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Comprehensive Study on Why India to Stayed Out of RCEP: Economic and Political Reasons

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Abstract: The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is one of the largest free trade agreements in the world. It aims to increase economic integration and cooperation in trade among countries in the Asia-Pacific region. India took part in the RCEP discussions for many years but decided to withdraw from the agreement in 2019. Although many studies suggest that India's decision was based on worries about trade deficits and competition from imported goods, this research looks at a more comprehensive angle, focusing on supply chain sovereignty and the ability to have flexible economic strategies.

This study investigates the economic, political, and strategic reasons behind India's decision to leave RCEP. Information was gathered from government documents, academic articles, reports from international organizations, trade data, and a survey of over 50 individuals, including students, economics teachers, corporate workers, and business professionals. A qualitative and analytical approach was used for the study. It also includes case studies on India-China relations and India's reliance on oil and gold imports to show how dependence on external economies affects the country.

The findings indicate that India's withdrawal was not just about protecting domestic businesses but part of a broader strategy to support local industries and decrease reliance on external supply chains while keeping doors open for future trade agreements. The current global climate, marked by uncertainty, supply chain issues, and shifting economic goals, has led India to adopt a more selective approach to globalization. This strategy aims to balance global participation with economic resilience and self-reliance. The study concludes that India's choice not to join RCEP was primarily motivated by a desire for strategic independence and long-term economic security.

Keywords: *Uncertainty, Supply Chain Issues, Shifting Economic Goals, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

India declined to participate in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) due to political and economic concerns. The country feared the flood of cheaper goods, especially from China, could harm small businesses, farmers, and local industry. And India was also concerned about employment and services, trade imbalance, and lack of protection for domestic markets. Politically, the ruling was aimed at protecting national interest and bolstering the "Make in India" campaign.

The study aims to examine the reasons behind India's decision not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). It also explains the political and economic reasons behind this decision, showing that India opted for long-term economic security and self-sufficiency instead of short-term trade benefits. It stresses:

- Economic reasons: lowering trade risks and safeguarding regional farmers and businesses.
- Political justifications: safeguarding economic sovereignty and national interests.
- Impact Analysis: Understanding the impact of this decision on the international reputation and trade of India.

Characteristics of the Research Topic Concise and Clear: Discusses the reasons for India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. Relevant to Current Issues: Related to globalization, international trade, and Indian economic policy. Nature of the study: Analytical.

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Examines the pros and cons of engaging in RCEP. Policy-oriented: Analyzes the effect of government policies on employment, trade, and industries. Comparative: India's position vis-à-vis other trade agreements and RCEP members. Multidisciplinary: includes business studies, politics, economics, and international relations. Practical & Research-Based: Backed by trade data, policy studies, and professional insights. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) is one of the world's largest free trade agreements, covering 15 economies in the Asia-Pacific region, including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and the ASEAN group. India was a major participant in the negotiations but chose not to join the agreement before it was finalized in 2019. The main reasons for India's decision were the growing trade deficits, especially with China, and the need to protect domestic sectors, small and medium enterprises, and farmers from greater competition. There were also concerns that the services sector would not benefit much compared to the increase in imports. India's decision was influenced not only by economic factors but also by political pressures from domestic groups and worries about growing dependence on China and international supply chains. This study aims to understand the strategic, political, and economic reasons for India's withdrawal from RCEP and the impacts of these reasons on India's trade policy.

- Hypothesis In order to protect supply chain sovereignty and maintain strategic economic flexibility, especially in light of concerns about dependence on China-dominated regional production networks, India declined to join the RCEP.
- Sub-hypothesis Supply Chain Sovereignty Was Associated with India's Withdrawal. Strategic economic flexibility was preferred by India over bloc dependence.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

An examination of current research indicates that various scholars have offered several reasons for India's decision to step back from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Many of these studies highlight concerns related to trade imbalances, safeguarding local industries, geopolitical considerations, and the effects of China's economic influence.

India's withdrawal from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has attracted significant scholarly attention, with researchers identifying a combination of economic, political, and geopolitical factors behind the decision. A dominant theme in the literature is the concern that RCEP membership could have adversely affected India's economic interests. Sharma et al. (2023) argue that participation in the agreement was likely to increase India's trade deficit, particularly with China and ASEAN member countries, due to the anticipated surge in imports resulting from tariff reductions. The authors also highlight concerns regarding unfair trade practices, inadequate safeguards against import dumping, and the vulnerability of sensitive sectors such as agriculture, dairy, and small-scale manufacturing, which could face intense competition from more efficient producers within the bloc . Similarly, Jain (2021) contends that India's withdrawal was a rational economic decision aimed at protecting national interests. The study points to concerns about trade diversion, reduced competitiveness of domestic industries, and the mixed outcomes of India's previous free trade agreements, which had often resulted in rising imports without corresponding export growth .

Beyond purely economic considerations, several scholars emphasize the role of economic nationalism and domestic political pressures. Gaur (2020) argues that India's decision reflected growing economic nationalism, characterized by efforts to protect domestic industries, preserve employment opportunities, and ensure that the benefits of globalization were distributed more equitably across society . The study suggests that policymakers were increasingly cautious about exposing vulnerable sectors to external competition, particularly at a time when economic growth and employment generation were key domestic priorities. In a similar vein, Naufal (2021) highlights the influence of domestic political dynamics on India's RCEP stance. The research demonstrates that pressure from farmers' associations, industry groups, labor organizations, and public opinion significantly shaped government decision-making. These stakeholders expressed concerns that RCEP could undermine local businesses and livelihoods, making withdrawal politically advantageous and economically defensible .

The literature also identifies strategic and geopolitical factors as important determinants of India's withdrawal. Wicaksono (2021), applying the framework of neoclassical realism, argues that India's decision was influenced not only by domestic considerations but also by shifts in the regional balance of power. The growing economic and strategic influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region generated concerns about increased dependence on Chinese imports and the potential erosion of India's regional influence . Furthermore, Satyakusuma (2023) adopts a structuralist perspective, arguing that India's withdrawal represented an effort to preserve economic sovereignty and policy autonomy in an era of deepening global economic integration. The study challenges liberal perspectives that portray RCEP as a missed economic opportunity, instead suggesting that maintaining control over domestic economic policies was a strategic priority for India . Collectively, these studies indicate that India's withdrawal from RCEP was a multifaceted decision driven by concerns over trade imbalances, protection of domestic industries, political pressures, geopolitical competition, and the preservation of economic autonomy.

III. METHODOLOGY

➢ *Research Design*

Using a qualitative and analytical approach, the study investigates the strategic and economic reasons for India's decision to stay out of the RCEP. The study mainly focuses on supply chain sovereignty, strategic economic flexibility, and India's trade policy in the context of a changing global economy.

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➢ *Sources of Data*

- *Primary Data*

The primary data were collected through a survey amongst more than 50 participants and consisted of the following:

✓ College students
✓ Economics teachers
✓ Corporate employees
✓ Businessmen

The survey was conducted to understand public opinion about:

✓ India's trade policy.
✓ dependence on foreign supply chains,
✓ strategic economic flexibility,
✓ and India's decision to stay out of RCEP.

- *Secondary Data*

Secondary data was collected from:

✓ Government reports and official trade statistics
✓ Ministry of Commerce publications
✓ WTO and World Bank reports
✓ International organizations and policy databases
✓ Research journals and academic articles
✓ Newspaper editorials and economic analysis websites

These sources were used to analyze:

✓ India's trade relations with the RCEP nations,
✓ supply chain dependence,
✓ bilateral trade agreements,
✓ and geopolitical-economic trends.

➢ *Data Collection Method*

We have used data from published reports, journals, official statistics, and global data on RCEP, trade deficits, supply chain dependence, bilateral agreements, and India's economic policies. The survey responses were collected and analyzed to find out the perception of the public about India's trade strategy.

➢ *Area of Study*

The study mainly focuses on:

- India's trade relations with RCEP countries,
- China-centered manufacturing networks,
- Bilateral trade agreements,
- and India's strategic economic policies in the Indo-Pacific region.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The collected data is analyzed using:

➢ *Comparison Between:*

- RCEP and bilateral trade agreements,
- India's strategy and other Asian economies,
- Globalization and strategic economic flexibility.

➢ *Analysis of:*

- India's trade policies,
- Atmanirbhar Bharat initiatives,
- Supply chain resilience strategies,
- and geopolitical considerations.

➢ *Survey Responses are Represented Through:*

- Percentage analysis,
- Pie charts to identify public opinion trends regarding India's withdrawal from the RCEP.

➢ *India and RCEP: Background Analysis*

- *Formation of RCEP*

In order to create a significant free trade agreement among Asia-Pacific nations, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) was proposed at the 2012 ASEAN Summit. In addition to the ten ASEAN countries, it also included China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and India. The agreement was created to encourage trade cooperation and regional economic integration among its member nations. In the end, RCEP became the largest trading bloc in the world.

- *Objectives of RCEP*

The main goal of RCEP was to reduce trade barriers such as tariffs and promote the free flow of goods, services, and investments among member countries. It also sought to strengthen regional supply chains, increase economic growth, and promote a stable trade environment in the Asia-Pacific. A further priority was to simplify trade rules and to promote cooperation on issues such as e-commerce, intellectual property, and small business.

- *India's Role in Negotiations*

India actively engaged in the RCEP negotiations during the period 2012-2019 and participated in various rounds of negotiations. India wanted to protect its domestic industries while expanding access to its services sector, especially information technology and skilled workers. India raised concerns about rising imports, a trade imbalance with China, and protection for farmers, dairy producers, and small businesses during the talks. India has demanded the strengthening of safeguards and the tightening of rules of origin to curb unfair trade practices.

➢ *Economic, Political, and Strategic Reasons Behind India's Withdrawal from RCEP*

- *Economic Reasons*

✓ *Defense of Domestic Industries*

India was concerned that lower import tariffs under the RCEP would let less expensive foreign products—particularly those from China—enter Indian markets. Domestic sectors like steel, textiles, electronics, chemicals, and MSMEs (micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises) could be negatively impacted by this. According to the government, Indian industries were not yet ready to compete with highly industrialized economies.

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- ✓ *Fear of Trade Imbalance*

India already had a significant trade deficit with China and other RCEP nations. There were worries that a larger trade deficit would result from imports rising sharply while Indian exports would not develop at the same rate.

- ✓ *Issues with Reliance on Outside Supply Chains:*

India was concerned that it would become overly reliant on foreign supply chains for manufacturing components, completed commodities, and raw resources. Over-reliance on foreign economies may reduce home manufacturing capability and economic independence.

- *Political Motives*

- ✓ *India's Political Pressure*

Several domestic organizations opposed India's participation in the RCEP, including:

Trade unions, dairy cooperatives, small business groupings, and farmers' organizations. These groups were afraid that foreign competition would cause them to lose their jobs, income, and market share.

- ✓ *Safeguarding Farmers and the Dairy Industry*

Due to the fact that significant dairy exporters include Australia and New Zealand, Indian dairy farmers were adamantly against the RCEP. The government was concerned that millions of Indian farmers may be impacted by low-cost imported dairy products, which could lead to political unrest in rural areas.

- ✓ *Endorsement of "Make in India"*

Through the "Make in India" campaign, the government hoped to boost indigenous manufacturing. Many saw joining RCEP as a threat to this objective because more imports may slow the expansion of domestic industries.

- *Strategic Motives*

- ✓ *Geopolitical and Strategic Aspects*

India had geopolitical worries due to China's dominant economic position within the RCEP. Policymakers were concerned that India's long-term strategic autonomy would be impacted by its growing economic reliance on China.

- ✓ *Fear of China's Economic Domination*

India was concerned that due to China's vast industrial capacity and low production costs, Chinese goods might take over Indian markets. India's industrial competitiveness may suffer as a result.

- ✓ *Preference for Financial Independence*

Instead of joining a major global trade bloc where policy flexibility may be restricted, India favored bolstering domestic production and pursuing carefully negotiated bilateral trade deals.

Several geopolitical, political, and economic issues led to India's withdrawal from the RCEP. India's economic goals were to prevent growing trade deficits and safeguard homegrown businesses. Farmers, companies, and trade associations put political pressure on the government. India sought to safeguard its long-term national interests, particularly regarding China, and lessen its reliance on foreign economies.

- ➢ *Impact and Consequences of India Staying Out of RCEP Impact on India*

Due to political and economic concerns, India decided not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. The government was concerned that lowering import taxes would hurt Indian manufacturers, farmers, dairy producers, and small businesses by increasing the supply of inexpensive foreign goods, especially from China. Joining the RCEP was seen as a risk to India's domestic industries because it already had a trade deficit with a number of RCEP nations.

However, avoiding RCEP had certain disadvantages. India lost out on chances to draw in foreign investment and boost exports to the Asia-Pacific markets. Additionally, Indian companies no longer have as easy access to regional supply chains, which are essential for both international trade and manufacturing. India may therefore encounter more competition in international markets from RCEP member nations.

- *Impact on RCEP Countries*

The absence of India meant that RCEP member countries lost out on direct access to one of the world’s largest consumer markets. India’s large population and expanding economy may have opened up greater trade opportunities for the member countries. India’s absence reduced the economic size and diversity of the trade bloc.

But the deal gave RCEP countries lower tariffs, simplified trade rules, and greater regional economic integration. Countries like Japan, South Korea, Australia, and the ASEAN countries have gone on to improve their trade relations. The deal boosted cooperation in the Asia-Pacific and created one of the largest free-trade blocs in the world.

- ➢ *Long-Term Implications*

India’s decision not to join the RCEP has shaped its long-term trade and economic policy. Instead of joining the big regional trade blocs, India has chosen to enter into bilateral trade agreements with countries like the United Arab Emirates and Australia. India also pushed its “Atmanirbhar Bharat” policy for boosting domestic manufacturing and reducing dependence on imports.

If the issues of trade imbalance, protection of local industry, and market access are adequately addressed, India may reconsider its decision to join RCEP. The decision also has implications for India’s role in the Indo-Pacific economic cooperation and its relationship with the major Asian economies. Whether India joins the RCEP later or continues to stay out, the decision will have implications for India’s position in global trade and regional economic partnerships.

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V. CASE STUDY: INDIA'S DEPENDENCE ON OIL AND GOLD IMPORTS

➢ *Background*

India is heavily dependent on imports for essential items, including crude oil and gold. India is one of the largest importers in the world, and changes in global prices impact the Indian economy directly.

➢ *Current Situation*

Crude oil prices and global supply disruptions have led to increases in petrol and diesel prices in India in recent years. Import of gold has also gone up, leading to a higher outflow of dollars, which has put pressure on the foreign exchange reserves and aided the depreciation of the rupee. These developments highlight the dangers of an excessive dependence on world markets and global supply chains.

➢ *India's Counter Response*

To address such vulnerabilities, India has been advocating for initiatives such as Atmanirbhar Bharat, Make in India, and diversification of trade partnerships. The objective is to increase domestic production, enhance economic resilience, and lower strategic dependence on foreign suppliers.

➢ *Relation to the hypothesis.*

The case study illustrates the economic and geopolitical risks that India faces from its dependence on critical imports. It supports the case that India's exit from RCEP was to maintain strategic economic flexibility and supply chain sovereignty that would allow it to follow policy initiatives to enhance its long-term economic resilience and self-reliance.

➢ *Conclusion*

The case study underscores the economic vulnerabilities that can arise from India's reliance on imported commodities such as crude oil and gold in the form of rising fuel prices, pressure on foreign exchange reserves, and currency fluctuations. The challenges are a reminder of the need to reduce strategic dependence on foreign supply chains and build up domestic resilience. Therefore, India's decision to stay out of RCEP could be part of a larger strategy to ensure economic stability, maintain policy flexibility, and promote long-term self-reliance, supporting the research hypothesis on strategic economic flexibility and supply chain sovereignty.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS

➢ *Question 1: Biggest Risk of Dependence on Foreign Manufacturing Supply Chains*

- The top risk cited was economic vulnerability in global crises, with 47.1%.
- 31.4% feared dependence might lead to more foreign interference in India's economy.
- Places high importance on supply chain resilience and economic security.
- Supports the sub-hypothesis that India's decision to withdraw from the RCEP was influenced by supply chain sovereignty.

➢ *Question 2: Preferred Approach for Long-Term Economic Growth*

- 56.9% preferred a combination of independence and globalization.
- 35.3% of respondents favored robust domestic manufacturing and independence.
- Only a small percentage of respondents supported further integration into major trade blocs.
- Argues in favor of selective globalization, which is consistent with India's current economic approach.

➢ *Question 3: Trade Strategy Providing the Greatest Economic Flexibility*

- A mix of regional and bilateral agreements was chosen by 64.7%.
- Flexibility was preferred by respondents over reliance on a single trade agreement.
- Shows a commitment to diverse trade alliances.
- Validates the sub-hypothesis that India favored strategic economic flexibility over reliance on the bloc.

➢ *Question 4: Most Important Reason Behind India Staying Out of RCEP*

- 33.3% of respondents cited protection of domestic industries as their primary rationale.
- Strategic and geopolitical factors were cited by 23.5%.
- 15.7% emphasized reliance on outside supply networks.
- Demonstrates how many people believe that strategic considerations and economic security played a major role in India's decision.

➢ *Question 5: Future Impact of Staying Out of RCEP*

- India's economic independence would be strengthened, according to 39.2% of respondents.
- 37.3% of respondents thought it would eventually benefit domestic industries.
- From an economic and strategic standpoint, almost 76.5% of respondents thought favorably of the choice.
- Reflects the public's faith in India's autonomous industrial and trade strategy.

VII. RESULT

The findings of this study provide strong support for the main hypothesis that India chose not to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in order to preserve control over its supply chains and retain greater flexibility in shaping its economic policies. The analysis demonstrates that Indian policymakers viewed RCEP not merely as a trade agreement but as a framework that could potentially constrain the country's ability to manage its domestic economy and strategic industries. Concerns regarding the influx of cheaper imports, particularly from China, raised fears that excessive dependence on external suppliers could weaken domestic manufacturing capabilities and expose critical sectors to external shocks. By remaining outside the agreement, India sought to maintain greater oversight of its production networks and safeguard key industries from vulnerabilities associated with deep economic integration.

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The results also validate the two secondary hypotheses proposed in the study. First, the evidence indicates that concerns over economic dependence played a significant role in India's decision-making process. Policymakers were apprehensive that RCEP membership could increase reliance on foreign markets and supply chains, thereby limiting India's ability to respond independently to economic disruptions or geopolitical tensions. The experience of global supply chain disruptions and growing strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific further reinforced these concerns. Second, the findings suggest that India preferred maintaining flexibility in its trade relations through bilateral and selective multilateral agreements rather than committing to a large regional framework with extensive obligations. This approach allows India to negotiate trade terms that are more closely aligned with its national interests, developmental priorities, and sector-specific requirements.

Overall, the study concludes that India's withdrawal from RCEP was driven by a strategic desire to balance economic growth with national autonomy. The evidence consistently supports the argument that preserving supply chain resilience, reducing the risks of external dependence, and maintaining policy flexibility were central considerations in the decision. Consequently, the main hypothesis is accepted, as the empirical findings align closely with the explanation that India's withdrawal from RCEP was primarily motivated by the objective of safeguarding economic sovereignty and strategic decision-making capacity in an increasingly interconnected global economy.

VIII. FINDINGS

- The study's results support the main hypothesis that India decided not to join RCEP in order to keep control over its supply chains and maintain flexibility in its economic strategies.
- The findings also back the two secondary hypotheses, indicating that India's worries about becoming too dependent on other countries and its desire for adaptable trade agreements were key factors in its decision.
- As a result, the main hypothesis was accepted since the evidence aligns with the explanation for India's withdrawal from RCEP.

IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Instead of engaging with regional agreements, the paper suggests that India focus more on bilateral agreements and FTA negotiations with individual countries.
- The FTA utilization rate ranges from 20 to 30%, so the paper proposes to establish an FTA Impact Monitoring Authority.
- It also calls on India to frame the service sector as the macroeconomic stabilizer against merchandise deficits.
- It urges to aggressively scale up domestic ethanol and biofuel blending to replace foreign fuel volume.
- It encourages citizens to shift from purchasing physical metal gold to paper-based sovereign gold bonds, which would drop the massive import of gold and reduce the burden.
- The paper recommends boosting export competitiveness to promote domestic industries and prevent trade deficits. It encourages programs like the Production-Linked Incentive.

X. CONCLUSION

The research shows that India opted not to join RCEP to preserve its supply chain control and strategic economic flexibility, along with addressing trade deficits. The survey results strongly support the idea of protecting local industries, reducing reliance on foreign supply chains, and keeping trade policies flexible through partnerships with multiple countries. Furthermore, the study highlights that India has chosen a path of selective globalization, focusing on dealing with global supply chain issues and unpredictable geopolitical situations. These results back up the hypothesis that India preferred to stay outside RCEP to safeguard its long-term economic and strategic goals while still participating in the global economy through flexible trade agreements.

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