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East Asian Regional Cooperation Network and China's Path Choice

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Abstract

The current East Asian regional cooperation framework is a complex system with multiple fields, levels, and players. In terms of social network theory and analysis, the East Asian regional cooperation framework can be defined as an affiliation network of cooperative mechanisms and players. Combing through the process of East Asian regional cooperation and constructing an East Asian regional cooperation network on the basis of the affiliation network model shows that the network has distinct characteristics in terms of cooperation mechanisms, cooperation entities, inter-entity relations, and the interaction of various fields of cooperation. These characteristics are apparent in concentrated form in the dynamics and limitations of East Asian regional cooperation networks. Describing and analyzing the structure and characteristics of the regional cooperation network of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) can help us conduct a comprehensive examination of the current regional cooperation framework, grasp the developmental prospects of East Asian regional cooperation, and provide reference material for China's path choice in the process of future regional cooperation.

Keywords: East Asian regional cooperation, affiliation network, relationship path

I. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of the East Asian economies and the comprehensive expansion of their cooperation framework, the progress of East Asian regional cooperation has been attracting much attention and the cooperation model and regionalism based on East Asian practice have been widely discussed in academic circles. Despite the controversy over the level of institutionalization and effectiveness of the East Asian regional cooperation framework, the practice of multilateral cooperation in the region has not been curtailed. It has not only achieved many solid results in a number of fields, but has also highlighted the East Asian characteristics of the cooperation process, characteristics that have played a key role in maintaining regional stability and stimulating regional development. At present, East Asian countries are faced with the serious challenge of COVID-19 and

post-pandemic economic recovery as well as the great opportunities brought by the signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Against such a complex background, the shape and effectiveness of the existing cooperation framework and the future of the regional cooperation process have become increasingly important issues for the security and development of East Asian countries.

Institutionalized cooperation in the East Asian region started with ASEAN and was marked by the ASEAN-China-Japan-ROK (10+3) cooperation mechanism and the East Asia Summit (EAS). The scope of cooperation has shifted from sub-regional to regional, from intra-regional to intra-regional and extra-regional entities, shaping the current multi-field, multi-level, and multi-player regional cooperation framework. In view of the complexity and distinctiveness of this structure, some existing studies have presented the nub of the East Asian regional cooperation framework as being “institutional competition,”¹ “institutional surplus”² or the “spaghetti bowl effect.”³ They argue that multiple competing systems are not conducive to regional cooperation in East Asia, and that competition among major powers for regional dominance will exacerbate the negative effects of low institutionalization.⁴ However, the complexity of the system does not mean disorder and ineffectiveness, and some studies have shown that in the practical context of East Asian regional cooperation, multiple systems can enhance the flexibility of cooperation and thus improve the effective use of institutional resources and make cooperation easier to achieve.⁵ Such studies focus on analyzing the current state of the East Asian regional cooperation framework from the theoretical perspective of international institutions. However, seen in the light of the developmental process of regional cooperation in East Asia, the current framework of cooperation has taken shape in response to the development needs of the regional cooperation process. It is marked by the unique characteristics of East Asian practice and at the same time reflects the different orientations of different historical stages; it is not sufficient to grasp the framework mechanism solely from the institutional framework itself.

In addition, since most of the cooperation arrangements currently operating in the East

1 Huang Dahui and Sun Yi, “Leadership of East Asian Regional Cooperation and Sino-Japanese Institutional Competition”; Zhang Qun, “Institutional Gaming in Asia-Pacific Regional Economic Cooperation.”

2 Wei Ling, “Regionalization in East Asia: Perplexities and Prospects”; Li Wei, “The End of East Asian Economic Regionalism?: The Dilemma of Institutional Surplus and Economic Integration.”

3 See Jagdish N. Bhagwati, *The World Trading System at Risk*; and “Introduction: The Unilateral Freeing of Trade Versus Reciprocity,” in *Going Alone: The Case for Relaxed Reciprocity in Freeing Trade*, pp. 1-47; Richard E. Baldwin, “Multilateralising Regionalism: Spaghetti Bowls as Building Blocs on the Path to Global Free Trade,” pp. 1451-1518.

4 See Xu Jin, “The Multilateral Security Cooperation Mechanism in East Asia: Issues and Concepts”; Sun Xuefeng, “The East Asian Quasi-Anarchy System and China’s East Asian Security Policy”; Wang Shengjin and Zhang Jingquan, “The Relationship between Military Alliance and Regional Cooperation in East Asia: An Analysis from the Perspective of Mechanisms”; Zhu Feng, “Sino-US Strategic Competition and the Future of the East Asian Security Order.”

5 Wang Mingguo, “The Complexity of International Systems and the East Asian Integration Process.”

Asian region are driven by economic factors, their main achievements are reflected in the economic field, with their functions in the political and security fields relatively weaker.⁶ Although mechanisms such as the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) provide a platform for political and security dialogue among regional players, their effectiveness is often affected by these entities' divergent interests and does not transcend the limits of inter-entity relations. The establishment and operation of regional cooperation mechanisms are based on inter-entity relations and common interests. Whether a mechanism can play its expected role in its respective area is not only a reflection of its own function, but also depends on each entity's objectives and willingness to cooperate in that area. In other words, on the one hand, the cooperative mechanism takes shape through inter-entity cooperation; the East Asian regional cooperation framework is a manifestation of each player's existing cooperation achievements and willingness, and plays an important role in inter-entity relations and regional order. On the other hand, the effectiveness of cooperation mechanisms is affected by the inter-entity relations in each field, manifest in differences in the level of cooperation in the economic, political, and security fields as well as in the mutual facilitation and constraints of the cooperation process in each field. In discussing the regional cooperation or integration process in East Asia, existing studies usually include institutionalized cooperation in each field under the process, but pay less attention to the influence of different arrangements in the international relations and regional order of the East Asian region and seldom elaborate on the interaction between the regional cooperation framework and inter-entity relations.

The relational theory of world politics⁷ provides an alternative explanation for the East Asian regional cooperation framework. According to this theory, the basic form of regional cooperation in East Asia is process-led, and the openness and dynamism of the process mean that it presents a multiplicity of features resembling those of a complex system; in the course of the process, different various mechanisms work together to maintain inter-entity relations and thus sustain the regional cooperation process.⁸ The East Asian regional cooperation framework emerges from the process of cooperation among regional players and provides the impetus for the "relational balance" among them and the survival of the cooperation process. This means that the East Asian regional cooperation framework is rooted in East Asian practice and influenced by the development and needs of the East Asian regional cooperation process; it is thus different from regional frameworks formed in other historical, cultural, and geographical contexts, and its own form and features likewise vary with different historical contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to understand and analyze the East Asian regional cooperation framework in the context of the developmental process of regional cooperation

6 Liu Feng, "Security Expectations, Economic Gains and the East Asian Security Order."

7 See Qin Yaqing, "Relational Orientation and Process Construction: Implanting Chinese Ideas into International Relations Theory"; "A Relational Theory of World Politics" (Chinese version); "A Relational Theory of World Politics" (English version); and *A Relational Theory of World Politics*.

8 Qin Yaqing, *Relationship and Process: Cultural Construction of China's International Relations Theory*, p. 216.

and inter-entity relations and to examine its composition and characteristics from a more dynamic and three-dimensional perspective.

II. East Asian Regional Cooperation Framework from a Network Perspective

Networking is a distinctive feature of the 21st century. Alongside the increasing networking of human society, network research has emerged in many disciplines and its application has become ever more extensive. At present, social networking is applied to the field of international relations to analyze issues such as international conflict and cooperation, international trade, global governance and international relations theory, demonstrating its unique value.⁹ On the basis of existing studies, this paper will draw on social network theory and analysis to construct a network analysis framework for East Asian regional cooperation architecture.

In social network theory, a network is seen as a form of organization distinct from markets and hierarchies.¹⁰ It is a structure consisting of a set of units and rules that define whether, how, and to what extent any two of these units are interconnected.¹¹ A social network is a relatively stable system composed of social relations between entities,¹² who can be individuals, communities, organizations, or states. The basic logic is to use nodes to represent individuals, and edges or ties between the nodes to describe the relationships between individuals. A network structure contains both nodes representing social existence or organization and relationships representing some form of social interaction, which can be expressed in terms of multidimensional relationships of different kinds.¹³ That is, individuals form relationships with each other through their interactions, and individuals and their relationships constitute a network.

There are two main approaches and research orientations in social network research. One is to treat social networks as organizational structures and emphasize the influence of network structures on individual behavior;¹⁴ the other is to link social networks with social capital and argue that individuals can use social networks to strive for social capital in order to gain status, an approach that places the emphasis on the utilitarian and instrumental nature of

9 Emilie M. Hafner-Burton, Miles Kahler and Alexander H. Montgomery, "Network Analysis for International Relations."

10 Walter Powell, "Neither Markets nor Hierarchy: Network Forms of Organization."

11 Zeev Maoz, *Networks of Nations: The Evolution, Structure, and Impact of International Networks, 1816-2001*, p. 7.

12 Barry Wellman, "Structural Analysis: From Method and Metaphor to Theory and Substance," in B. Wellman and S. Berkowitz, eds., *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, pp. 19-61.

13 See Yang Song, Franziska B. Keller and Zheng Lu, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Examples*, pp. 4-5.

14 See Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, p. 90; Harrison C. White, *Identity and Control: How Social Formations Emerge*; and *Markets from Networks: Socioeconomic Models of Production*; Mark Granovetter, "Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness"; and *Embeddedness: Social Network and Economic Action*; Mark Granovetter and Richard Swedberg, eds., *The Sociology of Economic Life*.

networks.¹⁵ According to social network theory, actors in international society form relationships by establishing bilateral and multilateral ties and interacting with each other, and the relationships among different actors in a certain field or range constitute a particular network. In specific research, according to different theoretical branches and problem requirements, one can either choose a certain network structure as the research object and focus on the characteristics of the structure as a whole, or focus on one or more actors in the network structure and analyze interactions among individuals and their impact on the network as a whole.

As a core concept in social network theory, “relationship” is generally defined as a specific contact, connection, or linkage between two actors or two points.¹⁶ Under the network structure, relationships can be directed, expressing relationships between individuals that are initiated by one party and accepted by another, or non-directed, expressing interactive relationships between individuals. Different levels and degrees of interaction may form varying relationships between individuals; these relationships constitute the network structure, which has structural properties that act on both individuals and their interactions. In the practical study of small-scale networks, we can delineate the object group in relation to a specific range and domain according to specific requirements and analyze the relationship or relationships, i.e., the mono- or multi-relationships that exist in the group. The relationships themselves have various properties, including reflexivity, symmetry and transitivity.¹⁷ By specifying the properties of relationships between individuals, we can refine the interaction patterns among individuals in the network, and also gain a better grasp of the structural characteristics of the network as a whole.

From a network perspective, the evolution of international relations can be seen as the interconnection and interaction of inter-state networks in which international relations evolve in a series of networks of mutual cooperation and conflict.¹⁸ The players in international relations interact with other players for the sake of interests including security and development, and cooperation is both a form of inter-entity interaction and a representation of the relationship established through the act of cooperation. In terms of the properties of relationships, first of all, international cooperation is usually reflexive in nature. The cooperation-oriented willingness and behavior of the players themselves are the basis for achieving cooperation. Only when two or more players have the willingness and convergence of interests that lead to cooperation can they improve mutual understanding and consensus

15 See James S. Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital”; Lin Nan, “Social Resources and Instrumental Action,” in Peter V. Marsden and Lin Nan, eds., *Social Structure and Network Analysis*, pp. 131-145; Lin Nan, *Social Capital: A Theory of Social Structure and Action*; Ronald Burt, *Structural Hole: The Social Structure of Competition*; Bian Yanjie et al., *Social Network and Status Acquisition*.

16 David Knock and Yang Song, *Social Network Analysis* (2nd ed.), p. 13.

17 See Stanley Wasserman and Catherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, p. 109.

18 Zeev Maoz, *Networks of Nations: The Evolution, Structure, and Impact of International Networks, 1816-2001*, p. 6.

through concrete action and develop cooperative relations in the course of these interactions. A change in the decision-making of cooperative actors will affect the cooperative relationship; for example, if one party imposes sanctions on another, the cooperative relationship between them will be damaged or stalled. The reflexive nature of cooperative relations shows that the actor, the cooperative relationship, and the network thus constituted influence and interact with each other, and at the same time determine the dynamic nature of the cooperative network. Secondly, the cooperative relationship is symmetrical. Cooperation itself is a kind of purposeful non-directional interaction, and the relationship thus established has a shared character involving two or more people. Thirdly, cooperative relationships may be transmissive. If, at any time, the relationship between three nodes in a network has a necessary causality, the relationship is transmissive. When there is a certain basis of cooperation (such as an alliance) or a correlation of interests between players in a certain area, a transmissive relationship may emerge between them. Such relationships can reflect the relevance and cohesiveness of the network. However, because transmissive relationships are likely to occur among only a few nodes, they form small groups in the network, highlighting differences in network structures' levels of hierarchy in "center" and "periphery" and levels of relationships.

The establishment of a cooperative mechanism is a sign of the institutionalization and normalization of cooperative relations. The cooperative mechanism itself is a network structure composed of the members within this structure and their relationships, with the network able to serve not only as a structure, but also as an actor.¹⁹ When a network has multiple mechanisms, each mechanism, as an actor, may have coexisting parallel relationships, coexisting complementary relationships, or relationships of competition and substitution.²⁰ Therefore, when judging the relationship between entities under different cooperative mechanisms, we need to consider relationships at both the actor level and the mechanism level.

The affiliation network in social networks provides a basic model for analyzing the binary relationships between the cooperation mechanism and the members. "Affiliation network" refers to a special class of two-mode networks, i.e., the network is termed an affiliation or membership network if one of its modes (the set of actors) is "individual actors" and the other is the "sector" to which these actors belong.²¹ "Affiliation network" is commonly used to describe the participation of actors in a series of events, both in terms of the relationships established by the actors through their participation in the events and in terms of the relationships and characteristics involving the events. An affiliation network model consisting

19 Miles Kahler, "Networked Politics: Agency, Power, and Governance."

20 See Zhou Xueguang, *Ten Lectures on Organizational Sociology*, pp. 150-151.

21 See Liu Jun, ed., *Holistic Network Analysis: A Practical Guide to UCINET Software* (2nd ed.), p. 5. "Mode" refers to the set of actors, and the number of modes refers to the number of types of actor set. A network consisting of the relationships among actors within a set of actors is a one-mode network that presents the relationships at a certain level of analysis; a network consisting of the relationships between one set of actors and another is a two-mode network that presents the connections between two sets of nodes at different levels of analysis.

of cooperative mechanisms and their members can be used to describe the relationships between multiple cooperating mechanisms and their actors. Actors establish relationships with the members of each mechanism through their participation in different mechanisms, and their position in the network is determined by the number of relationships in each set of relationships, their distance and the degree to which they participate in each mechanism. The relationships among actors need to be constructed by mechanisms of common affiliation, and thus each mechanism is always a shortcut between actors.

The East Asian regional cooperation framework includes both cooperation mechanisms and the cooperative entities falling under them; they can be regarded as networks consisting of the cooperation mechanisms and the relationships among their members. Constructing an affiliation network between East Asian regional cooperation mechanisms and cooperative actors emphasizes both the holistic features of the framework as a network structure and the individual characteristics of each mechanism and entity and the relationships between them. In the East Asian regional cooperation network, the level of relations among actors affects their decision-making and behavior, which in turn affects their cooperative relationships and thus the whole regional cooperation framework. At the same time, the participation of actors in each mechanism and the relations among the mechanisms also act on the network structure and affect the stability and effectiveness of the whole regional cooperation framework. Therefore, regarding the East Asian regional cooperation framework as an affiliation network not only allows us to observe the relationships among various cooperative actors and take note of the current fruits of institutionalization, but also enables us to grasp the relationship among various cooperative mechanisms and understand the dynamics and obstacles to the process of East Asian regional cooperation.

III. Evolution and Composition of the East Asian Regional Cooperation Network

From a network perspective, the East Asian regional cooperation network is a dynamic and open system. The system took shape in the course of East Asian regional cooperation and evolved as this developed. Based on the changes of actors and cooperation arrangements within the system, the East Asian regional cooperation network is marked by the ASEAN, ASEAN-China-Japan-ROK (ASEAN 10+3) mechanisms and the East Asia Summit. The scope of cooperation has shifted from sub-regional to regional, from intra-regional to intra-regional and extra-regional entities, and gradually formed the current multi-entity, multi-level and multi-disciplinary network structure.

1. Development of the East Asian regional cooperation framework

Institutionalized cooperation in the East Asian region began in the 1960s. The establishment and expansion of ASEAN formed a relatively stable regional cooperation framework among Southeast Asian countries, laying the foundation for regional cooperation in East Asia. In the 1990s, the end of the Cold War and the outbreak of the Asian Financial Crisis brought great

opportunities for the development of regional cooperation in East Asia. As countries became increasingly aware of the importance and urgency of regional cooperation, a series of regional cooperation mechanisms was established.

The establishment of the ASEAN-China-Japan-ROK (10+3) mechanism was driven by economic factors. In 1997, when the Asian Financial Crisis hit the entire East Asian region hard, the leaders of ASEAN and China, Japan and the ROK (then the “9+3” becoming the “10+3” after Cambodia joined ASEAN) held their first informal Leaders’ Meeting in Kuala Lumpur to discuss measures to deal with the crisis. In 1999, the third ASEAN +3 Leaders’ Meeting issued the Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation, bringing economic, monetary and financial, social and human resource development, science and technology, development cooperation, culture and information, political security, and transnational issues into the key area of East Asian regional cooperation. In 2000, the ninth 10+3 Finance Ministers’ Meeting signed the Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI) to set up a regional currency swap network, establishing a stable exchange rate between ASEAN countries and China, Japan and the ROK. It was upgraded to the Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralization Agreement (CMIM) in 2008, which laid the institutional foundation for promoting East Asian regional currency cooperation and preventing financial crises. In 2007, the leaders of ASEAN and China, Japan and the ROK adopted the second Joint Statement on East Asia Cooperation and formulated the Work Plan for 2007-2017 ASEAN-China-Japan-ROK Cooperation. This plan sets out the cooperation between ASEAN and China, Japan and the ROK over the decade in the areas of politics and security, the economy and finance, energy and sustainable development, society and culture, and supporting arrangements and follow-up action. The establishment of the 10+3 mechanism brought together the countries of East Asia in the geographical sense, and the expansion of its functions has facilitated their cooperation in a number of fields. The 10+3 mechanism has now developed into the main channel for regional cooperation in East Asia, with a structure that includes leaders’ meetings, ministerial meetings, senior officials’ meetings, meetings of the ASEAN Committee of Permanent Representatives and of the Chinese, Japanese, and ROK ambassadors to ASEAN, as well as working group meetings. It is supported by the East Asia Forum and the track II Network of East Asian Think-Tanks (NEAT).

Parallel to the 10+3 mechanism is the 10+1 mechanism, which is a bilateral cooperation mechanism established by ASEAN with China, Japan and the ROK respectively. With its basis on bilateral dialogue relationships and free trade agreements, the 10+1 mechanism’s main focus is on cooperation in the economic field, but it has gradually expanded to include political, security, cultural and other fields. The key 10+1 areas of cooperation include agriculture, information and communication, human resource development, mutual investment and Mekong River basin development, and the structure includes summits, ministerial meetings, senior officials’ meetings and working-level meetings. The bilateral cooperation form makes the 10+1 mechanism more flexible and targeted, allowing ASEAN to implement cooperation with China, Japan and the ROK in specific areas.

With the establishment of the 10+3 mechanism, China, Japan, and the ROK started to cooperate within the 10+3 framework, and the leaders of the three countries decided to meet regularly during the annual 10+3 meetings. In 2008, the leaders of China, Japan, and the ROK met for the first time outside the 10+3 framework and decided to establish a comprehensive future-oriented cooperation partnership, the China-Japan-ROK Summit, thus institutionalizing the meetings of the leaders of the three countries. The China-Japan-ROK Summit is a cooperative mechanism implemented by the three countries of Northeast Asia on the basis of seeking common ground while reserving differences. Although there have long been a number of contradictions between the three, developmental requirements and common interests have made cooperation between them an irresistible trend. In 2015, the three countries reached a consensus on the launch of free trade zone negotiations, a step that is of great significance to the construction of the China-Japan-ROK free trade zone and the economic integration of East Asia. While the outcomes of the China-Japan-ROK Summit are mainly in the economic field, this mechanism also provides an institutional platform for communication and cooperation among them in the political and security fields, thus assisting the three countries to address and resolve sub-regional issues such as the Korean Peninsula and territorial disputes while promoting their own and regional development.

With the participation of more entities, the 10+3 system has played a regulating and facilitating role in the cooperation mechanism. Both the 10+6 and 10+8 arrangements are based on the 10+3 cooperation mechanism. Australia, New Zealand, and India have been added, forming the 10+6 mechanism, and on this basis, the United States and Russia were added to the 10+8 mechanism of the East Asia Summit. Being more open, the East Asia Summit does not restrict member countries to the geographical scope of East Asia; this greatly enhances the inclusiveness and complementarity of regional development.

In November 2011, the 19th ASEAN Leaders' Meeting issued the ASEAN Framework for Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, proposing the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) initiative. In November 2012, negotiations on the RCEP Agreement were officially launched. RCEP is a free trade agreement initiated by the ten member states of ASEAN, including free trade agreements between ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India. It aims to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers and establish an open market in order to achieve regional economic integration. On November 15, 2020, after eight years and 28 rounds of formal negotiations, the ten ASEAN member states and fifteen countries including China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand formally signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEPA). Although the agreement has not yet entered into force, the planning, consultation and signing of this agreement have once again enabled the signatories to reach a consensus on further strengthening economic cooperation and promoting regional integration, thus making possible the world's largest free trade zone covering the world's largest population and most extensive scope.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC)

are multilateral cooperative arrangements in the Asia-Pacific region. The ARF is a security cooperation mechanism proposed and organized by ASEAN that aims to provide a platform for security dialogue and consultation among participating countries, promote communication and understanding among them, and maintain peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region. With ASEAN in the leading role, ARF incorporates major countries including China, the United States, Japan and Russia. There is a crisscrossing of power and interests among these countries, and they also have a vital influence on and responsibility for regional security. As the only official multilateral security dialogue mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region, ARF strengthens the basis of common interests among countries and helps them coordinate their conflicting interests as well as jointly addressing regional security matters.

APEC is an economic cooperation mechanism established in 1989 with 21 members. Its purpose is to maintain economic growth and development, promote economic interdependence among its members, strengthen an open multilateral trading system, reduce barriers to regional trade and investment, and safeguard the common interests of the people in the region. As the most influential intergovernmental economic cooperation mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region, APEC members include the seven ASEAN countries of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, as well as China as a sovereign state and the regional economies of China's Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, and Chinese Taipei. Since its establishment, APEC has been committed to promoting regional and global trade and investment liberalization, as well as promoting economic and technical cooperation among its members. It has made great contributions to the economic development of the Asia-Pacific region.

2. *Structural Analysis of the East Asian Regional Cooperation Network*

Currently, the main East Asian regional cooperation arrangements include ASEAN+1, ASEAN +3, the China-Japan-ROK Summit, the East Asia Summit (EAS) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). In addition to the main cooperation frameworks in the region, Asia-Pacific regional cooperation mechanisms such as ARF and APEC also influence the process of regional cooperation in East Asia. We delimit the cooperative networks in East Asian regional cooperation on this basis, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 East Asia Regional Cooperation Arrangements and Members²²

Cooperation mechanism	Member
10+1 (China)	ASEAN (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia), China
10+1 (Japan)	ASEAN (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia), Japan
10+1 (ROK)	ASEAN (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia), ROK

22 Source: Composed by author, April 27, 2021.

China-Japan-ROK Summit	China, Japan, ROK
10+3	ASEAN (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia), China, Japan, ROK
EAS (10+8)	ASEAN (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia), China, Japan, ROK, India, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Russia
RCEP	ASEAN (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia), China, Japan, ROK, Australia, New Zealand
ARF	ASEAN (Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia), China, Japan, ROK, North Korea, Mongolia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Russia, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, EU
APEC	Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, China, China's Hong Kong SAR, Chinese Taipei, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Peru, Russia, USA, Canada, Chile

This paper first takes ASEAN, China, Japan, the ROK, Australia, New Zealand, India, the United States and Russia as the main actors in East Asian regional cooperation,²³ and the 10+1 and 10+3, the China-Japan-ROK Summit, the East Asia Summit, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), ARF, and APEC as the main cooperation mechanisms, thus establishing a matrix of “actor-cooperation mechanism” affiliation in the East Asian region. The participation of actors in the cooperation mechanisms is scored as “yes” or “no” (1 represents yes, 0 represents no).

Table 2 Matrix of “Actor-Cooperation Mechanism” Affiliation in the East Asian Region²⁴

Cooperation mechanisms actors	10+1 (China)	10+1 (Japan)	10+1 (ROK)	China-Japan-ROK Summit	10+3	EAS	RCEP	ARF	APEC
ASEAN	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1
China	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
Japan	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1
ROK	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Australia	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1

23 In this paper, members of the East Asia Summit are considered to fall within the scope of this study of East Asian regional cooperation networks is that they are the most representative of the regional cooperation process in terms of both influence and depth and breadth of cooperation. In the East Asian geopolitical sense, the East Asia Summit members are best able to represent the main body of East Asian regional cooperation.

24 Source: Composed by author. It should be noted that although ASEAN is not a member of APEC as a whole, the seven ASEAN countries that have joined APEC (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) account for 75 percent of ASEAN’s land area and 87 percent of its population, as well as more than 95 percent of both its GDP and total trade. They thus occupy an important position in APEC. At the same time, the ASEAN Secretariat, one of APEC’s three observers, is also extensively involved in the organization’s meetings and affairs. Therefore, this paper identifies ASEAN’s participation in APEC as “Yes.”

New Zealand	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
India	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0
United States	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Russia	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1

As shown in Table 2, the East Asian regional “actor-cooperation mechanism” affiliation network is represented as a 9×9 square matrix, with network analysis showing that the density of the network is 0.556. The centrality results for each actor in the network are shown in Table 3.²⁵ The degree of centrality, proximity of centrality, and intermediary centrality of the nine actors ranked in numerical value from top to bottom of the table show five levels of characteristics respectively. The three ASEAN results have the highest values among the nodes, indicating that ASEAN has the most obvious strengths in terms of number of direct relations with countries, influence on resources and information, and the control and mediation of relations among countries. This clarifies the centrality of ASEAN in the East Asian regional cooperation network. India’s participation in the East Asian regional cooperation network is not high, and connections have been established among all nodes except India, so its intermediary centrality is 0, indicating that India can hardly play a bridging role in this network. However, its proximity centrality does not differ much from other entities because India is a member of the East Asia Summit and ASEAN Regional Forum and can establish direct or indirect connections with other entities through these two mechanisms.

Table 3 Results of Centrality Analysis of the “Actor-Cooperation Mechanism” Network in East Asia²⁶

Centrality actors	Degree centrality	Proximity centrality	Mediation centrality
ASEAN	0.444	0.525	0.043
China	0.389	0.515	0.025
Japan	0.389	0.515	0.025
ROK	0.389	0.515	0.025
Australia	0.222	0.486	0.003
New Zealand	0.222	0.486	0.003

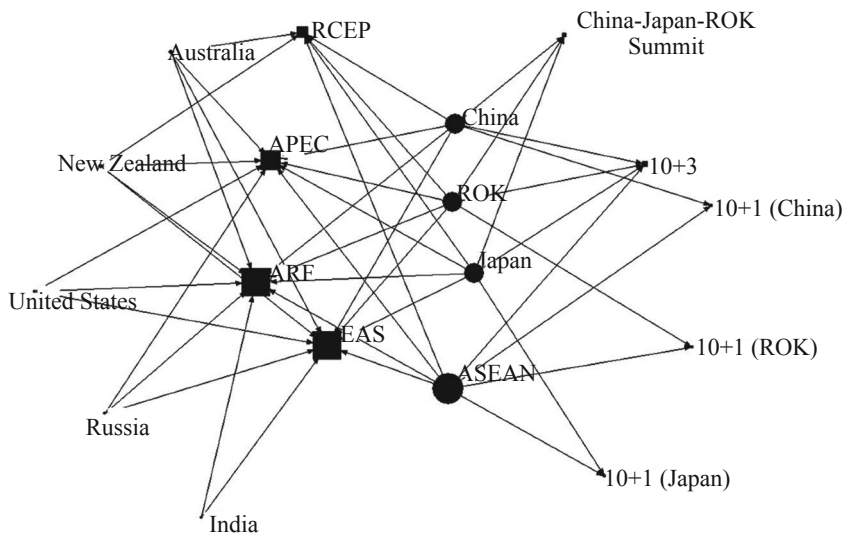
25 Density measurements provide an indicator of the degree of network connectivity, while centrality results reflect the position of each node in the network structure. Different centrality indicators reflect different content, with degree of centrality reflecting the number of relationships between some nodes and others in the network, proximity centrality reflecting the degree of direct or indirect proximity between some nodes and others, and intermediary centrality reflecting the association between some nodes and others and also the bridging role of nodes in the network. For a detailed introduction, see David Knock and Yang Song, *Social Network Analysis* (2nd ed.); Liu Jun, ed., *Holistic Network Analysis: A Practical Guide to UCINET Software* (2nd ed.); Katherine Faust, “Centrality in Affiliation Networks,” pp. 157-191.

26 Calculated using UCINET software. Software source: S.P. Borgatti, M.G. Everett and L.C. Freeman, *UCINET for Windows: Software for Social Network Analysis*.

India	0.111	0.468	0.000
United States	0.167	0.477	0.001
Russia	0.167	0.477	0.001

The results of the above analysis make it impossible to visualize the network via a more graphic representation based on the different indicators of centrality analysis. In the visualization results for a particular centrality indicator, the greater the centrality of the node, the larger the graphic representation. On the basis of the network intermediary centrality analysis, we derive the visualization results of Figure 1, which clearly shows the position of each node in the network. In terms of node size, ASEAN has the most significant centrality, followed by China, Japan, and the ROK; India has the lowest. Since the multidimensional scale technique is based on distance, the closer the points are in two-dimensional space, the closer they are to each other, and the greater their similarity in terms of event participation.²⁷ As shown in the figure, ASEAN, China, Japan and the ROK are the closest in distance, which indicates that the four countries have highly similar participation in cooperation mechanisms. The results of network analysis show that the current East Asian regional cooperation network has a certain degree of connectivity, but the density of the network structure is not high. The quite large differences in the position of each entity in the regional cooperation network and in the size of the nodes determine the differences in the strength and impact of different nodes in the network.

Figure 1 Visualization Results of the Centrality Analysis of the East Asian Regional Cooperation Network²⁸



27 Liu Jun, ed., *Holistic Network Analysis: A Practical Guide to UCINET Software* (2nd ed.), p. 284.

28 Source: Analysis using NetDraw software, based on the results of the centrality analysis above.

IV. Structural Characteristics of the East Asian Regional Cooperation Network

The main mode of regional cooperation in East Asia is process-oriented, featuring process, pluralism, and openness.²⁹ Unlike the result-oriented European integration process, East Asian regional cooperation attaches importance to a more loose and flexible process of cooperation and the inter-entity relations constantly constructed through cooperation. Under this mode of cooperation, different actors can put aside disagreements caused by substantial differences between them and carry out limited cooperation targeted on common interests in a certain area, forming institutions and norms in the course of cooperation. With the advancement of the regional cooperation process, cooperation mechanisms at different levels and in different fields composed of different entities in the East Asian region have been successively established. A series of cooperation mechanisms in the Asia-Pacific and even on a global scale have influenced East Asian regional cooperation and promoted the continuous evolution of the East Asian regional cooperation network. This network has noteworthy structural characteristics in terms of cooperation mechanisms, cooperation entities, inter-entity relations and the interaction of various areas of cooperation. These characteristics, which distinguish East Asian regional cooperation from other regional cooperation processes, are a concentrated expression of the dynamics and limitations of the East Asian regional cooperation process.

First, the current multiple pluralistic cooperation mechanisms in East Asia coexist in parallel or complementary relationships, with the consensus and norms formed in the cooperation process providing an authoritative basis for the current structure. These cooperation mechanisms have their own target areas and cover different members; the forms and contents of cooperation differ, and there is no clear division in terms of scope and functions. However, through the operation and effectiveness of various mechanisms, East Asian regional cooperation has made substantial progress and enhanced inter-entity relations. In the course of this process, parallel mechanisms function together as a framework for East Asian regional cooperation. Due to the openness of the East Asian regional cooperation process, many cooperation mechanisms include entities outside the geopolitical scope of East Asia, and the content of cooperation is no longer limited to the political, security and economic fields, but involves a series of global issues concerning human development. Although, from the perspective of the East Asian region as a whole, the emergence of a series of new cooperation mechanisms in the global arena in recent years is shaking the structure of the existing cooperation networks and although there is no guarantee that most of them do indeed have effective problem solving capacities, the role of the current structure is more one of maintaining the process of regional cooperation, providing a platform for establishing direct or indirect connections, and exchanging information and other resources among the actors in and outside the region. The coexistence and complementarity of multiple cooperation

29 See Qin Yaqing, *Relationship and Processes: Cultural Constructions of China's International Relations Theory*, pp. 220-225.

mechanisms provide more diverse channels and mediums for the maintenance of inter-entity relations, and the consensus and norms formed by the players in their long-term interaction compensate to a certain extent for the shortcomings of low institutionalization and strengthen the resilience of the cooperation network and the mechanisms themselves.

Second, the actors in East Asian regional cooperation include not only non-state actors like ASEAN but also the participation of extra-regional countries. The fact that the position and role of each entity in the cooperation network differs fully reflects the openness and pluralism of the East Asian regional cooperation process. The East Asian regional cooperation network includes not only a number of sovereign states in and outside the region, but also ASEAN as a regional organization; it covers most of the actors in the geopolitical scope of East Asia, and also includes the participation of extra-regional countries such as Australia, New Zealand, India, the United States and Russia. In terms of political systems, religious beliefs, and social culture, the network is compatible with both socialism and capitalism, Christianity and Buddhism, Eastern and Western culture, and other complex and diverse factors. The plurality of entities has created many obstacles to regional cooperation in East Asia, but with the deepening of their interdependence various heterogeneous features have been able to stimulate new dynamics in the course of cooperation, which in turn has strengthened the entire cooperation network.

ASEAN has always played a unique leading role in the East Asian regional cooperation framework. Existing studies usually define ASEAN as a limited “brokerage,” the “driver’s seat” of regional cooperation, a “norm provider,” a “process designer,” etc., thus explaining the connotations and formation of the “ASEAN Center.”³⁰ The result of our network analysis of the East Asian regional cooperation framework shows that ASEAN occupies a central position in the network and provides different connotations to its centrality. In terms of institutional level, ASEAN plays a leading role in the East Asian regional cooperation framework, and in terms of relational level, it constructs its relationship with East Asian countries through the East Asian regional cooperation framework, thus gaining a wealth of relational power resources and further consolidating its centrality.³¹ The incorporation of this element into ASEAN and ASEAN-led cooperation mechanisms has normalized ASEAN’s centrality and made it widely recognized among East Asian countries. This has not only given ASEAN a voice and influence at the institutional level and in specific areas of cooperation such as politics, security and the economy, but also enabled it to inject its wisdom and

30 Tan See Seng, “Conclusion: Trends and Driving Forces in East Asian Regionalism,” in Ralf Emmers, ed., *ASEAN and the Institutionalization of East Asia*, pp. 192-196; Evelyn Goh, “Institutions and the Great Power Bargain in East Asia: ASEAN’s Limited ‘Brokerage’ Role”; Lee Jones, “Still in the ‘Driver’s Seat,’ But for How Long? ASEAN’s Capacity for Leadership in East-Asian International Relations”; Richard Stubbs, “ASEAN’s Leadership in East Asian Region-Building: Strength in Weakness.”

31 Mely Caballero-Anthony, “Understanding ASEAN’s Centrality: Bases and Prospects in an Evolving Regional Architecture.”

experience of Southeast Asian regional integration into wider regional cooperation, as well as playing a “bridge” role and continuously strengthening the stability and closeness of the East Asian regional cooperation network.

Third, the relations among regional powers play a decisive role in the overall East Asian landscape, as structural confrontation and limited cooperation become the mainstream of major power relations and the “weak relations” in the common mechanism become a special track for exchanges and cooperation among major powers.

According to Granovetter’s “weak relationship hypothesis,” weak relationships facilitate the interaction and flow of information and resources to a greater degree than strong relationships, and social networks based on weak relationships have a wider influence.³² Compared with bilateral relations, which are mainly alliance-based and are relatively close and highly directed, belonging to the same cooperative mechanism or network can be understood as a weak relation in international relations. In such a network structure, the relationship between the nodes is usually a “complex relationship,”³³ i.e., a multifaceted and diverse relationship brought about by the complex interactions of the actors. The cooperation among the actors is repeatable and sustained, and the rationality they pursue is not the rationality of market logic but relational rationality. This determines that in the East Asian regional cooperation network, the decision making and practice of each actor must not only comply with regional cooperation mechanisms and norms, but also take into account its own relational resources, including its reputation and status in the network. The existing cooperation network not only facilitates complementarity and sharing of information and resources among different entities, but also promotes the spillover of institutional cooperation to the political, economic, and security fields, enabling each entity to put constraints on its own behavior to a certain extent and providing favorable conditions for inter-entity communication and cooperation in specific issue areas. The intricacies of the relations between China, the United States, Russia, Japan and other major powers constitute the underpinning of the East Asian regional cooperation network. As interactions among entities increase and interdependence deepens, common demands for security and development prompt countries to establish bilateral or multilateral cooperative relations, identify convergence of interests, and thence carry out limited cooperation.

Fourth, the level of cooperation in different fields varies widely. It is the interaction among different entities in the political, security, and economic fields that fundamentally determines the level of inter-entity relations; the cooperative mechanism itself does not provide direct kinetic energy for inter-entity cooperation. Among the driving factors of regional cooperation in East Asia are increasing regional economic integration, the influence on trade cooperation of each country’s domestic interests, and the domino effect generated

32 Mark Granovetter, *Embeddedness: Social Network and Economic Action*, pp. 56-77.

33 Robert Hanneman and Mark Riddle, *Introduction to Social Network Methods*, p. 240.

by various trade agreements.³⁴ Although economic cooperation often precedes political and security cooperation, economic relations will always be influenced by political and security relations. The rapid advancement of regional economic integration demonstrates the strong willingness and determination of East Asian countries to cooperate economically, and has raised economic relations among them to an unprecedented level. However, it has often been the case that the development of cooperative economic relations has stalled or even gone backwards due to contradictions or conflicts among countries in the political and security fields. Such disagreements and conflicts are the “greatest and most enduring difficulties” in the development of the East Asian regional cooperation framework.³⁵ The complexity of the political and security environment in East Asia makes it difficult for countries to maintain consistent positive relations; they are often trapped in the traditional security dilemmas of historical legacy problems and crises of confidence, making it hard to break through conflicting political and security interests.³⁶

In such circumstances, the mechanisms alone cannot achieve a solution to the problems. Each actor tends to adopt a “stress” strategy, or temporarily shelves the dispute to avoid the stagnation or regression of cooperation that would affect more important national interests. Because of the high sensitivity of East Asian countries over political security interests such as sovereignty and territory, when two or more parties are in conflict over major concerns, each may choose to limit or stop economic cooperation to make its position and attitude clear, or may hope to put pressure on the other party through economic sanctions in order to achieve its own strategic goals. The root cause of this feature lies in the game of power and interests among East Asian actors, but it also reveals the limitations of the effectiveness of the East Asian regional cooperation framework in specific areas of cooperation.

As more and more cooperation mechanisms overlap and take effect in East Asia, the established cooperation framework is bound to be affected. The current East Asian regional cooperation structure covers the core areas of inter-entity political, security, and economic cooperation, but its mechanisms still lack effectiveness. While these mechanisms have provided a platform for exchanges and cooperation among East Asian entities, the existing institutional norms do not effectively promote the implementation of decisions or solve the obstacles to cooperation confronting each entity, making it necessary for each entity to seek other bilateral or multilateral channels and complicating the cooperation process. However, despite the many challenges it faces, the East Asian regional cooperation framework still plays a positive role; in the long run, the characteristics of its network structure will influence the regional cooperation process in East Asia and even the wider geopolitical context. On the one hand, driven by its joint entities, the existing network can incorporate new mechanisms,

34 Andrew MacIntyre and John Ravenhill, “The Future of Asian Regional Institutions,” in Miles Kahler and Andrew MacIntyre, eds., *Integrating Regions: Asia in Comparative Context*, pp. 245-263.

35 Han Caizhen and Shi Yinhong, “Bottlenecks in East Asian Regional Cooperation and China.”

36 Wang Mingguo, “Institutional Practice and China’s Regional Governance in East Asia.”

forming a more diversified, multilayered and varied cooperation network and thus further enhancing the network structure's resilience and robustness in the face of shocks and challenges. On the other, with the development of regional powers and the strengthening of interaction among players inside and outside the region, more extra-regional players will join the East Asian regional cooperation network and sign on to East Asian cooperation; this will enable it to exert influence and play a role across a larger geopolitical scope, thus creating a favorable external environment for the survival of the East Asian regional cooperation network.

V. China's Relational Path in Regional Cooperation

In the context of a connected world, societies face many complex challenges that transcend national and continental boundaries: inter-country communication is carried out through large-scale networks with multiple centers, whose impacts have externalities in multiple areas.³⁷ Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the scope of the pandemic's spread and the depth of its impact have severely damaged the original global governance mechanisms. Although there has been significant divergence in the prevention and control situation and response measures at home and abroad, the pandemic has created a new context for countries' current security and development issues, highlighting the growing importance of regional cooperation. The survival of the current regional cooperation framework and model will determine the developmental direction of the regional cooperation process in East Asia and China's current and future neighborhood. Within the overall structure of the East Asian regional cooperation network, China plays an important role in the regional cooperation process, but this role is still curbed by the limited cohesion of the regional cooperation network and the differences in the level of relations between China and other countries. Therefore, in the future regional cooperation process, China should strengthen its relational thinking, pay attention to the structural characteristics of the East Asian regional cooperation network, and use the relational path to improve the effectiveness and level of its participation in regional cooperation practice.

First, China should pay more attention to the role of regional cooperation arrangements, enhance its participation in various cooperative mechanisms, and integrate into the East Asian regional cooperation process in a more active and open manner. At present, China has participated in a number of regional cooperation mechanisms and established extensive connections in the East Asian regional cooperation network. The formal signing of RCEP and consideration of the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) demonstrate China's determination to further increase its openness and promote regional

37 See R.S. Zaharna, Ali Fisher and Amelia Arsenault, eds., "Introduction: The Connective Mindshift," in *Relational, Networked and Collaborative Approaches to Public Diplomacy: The Connective Mindshift*, pp. 1-14.

and global economic cooperation. The development of the regional cooperation process provides China with opportunities that will assist in the construction of a new development pattern in which the domestic cycle is the mainstay and domestic and international cycles facilitate each other, as well as creating a more favorable environment for the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative. Given the openness and dynamism of the East Asian regional cooperation network, it is evident that the network will be further expanded in future and the areas of cooperation involved will be more diversified. As an important node in the network, China should align its development strategy with regional development, contribute more public goods to regional cooperation through the cooperation networks, and promote the improvement of the regional cooperation framework and the realization of integration goals such as the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP) together with other actors.

Second, China should further consolidate the partnership network, strengthen partnership resilience and enrich its connotations through regional cooperation. The sound foundation of international cooperation on prevention and control during the current pandemic has provided different countries with a window and platform for the exchange and sharing of prevention and control experience as well as for joint prevention and control in terms of medical supplies and other areas. The partnership network is an important achievement of great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics, laying the foundation for China to be further integrated into international cooperation and promoting new multilateralism. By playing a constructive role in various cooperation arrangements and specific areas, China will also be able to establish more direct links with other actors at the level of mechanisms and interaction, giving a richer meaning to partnership and allowing a linkage effect between China and its partners at different levels and in different areas of cooperation and partnership.

Third, China should face up to the negative impact on regional cooperation and shared development of the conflicts and disagreements in bilateral relations and other areas and explore the positive relations in the composite relationship. In national development and a series of specific regional affairs, cooperation between parties within and outside East Asia has long been characterized by the intertwining of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Different players' choice of bilateral and multilateral cooperation is influenced by factors such as geopolitics and cooperation goals. They can seek bilateral cooperation within the framework of multilateral cooperation and can also promote multilateral cooperation through bilateral cooperation. The organic combination of bilateral and multilateral cooperation is conducive to strengthening the relationship among the players and thus strengthening the network of regional cooperation in East Asia. In the case of the Sino-US relationship, China should, while having an overall grasp of the current complex relationship between the two countries, put a premium on key issues related to international social stability and the people's security and seek breakthroughs in communication and cooperation through bilateral dialogue channels and multilateral mechanisms, so that the positive element in this complex

relationship can play a leading role.

Fourth, China should work with other countries to promote the improvement of the East Asian regional cooperation framework, continuously strengthen the cohesion of the regional cooperation network, and jointly maintain the stable development of the cooperation process. In terms of the East Asian region as a whole, the operation of various cooperation mechanisms currently tends to overlap; they have yet to achieve a clear division of functions and fields, it is hard to guarantee their effectiveness, and a long-term process of improvement and strengthening still lies ahead of them. Although ASEAN has always occupied a central position in the East Asian regional cooperation network, its influence is mainly reflected in its leadership of the network of cooperative mechanisms. It contributes experience and wisdom to the institutionalization of East Asian regional cooperation, and plays a coordinating role in various cooperative mechanisms. The current interactions between major powers in and outside the region are constantly reshaping the environment of regional cooperation in East Asia and changing the original basis of “ASEAN as center,” in a way that puts forward new requirements for both ASEAN and members of the network. Whether it involves sovereign countries or regional organizations, participation in regional cooperation means identification with multilateralism, and effective multilateral cooperation requires the support and assurance of cooperation mechanisms and norms. Therefore, the future development of regional cooperation in East Asia should adhere to the new multilateralism and the principle of democratization and equality in international relations, should continuously enhance the cohesion of the regional cooperation network, and should make the various cooperation mechanisms more rational and effective in responding to and resolving specific problems. Based on its positioning in the East Asian regional cooperation network, China can act as a key node, providing greater resources for the development of regional cooperation and playing a more active and effective role in improving the regional architecture and the exchanges and cooperation among participants.

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