

Analysis of the Difficulties and Countermeasures of East Asian Regional Economic Cooperation

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Abstract. Global economic development witnessed two significant developments during the 1990s: economic globalization and regional economic integration. East Asia's economy has been steadily developing, making it one of the most promising areas in the world economy. Nonetheless, East Asia's economic cooperation is developing far more slowly than that of the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area. East Asian nations have deeply realized that the only way to increase the competitiveness of their economies and, consequently, their overall economic strength is to actively participate in economic cooperation, as evidenced by the rapid development of trade and economic ties between the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area. This article aims to study the difficulties and countermeasures of East Asian regional economic cooperation in the context of current economic globalization and regional economic integration. According to this study, there are three key reasons why regional economic cooperation among Southeast Asian countries is problematic: political factors in East Asian countries, economic factors in East Asian countries, and social and cultural factors in East Asian countries. Various measures have been suggested to address the current challenges. These include fostering East Asian regional cooperation around ASEAN, expediting economic recovery through trade and economic cooperation, and fortifying cultural exchanges and cooperation to further the development of East Asian regional economic cooperation.

Keywords: East Asia; regional economy; cooperation.

1. Introduction

Under the trend of continuous development of economic globalization, regional economic integration and international multilateral trade systems also show a strong momentum of development. One of the most vibrant economic regions in the globe is East Asia. East Asia's economic integration is a challenging process, and numerous issues must be resolved for it to advance [1]. Many scholars have also researched current issues, such as scholar Jiang Yuechun's belief that China, Japan, and South Korea have the conditions to achieve accelerated development [2]. Although faced with problems of political mutual trust, fierce economic competition, and different standards of trade cooperation, the three countries will make joint efforts to promote regional cooperation in East Asia. Shen Minghui and Li Guoguo analyzed the impact of COVID-19 on the international order and regional cooperation in East Asia. East Asian countries need to strengthen political mutual trust, accelerate negotiations on free trade zones, strengthen cooperation in non-traditional security fields, and promote people-to-people and cultural exchanges and cooperation [3]. Lokshin GrigoriM wrote in ASEAN-China Cooperation: the Key to Peace in South-East Asia discusses whether ASEAN can only choose one side or the other in the face of growing confrontation between the United States and China, and studies show that ASEAN has adopted a time-tested policy of hedging to avoid joining either side [3,4]. Based on this, this paper analyzes the main problems existing in the process of East Asian economic cooperation and puts forward relevant countermeasures to promote East Asian economic cooperation according to the actual situation of East Asian economic cooperation.

2. Difficulties of East Asian Regional Economic Cooperation

There are many factors affecting regional economic cooperation in East Asia, which can be roughly classified into three aspects: political factors, economic factors, and social and cultural factors.

2.1. Political Factors among East Asian Countries

Political and security concerns have long plagued East Asian nations. The process of regional economic integration will be impacted by and give rise to several concerns regarding matters of political security. Given the bitter experience of being invaded and enslaved, East Asian countries regard national security as the primary position of national survival, and The reason for the ownership of political power is the main reason for internal security issues in East Asia. In addition, due to the lack of leadership from core countries, East Asian economic integration lacks momentum. Both political and economic integration need a strong leader to lead the development of regional cooperation. Take European integration as an example, it is obviously due to the factor of "German and French dominance". However, on the issue of regional economic integration in East Asia, Japan, a large and economically developed country, has always held a negative attitude towards this issue. the development trend of Sino-Japanese relations has had a crucial impact on the process of regional economic integration in East Asia, However, Japan has not truly realized the importance of the development of Sino-Japanese relations for East Asian economic integration, Since Abe took office, Sino-Japanese relations have not been eased no matter from the historical issues including Diaoyu Islands, military deployment and diplomatic actions, and the two sides have restricted each other in the issue of dominance in this region [5]. It can be seen that the development of regional economic integration is influenced by political factors, which have a strong interfering effect on economic development.

2.2. Economic Factors among East Asian Countries

The key to determining the sustainable and stable development of regional economic integration during the construction phase is the similarity in economic development levels between the local economies. However, the degree of economic development and the primary issues that each East Asian nation faces are highly diverse, which surely slows the development of their economic integration [6]. The economic development curve of East Asian countries includes countries with per capita GDP of more than 40,000 US dollars, such as Singapore and Japan, as well as countries with per capita GDP of less than 900 US dollars, such as Myanmar. It can be found that the economic development level of a region itself has a significant impact on the development of regional economic integration. The low level of regional economic development will bring significant challenges to the development of regional economic integration.

2.3. Social and Cultural Factors among East Asian Countries

Different from European and American countries, East Asia culture presents a high degree of diversity. Cultural diversity includes social systems, religious beliefs, etc. In terms of political systems, East Asia includes both capitalist countries, in which there are different types of democratic political institutions, and socialist countries, whose political systems are rather complex. In terms of interests, East Asian countries have their starting points and have no intention to promote regional economic cooperation by giving up some of their national interests [7]. In terms of religious belief, there are many East Asian countries with various forms of religious belief. For example, Thailand, Vietnam, and Laos believe in Buddhism, while the Philippines believes in Christianity. East Asian countries cannot converge in religious belief as Europe does. Culture has an important impact on social development, and cultural differences will form differentiated social systems and ideologies, especially differences in religious beliefs, which have a particularly significant impact on social systems.

3. Measures to Promote Economic Cooperation and Development in East Asia

3.1. Develop East Asia Regional Cooperation with ASEAN as the Center

The absence of strong leaders and the fierce competition between East Asian nations and those outside of it has slowed regional cooperation in the region. Several mechanisms for regional cooperation in East Asia have been established by ASEAN, which has long served as the coordinator of the region's cooperation. These mechanisms include ASEAN summits, the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN Free Trade Area, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting, and others. ASEAN has maintained good relations with countries inside and outside East Asia. All countries believe that the limited strength of ASEAN does not pose a threat to their development [8]. Therefore, East Asian countries can continue to develop East Asian regional cooperation with ASEAN as the center. ASEAN can play a balancing role in the power game among major powers in East Asia, and ASEAN-centered regional cooperation in East Asia means that ASEAN is in a neutral position in the power game. Sticking to ASEAN-centered regional cooperation in East Asia can maintain political stability in East Asia and keep the power game in a state of confrontation. China has repeatedly expressed the view of upholding ASEAN centrality. The cooperation between China and ASEAN is the most substantive part of ASEAN's external cooperation. The extensive cooperation between the ASEAN shows that China supports ASEAN in real terms. However, ASEAN's development still faces some threats. The United States emphasizes respect for ASEAN centrality, but the Indo-Pacific strategy of the United States has impacted ASEAN's status, attempting to break the principle of ASEAN neutrality and make ASEAN side with the United States in terms of political security, so that ASEAN will not be able to maintain its centrality in East Asian regional cooperation. In June 2019, ASEAN adopted a vision document on the Indo-Pacific order [9]. It put forward the basic principles of regional order construction: openness, inclusiveness, transparency, respect for international law, and ASEAN centrality. ASEAN wants to participate more actively in regional cooperation in East Asia and is dissatisfied with the "little horse and cart" model. ASEAN proposed that regional order-building should take a gradual approach and seek commonalities among existing regional mechanisms, among which the ASEAN-led regional mechanism should play a central role in norm-building and concrete cooperation. To develop regional cooperation centered around ASEAN, in terms of specific approaches, ASEAN member countries must stabilize the political situation, expand the scope of cooperation, strengthen economic and cultural exchanges, respect differences in culture, maintain commonalities, and promote cooperation and development.

3.2. Accelerating Economic Recovery through Economic and Trade Cooperation

The global economy has been hit hard by COVID-19, and East Asian countries are not immune. After the peak of the epidemic, East Asian countries have taken the East Asia Cooperation Mechanism as an important platform for solidarity and cooperation among regional countries, based on trade and investment cooperation, and with digital economy and green development as new growth areas, and carried out practical cooperation to revive the regional economy. Due to the wide gap in economic development among East Asian countries and the uneven product quality and price levels among them, it will take a long time for East Asian countries to achieve the goal of a unified market. East Asian countries are more active in strengthening economic and technological cooperation, which can narrow the economic gap among East Asian countries. Now economic and technological cooperation is an important part of RCEP. Regional cooperation among economies in human resources development, infrastructure construction, science and technology, small and medium-sized enterprises, and other fields can promote the economic growth of developing countries. Among them, scientific and technological innovation is an important driving force for industrial transformation and upgrading in East Asia [10]. The digital economy is one side of scientific and technological innovation, which makes people's life more convenient. China is already the world's largest data resource country and global data center. The size of its digital economy reached nearly 36 trillion yuan in 2019 and is expected to reach 60 trillion yuan in 2025. China and ASEAN have designated 2020 as the Year of China-Asean Digital Economy Cooperation, committed to carrying out

cooperation in digital economy, artificial intelligence, big data, and cyber security. Strengthening ASEAN regional economic and trade cooperation focuses on strengthening trade, with member countries continuously improving product quality. In addition to product trade, strengthening regional trade cooperation also requires strengthening talent exchange and promoting the development of science and technology industries.

3.3. Further Strengthen People-to-people Exchanges and Cooperation

In the process of fighting the epidemic, East Asian countries have shown their cultural commonalities, which are different from those of Western countries. The "collectivist" and "patriarchal" characteristics of East Asian cultures enabled East Asian countries to act in the collective interest in the face of the epidemic crisis, formulate national measures, actively abide by them, and respond to the crisis in an orderly manner. East Asian countries helped each other and shared a common destiny. Cultural exchanges and cooperation serve as an important guarantee for enhancing political mutual trust and expanding economic and trade cooperation. The European Union adopts different policies at the pan-European, national, group, and individual levels through cultural legislation, cultural activities, and cultural financial support to enhance European countries' understanding of their common history and culture and establish European cultural identity. East Asia faces a more complex situation than Europe in building its cultural identity in East Asia. East Asia can learn from the European experience and gradually strengthen its regional identity while respecting the culture of East Asian countries. East Asian countries should actively promote cultural exchanges and cooperation within the region to enhance their understanding of each other's cultures. There are already many cultural exchanges in East Asia, involving art, sports, tourism, humanities, and academia. In the future, East Asia should further enrich cultural exchanges and provide more platforms for such exchanges. East Asian countries have a strong nationalistic mentality, and cultural egocentrism is evident in East Asia. East Asian countries should find the commonality of East Asian cultures in the process of cultural exchanges. Cultural commonality can enhance East Asian countries' sense of regional identity, which can unite East Asian countries. Each region has its own unique culture. If East Asia forms an East Asian culture similar to Western culture and at the same time enhances the international influence of East Asian culture, then the cultural pride generated by East Asian countries enhances East Asian regional identity.

4. Conclusions

Since the 1990s, economic globalization and regional economic integration have become two major trends in world economic development. The process of economic cooperation in East Asia is relatively slow compared to the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area. As the most economically dynamic region in the world, deep regional economic cooperation in East Asia will further accelerate the pace of economic development and comply with the trend of world economic development. Against the backdrop of rapid development of regional economic cooperation, the necessity and importance of regional economic cooperation in East Asia are self-evident. East Asian countries and regions have begun to actively seek opportunities to deepen regional cooperation. The main reasons for the slow economic cooperation in East Asia are the differences in the development levels and political systems of various economies, the uneven economic development levels of East Asian countries, and significant cultural differences. Facing the current situation of weak global economic development, it is particularly urgent to seek new economic growth points and accelerate the promotion of regional economic cooperation in East Asia. Therefore, this article proposes strategies to develop East Asian regional cooperation centered around ASEAN, accelerate economic recovery through economic and trade cooperation, and strengthen cultural exchanges and cooperation to further promote the development of East Asian regional economic cooperation.

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