

A Neo-Gramscian Perspective On East Asian Economic Regionalism In The Aftermath Of Trump’s Protectionism

Faturrahman

Faculty of Social and Political Science, University of Indonesia

*Corresponding Author

Email: faturrahman@ui.ac.id

Abstract

The resurgence of U.S. protectionist policies under President Donald Trump has triggered major shifts in the global economic and geopolitical landscape. The imposition of unilateral tariffs on over 80 countries, including China, Japan, and South Korea, disrupted international trade flows and weakened trust in the liberal international order. This article examines the relationship between U.S. protectionism and the rise of East Asian regionalism through a neo-Gramscian lens, drawing on Robert Cox’s framework of historical structures and counter-hegemonic projects. The analysis shows that protectionist measures by the United States prompted East Asian powers to strengthen their economic interdependence, reorient ideological commitments toward regional multilateralism, and revive institutional mechanisms such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). Trilateral cooperation among China, Japan, and South Korea, particularly through renewed negotiations for a Trilateral Free Trade Area, reflects a strategic response to hegemonic instability and a desire to construct a more autonomous regional order. These developments indicate the emergence of a new East Asian bloc that challenges U.S.-centric global trade leadership and contributes to a broader structural transformation toward a multipolar world.

Keywords: *neo-Gramscian theory, U.S. protectionism, East Asian regionalism, trilateral cooperation, global hegemonic crisis, trade war*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the dynamics of international trade have shifted significantly due to the resurgence of protectionist policies, particularly those implemented by the United States under President Donald Trump. Under the slogan “America First,” the Trump administration imposed high tariffs on major trading partners, including China, Japan, and South Korea. These included a general 10% tariff on all imported goods and special tariffs of up to 245% on selected strategic products from China (The White House, 2025). This marked a sharp reversal from decades of U.S. commitment to free trade and multilateralism and signaled early signs of structural tensions within the liberal international order.

The impact of these protectionist measures has been felt acutely in East Asia. Japan faced increased pressure on its automotive industry, South Korea experienced disruptions in its semiconductor and electronics exports, and China, while seeking to diversify its trade partnerships, remained heavily reliant on the U.S. market (Kim & Cho, 2024; Reuters, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). This external pressure has compelled these countries to reassess their trade and foreign policy strategies, particularly with regard to overdependence on the U.S. as a hegemonic market. In response, there has been growing momentum to strengthen independent mechanisms of regional cooperation.

This momentum was illustrated in the trilateral summit between China, Japan, and South Korea held in Seoul on March 30, 2025 (Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat, 2025). The summit revived a previously stagnant regional dialogue and resulted in an agreement to accelerate negotiations toward establishing a Trilateral Free Trade Area (FTA). Rather than a technocratic adjustment to trade disruptions, this initiative can be interpreted as a form of structured resistance

to the uncertainty and volatility of the global trading system in the wake of U.S. protectionism (China Daily, 2025).

To fully grasp the significance of this regional response, conventional international relations theories such as realism, neorealism, liberalism, and neoliberal institutionalism prove inadequate. These perspectives often reduce state behavior to rational calculations within an anarchic system or focus narrowly on institutional cooperation and absolute gains, without sufficiently accounting for deeper structural and ideological transformations (Waltz, 1979; Morgenthau, 1948; Keohane, 1984; Doyle, 1986). In contrast, the neo-Gramscian approach, as developed by Robert Cox (1981, 1983), offers a historically grounded and critical lens. It links material capabilities, dominant ideologies, and institutional arrangements as components of a “historical structure” that both shapes and is shaped by hegemonic power relations.

From this perspective, U.S. protectionism is not merely a shift in trade policy but a manifestation of a hegemonic crisis, characterized by declining legitimacy, erosion of multilateral institutions such as the WTO, and ideological fragmentation (Gill, 1993). Within this moment of crisis, East Asia’s pursuit of deeper regional integration, including the Trilateral FTA initiative, can be seen as the articulation of a counter-hegemonic project aimed at reclaiming regional autonomy and stability.

Several recent studies have explored these developments from both empirical and theoretical angles. Jackson and Shepotylo (2023) demonstrate how enhanced China–Japan–Korea trade integration can offset the economic fallout of U.S.–China tensions, while Zhang (2025) highlights Japan’s role in leading the TPP-11 following U.S. withdrawal, interpreting it as a move to preserve regional order. Beeson (2020) and Hlovor and Mawuko-Yevugah (2024) examine the Trump administration’s protectionism as a symptom of a deeper crisis in U.S. global leadership, but often stop short of analyzing how regional actors respond structurally and ideologically. On the theoretical front, scholars such as Bieler and Morton (2004), Gill (1995), and Revell (2020) underscore the value of a neo-Gramscian approach in capturing the relational dynamics between hegemony, resistance, and institutional transformation. However, the application of this framework to East Asian regionalism, particularly in response to recent protectionist shocks, remains underexplored.

This article seeks to bridge these gaps by analyzing how U.S. protectionist policies under Donald Trump have catalyzed a shift in regional political economy in East Asia through the lens of neo-Gramscian theory. East Asian regionalism, in this context, is not simply a pragmatic response to trade disruption but a historically contingent political project involving the reconfiguration of material power, ideational alignments, and institutional frameworks. By locating this regional initiative within the broader trajectory of global hegemonic crisis, the study contributes to ongoing debates in international political economy on how regional blocs function as contested arenas for shaping power, legitimacy, and resistance.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section reviews the literature on U.S. protectionism, East Asian regionalism, and neo-Gramscian theoretical perspectives. The third section elaborates the conceptual framework, focusing on Cox’s notions of historical structures and counter-hegemony. The fourth section explains the qualitative-critical methodology and data sources. The fifth section presents the analysis in thematic subsections, examining the material, ideational, and institutional shifts that underpin East Asia’s regionalist response. The final section concludes by summarizing the findings and reflecting on the implications of East Asian regionalism as a counter-hegemonic formation in a transforming world order.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study adopts a critical qualitative approach rooted in the neo-Gramscian framework developed by Robert W. Cox. As noted by Denzin and Lincoln (2018), qualitative research not only describes phenomena but also interprets the underlying meanings and power structures embedded in social and political life. Within this tradition, a critical approach aims to challenge dominant ideologies and uncover how social realities are historically constructed, particularly within systems of unequal power.

The neo-Gramscian perspective, as articulated by Cox (1981, 1983), originates from critical theory and Gramscian thought. It emphasizes that global political economy is shaped by dynamic interactions among material capabilities, dominant ideologies, and institutional arrangements. Unlike conventional positivist approaches that assume the neutrality of state interests or institutional forms, the neo-Gramscian framework views these as historically contingent and shaped by prevailing configurations of social forces. Thus, this perspective enables a more relational and historically grounded understanding of how hegemony is constructed, maintained, or challenged.

Methodologically, this study relies on secondary data collected through document analysis. Sources include official economic and trade policy documents from the governments of the United States, China, Japan, and South Korea, as well as joint statements from the 2025 Seoul Trilateral Summit. Reports and datasets from international organizations such as the WTO, IMF, and OECD are also utilized. In addition, peer-reviewed journal articles, strategic policy briefs from leading think tanks (e.g., CSIS and Brookings), and coverage from reputable international media are examined to trace the development of U.S. protectionism and the subsequent regional responses in East Asia.

The data is analyzed using historical-structural discourse analysis, a method consistent with the neo-Gramscian tradition as advocated by Gill (1993) and Bieler and Morton (2004). Thematic interpretation focuses on key components of Cox's framework—material capabilities, dominant ideas, and institutional arrangements—within the context of global hegemonic crisis. Particular attention is given to how U.S. protectionist policies under the Trump administration have disrupted the liberal international order, and how East Asian states have responded by articulating new forms of regional cooperation.

To enhance the validity and credibility of the analysis, triangulation of sources is applied by comparing data from various state and non-state actors across multiple levels. Throughout the process, theoretical consistency with the neo-Gramscian approach is maintained to ensure that interpretations are not only empirically supported but also conceptually grounded. Ultimately, this research aims to explain East Asian regionalism not merely as a pragmatic adjustment to trade disruptions, but as a politically significant and ideologically informed response to the broader structural transformation in the global order.

Conceptual framework: neo-gramscian analysis of u.s. Protectionism and east asian regionalism

Although the neo-Gramscian framework is often associated with the analysis of transnational social forces and civil society movements, it does not exclude the role of the state. In Cox's formulation, the state is understood not as a unitary actor, but as a social relation that reflects and reproduces the prevailing configuration of social forces within a historical structure (Cox, 1983). Accordingly, states can serve as agents of either hegemonic stabilization or counter-hegemonic transformation. In the context of East Asia, China, Japan, and South Korea function not merely as reactive entities responding to external economic pressures, but as strategic actors capable of reconfiguring institutional and ideational orders. Their trilateral initiatives, including the revival of FTA negotiations, represent a form of state-led counter-hegemonic project that seeks to reconstruct regional autonomy in response to the disarticulation of U.S. leadership. This

confirms that neo-Gramscian theory remains analytically robust for interpreting state behavior—especially when states act as institutional nodes within broader configurations of global power.

The state, in neo-Gramscian terms, is not excluded from analysis but seen as a central institutional condensation of social forces. As Bieler and Morton (2004) argue, the state plays an active role in reproducing or challenging global hegemony. Similarly, Mattheis (2017) emphasizes that regionalism itself is a site of hegemonic contestation in which states can act as both agents and arenas. This is particularly relevant in the case of East Asia, where state-led projects like RCEP and the Trilateral FTA negotiations demonstrate purposeful agency by states in restructuring regional economic orders. Rather than dismissing state behavior, the neo-Gramscian approach redefines it as embedded within and shaped by the dynamics of global capitalism and ideological struggle.

1. Material Capabilities

Material capabilities refer to economic and technological resources that sustain power. In East Asia, the combined economic weight of China, Japan, and Korea—including their roles in global manufacturing and technology—provides a strong basis for autonomous regional integration. Trump's tariffs on automobiles and electronics disrupted this network, pushing East Asian states to reconfigure their supply chains and deepen intra-regional trade (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

2. Ideology

Ideology in Gramscian theory is the dominant worldview that legitimizes power structures. The U.S.-led order was historically underpinned by liberal internationalism. Trump's "America First" rhetoric marked a departure from this, embracing protectionism and rejecting multilateral norms. This ideological rupture created space for East Asia to revive and promote a regional consensus around open trade and multilateralism (Gill, 1995).

3. Institutions

Institutions serve as mechanisms to reproduce hegemonic order. Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and criticism of the WTO signaled the erosion of institutional multilateralism. In response, East Asian states reinforced regional institutions like the RCEP and resumed negotiations for a Trilateral Free Trade Area, reflecting an institutional reorientation towards regional autonomy (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

4. Historical Bloc

A historical bloc is the synthesis of material, ideological, and institutional elements that stabilize a hegemonic order. The post-WWII liberal bloc, led by the U.S., is fragmenting due to internal contradictions. In contrast, an emergent East Asian bloc appears to be forming, grounded in mutual economic interests and a shared ideological commitment to regional trade integration .

5. Disarticulation

Disarticulation refers to the weakening coherence of a hegemonic bloc when its foundational elements diverge. Trump's protectionist measures caused institutional exits, ideological confusion, and material trade disruptions, triggering the disintegration of the liberal bloc. This fragmentation provided an opportunity for regional actors to explore new alignments (Cox, 1981).

6. Counter-Hegemony

Counter-hegemony involves the construction of alternative coalitions and ideologies that challenge the dominant order. The recent trilateral summit among China, Japan, and South Korea and their joint economic initiatives illustrate an emerging counter-hegemonic project. By strengthening their own institutions and interdependence, these states challenge U.S. leadership and present a normative alternative rooted in Asian multilateralism (Gill, 1995).

In sum, the neo-Gramscian framework explains how U.S. protectionist policies disrupted the liberal international order and facilitated the rise of a counter-hegemonic regional initiative

in East Asia. The concepts of material capabilities, ideology, institutions, historical bloc, disarticulation, and counter-hegemony are essential in interpreting the shifting dynamics of power and integration in the region.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Impact of U.S. Protectionism on East Asian Regionalism Material Capabilities

The combined economic weight of China, Japan, and South Korea now rivals that of the United States, giving them substantial capacity to drive regional integration. China, Japan and South Korea are immediate neighbors and among the world's largest economies (ranked roughly 2nd, 4th, and 14th by GDP) (Global Asia, 2024). Together with ASEAN partners, they participate in mega-regional pacts covering roughly 30% of global GDP. For example, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) links Northeast and Southeast Asia and is projected to add about \$500 billion in trade by 2030. Brookings analysts observe that with the United States and India withdrawn, RCEP and the CPTPP “forcefully stimulate intra-East Asian integration around China and Japan,” explicitly in response to U.S. policy shifts (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

Indeed, trade has begun to re-orient on reliability rather than maximum efficiency: post-2018 data show a growing “policy-driven divergence,” with supply chains realigning toward trusted regional partners as U.S. tariffs rise (CSIS, 2025). These material gains give Northeast Asia a strong bargaining position: for instance, Trump's 25% auto tariffs threaten Japan and South Korea, which are the second- and third-largest exporters of vehicles to the U.S. market (Reuters, 2025). Confronted with this, the three governments have leveraged their sizeable domestic markets and production capacity to bolster regional trade frameworks.

Ideology

Under Trump, Washington's ideology shifted sharply from postwar liberalism to economic nationalism, unsettling prior norms and spurring Asia-Pacific states to seek alternatives. As one analyst notes, the world's trade landscape has been “shifting from liberalism to rising protectionism” (Global Asia, 2024). President Trump's “America First” narrative painted trade deficits as inimical and cast longstanding allies as unfair partners. Many observers note that the White House's aggressive tariffs often lacked clear economic justification and instead appeared politically motivated – for example, the high “reciprocal” duties on Asian goods seemed aimed at deterring close ties with China (South China Morning Post, 2025).

This has undermined trust: the Council on Foreign Relations warns that Asian governments increasingly view Washington as “not a trustworthy partner” after erratic trade actions (Kurlantzick, 2025). The protectionist rhetoric – blaming multilateral institutions like the WTO for China's gains – has also turned U.S. policy against the multilateral trade order. Cumulatively, the ideological break with neoliberal trade orthodoxy has prompted Japan, South Korea, and China to reconsider their economic orientation. In contrast, Beijing has promoted narratives of “open regionalism” and infrastructural connectivity (e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative), and even arranged high-level visits to reinforce ties. For instance, immediately after Trump's tariff announcements, President Xi Jinping toured Southeast Asia, securing new trade and investment deals (Kurlantzick, 2025). In effect, U.S. ideological retrenchment has prompted regional leaders to redouble commitments to free trade norms – but on their own, Asia-centered terms.

Institutions

Institutionally, Trump's protectionism accelerated the formation and deepening of Asian trade frameworks independent of Washington. Two landmark pacts – RCEP and the CPTPP – reached fruition during this period. RCEP, signed in 2020 by 15 Asia-Pacific nations (including

China, Japan, and South Korea), embodies the region's largest FTA, covering some 30% of world output. Notably, India and the United States were original members slated to join RCEP/CPTPP but withdrew under Modi and Trump, leaving the agreements to “forcefully stimulate intra-East Asian integration”. In response to Trump's pullout from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the remaining TPP countries (led by Japan) forged the CPTPP in 2018 to preserve high-standard trade rules in the Pacific. Together, RCEP and CPTPP are estimated to offset much of the global trade loss from the U.S.-China tariff war (with gains concentrated in East and Southeast Asia (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

Within this institutional space, China–Japan–South Korea (CJK) cooperation has revived. For example, in March 2025 the three trade ministers held their first economic dialogue in five years, agreeing to pursue a trilateral FTA and to “strengthen the implementation of RCEP” as a framework for expanded cooperation (Reuters, 2025). (This trilateral forum had been dormant since 2019.) High-level summitry has also returned: in May 2024, the leaders of China, Japan, and South Korea held their first summit in four years, pledging joint action on trade, technology, public health and other areas (Reuter, 2024). The accompanying communique explicitly called for “high-level” talks on a Korea-Japan-China FTA and closer economic coordination through RCEP (Reuters, 2024, 2025). Meanwhile, multilateral venues like APEC have seen Asian envoys urgently discussing a Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific to counter global protectionism (Reuters, 2025). These institutional moves – from new treaties to revived summits – illustrate how U.S. policy shocks have catalyzed a more autonomous institutional architecture in East Asia.

Historical Bloc

In neo-Gramscian terms, a new regional historical bloc is taking shape as Northeast Asian states weave economic and political alliances distinct from Washington's. Traditionally U.S. allies, Japan and South Korea have been threading closer ties with China out of necessity. Their recent trilateral engagements signal a partial shift from traditional alignments. For instance, the May 2024 summit marked a “turning point” in normalizing trilateral cooperation after years of bilateral friction (Reuters, 2024). The leaders agreed to an annual summit schedule (reviving the disrupted 2008 agreement) and issued statements on shared interests. Seoul has also moved to align more tightly with Beijing: even as it modernizes its own FTA network (e.g. updating its China FTA), South Korea announced in early 2025 a high-level working group with Japan and China to flesh out a regional FTA negotiating framework (Reuters, 2025).

These developments suggest the emergence of an East Asian bloc in the economic realm. East Asia already boasts finance and investment bodies (like the Chiang Mai Initiative multilateral swap, the AIIB, and new Asian development frameworks) that bind the region. The recent trade initiatives are building a parallel bloc: Japan and South Korea have explicitly sought to “nurture and expand” RCEP and related agreements, even viewing a CJK FTA as instrumental to reviving the broader multilateral system (Global Asia, 2025). In sum, a quasi-regional coalition is coalescing around market-liberal economic objectives and mutual assurance, partly as a hedge against U.S. unpredictability. The “East Asian Identity” first forged in the 1990s financial crisis – a self-help bloc of Asia–Pacific economies – thus appears to be reanimating in trade form under current pressures (Global Asia, 2025).

Disarticulation

Trump's tariffs and trade coercion have disarticulated traditional alliances and undercut the existing U.S.-led trade order, opening space for regional realignment. By treating close allies (Japan, Korea, EU) as harshly as rivals, the U.S. undermined the postwar normative consensus that binding allies through trade liberalization was rational. This has driven a wedge between rhetoric and reality: for example, even as the administration claimed tariffs would spur an anti-China coalition, many Asian partners saw no lasting logic and felt betrayed (Kurlantzick, 2025). Commentators note that long-term institutions are being weakened: politically-driven tariffs “weaken long-term economic resilience, degrade institutions, and undermine U.S. global

leadership” (CSIS, 2025). The World Trade Organization itself has felt the strain; the U.S. has criticized its dispute mechanisms and even paused funding, further fracturing the rules-based order.

Concretely, U.S. actions have dislodged the incentives to follow Washington’s trade agenda. Japan and South Korea have expanded their own regional pacts “often without U.S. involvement” since 2018 (CSIS, 2025). The aborted U.S. participation in TPP/RCEP and the cutting of trade ties has effectively removed the “glue” that once linked Asia to the U.S. economy. Supply chain reports show that after 2018, firms increasingly relocate production not for cost but for tariff and political certainty (CSIS, 2025). In sum, the contradictory U.S. posture – one that champions free trade yet imposes sweeping tariffs – has disarticulated the earlier liberal hegemony, accelerating the search for a new organizing logic in East Asia.

Counter-Hegemony

Against this backdrop, China, Japan, and South Korea are engaging in counter-hegemonic moves to forge an alternative regional leadership on trade. Beijing has actively built institutions (AIIB, RCEP, Belt and Road) that challenge the U.S.-dominated order, and its counterparts have shown willingness to participate. For example, Chinese and Korean officials recently re-emphasized moving the stalled trilateral FTA forward “once they conclude the negotiation on RCEP,” suggesting a strategic pivot to Asian-led rule-making. Analysts argue that by jointly upgrading RCEP toward CPTPP standards, the trio could realize an Asia Pacific Free Trade Area, thereby reclaiming initiative in global commerce (Petri & Plummer, 2020).

These initiatives represent a nascent counter-hegemonic bloc. The commitment of Japan and South Korea to embed themselves in high-level regional frameworks – even with China – signals that East Asian powers are hedging against unilateral U.S. leverage. As one observer summarizes, Japan and Korea have “ample reason to nurture and expand” RCEP and a China-Japan-Korea trade pact with the goal of restoring multilateral trade norms from within East Asia (Global Asia 2025). In parallel, China’s recent outreach (such as Xi’s Southeast Asia tour and proposed free-trade talks with the EU) highlights a concerted effort to deepen economic ties across the region, effectively drawing neighbors into its sphere (Yeoh, 2025). Together, these moves reflect an emergent regional hegemony in the making: a Sinocentric institutional order in East Asia that can serve as a counterweight to a retreating U.S. free-trade paradigm.

Discussion

East Asian Regionalism and Neo-Gramscian Theory in the Context of U.S. Protectionism

A growing literature examines how the Trump administration’s protectionist trade policies have reshaped East Asian integration. Many studies note that U.S. tariff actions and withdrawal from multilateral agreements (e.g. the TPP) have prompted East Asian states to seek alternative economic arrangements. For example, Jackson and Shepotylo (2023) use a gravity-model analysis to show that deeper China–Japan–Korea trade integration can compensate for U.S.–China trade tensions, concluding that “East Asian integration appears to be a more appealing prospect in light of tensions with the US” (Jackson & Shepotylo, 2023). Similarly, Zhang (2025) observes that even as Trump exited the TPP, Japan took the lead in forming the TPP-11 and thus “filled the vacuum in Asia” left by U.S. withdrawal (Zhang, 2025). These findings illustrate a trend where Asian economies pursue regional trade deals (e.g. RCEP, CPTPP) in response to U.S. protectionism.

Realist and Liberal Perspectives in Existing Studies

Conventional IR scholarship tends to interpret these shifts through realist or neoliberal-institutionalist lenses. Realist accounts emphasize great-power competition: the Trump tariffs can be seen as an effort to counter China’s rise, and U.S. allies (Japan, South Korea) may align with the U.S. under pressure. Indeed, Zhong (2025) reports that Japan and South Korea have begun “distancing themselves from China and approaching the United States” in trade, reflecting U.S. strategic coercion (Zhong, 2025).

Such analyses fit within balance-of-power logic (allies uniting behind the U.S.); however, Trump's policies also conflict with classical realism. For instance, Trump's abrupt withdrawal from the TPP defied expectations that he would use trade agreements to preserve U.S. influence, leading commentators to label his approach "transactional" and narrowly self-interested (Beeson, 2020). In other words, realism captures the strategic competition but often fails to predict why the U.S. abandoned institutions that would traditionally serve its hegemonic interests (e.g. multilateral trade pacts).

Neoliberal institutionalists, by contrast, focus on the role of trade agreements and interdependence. From this view, one would expect robust regional institutions (like RCEP or APEC) to mitigate trade frictions. In practice, however, Trump's actions revealed limits of this optimism: the U.S. sidelined itself from established frameworks (TPP, WTO dispute rulings) and imposed unilateral tariffs on allies. Beeson (2020) notes that Trump's election "may draw a line under Obama's 'Pivot' to Asia and initiatives like the Trans-Pacific Partnership," replacing them with a more narrowly defined American policy of "national interest" (Beeson, 2020).

Neoliberal theory struggles to explain this reversal of integration; the rise of regional deals like RCEP appears less as a cooperative choice and more as a response to U.S. retrenchment. Indeed, world-systems studies argue that the Trump–China trade war reflects deeper contradictions of the existing global order. Hlovor and Mawuko-Yevugah (2024) show from a world-systems perspective that both China's rise and U.S. protectionism are "products of the neoliberal world economic and political order," implying these are systemic phenomena that outlive any one administration (Hlovor & Mawuko-Yevugah, 2024).

Empirical Findings on Regional Responses

Empirical work on East Asia often corroborates that U.S. protectionism has accelerated regional economic linkages. Jackson and Shepotylo (2023) find large welfare gains for Asia from a trilateral China–Japan–Korea FTA, especially given U.S. tariffs – suggesting a compensatory "bigger pie" logic (Jackson & Shepotylo, 2023). Likewise, analysts note that as the Trump administration rallied allies against China, East Asian states moved to diversify supply chains and trade. For example, following U.S. export controls, Japan and South Korea showed increased interest in sourcing raw materials from China and vice versa, and even agreed to accelerate trilateral FTA talks for "regional and global trade" protection (Reuters, 2025) – evidence that regionalism can act as a hedge.

In contrast, some scholars (especially from a Chinese perspective) stress fragmentation: Zhong (2025) argues there is an "offensive strategic decoupling" led by the U.S., with allies succumbing to coercion and actively disentangling from China (Zhong, 2025). This view highlights that U.S. pressure has also squeezed space for China–Japan–Korea cooperation, consistent with a realist geopolitics narrative. Together, these studies show both trends – new trade agreements and some de-coupling – underscoring the complexity of East Asia's economic realignment under U.S. pressure.

Limitations of Realist and Neoliberal Approaches

Despite insights, mainstream IR frameworks have blind spots in this context. Realism tends to model state interests in zero-sum terms and often treats domestic constituencies as secondary; it does not readily account for how private capital, labor interests, or ideology might shape trade policy. For instance, Trump's protectionism was driven in part by internal American politics and economic ideology, factors not easily captured by power-balancing alone. Neoliberal institutionalism likewise underestimates how a hegemonic state's domestic shift can upend institutions: it assumes treaties endure under mutual gains, yet Trump's revolt against free trade shows those gains are not immutable.

Empirical evidence of rapid institutional innovation (e.g. RCEP's signing in 2020) undercuts assumptions of static order. Furthermore, by focusing on either state interests or formal institutions, these theories often omit the broader political–economic transformations at play. For

example, Hlovor and Mawuko-Yevugah (2024) emphasize that the trade war is not merely an inter-state dispute but a systemic feature of late capitalism (Hlovor & Mawuko-Yevugah, 2024); such complexity is beyond standard IR tools. Likewise, Beeson (2020) highlights that Trump’s “transactional” turn has altered the entire regional status quo, suggesting a crisis of the liberal order that realist and liberal models have difficulty theorizing (Beeson, 2020).

Neo-Gramscian Perspectives and Gaps in the Literature

By contrast, a neo-Gramscian approach offers novel angles. Gramsci’s theory sees hegemony as resting not only on military or economic preponderance, but on consent shaped by ideas and institutions. Under this view, the U.S. protectionist turn could be seen as a sign of a hegemonic crisis: the “material, ideational and institutional power” of American leadership is being contested (Revell, 2020). East Asian states, in turn, might negotiate new regimes (a kind of “passive revolution”) to preserve stability under shifting conditions.

Hesketh (2017) argues that the concept of passive revolution “offers a corrective to the frequently aspatial view” of world development in mainstream IR, and “provides a more politicized understanding of the present” by connecting global tensions with domestic social forces (Hesketh, 2017). Applying this insight to Asia could illuminate how elites in Japan, Korea, and China might reshape trade regimes in response to U.S. hegemony’s decline – an analysis that realist and liberal theories largely miss.

Yet the literature has scarcely pursued this path. Critical IR scholarship on Asia has noted broad phenomena (e.g. Arrighi’s long-cycle theory, passive revolution in Asian development), but few studies explicitly analyze East Asian regionalism under Trump through a Gramscian lens. For example, works on “Asian regionalism” typically emphasize institutional evolution or identity and seldom address how class coalitions or counter-hegemonic leadership are involved. In short, existing research largely treats East Asia’s regional integration as technical or geopolitical, without theorizing the underlying politico-economic bloc shifts. This gap means that the role of ideology, state–society relations, and capitalist restructuring in driving Asia’s response to U.S. protectionism remains underexplored.

In summary, the conventional literature is rich on what has happened – tariff increases, FTA negotiations, shifting trade flows – and offers interpretations in terms of power politics or institutional continuity. But it is thin on explaining why these transformations have occurred in terms of changing hegemony and social forces. By introducing a neo-Gramscian framework, one can address this deficiency: examining how a crisis of U.S. leadership (a “hegemonic crisis”) provokes alternative regional orders. Such an approach would illuminate the formation of a new East Asian “historical bloc” (in Gramsci’s sense) and thus fills a clear gap in the literature on regionalism under protectionism.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how the rise of protectionist trade policies under the Trump administration significantly altered the trajectory of regional cooperation in East Asia. By applying a neo-Gramscian theoretical framework, the analysis demonstrates that regional initiatives undertaken by China, Japan, and South Korea are not merely reactive economic adjustments. Instead, they reflect a broader structural response to the erosion of the liberal international order historically dominated by U.S. leadership.

The findings reveal that U.S. protectionism has disrupted the material, ideological, and institutional foundations of its global hegemonic position, thereby opening space for East Asian states to advance regional trade cooperation through mechanisms such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). These developments point to an emerging

shift toward a more autonomous regional configuration anchored in shared economic interests, strategic recalibration, and institutional innovation.

The neo-Gramscian approach has proven effective in capturing how economic structures, ideological contestations, and institutional arrangements evolve collectively in response to hegemonic crisis. Unlike realist or liberal perspectives that isolate either security concerns or functional cooperation, this critical perspective offers a more integrated view of power, resistance, and transformation. The emergence of a nascent East Asian bloc can therefore be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic project that seeks to redefine the principles of international economic governance in the context of declining U.S. legitimacy.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, this research also opens avenues for further inquiry. Future studies may explore how domestic class dynamics, labor interests, or business coalitions within East Asian countries influence the trajectory of regionalism. In addition, the scope of regional cooperation could be examined beyond the economic domain, such as in digital infrastructure, environmental governance, or public health. Comparative perspectives involving other regions may also enrich understanding of how protectionist pressures reshape regional alignments differently across geopolitical contexts. Finally, deeper analysis into the domestic political economy of the United States may shed light on the internal ideological shifts that continue to shape the international order.

By highlighting the relationship between global hegemonic disruption and the restructuring of regional power, this study offers a critical and timely contribution to the field of international political economy. It emphasizes the importance of situating regionalism not only as a response to market shifts, but also as a strategic and ideational reordering of global power relations in the post-liberal era.

REFERENCES

- Beeson, M. (2014). *Regionalism and Globalization in East Asia: Politics, Security and Economic Development*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Beeson, M. (2020). Donald Trump and Post-Pivot Asia: The Implications of a “Transactional” Approach to Foreign Policy. *Asian Studies Review*, 44(1), 10–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1680604>
- Bieler, A., & Morton, A. D. (2004). A critical theory route to hegemony, world order and historical change: neo-Gramscian perspectives in International Relations. *Capital & Class*, 28(1), 85–113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/030981680408200106>
- China Daily. (2025, April 11). *Experts urge deeper Beijing-Tokyo-Seoul cooperation*. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202504/11/WS67f87462a3104d9fd381eb91.html>
- Cox, R. W. (1981). Social Forces, States and World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 10(2), 126–155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298810100020501>
- Cox, R. W. (1983). Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations : An Essay in Method. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 12(2), 162–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298830120020701>
- CSIS. (2025). *Understanding the Temporary De-Escalation of the U.S.-China Trade War*. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-temporary-de-escalation-us-china-trade-war#:~:text=China%20weaponize%20trade%20ties%2C%20third,on%20perceived%20reliability%2C%20not%20efficiency>
- Doyle, M. W. (1986). Liberalism and World Politics. *American Political Science Review*, 80(4), 1151–1169. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1960861>

- Gill, S. (1993). *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Gill, S. (1995). Globalisation, Market Civilisation, and Disciplinary Neoliberalism. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 24(3), 399–423. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298950240030801>
- Hesketh, C. (2017). Passive revolution: a universal concept with geographical seats. *Review of International Studies*, 43(3), 389–408. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210517000079>
- Hlovor, I., & Mawuko-Yevugah, Lord. (2024). Current World-System and Conflicts. *Journal of World-Systems Research*, 30(2), 583–609. <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2024.1192>
- Jackson, K., & Shepotylo, O. (2023). Transforming East Asia: Regional Integration in a Trade War Era. *Open Economies Review*, 34(3), 657–672. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11079-022-09698-y>
- Keohane, R. O. (1984). *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*. Princeton University Press.
- Kim, H., & Cho, J. (2024). The Impact of US Export Controls on Korean Semiconductor Exports. *KDI Journal of Economic Policy*, 46(3), 1–23. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.23895/kdijep.2024.46.3.1>
- Kurlantzick, J. (2025, April 30). *Why East Asia Is a Target of Trump's Tariff War, in Six Charts*. <https://www.cfr.org/article/why-east-asia-target-trumps-tariff-war-six-charts#:~:text=The%20White%20House%20claims%20the,signed%20several%20economic%20cooperation%20agreements>
- Morgenthau, H. J. (1948). *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Petri, P. A., & Plummer, M. G. (2020). *RCEP: A new trade agreement that will shape global economics and politics*. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/rcep-a-new-trade-agreement-that-will-shape-global-economics-and-politics/>
- Reuters. (2025, April 30). *Japan's factory output slides as Trump tariffs jolt manufacturers*. Japan's factory output slides as Trump tariffs jolt manufacturers
- South China Morning Post. (2025). *Can the US be counted on for Asia security? Crisis report casts doubt, warns of arms race*. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3311506/can-us-be-counted-asia-security-crisis-report-casts-doubt-warns-arms-race>
- The White House. (2025, April 2). *Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase our Competitive Edge, Protect our Sovereignty, and Strengthen our National and Economic Security*. Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Declares National Emergency to Increase our Competitive Edge, Protect our Sovereignty, and Strengthen our National and Economic Security
- Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat. (2025, March 30). *13th Trilateral Economic and Trade Ministers' Meeting*. https://tcs-asia.org/en/board/news_view.php?idx=5875
- Waltz, K. N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics*. Addison-Wesley.
- Yang, T., Lau, W.-Y., & Bahri, E. N. A. (2025). The Impact of US-China Trade War on China's Exports: Evidence From Difference-in-Differences Model. *SAGE Open*, 15(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251328482>
- Yeoh, T. (2025, April 15). *Trump's On-off Tariffs Could Disengage Southeast Asia Further from the U.S*. <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/trumps-tariffs-could-disengage-southeast-asia-further-us#:~:text=However%2C%20Trump%E2%80%99s%20punitive%20tariff%20strategy,reciprocal%20tariffs%20list>
- Zhang, M. (2025). *Institution Building and Power Politics China-Japan-South Korea Trilateral Cooperation*.

Zhong, F. (2025). Offensive decoupling and realignment of trade in Northeast Asia. *China International Strategy Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-025-00183-y>