RCEP's effectiveness in reinforcing and optimising existing regional production networks. The limited impact is consistent with RCEP's low utilisation rate reported in enterprise surveys, as many firms continue to trade under other pre-existing FTAs. The low utilisation also suggests scope for further gains as awareness and implementation deepen.

b) RCEP's services trade provisions are broadly comparable to those in earlier ASEAN+1 agreements. More liberal provisions are concentrated in Northeast Asia–ASEAN country pairs and within Northeast Asia. The improved services trade liberalisation is associated with increased services trade following RCEP's entry into force, driven mainly by Northeast Asia–ASEAN flows. Economies adopting a positive-list approach under RCEP undertook more liberal commitments than in the pre-existing ASEAN+1 FTAs. Higher services trade restrictiveness constrains both services and services-linked manufacturing exports, with the most significant barriers found in professional services, telecommunications, and transport.

c) Digitally deliverable services (DDS) trade within RCEP has expanded rapidly. Geographically, trade patterns have shifted from a Northeast Asia-centred structure toward one anchored in ASEAN, with ASEAN-linked flows rising faster than trade within Northeast Asia. Overall, RCEP's e-commerce chapter adopts a more balanced approach that preserves flexibility, including broader exclusions on data protection and cross-border transfer commitments than those in upgraded ASEAN+1 FTAs and Digital Economy Agreements (DEAs). There is, however, scope to further strengthen this chapter by

advancing provisions on digital payments, e-invoicing, and digital identity, as well as deepening cooperation on emerging issues including AI, Fintech, and Lawtech.

d) RCEP members recorded a 42 per cent increase in greenfield FDI inflows, rising from USD 125 billion in 2022 to USD 178 billion in 2024, highlighting the region's growing attractiveness as an investment destination. Investment creation under the Agreement is emerging, with effects becoming more evident in the most recent year. Investment within the region remains highly concentrated in manufacturing, with Northeast Asia continuing to dominate as the major investor. RCEP's investment chapter prioritises sovereignty-preserving policy space over deep liberalisation, with room to further strengthen commitments on labour and environmental standards, corporate social responsibility, and institutional and transparency mechanisms.

e) The current pattern of trade creation suggests that the expansion of RCEP membership could generate substantial gains. Applicants who are already well integrated with the region would benefit from lower trade frictions, while less-connected economies could see greater scope for new trade linkages. Accession of new countries could create opportunities for firms to relocate or expand supply-chain investments. Current RCEP members are concentrated in manufacturing sectors such as electronics and transport equipment, whereas applicants tend to specialise in apparel, minerals, agriculture, and services intermediation. This configuration favours the development of new production links rather than direct competition. Although expansion would only marginally increase the region's shares of global GDP and population, it could significantly raise its trade weight and sectoral diversity, pointing to gains that extend beyond tariff liberalisation alone.

Tariff and Non-Tariff Barriers

f) Tariff liberalisation under RCEP is broad but phased in slowly and unevenly across RPCs: about 66 per cent of tariff lines were duty-free upon entry into force, rising to roughly 89 per cent at full implementation. The speed and depth of liberalisation vary widely across RCEP members. Overall, RCEP's zero-tariff coverage at full implementation is lower than that achieved under ATIGA and other ASEAN+1 FTAs. New market access gains accrue mainly to Northeast Asian countries.

g) NTMs remain prevalent in the region. Although NTM removals have increased since 2022, they continue to lag behind the introduction of new measures. Trade-restrictive instruments, particularly subsidies and export controls, continue to account for a substantial share of NTMs in force. In value terms, tax-based export incentives and import licensing requirements impose the most significant distortions on intra-RCEP trade, with particularly pronounced effects in the electronic components sector. In coverage terms, NTMs are most prevalent in agriculture, with technical barriers to trade, quantity restrictions, and export measures featuring more prominently than other NTM categories.

Technology Collaboration

h) The RCEP has emerged as a significant market for technology commercialisation, mainly led by the Northeast Asia region, attracting over 60 per cent of global patent applications (2003-2022). Even before RCEP entered into force, the Northeast Asian economies had maintained significant bilateral R&D investment and patent application flows despite the absence of a common FTA. Intra-RCEP co-invention is rising and plays a critical role in supporting technological development.

i) While RCEP's intellectual property (IP) chapter is more comprehensive and inclusive than that of pre-existing ASEAN+1 FTAs, its practical impact is limited, as many members are already subject to deeper IP commitments under intra-RCEP bilateral FTAs. RCEP's potential hinges on targeted implementation mechanisms and the effective delivery of technical assistance, rather than new IP rules. Complementary policies beyond IP, such as those addressing talent development and mobility, are essential to fostering greater intra-bloc innovation activities.

Environment and Sustainability Issues

j) RCEP incorporates environmental provisions that emphasise cooperation and broad principles, creating a foundation for the progressive strengthening of environmental commitments over time. Tariff rates on environmental goods under RCEP generally remain higher than the lowest rates offered in pre-existing FTAs. RCEP primarily enhances existing trade relationships with limited evidence of generating new bilateral trade. Lower tariffs and a greater number of environmental provisions increase trade values only among country pairs where environmental goods trade already exists.

Future Directions

8. The Conference noted that RCEP has been a positive force for economic growth in the region, although its economic impact to date remains modest and uneven in these early years of implementation. The Conference nonetheless strongly affirmed RCEP's significant role in fostering regional economic integration. It emphasised the need for concerted and sustained efforts to upgrade RCEP to fully realise its potential and strengthen its long-term relevance and impact. In this view, the Conference identified the following policy priorities to guide future directions of RCEP:

a) RCEP is a core pillar of the region's institutional architecture for trade and investment. At a time of heightened global uncertainties and retreating multilateralism, RCEP is a stabilising force for the region. Upgrading RCEP should remain a key priority for governments seeking to safeguard economic growth and deepen regional economic cooperation.

b) RCEP must continue to evolve to remain relevant in a rapidly changing global economy. Efforts to upgrade RCEP should take into account emerging developments

in the digital economy, environment and sustainability issues, artificial intelligence, and other nascent areas, and incorporate appropriate updates accordingly.

- c) Recent upgrades to ASEAN-wide and ASEAN+1 FTAs, including ATIGA, AANZFTA, and ACFTA, demonstrate the shared imperative and the vast potential to advance high-standard, forward-looking commitments among RCEP's diverse membership. Newly adopted provisions in these FTAs illuminate a credible and practical pathway for upgrading RCEP.
- d) RCEP does not stand alone in fostering and integrating economic linkages among the RPCs. It builds upon a dense network of regional FTAs with overlapping memberships. Greater emphasis should therefore be placed on strengthening the complementarity between RCEP and regional FTAs.
- e) There is an urgency for, and an opportunity presented by, the RCEP General Review scheduled for 2027. Given resource constraints and to ensure timely completion, such a review must be carefully prioritised, focusing on early harvest and a phased approach rather than addressing all the identified gaps in a single undertaking. The opportunity to update the Agreement to keep it relevant will be welcomed. However, it should not come at the cost of a prolonged review. Preparatory work for the RCEP General Review should begin as soon as possible.

Specific Recommendations

9. Drawing on the research findings and the deliberations, the Conference proposed the following actions to advance the upgrade of RCEP:

Actions on Elevating RCEP's Institutional Capacity

- a) Upgrade the RCEP Support Unit into a full-fledged Secretariat to coordinate negotiations, support implementation, and ECOTECH initiatives, oversee communications, commission research, and develop long-term work programmes.
- b) Establish a dedicated mechanism to facilitate the exchange of data among RPCs, including customs-level data, to effectively assess the Agreement's utilisation.
- c) Strengthen ECOTECH to assist RPCs, particularly LDCs, in implementing their commitments and narrowing development gaps.
- d) Adopt an accelerated accession mechanism to facilitate membership expansion, and pursue broader cooperation with sub-regional, regional, and international organisations and institutions to enhance RCEP's network and strategic relevance.

- e) Establish an official RCEP digital platform to provide one-stop access to related information by the business sector and the public, including consolidated laws and regulations, applied tariff data, utilisation guidance, customs procedures, and trade indicators.

Actions on Enhancing Tariff Implementation and Utilisation

- f) Accelerate the implementation of scheduled tariff reductions and prioritise the elimination of low-yield "nuisance tariffs" where administrative costs outweigh revenue gains.
- g) Conclude the review of full cumulation of Rules of Origin and update Product-Specific Rules of Origin to improve utilisation and enhance operational effectiveness for regional supply chains.
- h) Address tariff differentials with a view to simplifying procedures and reducing compliance costs.
- i) Adopt an effective utilisation monitoring mechanism to identify sources of low utilisation and support targeted improvements.

Actions on Strengthening Supply Chain Connectivity and Resilience

- j) Establish interoperable linkages among customs single windows, including real-time electronic exchange of certificates of origin and related trade documentation.
- k) Establish sector-specific implementation tracks to address behind-the-border barriers, support regulatory cooperation, advance mutual recognition, and facilitate harmonisation of standards, certification, and technical regulations.
- l) Strengthen coordination and information-sharing across RCEP members to enhance supply chain resilience.

Actions on Advancing Digital Economy Integration

- m) Upgrade the e-commerce chapter to a more comprehensive digital economy chapter that covers a broader range of issues, including, but not limited to, digital payments, e-invoicing, and digital identity.
- n) Establish baseline principles for data governance, including data protection, cross-border data transfers, and data localisation, supported by enhanced transparency and regulatory cooperation.
- o) Establish a work programme on emerging digital services, including AI, Fintech, and Lawtech, to support information exchange and regulatory learning.

- p) Promote knowledge diffusion within RCEP by complementing IP cooperation with policies that facilitate talent mobility, regulatory transparency, and cross-border data sharing, thus enhancing broader participation in the digital economy.

Actions on Modernising Environmental and Sustainability Commitments

- q) Adopt an environmental chapter to consolidate existing green provisions and, within it, establish an environmental goods list and a pathway to prioritise tariff reductions for such goods, drawing on established international benchmarks such as the APEC List of Environmental Goods.
 - r) Upgrade environmental provisions to strengthen implementation, monitoring, and accountability, while establishing appropriate mechanisms for members to undertake binding environmental commitments.
10. The Conference noted with satisfaction the innovative ways of harnessing data, the analyses presented, and the depth of the discussion. The participants agreed to enhance research collaboration among the research centres on issues of interest. Potential topics include the impact of variations in Rules of Origin, RCEP's impact on the welfare of underrepresented groups such as SMEs, women, and indigenous peoples, and the economic resilience of the RCEP grouping against global shocks.
 11. The Conference decided to disseminate the research findings through a publication of conference proceedings. Each research centre would decide, in accordance with its rules and regulations, whether to release the findings to the public domain before or through the publication of the conference proceedings.
 12. The Conference concluded with a vote of thanks to the Conference Organiser.

Annexure I: List of Participating Institutes

Country	Name of Institute
Singapore	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)
Indonesia	Centre for World Trade Studies (CWTS), Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM)
	Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
	Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA)
Malaysia	The Institute for Democracy & Economic Affairs (IDEAS)
Myanmar	Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)
	Meiktila University of Economics
Thailand	International Institute for Trade and Development (ITD)
Vietnam	Vietnam Institute of Strategy and Policy for Industry and Trade (VIOIT)
Australia	Institute for International Trade (IIT), The University of Adelaide
	East Asian Bureau of Economic Research (EABER)
China	Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC)
Japan	Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI)
Korea	Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP)
New Zealand	Victoria University of Wellington

Annexure II: List of Presentations

S.No	Author	Presentation Title	Affiliation
1	Dr Banh Thi Hang	RCEP's First Four Years: Progress and Promise	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)
2	Dr Pan Yichen	Evaluating RCEP Implementation: Evidence from Macro Data and Enterprise Surveys	Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC)
3	Professor Ang Siah Hwee	Improving Utilisation & Implementation, and Possible Enhancements to RCEP	Victoria University of Wellington
4	Dr Kumuthini Sivathas	Assessing RCEP's Trade and Welfare Gains: Agreements' Depth and the Impact of CPTPP Expansion on RCEP	Institute for International Trade (IIT), University of Adelaide
5	Professor Ken Itakura	Economic Impact of the RCEP	Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI) / Nagoya City University
6	Dr Sangjun Yea	The Role of RCEP in Shaping Korea's Production Networks	Korea Institute for International Economic Policy (KIEP)
7	Ms Tran Thi Ngoc My	RCEP and Investment Creation: Rules, Results, and What Comes Next?	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)
8	Mr Wang Qingchen	Green Investment in RCEP: Trends & Future	Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC)
9	Dr Vutha Hing	Impact Assessment of Digital Trade and Services Trade Regimes for ASEAN	Institute for International Trade (IIT), University of Adelaide
10	Dr Liu Jingting	Assessing Services Trade Commitments Under RCEP and Trade Creation	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)
11	Ms Huang Yijia	Advancing Digitally Deliverable Services Trade within RCEP: Challenges and Future Directions	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)
12	Mr Woraphat Ditpan	Enhancing the Readiness of Thai and ASEAN SMEs for Digital Trade under the RCEP: Exploration, and Analysis	International Institute for Trade and Development (ITD)
13	Ms Nwe Nwe Yee	Digital Trade and Trade in Services under RCEP	Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)
14	Ms Yan Bowen	When Technology Goes Borderless: Rethinking the Role of Regional IP Harmonisation under RCEP	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)

15	Dr Maharani Hapsari	Realigning IP and Public Health Needs in ASEAN: Regional Procurement and Licensing Facility	Center for World Trade Studies (CWTS), Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM)
16	Professor Kazufumi Yaji	Study on Industrial Development and Advanced Utilisation of Intellectual Property: The Implications of the Experiences of Japan and South Korea	Research Institute of Economy, Trade and Industry (RIETI) / Seijo University
17	Ms Anna Maria Rosario D. Robeniol	Assessing the Effectiveness of the RCEP ECOTECH Chapter	Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA)
18	Professor Peter Draper	Economic Cooperation Under RCEP: The Role of Regional Trade for Development Facility (RT4D)	Institute for International Trade (IIT), University of Adelaide
19	Ms Miranda Lu	RCEP and Non-tariff Measures: Transparency and Cooperation Beyond Tariff Cuts	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)
20	Mr Thant Htet Sint	The Influence of Institutional Capacity on Regional Development in ASEAN's Emerging Economies	Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)
21	Ms Mya Lwin Lwin Aung	ASEAN Trade Integration and Agri-food MSMEs: Insights from the Fresh Fruit and Processed Fruit Sector	Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)
22	Ms Yuan Bo	Future Direction of RCEP amid Global Transformations	Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation (CAITEC)
23	Dr Julia Puspawati Tijaja	Practical Recommendations for RCEP Enhancements	Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
24	Mr Dandy Rafitrandi	Greening RCEP: Priorities, Instruments, and Pathways	Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)
25	Professor Peter Draper	RCEP Review: Sustainability, New and Emerging Issues	Institute for International Trade (IIT), University of Adelaide
26	Dr Dionisius Ardiyanto Narjoko	Tracking RCEP: Monitoring Compliance and Utilisation	Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA)
27	Mr Adam Romzi	Green Provisions and Tariffs Under RCEP: Implications for Environmental Goods Trade	Asia Competitiveness Institute (ACI)
28	Ms Aye Mar Way	Environmental Goods Trade in RCEP: A Pathway to Myanmar's Green Transition	Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS)
29	Dr Trinh Quoc Vinh	RCEP and the Future of Green Trade in Vietnam: Opportunities, Challenges, and Strategic Policy Recommendations	Vietnam Institute of Strategy and Policy for Industry and Trade (VIOIT)