

## **Editorial: Regional partnerships and strategic cooperation in times of crisis**

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Recent years have been dominated by multiple crises, instability, higher risks, uncertainty, and even war. In such a globalised world, all these major concerns have raised awareness, once more, towards the incremental need to boost cooperation among countries, whether they are placed in the closer or wider neighbourhood. Such joint actions are more than required to mitigate positive transaction costs such as trade barriers, investment cuts, economic decline, diplomatic conflicts, security issues, or even harsh pandemic effects etc. Consequently, regional partnerships in all forms and contents matter because they shape new dimensions of strategic cooperation and become a nodal landmark for deepening economic interdependencies, prosperity and resilience building.

Every regional partnership incorporates, most often, at least one of the great players from the international arena. The global competition among actors such as the United States of America, the European Union perceived as a bloc, China and other Asian countries, Australia or New Zealand, and the ongoing power shifts have a mirroring effect on the cooperation profile established between country members. Therefore, frameworks designed by these states aim to preserve and exercise their dominant position (Hamanaka, 2014). In other words, regional partnerships proposed a distinct framework of governance, one that is not having the formality of a regional bloc, grounded on deep economic integration, but is rather based on a collaborative character, that still has embedded the influence and vision of the developed countries that designed the internal profile of their long-term strategic cooperation (Lissovolik et al., 2019; WTO, 2025; Das, 2014).

Most regional partnerships have as a nodal objective of their agenda the facilitation of trade in goods or services, including electronic commerce, transactions with intellectual property rights, environmental protection, investments, etc, in a transparent manner, especially when the same countries belong to or are willing to be part of multiple such collaborative frameworks. Latest developments have drawn attention to the *Asia Pacific Region*, where the 2016 initial version of the *Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)*, that gathered twelve developed and developing states was redefined in 2018 under the version of the *Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)*, after the withdrawal of the United States of America (USA) in 2017, due to its potential harms on the American

labour market (Hoff, 2025). The importance of such a free trade agreement, that does not include China, in the world arena is notable, considering that, in 2024, the CPTPP had a GDP of 15,8 trillion US\$, representing more than 14,4% of global GDP and a population of 593,2 million, signifying 7.7% of the world population (Australian Government, 2024). Currently, other nations have expressed their intentions to join CPTPP to benefit from access to the Indo-Pacific region, among which we can nominate the United Kingdom, China, Taiwan, Philippines while others like South Korea, Thailand or Colombia are willing to join in the near future (Hoff, 2025).

Another important partnership in the Asian region remains the *Regional Comprehensive Partnership Agreement (RCEP)* grouping ASEAN countries and six other nations belonging to the World Trade Organisation, such as China, India, South Korea, Japan, New Zealand and Australia. If in the initial version, TPP excluded China, and RCEP excluded the United States of America, highlighting the opposition of the two cooperation initiatives, currently, both CPTPP and RCEP are projected on the long-term prospects of liberalising trade flows, with the opportunity of further expansion and overlapping in terms of membership. However, there remain some important key aspects which deserve to be pointed out between the two partnerships. On the one hand, the fact that RCEP includes countries with different levels of development, having internal asymmetries, makes it more flexible and relaxed in terms of the timeframe for applying regulations. Another essential particularity is the fact that the cooperation group is mainly relying on intensive tariff cuts, being less focused on other aspects such as environmental issues or labour market regulations (Vietnam National Trade Repository, 2025). On the other hand, CPTPP is founded on stronger regulations applied to a broader palette of areas, like investments, wellbeing, competitiveness and attention paid to the activity of Small and Medium Size Enterprises, intellectual property rights, or e-commerce (US-ASEAN Business Council, 2025). Even though the United States of America is not currently a member, there is openness towards receiving new states that are on the same wavelength in the future, an aspect that would boost the status of the trade regulation architect of the USA in the international trade arena.

Such important dynamics in the Eastern part of the world should be balanced through similar strengthened cooperation in the West. In 2013, the European Union and the United States proposed the *Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)*, a free trade agreement willing at mutually stimulating economic growth and the labour market dynamics in the absence of barriers applied to trade with goods, services or investments (European Commission, 2014). Unfortunately, not only were negotiations never finalised, but the current international context, determined by the War in Ukraine, has distanced the EU and the USA even more, due to diverging perspectives concerning the path towards ending the conflict. However, cooperation with states from the closer neighbourhood was prioritised. While the USA signed in 2020 the *United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)*, replacing the old NAFTA treaty and fell under trade disputes in September 2025 with the purpose of

diminishing the USA trade deficit with its neighbours (Rodríguez-Clare et al., 2025), the EU insisted on consolidating the regional alliances with countries from the Eastern European border by signing in 2009 the Eastern Partnership (EaP) (European Union External Action, 2025). The dimensions of such cooperation were not limited only to free trade, but also included more profound aspects such as the rule of law and quality of governance, democracy consolidation, civil protection, deepening economic cooperation, or better connectivity in terms of education opportunities, as to boost resilience in the area (European Commission, 2025; Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, 2025).

The aim of the special issue entitled *Regional Partnerships and strategic cooperation in times of crisis* is to emphasise that in such a complex current context, with highly interdependent links between countries worldwide, not only closed neighbours, partnerships are more than welcomed to consolidate regional security. Allowing a flexible degree of coordination on multiple dimensions, whether targeting only trade relations, or on the contrary, more complex issues like investments, services, labour market, development, peace, etc, they become strategic approaches to cultivate resilience, stability and long-term predictability at the regional level.

At a glance, the specificity and original contribution of such partnerships embraced at the regional level in enhancing cooperation between country members are highlighted by the *four main sub-topics* covered by this special issue. The first one is concentrated on the analysis of partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region, the second sub-topic is focused on the EU prospects in the Indo-Pacific area, followed by a more particular analysis of the EU relations with the EaP countries and finishing with a broader perspective of the nexus between macroeconomic stability, energy security and the dynamics of the global oil market.

## **1. Asia-Pacific economic landscape in a nutshell – current trends, challenges and future prospects**

This first dimension of the special issue is covered by a number of five papers originating from countries like Japan, Romania, Indonesia and Turkey. The paper entitled *The Nexus of FDI, Trade, and Institutional Quality: A Panel Data Analysis of RCEP Countries* explores the relationship between global trade, investment, and public governance at the level of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) economies from 2014 to 2023. In a world governed by uncertainty and risks, the quality of institutions (economic and political ones) that guide a society is crucial. They are a result as well as a starting point for further dynamics, being highly dependent on the effectiveness and soundness of the economic and social climate of every nation. Consequently, the authors have emphasised that exogenous factors such as foreign direct investments and international trade may significantly influence the quality of economic and political institutions. If both determinants have a major

positive impact on the quality of economic institutional quality of the RCEP countries, contributing to their economic development, their impact on political institutions remains rather negative. From this latter perspective, in countries where political institutions are already fragile, their exposure to the international contexts may rather determine rent-seeking activities, boost corruption and deterring democracy. The second manuscript *The Role of Economic Diplomacy in ASEAN's Evolving Trade and Investment Landscape – Features of the RCEP*, proposes a deeper analysis of ASEAN's economic diplomacy in the light of its distinct strategies, actions and policies, while shedding light on RCEP as a defining moment of it. On the basis of a profound analysis of the existing body of theoretical and empirical literature on the topic, the paper provides a comprehensive overview of ASEAN and RCEP's ongoing importance and influence in the global trade arena, from the status of a strategic tool for materialising trade liberalisation, capturing foreign direct investments, expanding trade partnerships, to its diplomatic character able to mitigate against regional tensions and to ease political tensions between its members, under the form of RCEP. The third paper entitled *The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership: Rationality and the Power Plays* provide additional valuable information concerning the benefits of RCEP and CPTPP, with their similarities and important differences, while considering the growing influence of China, as an RCEP member, in the Southeast Asia region, with its negative impact on the US's importance in the region. If RCEP appears as being rather attached to the "Asian approach" in terms of step-by-step liberalisation of trade and investment flows, containing the noticeable influence of China, conversely, the CPTPP contains a distinct recipe designed in accordance with American principles, which goes beyond trade and investments and proposes more complex policies for the countries in Southeast and East Asia. While stressing the existing level of competition between the two regional partnerships, and moreover between China, which uses RCEP as a sort of "geopolitical tool" and the USA, which highly influenced the CPTTP pattern even though it is placed outside of it, the final message of the paper is focused on the benefits of both cooperation forms to their members, where Chinese leading role should also be improved in terms of diplomacy. The fourth paper, named *The Future of RCEP after Make America Great Again (How Will US Trade Tensions Reverberate in The Asia-Pacific Region?)* provides a complementary perspective focused on the major role of the United States of America. Starting from the premises of economic and geopolitical tensions determined by the trade war between the two opposed global powers, USA and China, the paper also analyses the direct consequences on the RCEP nations. As expected, tariffs had negative consequences on GDP for both nations. From a broader perspective, it negatively affected the competitiveness of the US manufacturing sector, while for China it determined a rapid investment shift towards sectors considered as being strategic, such as robotics, electronics or semiconductors. However, the extended impact of such trade disputes had an important trade diversion effect in RCEP countries, which started to replace

China's leading position in terms of automotive and electronics exports to the USA. In other words, even in difficult and tense times, flexible trade policies defining regional partnerships can provide fruitful results and gains from trade. The last paper from this sub-topic, called *ASEAN's Strategy within RCEP: Managing Protectionist Policies of the Second Trump Administration*, provides an updated perspective concerning the path that ASEAN countries must follow in order to reduce their dependency on the USA, where RCEP could be a lifeline instrument able to enhance regional economic stability, while also strengthening intra-regional unity among ASEAN members through proactive policies. The authors also provide some important recommendations: a former one for boosting resilience in front of external shocks, in the form of regional solidarity, and a latter one, for expanding future partnerships with new partners in the form of strategic multilateralism.

## **2. EU prospects in the Indo-Pacific region**

This second dimension of the special issue is reflected by two papers provided by authors coming from distinct parts of the world, India and Poland. The first paper, named *Assessing the global value chain trade structure of the EU, RCEP and TPP through trade network analysis*, provides the transition from the previous sub-topic focused on the Asia-Pacific region towards a more complex perspective that also encompasses the European Union. It presents a detailed overview of the trade structure for each trade bloc, highlighting the dominant actor for every regional partnership. With a supply chain dominated by Germany and other solid economies, such as Finland, France, Italy, and Spain, the EU is benefiting from a solid and deeply integrated trade network based on profound integration in terms of trade. A similar picture, but with a rather lower integration profile, is available for RCEP, where China is the major player. Conversely, the CPTPP is following two different paths. On the one hand, developed country members are very much involved in the internal trade flows and supply chains. On the other hand, developing countries are less inserted. From a general perspective, developing countries, mainly those from CPTPP, have rather limited prospects of boosting their contribution to the intra-regional trade flows and supply chains, due to the high-quality standards designed by their wealthier neighbours. The second paper, entitled *The EU's Evolving Security Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: A Neo-Liberal Institutional Perspective*, presents the urgent need for the EU to reorient its strategic approach on the world arena, given the negative impact of Ukrainian war in its eastern neighbourhood and its distancing from the USA perspective of ending the conflict, but also the challenging growing rivalry between the USA and China. Obviously, the previous perspective of normative power on the global arena is not suitable anymore, while a new perspective of security-oriented approach in the Indo-Pacific zone would balance its position. Therefore, the path toward the future of the EU is more likely to be secured through expanding collaboration with other regional partners, where a re-orientation

towards Indo-Pacific area where to fruitfully exploit its proactive position in terms of strengthening democracy, rule of law, human rights, and maritime security through specific actions like the Atalanta operation. The authors are presenting some recommendations concerning the strategy of the EU targeting the Indo-Pacific region, stating that it should be placed somewhere between ambition and caution, to avoid the hypostasis of being marginalised by USA-China competition.

### **3. EU as a normative actor for the EaP region at the crossroads of resilience building and current challenges**

This third dimension of the special issue is covered by three papers, which encapsulate the viewpoint of authors from Romania, as a member state of the EU, but also Ukraine and Georgia, as candidate countries which are currently dealing with major obstacles, such as ongoing war or unfavourable political regime. The first paper, called *Exploring the role of firm location and activity field in shaping Internationalisation Pathways: Insights from Romania and the Republic of Moldova*, shows that, in terms of internationalisation patterns for the companies activating in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, location has a moderate impact on the process of firms' internationalisation, due to region specific conditions, while the firm's activity matters more in shaping their future collaborations. Generally, companies located in developed regions, in the case of both countries, are using rather advanced methods to enter the international market, being more familiar with direct strategies of selling abroad, exploiting their digital skills, and disposing of better financing opportunities in order to implement these strategies. Conversely, firms located in less developed regions of Romania and Moldova are confronted with important limitations in terms of knowledge, access to financing, and existing infrastructure, so in these regions, the aid provided by the EU programmes and projects is vital to improve the situation. The activity profile matters more in the success recipe because every domain of activity has particular characteristics and needs which must be satisfied in the process of internationalisation. From this perspective, the authors highlight the need to boost cooperation at the specific sector level among companies from both countries, mainly because Romanian companies, in virtue of their higher experience with the EU market, could become donors of good practices to their counterparts from the Republic of Moldova. The second paper, entitled *Resilience of public administration in the Bucharest Nine countries and Ukraine*, brings to attention the incremental need to build and consolidate resilience when discussing the relationship between Ukraine and the EU. The case study provided in this respect is targeting the case of public administration from Ukraine and the representatives of the Bucharest Nine Countries (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), pointing out that local institutional quality is a driving factor of internal resilience. The effectiveness of government is highly connected with the level of

perceived corruption, the quality of the rule of law, the quality of the regulatory framework, and the manner in which elections are organised, etc. When dealing with the specific issue of public administration resilience, all these institutional components, doubled by functional-digital ones, can determine the capacity of the public administration to function properly in any condition. As expected, countries with an effective institutional basis benefit from a more resilient public administration, while those with less institutional support are more exposed to external shocks. As for the case of Ukraine, as a candidate country for the EU accession, the authors state the importance of strengthening institutional ability to adapt to new challenges as well as to insist on developing digitalisation, so as to gradually catch up to the level of the Bucharest Nine countries. The third paper from this sub-topic is called *War in Ukraine, Transformation of Perceptions in the EU's Geopolitics and Possibility of Sectoral Integration of Georgia into the European Energy and Transportation Policies*. The authors propose an investigation concerning the impact of the war in Ukraine on the prospects of Georgia's integration into the EU, mainly when the country is facing major challenges such as democracy constraints and a rather volatile geopolitical context. Even though from some perspectives, such as connectivity, energy transit or critical infrastructure, Georgia is aligned with the EU requirements, there is much to be done in other essential areas, democracy and institutional quality being the number one priority. Still guided by political unpredictability, internal tensions and opposition to embracing the EU values, Georgia's path towards the EU road seems unclear for the moment, despite the country's important strategic location for energy and transport security. The solution proposed by the authors to overcome the recent problematic political trajectory of the country, and also the negative impact of the Ukrainian war, is to focus more on sectoral integration. This seems to be a viable solution for remaining attached to the European path.

#### **4. Macroeconomic stability, energy security and the dynamics of the global oil market**

The fourth and last dimension of the current special issue of the EJES journal is fruitfully explored in the paper entitled *Oil Demand-Supply Equilibria in Some Selected Regions: Macroeconomic Implications for Market Stability and Energy Security*, which proposes an investigation of the influence of Gross National Income on the global oil demand-supply equilibrium and the impact of unemployment on the global oil market performance on the specific case of nine countries, USA and Canada, (representing North America); France and Russia (representing Europe); China and India (representing Asia); South Africa (representing Africa); Qatar (representing the Middle East), and Ecuador (representing Latin America). The findings of the analysis point out that oil production and consumption are boosted by higher incomes, while a problematic level of unemployment is negatively

affecting oil demand by constraining industrial activities and reducing household spending. In other words, macroeconomic stability reflected in job creation and income growth is a prerequisite for the equilibrium state in the global oil market, with subsequent positive effects on energy security. The authors advise that the existing dynamics in the worldwide oil market can contribute to the development of macroeconomic policies and more solid energy systems.

In conclusion, all eleven papers fruitfully and originally explore the theoretical and practical concepts and dimensions of the topic, *Regional Partnerships and strategic cooperation in times of crisis*, proposed for the EJES special issue, by providing interesting insights and new approaches to a complex subject that embraces dissimilar specificity from one world region to another. As researchers, it is our calling to never stop searching, discovering and exposing the truth related to the complex phenomena that guide our existence in a manner which enriches knowledge and paves the road towards curiosity and new research questions.

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