

Strategic trust among ASEAN member states and its implications for trilateral cooperation among China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea

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Abstract. Drawing upon the typology of strategic trust proposed by Zhao and Luo, this study suggests that, when confronted with economic and security dilemmas, cooperation among ASEAN member states is not confined to identity-based strategic trust. Rather, cooperation can also emerge in the absence of shared identity, provided that common interests exist. Based on ASEAN's experience in regional cooperation and the practical circumstances of China, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK), this paper argues that the key to fostering stable and institutionalized trilateral cooperation lies in establishing a foundation of calculative strategic trust and gradually advancing toward identity-based strategic trust. Meanwhile, a China–Japan–ROK 3+1 dispute settlement mechanism should be established to manage differences in a rational and effective manner.

Keywords: ASEAN, strategic trust, trilateral cooperation, security dilemma

1. Introduction

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in Bangkok, Thailand, in 1967 by five founding members—Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand—to address the region's security needs under the Cold War bipolar order while promoting the developmental aspirations of Southeast Asian countries. By 2025, ASEAN had evolved into a major economic bloc comprising eleven member states, with a combined population of approximately 684 million, accounting for 8.4% of the world's total population, and a combined Gross Domestic Product (GDP) approaching US\$4 trillion [1]. It has become a powerful engine driving regional integration in Southeast Asia.

Beyond its role in Southeast Asian integration, ASEAN has also made significant contributions to promoting peace and development in East Asia. One notable example is the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) framework, which has become the principal institutional channel for advancing the East Asian Community-building process. Centered on the leaders' summit and supported by ministerial meetings and senior officials' meetings, the APT framework has developed a comprehensive system encompassing more than 20 areas of cooperation and over 60 dialogue and cooperation mechanisms. Through pragmatic collaboration in fields

such as trade, finance, and food security, it has evolved into the central institutional linkage connecting cooperation between Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia.

Compared with the relatively stable and institutionalized framework of cooperation represented by ASEAN, institutionalized cooperation in Northeast Asia—particularly among China, Japan, and the ROK—remains comparatively underdeveloped. The Trilateral Summit Meeting serves as the highest-level consultative mechanism among the three countries. Beneath this summit framework, more than 20 ministerial meetings and over 70 dialogue mechanisms have been established, through which more than 100 cooperative exchange programs have been implemented. In 2011, the three countries jointly established the Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat (TCS), which provides administrative and technical support for multilevel consultation mechanisms, coordinates cooperative projects, conducts policy research and public outreach, and facilitates the efficient and institutionalized operation of trilateral cooperation [2].

Although numerous cooperation mechanisms have been established among China, Japan, and the ROK, these institutional arrangements have frequently been interrupted or suspended by both internal and external factors. Since the first independent Trilateral Summit Meeting was held in 2008, the summit mechanism has experienced two major periods of suspension.

The first occurred between 2012 and 2015, when territorial disputes and historical issues gave rise to serious tensions among the three countries. In August 2012, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak visited Dokdo (known as Takeshima in Japan), resulting in a sharp deterioration of Japan–ROK relations. In September of the same year, the administration of Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda proceeded with the "nationalization" of the Diaoyu Islands, causing Sino–Japanese relations to reach a historic low. Furthermore, following Shinzo Abe's return to office at the end of 2012, his visit to the Yasukuni Shrine, together with his government's positions on the "comfort women" issue and Japanese history textbooks, generated strong dissatisfaction in both China and the ROK. Consequently, bilateral relations between China and Japan, as well as between Japan and the ROK, simultaneously fell into deadlock, leading to the suspension of the Trilateral Summit Meeting.

The second period of suspension lasted from 2019 to 2024. The immediate cause was the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which drastically reduced cross-border exchanges among the three countries and made face-to-face summit meetings difficult to convene. In addition, geopolitical factors also indirectly contributed to the suspension of the trilateral summit mechanism. As strategic competition between China and the United States intensified under the Biden administration, Japan and the ROK, as key participants in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, found themselves increasingly compelled to align strategically because of their asymmetric dependence on both China and the United States [3]. As a result, trilateral cooperation became increasingly constrained by external geopolitical dynamics. In the absence of political consensus at the leadership level, many trilateral cooperative initiatives failed to achieve substantive progress. For instance, negotiations on the China–Japan–ROK Free Trade Agreement (FTA) have proceeded at a remarkably slow pace, while many other ministerial meetings and dialogue mechanisms have become largely symbolic rather than substantively effective.

Considerable scholarly attention has been devoted to explaining why China, Japan, and the ROK have failed to capitalize on their geographical proximity to establish a highly integrated regional cooperation mechanism comparable to that of ASEAN. Existing studies generally approach this question from two perspectives: internal and external.

From the internal perspective, first, China's rapid economic rise has gradually eroded the technological advantages previously enjoyed by Japan and the ROK in key industries, such as automobiles and auto parts, as well as petrochemicals, thereby weakening expectations for mutually beneficial cooperation. Second,

geopolitical issues in Northeast Asia—most notably the North Korean nuclear issue and the Taiwan Strait issue—remain unresolved, and differences in the three countries' security perceptions continue to constrain the deepening of regional security cooperation. Third, the three countries have yet to achieve full reconciliation over historical legacies. Unresolved issues—including the Nanjing Massacre, the abandonment of chemical and biological weapons, the "comfort women" issue, and the forced labor issue—have widened divisions in cultural identity among the three countries and weakened the impetus for trilateral cooperation [4].

From the external perspective, under the increasingly confrontational China policy pursued first by the Trump administration and subsequently by the Biden administration, Japan and the ROK, as the relatively weaker actors within an asymmetrical trilateral interdependence structure involving two major powers and one smaller power, have found it increasingly difficult to maintain strategic balance between China and the United States and have instead been compelled to align more closely with one side. Moreover, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, intensifying major-power competition, and growing geopolitical conflicts, both Japan and the ROK have elevated economic security to a strategic priority by placing greater emphasis on supply chain resilience, thereby exhibiting a stronger tendency to align with the United States, whose strategic partnership is perceived as more readily substitutable in this context [3].

Despite these valuable contributions, existing studies have focused primarily on identifying the causes of the difficulties facing China–Japan–ROK cooperation. Their analytical frameworks are largely confined to internal factors and external dynamics—particularly the triangular relationship among China, Japan, the ROK, and the United States—while paying comparatively little attention to the institutional experiences of more successful models of regional integration, such as ASEAN or the European Union. This paper therefore adopts the perspective of strategic trust to examine the cooperative mechanisms among ASEAN member states, with the aim of drawing practical lessons and policy implications for the future development of China–Japan–ROK cooperation.

2. Strategic trust among ASEAN member states amid economic and security dilemmas

Strategic trust refers to the confidence between states that, with respect to major strategic interests, the other country will not adopt a hostile strategic posture. Strategic trust is the outcome of shared strategic interests rather than a precondition for cooperation. In other words, as long as common interests exist, cooperation can still take place even in the absence of strategic trust. Drawing on the dimensions of shared interests and identity among states or other actors, Zhao and Luo classify strategic trust into four levels, ranging from low to high: strategic distrust, calculative strategic trust, knowledge-based strategic trust, and identity-based strategic trust [5], as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of strategic trust proposed by Zhao and Luo Shengrong

		Affective Dimension	
		High	Low
Cognitive Dimension	High	Identity-based Strategic Trust	Calculative Strategic Trust
	Low	Knowledge-based Strategic Trust	Strategic Distrust

Zhao and Luo argue that the level of strategic trust is not static but evolves progressively over time as interactions deepen and relationships develop. Moreover, cooperation does not necessarily require the existence of identity-based strategic trust. In some cases, bilateral relations may develop only to the stage of

calculative strategic trust without progressing further, as the benefits generated by this level of strategic trust may already be sufficient to satisfy the interests of both countries. Under such circumstances, cooperation can still be sustained despite the absence of deeper forms of strategic trust [5].

By 2025, ASEAN had expanded to comprise eleven member states, with varying degrees and forms of strategic trust characterizing relations among them. The strategic trust embedded within ASEAN is therefore both multilayered and differentiated. Drawing on the analytical framework proposed by Zhao and Luo, this section examines several representative cases to analyze, first, how strategic trust has enabled ASEAN member states to respond collectively to external threats as a unified actor, and second, how strategic trust has contributed to mitigating internal disputes and preserving regional cohesion when disagreements have arisen among member states.

2.1. ASEAN's strategic trust during the asian financial crisis: identity-based strategic trust

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 began when Thailand faced a severe balance-of-payments deficit and rapidly depleted its already limited foreign exchange reserves in an attempt to defend the Thai baht. On 2 July 1997, the Thai government abandoned its fixed exchange rate regime, causing the baht to depreciate by 17 percent against the U.S. dollar in a single day and triggering the Asian Financial Crisis.

The collapse of Thailand's financial system subsequently generated severe spillover effects across ASEAN member states. On the one hand, after more than three decades of economic integration, ASEAN economies had become highly interdependent. The collapse of the Thai economy therefore produced a contagion effect, inflicting substantial economic losses on other member states. By January 1998, the Indonesian rupiah, Thai baht, Malaysian ringgit, and Philippine peso had depreciated by 65.3 percent, 44.1 percent, 32.5 percent, and 26.6 percent, respectively, compared with their values in June 1997 [6]. On the other hand, the economic crisis triggered widespread political instability, including social unrest and a sharp increase in extreme poverty. ASEAN governments consequently faced a common political imperative: maintaining regime stability and preventing domestic social disorder. As economic recovery and political security became shared priorities, cooperation among ASEAN member states evolved from routine functional cooperation to a form of cooperation characterized by shared survival interests.

From the perspective of shared interests, ASEAN member states rapidly coordinated their policy responses within the ASEAN framework in order to mitigate the economic and political consequences of the crisis. They jointly promoted the APT Finance and Central Bank Deputies Meeting, which laid the institutional foundation for the Chiang Mai Initiative—a regional currency swap arrangement launched in 2000. This process demonstrated the synergistic benefits of collective action, whereby coordinated responses generated outcomes superior to those achievable through unilateral efforts. Furthermore, economically stronger member states, including Singapore and Malaysia, extended foreign exchange support to the countries most severely affected by the crisis. Such willingness to incur short-term costs for the collective good reflects the defining characteristic of identity-based strategic trust, namely, the readiness to make voluntary concessions in pursuit of shared long-term interests.

From the perspective of identity, or the affective dimension of strategic trust, the crisis fostered a shared identity among ASEAN member states as common victims of the same external shock. This shared experience transcended pre-existing developmental disparities and competitive rivalries, generating a strong sense of emotional solidarity. As Zhang argues, a shared sense of common destiny constitutes a central determinant of identity formation. The collective experience of the crisis transformed ASEAN member states' self-perception from that of independent national economies into members of a community with a shared future.

Consequently, the level of mutual identification among ASEAN member states reached an unprecedented high [7].

In summary, the Asian Financial Crisis gave rise to a typical case of identity-based strategic trust, as ASEAN member states simultaneously shared vital common interests and a strong sense of collective identity forged through the crisis. This form of strategic trust extended beyond narrow cost–benefit calculations and was characterized by proactive coordination, voluntary concession-making, and emotional solidarity. It not only enabled ASEAN member states to respond collectively to the crisis but also strengthened the institutional foundations for subsequent regional cooperation.

2.2. ASEAN's strategic trust during the Russia–Ukraine conflict: calculative strategic trust

In 1976, the leaders of Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Singapore, and Indonesia signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) at the First ASEAN Summit. The Treaty established the fundamental principles governing relations among the contracting parties, including mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity, and national identity of all states, as well as the principle of non-interference in one another's internal affairs. It further calls upon member states to settle disputes through peaceful consultation, strengthen economic cooperation, coordinate policies on regional and international issues, and remain open to accession by other Southeast Asian countries [8]. As the foundational legal instrument underpinning cooperation among ASEAN member states, the TAC reflects ASEAN's long-standing commitment to neutrality, non-alignment, and non-interference in sovereignty-related disputes, while emphasizing dialogue and consultation as the primary means of conflict resolution.

However, the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2022 exposed significant policy divergences among ASEAN member states. On 24 February 2022, Russia launched a large-scale military operation in Ukraine, an event widely regarded as marking the beginning of the conflict. Two days later, on 26 February, the ASEAN Foreign Ministers issued a Joint Statement expressing "deep concern" over the "evolving situation and armed hostilities in Ukraine." The statement called upon all parties to exercise maximum restraint and to pursue dialogue through all available channels, including diplomatic means, in order to prevent further escalation and reduce tensions.

This position was broadly consistent with ASEAN's long-standing principles derived from international law, the Charter of the United Nations, and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, while also reaffirming ASEAN's commitment to maintaining its "centrality" in regional affairs. Accordingly, the Joint Statement has generally been interpreted as representing ASEAN's collective position on the conflict.

Nevertheless, only two days after the issuance of the Joint Statement, Singapore announced that it would impose "appropriate sanctions and restrictions" on Russia in coordination with "other like-minded countries." This decision was announced unilaterally by Singapore's Minister for Foreign Affairs, Vivian Balakrishnan, rather than through consultation with other ASEAN member states. Subsequently, during the United Nations General Assembly vote on 2 March 2022 concerning the draft resolution deploring Russia's military actions in Ukraine, ASEAN member states adopted divergent positions regarding whether to support the resolution, as shown in Table 2. Although the resolution was not legally binding upon UN member states, it served as an expression of the prevailing views of the international community regarding the conflict.

Table 2. Voting positions of ASEAN member states on United Nations General Assembly Resolution ES-11/1 [9]

Position	ASEAN Member States
Voted in favor and subsequently imposed sanctions	Singapore
Voted in favor but did not impose sanctions	Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, Brunei
Abstained	Viet Nam, Lao PDR
Voted against	None

According to the typology proposed by Zhao and Luo, ASEAN member states' responses to the Russia–Ukraine conflict can be understood as a manifestation of calculative strategic trust [5]. Owing to their respective political, economic, and security ties with Russia, Ukraine, and the United States, ASEAN member states were unable to fully prioritize ASEAN's collective position as a unified regional actor. Instead, their policy choices were shaped primarily by national interests within the constraints of existing international norms and institutional commitments. This pattern exemplifies calculative strategic trust, namely, cooperation based on the calculation of interests and adherence to shared rules, while lacking the emotional solidarity and deep identity that characterize identity-based strategic trust.

Singapore provides a representative example. As a small maritime state with a population of just over five million and limited strategic depth, Singapore has long been highly sensitive to security vulnerabilities associated with major-power politics. The Singaporean government argued that Russia's military actions in Ukraine constituted "an unacceptable precedent," as allowing major powers to violate the sovereignty of smaller states through the use of force would fundamentally undermine the international norms upon which Singapore's own security depends. Its condemnation of Russia was therefore aimed not only at responding to the immediate crisis but also at defending the principle of the sovereign equality of small states and preserving a rules-based international order. Furthermore, Singapore's heavy dependence on imported food and energy makes it particularly vulnerable to disruptions caused by armed conflict. A major war could severely threaten the country's economic prosperity and national resilience, which have been built over decades. These considerations help explain why Singapore adopted a comparatively firm position in support of Ukraine.

By contrast, although Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, the Philippines, and Brunei voted in favor of the UN General Assembly resolution, none imposed substantive sanctions on Russia. Voting in favor should therefore not be interpreted as aligning unconditionally with the United States or adopting an explicitly anti-Russian position. Rather, these governments sought to avoid creating the impression that they had fundamentally altered their diplomatic orientation toward Russia. Such behavior is consistent with the logic of balance-of-power diplomacy, whereby states seek to avoid excessive alignment with any single major power in order to preserve strategic flexibility [10]. Similarly, while Viet Nam and the Lao PDR appeared to adhere more closely to the neutral principles of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, including respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference, their abstentions also reflected pragmatic considerations. Both countries maintain close military or economic ties with Russia, yet at the same time were reluctant to position themselves in direct opposition to the United States. Abstention thus represented a compromise between these competing strategic considerations.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that, although ASEAN member states shared certain common interests, differences in their security perceptions and strategic circumstances prevented the emergence of

strong emotional solidarity or a shared identity. Their divergent responses to the Russia–Ukraine conflict therefore illustrate a form of calculative strategic trust, in which cooperation continues to rest primarily on national interest calculations and institutional rules rather than on deep mutual identification or affective bonds.

2.3. ASEAN's strategic trust during the Thailand–Cambodia conflict: calculative strategic trust

Although ASEAN is often regarded as a successful model of regional cooperation, disputes among its member states are by no means absent. Indeed, geographical proximity and close historical and cultural ties have also given rise to numerous territorial and historical disputes. Examples include the sovereignty disputes between Malaysia and Singapore over Pedra Branca and Middle Rocks, as well as the long-standing sovereignty dispute between the Philippines and Malaysia over Sabah. Owing to their shared experience of colonialism, many historical disputes within ASEAN stem from colonial legacies or cross-border migration. For instance, the Shan people in Myanmar's Shan State and the Miao (Hmong) communities in northern Lao PDR constitute cross-border ethnic groups whose prolonged conflicts with government forces have periodically spilled over into the border regions of Thailand and Lao PDR, generating refugee flows and regional security challenges.

As the most important regional organization in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has played a significant role in facilitating dialogue and mediating disputes among its member states. Its conflict-management mechanisms therefore merit closer examination. This section focuses on the Thailand–Cambodia conflict, one of the most consequential intra-ASEAN disputes, to explore how strategic trust has functioned in mitigating conflict among ASEAN member states.

Among the territorial disputes within ASEAN, the conflict between Thailand and Cambodia over the Preah Vihear Temple and its surrounding territory has been the most influential. The dispute has persisted for decades, periodically erupting into armed confrontations before being contained through ASEAN's internal coordination mechanisms. The 2025 Thailand–Cambodia conflict represented the most intense military confrontation in Southeast Asia in recent years, with armed clashes occurring in both July and December. On 24 July, tensions escalated rapidly after a Thai soldier was injured by a landmine while patrolling the border adjacent to Cambodia. What initially began as mutual diplomatic accusations quickly developed into armed hostilities across six sections of the border, with both sides deploying fighter aircraft, tanks, armored vehicles, artillery, and rocket systems. As concerns mounted that the conflict might evolve into a prolonged war similar to the Russia–Ukraine conflict, ASEAN member states and other international actors intensified diplomatic mediation. As a result, Thailand and Cambodia simultaneously implemented a ceasefire on 28 July, bringing the five-day armed conflict to an end [11].

However, the ceasefire proved temporary. Between 7 and 18 December, tensions between the two countries resurfaced. Although mediation efforts were undertaken by Malaysia, serving as ASEAN Chair, as well as by the United States and the United Nations, these initiatives failed to produce a substantive ceasefire agreement. Ultimately, through China's active mediation, Thailand and Cambodia signed a joint ceasefire declaration in Yunnan Province, China, on 28–29 December [12].

From the perspective of shared interests, both Thailand and Cambodia, together with the other ASEAN member states, have long recognized that maintaining regional stability outweighs short-term political disagreements. Years of sustained interaction and cooperation have fostered mutual familiarity between Thailand and Cambodia, thereby creating a limited degree of mutual identification. ASEAN member states also recognize that a prolonged Thailand–Cambodia conflict would undermine Southeast Asia's long-standing record of regional peace, disrupt regional economic frameworks such as the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and ultimately damage the collective

interests of all member states. Accordingly, immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, Malaysia, as ASEAN Chair, promptly initiated mediation and coordinated the issuance of a joint statement by the foreign ministers of the ten ASEAN member states. Moreover, Thailand and Cambodia are highly interdependent in such areas as trade, tourism, and cross-border energy cooperation, making a protracted conflict economically costly for both sides and ultimately detrimental to their respective national interests.

From the perspective of identity, however, mutual identification between Thailand and Cambodia remains relatively weak. The dispute over the Preah Vihear Temple and its surrounding territory has persisted for decades. Although the International Court of Justice ruled in 1962 that sovereignty over the temple belonged to Cambodia, Thailand has consistently disputed the ownership of the adjacent territory. Each side continues to perceive the other through competing threat narratives: Cambodia views Thailand as challenging international law, whereas Thailand regards Cambodia's cross-border deployment of landmines and construction of military facilities as threats to its sovereignty. Consequently, although both countries possess a strong sense of attachment to ASEAN as a regional institution, this institutional identification has not translated into a similarly strong bilateral identity between Thailand and Cambodia.

In summary, although Thailand and Cambodia once again reached a ceasefire agreement, the underlying territorial dispute surrounding the Preah Vihear Temple remains unresolved. Mutual identification between the two countries continues to be limited, and the ceasefire should therefore be understood primarily as a pragmatic compromise based on the calculation that the shared economic costs of continued conflict outweighed the potential political gains. This case thus illustrates another example of calculative strategic trust, in which cooperation is sustained primarily by convergent interests rather than by deep mutual identity or emotional solidarity.

3. The future direction of China–Japan–ROK cooperation

As the principal regional organization driving cooperation and development in Southeast Asia, ASEAN has, over nearly six decades since its establishment, remained a successful model of regional cooperation in both Asia and the wider international community. It has continued to reinforce its ASEAN Centrality, particularly through its efforts to cultivate strategic trust among member states and to establish effective mechanisms for conflict mediation and dispute management. These accumulated experiences offer valuable lessons for advancing future cooperation among China, Japan, and the ROK.

3.1. Building a foundation of calculative strategic trust among China, Japan, and the ROK: advancing gradually toward identity-based strategic trust

As Zhao and Luo argued, the existence of shared interests is sufficient to make cooperation possible. However, the realization of long-term and stable cooperation ultimately requires the development of strategic trust, a proposition that is well illustrated by the experience of ASEAN. The three cases discussed above demonstrate that, regardless of whether member states are confronted with internal disputes or external challenges, or whether the issues concern economic development or security dilemmas, the foundation of cooperation lies in the recognition of shared interests and the observance of jointly established rules and institutions. It is precisely the convergence of these interests that provides states with the fundamental incentive to cooperate.

Identity, in turn, refers to the self-conception that actors construct through interaction with significant others and is gradually formed through sustained contact and emotional attachment [13]. The degree of identity may vary across cooperative relationships, and stronger emotional bonds generally contribute to more stable and durable cooperation. Accordingly, the foremost task for China, Japan, and the ROK is to establish a

solid foundation of calculative strategic trust, upon which identity-based strategic trust can be gradually cultivated over time.

China, Japan, and the ROK possess substantial and complementary economic interests that provide a natural basis for cooperation. As the three principal economies of East Asia, they have developed a highly complementary pattern of industrial specialization: China serves as the region's primary manufacturing base and consumer market, Japan provides advanced technologies and key industrial components, while the ROK plays a leading role in high-end manufacturing and technological innovation. Against the backdrop of increasing instability in global supply chains, closer regional cooperation would not only enhance the resilience of their own economies but also contribute to greater stability in the global economy.

Furthermore, under the framework of the RCEP, total merchandise trade among China, Japan, and the ROK reached US\$8.93 trillion in 2024, accounting for 18.8 percent of global merchandise trade. Combined exports amounted to US\$4.97 trillion, representing 21 percent of the global total, while combined imports reached US\$3.96 trillion, accounting for 16.5 percent of world imports [14]. These figures underscore the three countries' dual role as major hubs for both global exports and imports and highlight their central position within international supply chains.

The three countries also share significant interests in the field of non-traditional security, particularly in public health and environmental governance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, geographical proximity facilitated extensive mutual assistance among the three countries. In the early stages of the outbreak in China, local governments, enterprises, think tanks, and citizens in Japan and the ROK provided various forms of humanitarian assistance, demonstrating a strong spirit of regional solidarity. Likewise, when the pandemic later intensified in Japan and the ROK, the Chinese government, local authorities, and private enterprises supplied large quantities of anti-pandemic materials, including face masks, protective clothing, and PCR testing kits [15].

Cooperation has also deepened in the area of carbon neutrality. Through platforms such as carbon pricing workshops, environmental business roundtables, and carbon neutrality forums, the three countries have promoted policy dialogue, exchanged technologies related to hydrogen energy and the circular economy, implemented demonstration projects for industrial decarbonization, and strengthened academic collaboration.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate that China, Japan, and the ROK possess clear common interests across a wide range of fields—including the economy, public health, and environmental governance—which constitute the objective foundation for cooperation based on the recognition of shared interests. At this stage, the core of strategic trust is fundamentally calculative in nature: adherence to commonly accepted rules generates tangible benefits, such as expanded trade opportunities and technological cooperation, whereas non-compliance entails substantial costs, including supply chain disruptions and the loss of market access. This pattern of cooperation—grounded in interest-based calculations under institutional constraints—constitutes the defining feature of calculative strategic trust and represents the most realistic point of departure for the future development of China–Japan–ROK cooperation.

With regard to identity, China, Japan, and the ROK belong to the broader East Asian cultural sphere shaped by the historical use of Chinese characters and the enduring influence of Confucian traditions. These shared cultural foundations have contributed to considerable similarities in social customs, modes of thinking, and normative values among the peoples of the three countries. Although certain political groups in Japan and the ROK have, in recent years, promoted narratives that seek to distance their countries from China and have advanced discourses emphasizing de-Sinicization, such political narratives have not fundamentally erased the shared cultural heritage and common civilizational values that have evolved over centuries. This suggests that a certain degree of mutual identity continues to exist among the peoples of China, Japan, and the ROK.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that ideological divergence and shifting geopolitical circumstances since the modern era have gradually widened the psychological and political distance between China and its two Northeast Asian neighbors. This divergence is particularly evident in the security domain, where Japan and the ROK currently face institutional and strategic constraints that make it difficult to align closely with China on major regional security issues.

Overall, China, Japan, and the ROK possess substantial common interests across multiple areas of cooperation, whereas the development of a high level of mutual identity is unlikely to be achieved in the short term. Accordingly, the immediate priority for institutionalized trilateral cooperation should be the establishment of a robust foundation of calculative strategic trust. This requires the three countries to clearly identify their shared interests in such areas as economic development, cultural exchange, public health, and environmental governance, while jointly developing rules and institutional arrangements that are acceptable to all parties. At the same time, cooperation in the security domain should proceed from a realistic appreciation of the security concerns faced by Japan and the ROK. Rather than seeking strategic alignment, the three countries should work toward maintaining an appropriate degree of strategic autonomy and fostering a non-confrontational trilateral security relationship. As the institutional foundations of calculative strategic trust are progressively consolidated and people-to-people exchanges continue to deepen, trilateral relations will become increasingly conducive to the gradual development of identity-based strategic trust, thereby providing a more durable basis for long-term and stable regional cooperation.

3.2. Establishing a China–Japan–ROK plus one dispute settlement mechanism

The preceding discussion demonstrates that ASEAN has developed an effective, flexible, multi-level, and non-coercive dispute settlement mechanism, grounded primarily in the Protocol to the ASEAN Charter on Dispute Settlement Mechanisms and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC). This mechanism emphasizes the peaceful resolution of disputes among member states through a sequential process of consultation, mediation, and arbitration, while consistently adhering to the principles of non-coercion and non-interference in the internal affairs of member states. These institutional arrangements offer valuable lessons that may be adapted to the context of China–Japan–ROK cooperation.

Nevertheless, the so-called "ASEAN Way" has also been the subject of scholarly debate. Critics argue that ASEAN lacks effective instruments for exerting pressure once a crisis has erupted, limiting its ability to intervene promptly in ongoing conflicts and to contain their initial escalation. Consequently, ASEAN has often been criticized for responding slowly and with limited effectiveness. Furthermore, the ASEAN Way relies heavily on consensus-based decision-making, quiet diplomacy, and informal personal relations among political leaders rather than on robust mediation and adjudication mechanisms. While this approach provides considerable flexibility, it has also been criticized for lacking institutional strength and enforcement capacity [16].

Taking these critiques into account, while also considering the specific characteristics of China–Japan–ROK relations, this article proposes an adaptation of the ASEAN model through the establishment of a China–Japan–ROK Plus One (3+1) Dispute Settlement Mechanism.

The proposed mechanism would retain the fundamental principles of the ASEAN Way and would apply to disputes arising in non-military fields. It would preserve the three-stage procedure of consultation–mediation–arbitration, but with one important institutional innovation. During the mediation stage, the ASEAN Chair would be invited to serve as the third-party mediator. In this framework, the "3" refers to China, Japan, and the ROK, while the "1" represents the ASEAN Chair.

This institutional arrangement offers three principal advantages. First, ASEAN member states, as relatively smaller powers, are generally better positioned to maintain neutrality during mediation and are less likely to be directly constrained by major-power strategic competition. This enables them to facilitate dialogue from the perspective of broader regional interests. Second, because the ASEAN Chair rotates annually rather than remaining with a single country, the mechanism avoids concentrating mediation authority in any fixed state, thereby further enhancing the perceived neutrality and impartiality of the mediator. Third, ASEAN's geographical proximity to Northeast Asia makes it well suited to conducting shuttle diplomacy and facilitating timely communication among the three parties.

The mediating role played by China in facilitating dialogue during the Thailand–Cambodia conflict illustrates the potential value of an impartial regional actor in managing interstate disputes. Likewise, assigning the ASEAN Chair the role of mediator in disputes among China, Japan, and the ROK could provide an effective mechanism for reducing tensions and promoting dialogue. Only by ensuring that disagreements among the three countries can be managed through institutionalized and peaceful means can China–Japan–ROK cooperation achieve long-term stability and sustainable development.

4. Conclusion

Drawing upon the typology of strategic trust proposed by Zhao and Luo, this study examines ASEAN's experience in the Asian Financial Crisis, the Russia–Ukraine conflict, and the Thailand–Cambodia conflict. It argues that successful regional cooperation rests on three interrelated pillars: shared interests as the foundation, identity as the source of cohesion, and institutional mechanisms as the guarantee of sustained cooperation. Based on this analytical framework, the study also offers practical implications for strengthening institutionalized cooperation among China, Japan, and the ROK.

The analysis demonstrates that strategic trust among ASEAN member states is neither homogeneous nor static but instead exhibits multiple levels and forms. In times of crisis, the combination of vital shared interests and a strong sense of collective identity can give rise to identity-based strategic trust. Under normal circumstances, however, cooperation is more commonly sustained through calculative strategic trust, which is grounded in rational interest calculations and adherence to commonly accepted rules. This flexible pattern of trust-building, together with ASEAN's non-coercive dispute settlement mechanism based on consultation, mediation, and arbitration, has been central to maintaining regional stability and has contributed significantly to ASEAN's success as a model of regional integration.

By comparison, although China, Japan, and the ROK possess highly complementary industrial structures, substantial trade interdependence under the framework of the RCEP, and shared interests in areas such as non-traditional security and environmental governance, institutionalized trilateral cooperation has repeatedly been interrupted by historical grievances, divergent security perceptions, and external geopolitical dynamics. ASEAN's experience demonstrates, however, that cooperation does not necessarily require a high degree of mutual identity. Even in the absence of identity-based trust, calculative strategic trust can provide a sufficiently robust foundation for sustained cooperation when states recognize convergent interests and operate within mutually accepted institutional rules.

Building on both ASEAN's experience and the realities of China–Japan–ROK relations, this study proposes a two-stage pathway for advancing future trilateral cooperation. The first stage should focus on consolidating calculative strategic trust by anchoring cooperation in shared interests. This requires clarifying mutually accepted rules of cooperation, strengthening industrial and supply chain coordination, and expanding collaboration in non-traditional security areas, thereby fostering a form of rational cooperation characterized

by shared benefits and shared responsibilities. The second stage should emphasize institutional innovation through the establishment of a China–Japan–ROK Plus One (3+1) Dispute Settlement Mechanism, under which the ASEAN Chair would serve as a neutral third-party mediator. Such an arrangement would capitalize on ASEAN's experience in conflict mediation, as well as its perceived neutrality and geographical proximity, thereby improving the capacity of the three countries to manage bilateral disputes without undermining broader regional cooperation. Over the longer term, people-to-people exchanges and cultural interactions should be further strengthened in order to revitalize the shared cultural heritage of East Asia and gradually facilitate the evolution of strategic trust from an interest-driven to an identity-based form.

As the three principal economies of East Asia and major pillars of the global trading system, the future of institutionalized cooperation among China, Japan, and the ROK carries implications that extend well beyond the three countries themselves. It will shape not only the stability and prosperity of East Asia but also the resilience of global supply chains. ASEAN's experience demonstrates that regional cooperation does not require complete identity convergence as a precondition. Rather, by identifying shared interests, cultivating appropriate forms of strategic trust, and establishing effective institutional mechanisms for dispute management, states can progressively transform fragmented cooperation into stable and institutionalized regional collaboration. In this respect, ASEAN's experience offers valuable practical insights for overcoming the current obstacles to China–Japan–ROK cooperation and for fostering a more stable and sustainable regional order in Northeast Asia.

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