



The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership through the eyes of AI

About this Whitepaper

The media coverage of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a monumental deal among 15 Asia Pacific countries, has been interesting.

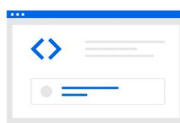
As media analysts, we looked into more than 800 articles and videos from the prominent news outlets across the 15 countries that signed the deal within the time period of 8 Nov to 20 Nov 2020.

We applied the rigour of AI with qualitative context to uncover insights about this deal. We employed state of the art AI models specialising in Natural Language Processing (NLP) and Video processing. Our analysts then looked at the outputs of the AI and contextualised it with a strategic viewpoint.



Text and Video Data

Relevant online news from 800 articles and YouTube videos from the prominent news outlets across the 15 countries that signed the RCEP deal. Time period: 8 Nov to 20 Nov 2020




Natural language processing and Video AI

A trained NLP model to identify entities. Video AI identifies various objects shown in the video.



Recommendation Engineering

Analysts look at the outputs of the NLP and Video AI and come up with contextual recommendations



1. Natural language processing uncovers the power dynamics in the region.

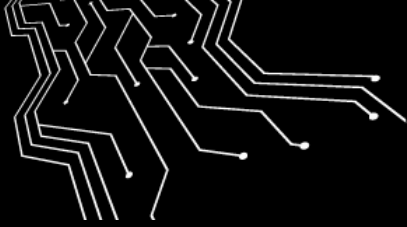
Isentia's Insights team used the NLP model to extract key entities such as the top mentioned countries, spokespersons & organisations mentioned in various articles. There were two different lenses through which our analysts examined the entities.

We first looked at the countries that were mentioned in most articles. This revealed the usual suspects, the 15 countries that signed the deal were mentioned in most of the articles.

“What was interesting to see was other countries that were not part of the partnership that were mentioned namely the US, India, and Taiwan,”



Arisa Otsuka,
Insights Analyst



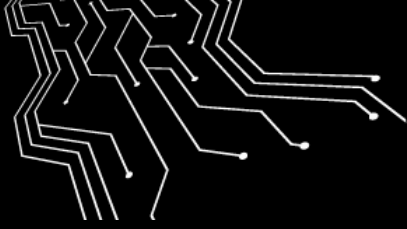
“NLP models work well for key information retrieval, specifically identifying proper nouns (entities). The entities are classified into several categories by the AI/NLP model,”



Joseff Ymanuel Tan,
Jr. Data Scientist at Isentia

On Sunday, **leaders**₁ from **China**₂, **Japan**₅, **South Korea**₄, **Australia**₉, **New Zealand**₈ and the **10**₁₃ **members**₃ of the **Association of Southeast Asian Nations**₇ (**Asean**₇) witnessed the **signing**₁₂ of the **pact**₆ by their **trade ministers**₁₁ by **video conference**₁₀.

<div>1. leaders</div> <div>Saliency: 0.43</div>	<div>PERSON</div>	<div>2. China</div> <div>Wikipedia Article</div> <div>Saliency: 0.14</div>	<div>LOCATION</div>
<div>3. members</div> <div>Saliency: 0.06</div>	<div>PERSON</div>	<div>4. South Korea</div> <div>Wikipedia Article</div> <div>Saliency: 0.06</div>	<div>LOCATION</div>
<div>5. Japan</div> <div>Wikipedia Article</div> <div>Saliency: 0.06</div>	<div>LOCATION</div>	<div>6. pact</div> <div>Saliency: 0.04</div>	<div>OTHER</div>
<div>7. Association of Sout...</div> <div>Wikipedia Article</div> <div>Saliency: 0.04</div>	<div>ORGANIZATION</div>	<div>8. New Zealand</div> <div>Wikipedia Article</div> <div>Saliency: 0.04</div>	<div>LOCATION</div>



As the world's leading economies, the US and China appearing in most on the region's RCEP news articles was expected. The **US** leads with **843** articles, followed by **China**, mentioned in **749** articles.

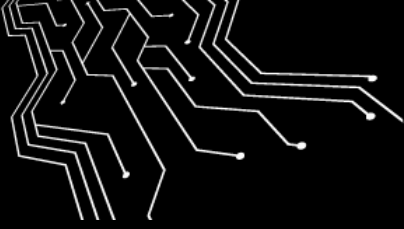


Frequency Word Cloud: based on number of articles each country was mentioned

“At first glance of the country names, the AI is merely confirming the hypothesis that everyone would have regarding this deal, the 15 countries who signed the agreement are covered equally. But when we look at the results of the AI through a different lens, the message changes”



Arun Elangovan,
Regional Analytics Manager



The different lens being prominence. Prominence is how many times the countries were mentioned across the articles. It reveals something subliminal.



Prominence Word Cloud: based on number of times each country were mentioned across articles

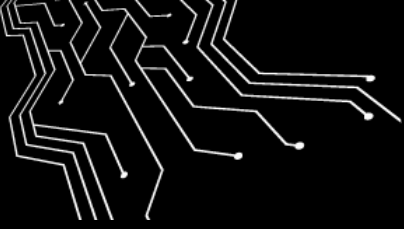
The articles more prominently featured **China** (**4324** times) than any other country. **US** (**3171** times), **Japan** (**1483**) & **Australia** (**1246**) were some of the other countries also prominently mentioned. This could seed the idea that some countries are more influential than others, portraying the power dynamics in the region.

1.1 China's Influence

Furthermore, upon reading the RCEP articles, a common theme surfaced on how US economic influence is waning and China about to take the lead:

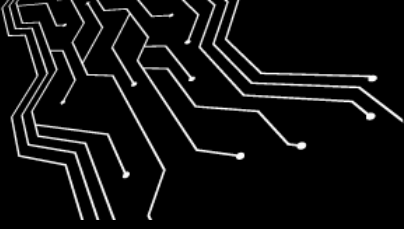
- The region's mainstream media covered the US Chamber raising concerns about the US being left behind after the 15 Asia-Pacific economies signed the RCEP agreement, which reinforced China's dominant presence in the region [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#)[\[5\]](#)[\[6\]](#).
- Also mentioned separately is how economic interests push Asia-Pacific nations to strengthen relations with China and chase away US push to stand up against them. [\[1\]](#)





- He Weiwen, a former Chinese trade official and now a senior researcher at the Centre for China and Globalisation pointed out that China's reduced reliance to the US market will give them the bargaining power when dealing with the US. [\[1\]](#) Formal signing of the RCEP agreement is seen as a “victory” for China over the United States, as it certainly gains an advantage over the latter in their ongoing trade war. [\[2\]](#)
- Observers also speculated that the China-backed deal would give China an advantage to advance its political and economic interests/shape the region's trade rules amid a retreating US global presence [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#).

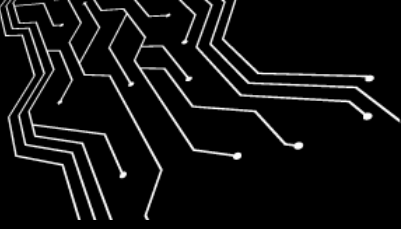




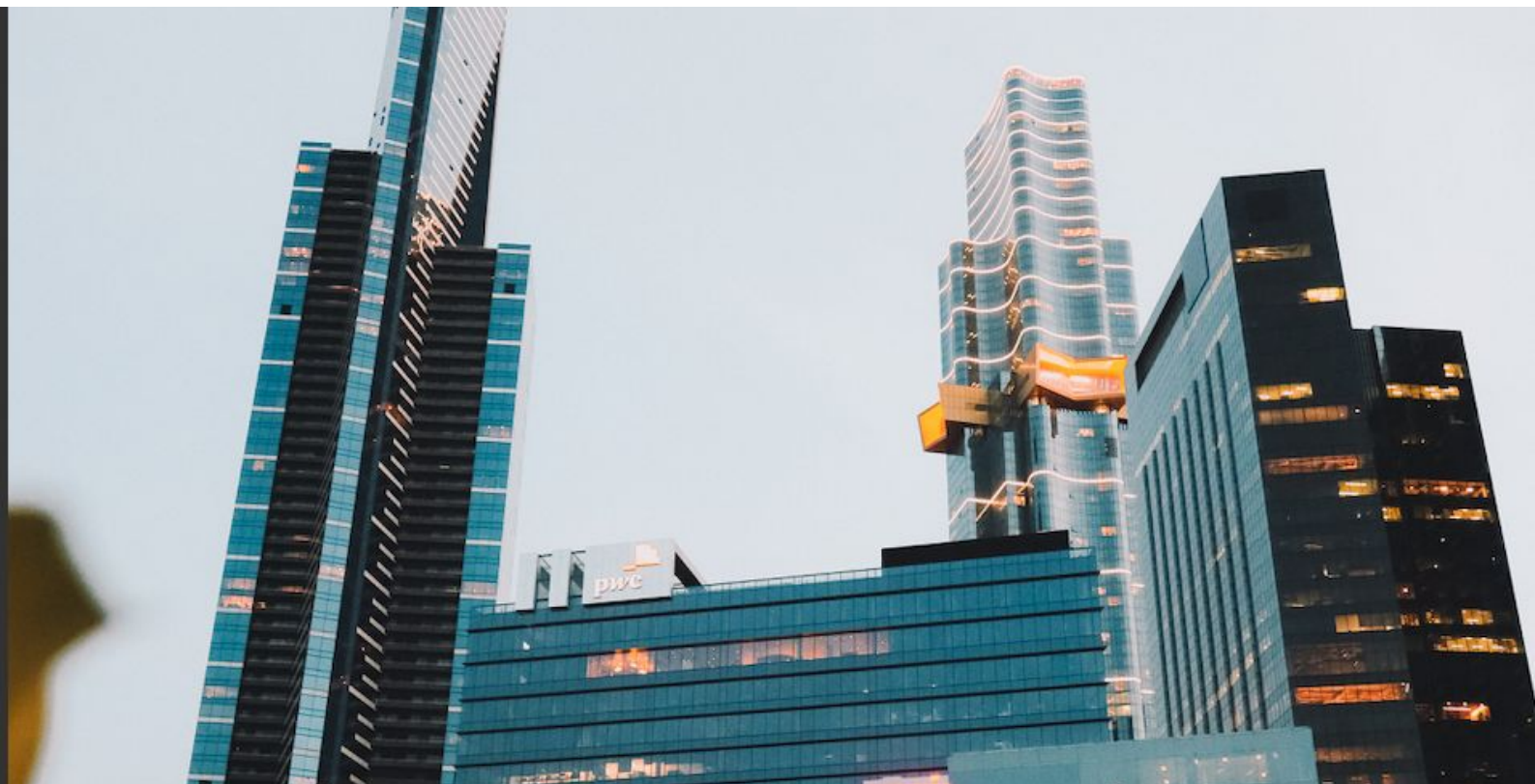
Mentions of China

China was also consistently mentioned alongside the other top countries mentioned like **Japan** (**1,483** mentions across **584** articles) and **Australia** (**1,246** mentions across **530** articles). The articles conveyed Japan and Australia's next steps after RCEP, the former focusing on military defense against China and the latter focusing on amending trade disputes with China:

- News articles wrote about Japan and Australia moving forward on the bilateral defense pact, including both countries having signed the RCEP [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#).
- In a separate article, a current affairs commentator also mentioned that it is highly unlikely for Japan to place economic ties to China above its diplomatic and military ties with the US. [\[1\]](#)



- China's Global Times claimed that Japan was seeking to establish military and defence dominance over China especially in the South China Sea. However, some analysts held that the Asia Pacific region would not easily be dragged into military or defence issues, as countries have just concluded the RCEP, signally that they recognised the importance of maintaining good relations with China. [\[1\]](#).
- On the other hand, Australia was hopeful that the RCEP would help to improve the country's strained ties with China, following trade disputes which threatened the country's exports [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#).

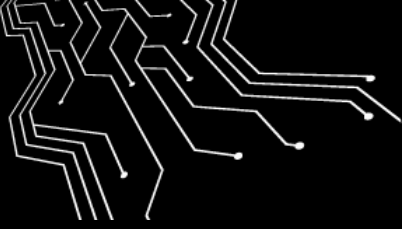


1.2 What about India and Taiwan?

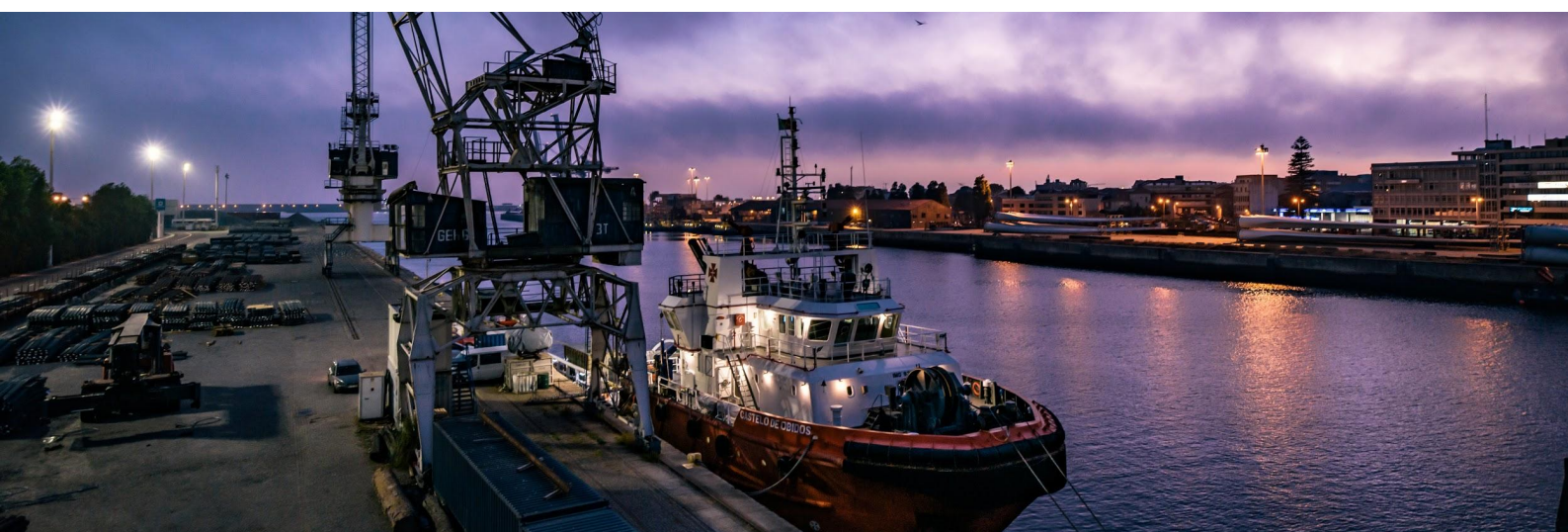
It is notable as well how non-participating countries, **India** (**749** mentions across **296** articles) and **Taiwan** (**298** mentions across **66** articles), also exhibited prominence across RCEP articles. It is known how both countries have territorial disputes with **China**.

This and some other factors may have motivated India's withdrawal. Taiwan, on the other hand, downplays RCEP's effects on its economy:

- India, the sixth dialogue partner, was originally part of the group but chose to withdraw late last year on fears of an onslaught of dumped goods from China, among other concerns. [\[1\]](#)
- The Indian government believes that joining the RCEP will leave India in an unfair situation, with its huge trade deficit with China. Furthermore, Indian Prime Minister Modi pushes for economic nationalism with its "Make in India" policy, to encourage domestic production. The country's "de-Sinization" may have also led to India not participating in RCEP, as it hopes to build its own manufacturing industry independent from China. [\[1\]](#)



- Despite the withdrawal from RCEP, doors are kept open for India if they wish to get back on board. [1] Many have expressed their support for India in this regard. According to Leather of Capital Economics, Japan considers India's presence important to counter China's economic weight. [2] Singapore respects India's decision for not participating but also stands ready to welcome India whenever they wish to re-join. [3][4] Australia and Vietnam will also welcome India's entry anytime. [5][6]
- Taiwan played down the importance of the RCEP on its economy. It argued that most of its exports, largely electronic, to RCEP members are already tariff-free [1]. It is, instead, keen to join the 11-country CPTPP, after the US withdrew from the original TPP agreement [1][2][3][4][5].





Other Interesting Media Mentions

Alongside mentions of countries are the mention of RCEP participating nation's leaders like China's Premier **Li Keqiang** (**262** articles; **319** mentions), Singapore's PM **Lee Hsien Loong** (**122** articles; **389** mentions), Vietnam's PM **Nguyen Xuan Phuc** (**95** articles; **103** mentions) and Malaysia's Trade Minister **Mohamed Azmin Ali** (**78** articles; **182** mentions).

1.3 The US involvement in RCEP Articles

Quite notable, however, is how US leaders were most frequently mentioned across RCEP articles, and even exhibited the highest prominence. The US president-elect, **Joe Biden**, leads with **988** mentions across **314** articles, followed by **Donald Trump** with **642** mentions across **314** articles. Former US President, **Barack Obama**, was also prominent with **185** mentions across **115** articles.



From L-R: Former US President Barack Obama, incumbent US President Donald Trump, US President-Elect Joe Biden



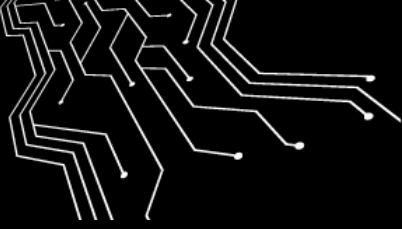
Trump vs. Biden (Frequency and Prominence Word Clouds)



Frequency Word Cloud: based on number of articles each person was mentioned



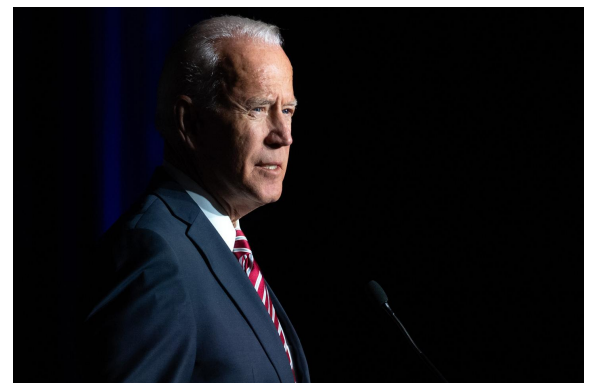
Prominence Word Cloud: based on number of mentions of each person across articles



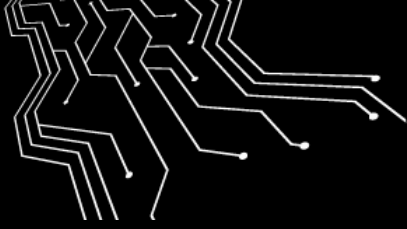
Joe Biden in RCEP Articles

Upon further reading, Joe Biden administration was frequently mentioned since most analysts and countries' leaders are keeping an eye on what would be the next steps for the current economic leader, as a response to the signing of the RCEP:

- When asked on whether the US would join the 15-country trade pact, Joe Biden reportedly said that the US trade policy could not be discussed as he was not yet in office. He added, however, that the US needed to align to other democracies, and counter China's growing influence [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#).
- Analysts also shared similar views to PM Lee Hsien Loong, who said that uncertainty remains as to whether the U.S. will negotiate any huge trade pacts with regional economies under Joe Biden [\[1\]](#).
- It was mentioned several times how the Biden administration still has no clear stance on multilateralism, nor it has a concrete response to the RCEP [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#). Nevertheless, some still thought that Biden would likely move towards a multilateral approach [\[1\]](#).



US President-Elect Joe Biden



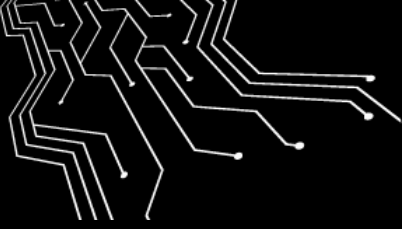
Donald Trump in RCEP Articles

On the other hand, Donald Trump administration was frequently mentioned as it is blamed to be responsible for US weakened engagement with Asia:

- America's relatively weak engagement with Asia was notable during the Trump administration, despite the administration having declared tackling the rising power of China in the Asia Pacific region as one of its key foreign policy priorities [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#).
- Moreover, with the US's absence from trade pacts, including the TPP and RCEP, Trump was also reported to have missed the ASEAN summit and the broader East Asia Summit [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#)[\[5\]](#).

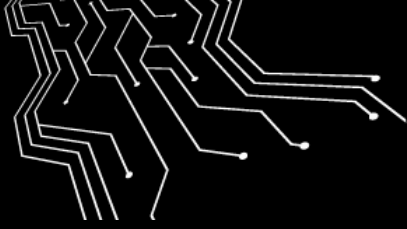


Incumbent US President Donald Trump



Donald Trump in RCEP Articles

- The Chamber's Executive Vice-President Myron Brilliant said that the Trump administration had confronted unfair trade practices by China but was only able to secure limited opportunities for U.S. exporters in Asia. He added that while the Chamber welcomed the RCEP trade pact, it did not recommend the U.S. joining the trade pact given the RCEP's shortcomings [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#).
- However, he underscored the importance of the Asia Pacific market and added that the U.S. should make strategic efforts to reinforce the U.S.'s economic presence in the region or risked being left behind the global growth engine [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#).
- News also reported that the impetus for the RCEP increased following Trump's withdrawal from the TPP in 2017 and trade war with China [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#).



Barack Obama in RCEP Articles



Former US President Barack Obama

Articles on former President Barack Obama mainly revolves around how the incoming administration would most likely follow or mirror Obama's administration:

- News media suspects that Biden, having been the vice president in Obama's term, will be a great motivator for his administration to re-engage with multilateral trade pacts in Asia just as Obama did. [\[1\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#)
- According to Alexander Capri, a trade expert in National University of Singapore, Biden's administration could be thought of as the continuation of Obama's, at least when it comes to the US pivot to Asia. [\[5\]](#)

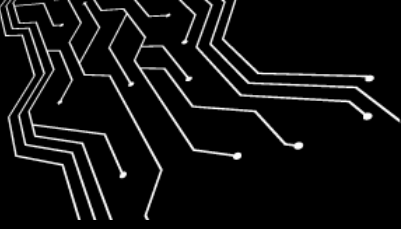
1.4 Prominence of other RCEP member nations' leaders

Moreover, other RCEP member nations' leaders who exhibited high prominence mainly have a positive response on the trade pact, highlighting support to multilateralism as well:

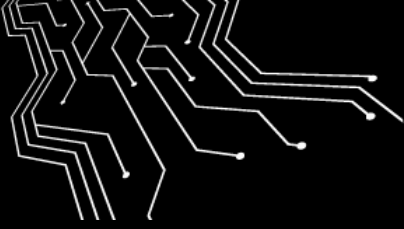
- Overall, PM Lee Hsien Loong praised the RCEP as a “big step forward”, and pointed out that with multilateralism losing ground, the commitment by regional economies would imply that countries in Asia are keen to confront challenges, regional integration and grow together as a group [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#)[\[5\]](#).



*Singapore's PM Lee Hsien Loong,
Photo by Prime Minister's Office (GODL-India)*



- Malaysia's Minister trade minister, Mohamed Azmin Ali, who supports multilateralism, expresses relief on RCEP being sealed among the 15 nations after years of negotiations. [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)
- China's Premier Li Keqiang was positively reported in articles in which he said that China welcomed the signing of the RCEP, seeing it as key to upholding multilateralism and building an open world economy [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#)[\[3\]](#)[\[4\]](#)[\[5\]](#).
- Moreover, he also pointed out that the South China Sea situation is relatively stable due to deeper cooperation between China and ASEAN countries [\[1\]](#)[\[2\]](#).
- Vietnamese PM Nguyễn Xuân Phúc also emphasised the significance of RCEP to global trade. [\[1\]](#)

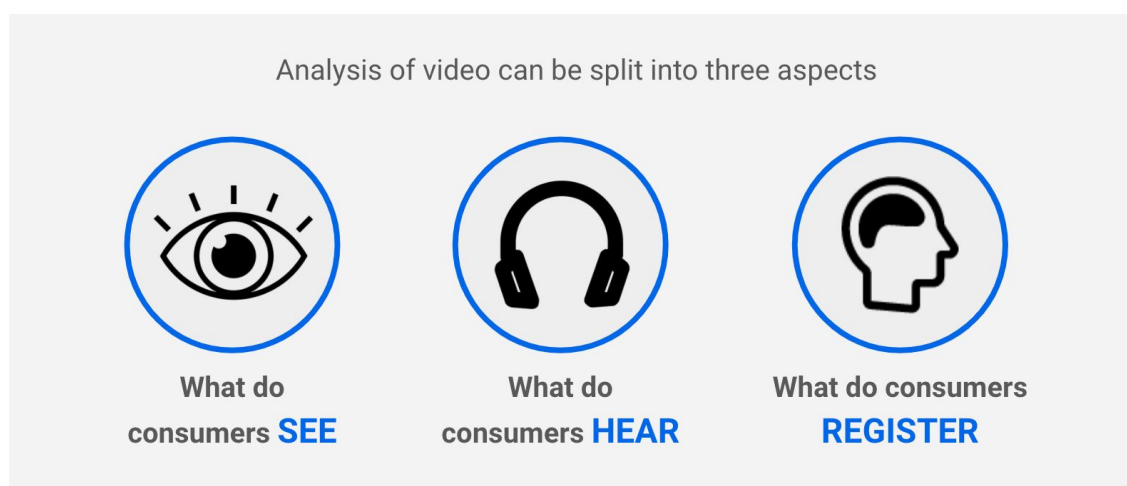


From analysing the articles, we could see how the US and China remain the most influential in topics of economic interests. Other nations' leaders, analysts and the news media recognise this and so it is evident in news articles relating to events like the RCEP signing.



2. Video AI hints towards a hopeful and prosperous future

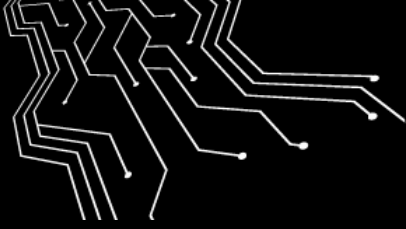
The subliminal messaging in video coverage is less subtle as compared to articles. This is due to a video having three components, the visuals and the audio/speech.



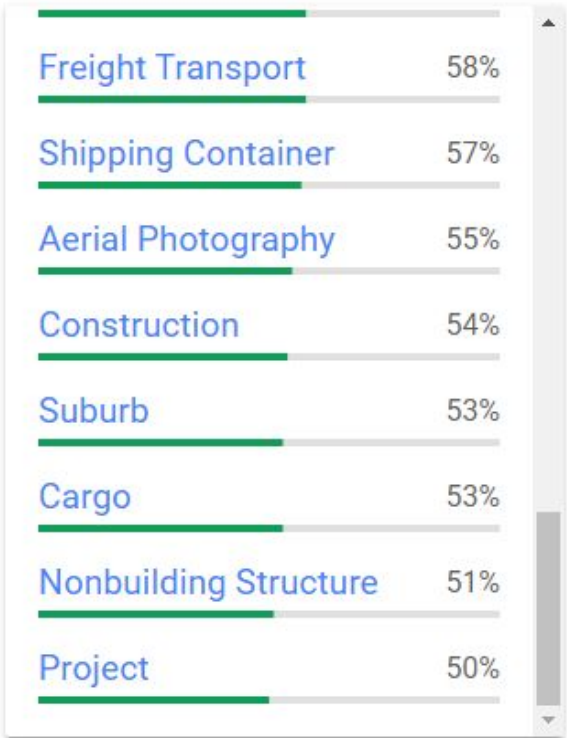
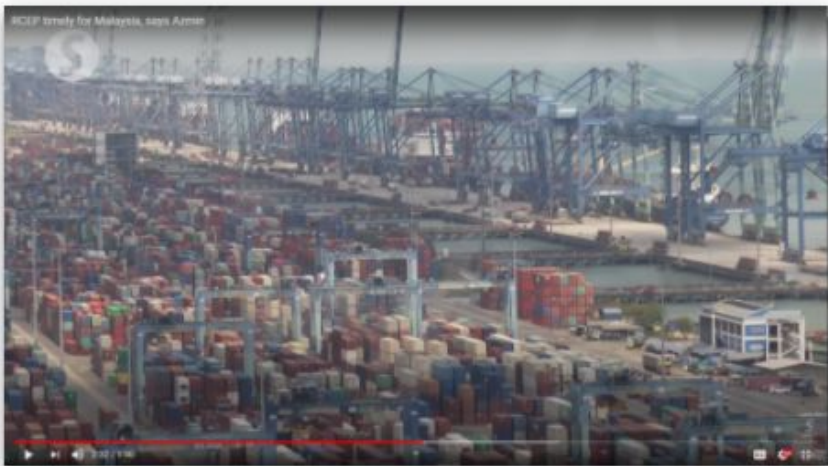
“Most of the news reporting on mainstream media state the facts through audio/speech and show accompanying visuals. When we analysed the audio/speech, the narratives were very similar to the one we uncovered through the articles,”

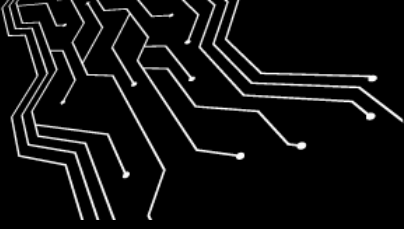


Ma. Angelica Tatad,
Data Scientist at Isentia



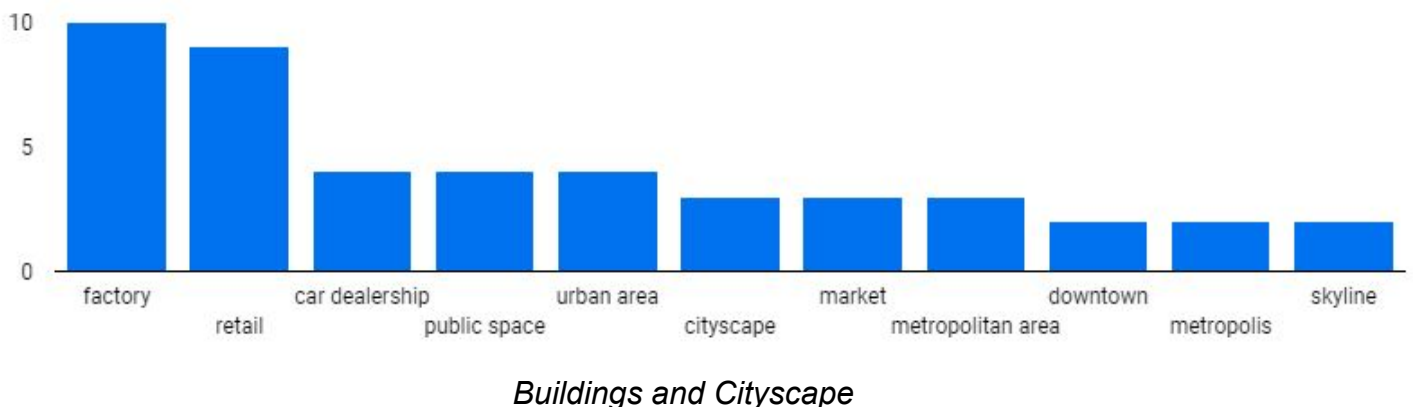
Using artificial intelligence and analysing the visuals of the video coverage, we see some interesting points. The visual video analysis uses machine learning to identify and tag labels to objects shown in the video. These labels are then grouped further into relevant categories. The number of times each appeared in the video are then charted.



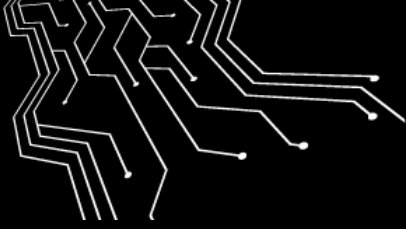


2.1 Manufacturing and retail benefit from RCEP

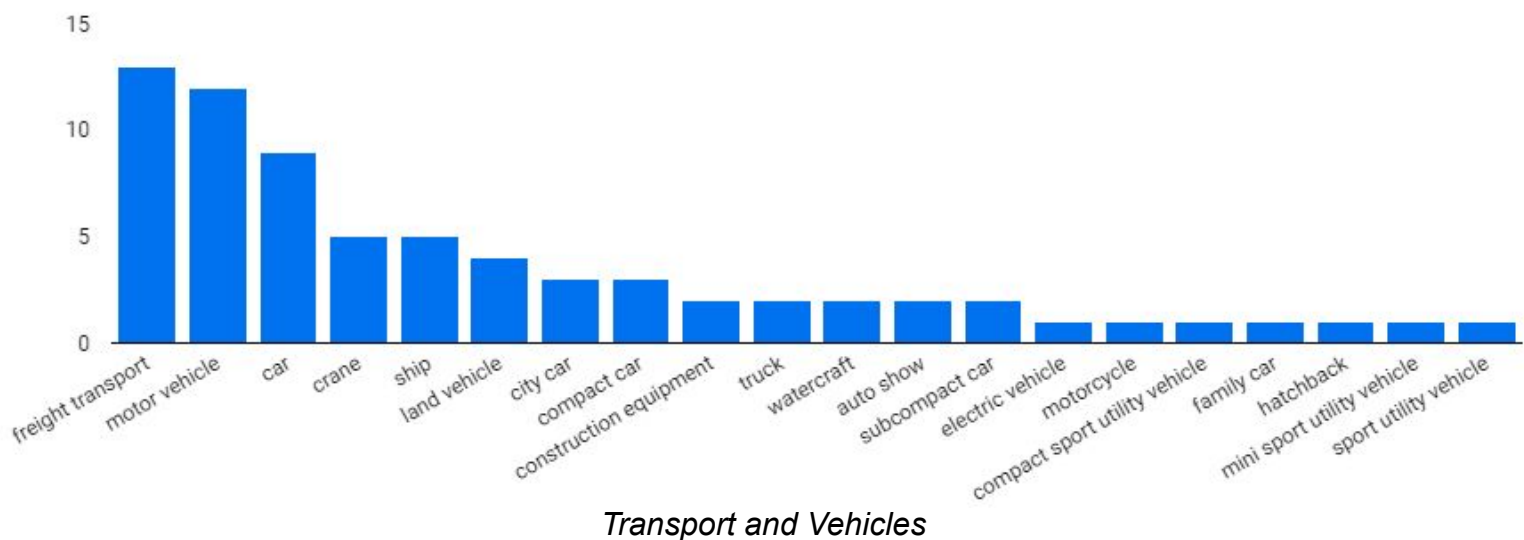
Apart from the usual groups of objects that we saw when we applied machine learning like people (i.e. audience, speaker, journalist, etc.) and event-related labels (i.e. conference, auditorium, etc.), we also saw other groups. The first bar graph below that shows a group under the category of Buildings and Cityscapes. In contrast, the second bar graph is a group under the category of Transport and Vehicles.



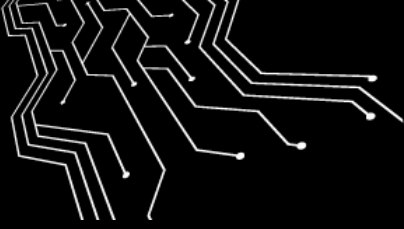
The chart above shows a focus on factories, retails, public space, urban, and metropolitan areas.



2.2 Overall, RCEP videos indicate media the trade deal as future-looking and an opportunity for progress



This chart shows a focus on transportation, vehicles, logistics, heavy equipment and ships. These labels seem to indicate that the media is visually portraying this partnership as a factor that will significantly affect manufacturing, retails, and markets. We could also see that the media focuses on logistics that seems to indicate trade and opportunity and promote economic activity which is the primary goal of the RCEP. On a holistic view, the media seems to view RCEP as future-looking and an opportunity for progress.

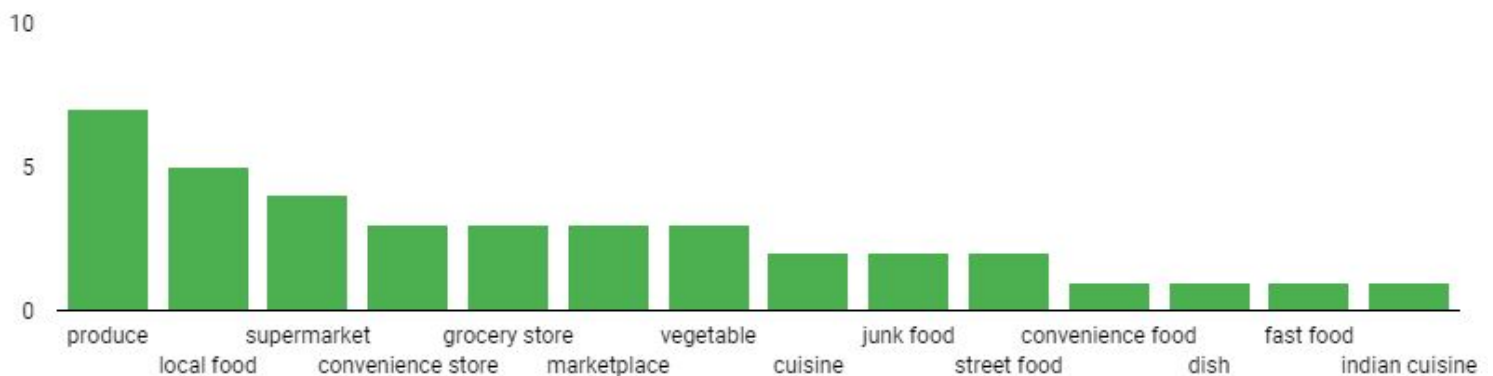


“Video analysis was done through a state of the art neural network (AI) which can identify the objects shown in a video. Our analysts then group these object labels into relevant categories.”



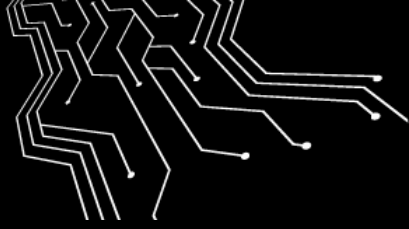
Francis De Leon,
Jr. Data Scientist at Isentia

We can see another interesting label that our AI brought up. The bar graph below shows that the media also showed various parts of the food supply chain, touching on one of the top priorities for countries especially in the Southeast Asia region, food security.



Food Security

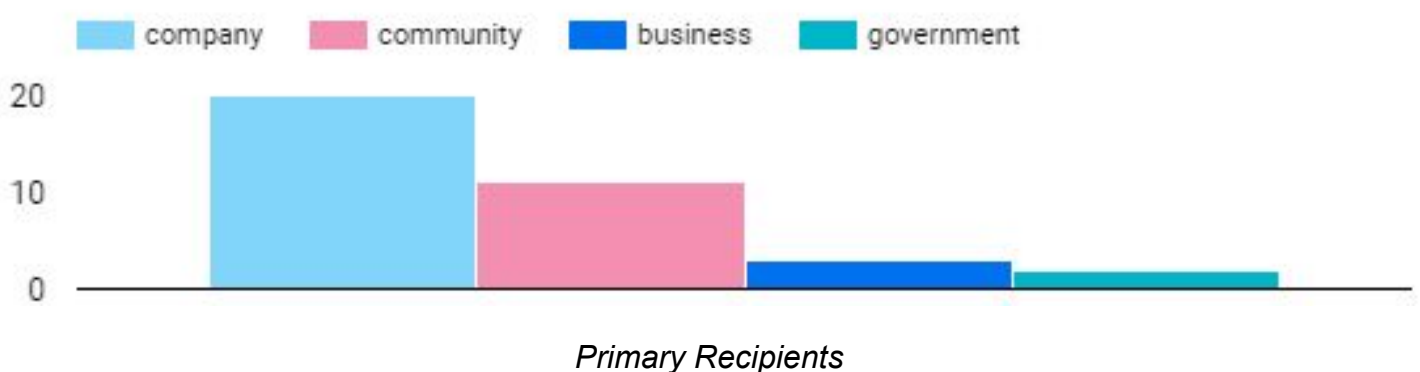
The media emphasizes the effect of the RCEP on agricultural and local food security.



The deal could potentially ease the tariffs on food import and export amongst the countries that are part of the deal.

However, it was seen that some countries are wary of it affecting their own local farmers and producers in the long run. It is interesting to note that an Indian cuisine was mentioned. It shows that the media has at some point talked about India with regards to the RCEP in their video coverage.

We can also see that while RCEP is multilateralism of countries, the media mostly shows companies and communities as seen in the graph below. The media is emphasizing the scope of effects of the RCEP with the companies and communities being the primary audience and of such consequences.






Conclusion

Analysing the coverage around RCEP through the eyes of the AI revealed that the media while largely emphasising the impact on the on-going power dynamics be it the dynamics between the US & its allies and China, also portrayed this deal as bringing a bright and prosperous future to the countries in the region. It also revealed that there are some subtle/subliminal messages that lie underneath the obvious.




Please do not hesitate to get in touch with us for more information on this whitepaper.

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