

Opportunities, Challenges, and Strategies of China's Sporting Goods Export under the Background of RCEP

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Abstract: China has long been recognized as a major producer and exporter of sporting goods, with its share of global sporting goods exports continuing to rise steadily. The implementation of the RCEP agreement presents both opportunities and challenges for China's sporting goods export trade. To achieve sustained growth, enterprises must enhance their innovation capacity, improve product quality, strengthen brand influence, and refine marketing strategies. At the same time, they must proactively manage risks related to exchange rate fluctuations and rising international logistics costs.

Keywords: RCEP; Sporting goods; Exports; Challenges; Opportunities

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1. Introduction

China's sporting goods industry as a national strategic emerging industry, its foreign export trade is of great significance to promote industrial upgrading, increase employment, and promote economic growth. The signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) has provided new opportunities and challenges for trade exchanges among member countries. As one of the important members of RCEP, China's export trade of sporting goods will face a new development environment under the background of the RCEP.

2. The current situation of China's export trade of sporting goods

2.1. Export scale and product structure

According to the General Administration of Sport, China's total exports of sporting goods and equipment reached \$17.669 billion in 2022, surpassing the \$15.812 billion in 2020, showing the industry's resilience ^[1]. However, China's exports of sporting goods and equipment in 2022 decreased by \$511.4037 million compared with the same period in 2021, down 22.3 percent year on year. In the first quarter of 2023, the export value of sporting goods and equipment was 4.074 billion US dollars, an increase of 4.22% from the previous quarter, indicating the recovery trend of foreign trade in the sporting goods industry ^[2]. This change may be affected by a variety of

factors, including changes in international market demand, the impact of the trade environment, and changes in the economic situation at home and abroad ^[3].

The product structure of China's sporting goods exports can be seen in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Structure of export products of China's sporting goods

Product classification	Product categories
Apparel	Clothing accessories; Gloves, mittens, leather or synthetic leather, with padding, specially designed for sporting use Sportswear, ski and swimwear (knitted or crocheted) Athletic wear, swimwear, and other clothing (not knitted or crocheted)
Footwear	Sneakers; Rubber or plastic outsole and upper Sneakers; Made of rubber, plastic, leather or synthetic leather Sneakers; Tennis shoes, basketball shoes, sneakers, training shoes, etc
Equipment	Yachts and other boats; And recreational or sports, rowboats and canoes Articles and equipment not listed in this chapter for general sports activities, gymnastics, competitive and other sports (including table tennis), or outdoor games Fishing rods, fishing hooks and other fishing supplies; Shoeing "birds" and similar hunting supplies

For a long time in the past, the export of China's sporting goods mainly concentrated on low-end products, such as sports shoes, sportswear, and so on. These products usually have price advantages, but relatively low technical content and added value. However, the product structure of China's sporting goods exports is gradually shifting to high-end products, as the country's sporting goods manufacturing industry is making technological progress and strengthening brand building. For example, high-end sports equipment includes professional sports shoes, sports apparel, sports equipment, etc. These products usually use high-performance materials and technologies to meet the needs of professional athletes and high-end consumers. China's sporting goods manufacturing industry is also actively responding to changes in demand in the international market by launching high-end products that meet market demand, boosting the competitiveness and market share of China's sporting goods in the international market ^[4].

In addition, the Chinese government is also actively promoting the upgrading and transformation of the sporting goods manufacturing industry. Through policy support and financial investment, enterprises are encouraged to increase investment in research and development, enhance technological innovation capabilities, and promote the development of sporting goods manufacturing to a high-end and intelligent direction. Chinese sporting goods companies are also actively exploring overseas markets and further expanding their export scale by establishing overseas branches and participating in international exhibitions ^[5].

2.2. Distribution of export markets

According to the quarterly research report of China Sporting Goods Industry Federation in 2023, the geographical distribution of China's sporting goods export market is shown in **Table 2** ^[6]. From the perspective of export share in the past ten years, the export situation of China's sporting goods in major markets shows a diversified and growing trend, among which ASEAN and East Asia markets are important destinations for China's sporting goods exports, the status of the CIS market is gradually declining, and South Asia, West Asia, Central and Eastern Europe

and Central Asia markets, although relatively small, but still have potential (**Table 3**).

Table 2. Geographical distribution of China's sporting goods export market

Regions	Nation
ASEAN	Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei
East Asia	Mongolia, North Korea, South Korea, Japan
CIS	Russia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia
South Asia	Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel
West Asia	Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Yemen, Egypt, Turkey, United Arab Emirates
Central and Eastern Europe	Poland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia
Central Asia	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan

Table 3. Export status of China's major sporting goods markets

Year	ASEAN		East Asia		CIS		South Asia	
	Export value	Percentage	Value of exports	Percentage	Value of exports	Percentage	Value of exports	Take up a proportion of
2009	3.61	2.55%	4.11	2.90%	4.14	2.93%	0.43	0.31%
2010	3.91	2.42%	4.70	2.91%	4.81	2.98%	0.68	0.42%
2011	4.97	2.77%	5.47	3.05%	5.71	3.19%	0.80	0.45%
2012	6.87	3.72%	5.66	3.07%	5.97	3.24%	1.01	0.55%
2013	8.96	4.62%	6.13	3.16%	7.44	3.83%	0.96	0.49%
2014	9.29	4.46%	6.98	3.35%	7.82	3.75%	1.18	0.57%
2015	9.02	4.47%	7.18	3.56%	4.82	2.39%	1.32	0.66%
2016	8.11	4.45%	5.44	2.99%	4.66	2.56%	0.83	0.46%
2017	8.01	4.29%	5.71	3.06%	4.08	2.18%	0.86	0.46%
2018	8.82	4.42%	6.01	3.01%	4.28	2.15%	0.81	0.41%
2019	12.63	5.90%	6.80	3.17%	4.77	2.23%	0.96	0.45%
2020	18.28	7.39%	8.07	3.26%	5.04	2.04%	0.90	0.36%
2021	14.59	6.69%	6.41	3.22%	5.40	2.81%	0.93	0.48%
2022	17.45	7.66%	7.84	4.01%	6.94	2.97%	1.14	0.54%
2023	21.17	8.45%	9.05	4.38%	6.68	3.05%	1.38	0.60%

Year	West Asia		Central and Eastern Europe		Central Asia	
	Value of exports	Percentage	Value of exports	Percentage	Value of exports	Percentage
2009	6.61	4.67%	2.01	1.42%	1.20	0.85%
2010	7.31	4.53%	2.09	1.29%	0.85	0.53%
2011	7.98	4.45%	2.87	1.60%	0.97	0.54%
2012	8.94	4.85%	3.01	1.63%	0.98	0.53%

Table 3 (Continued)

Year	West Asia		Central and Eastern Europe		Central Asia	
	Value of exports	Percentage	Value of exports	Percentage	Value of exports	Percentage
2013	9.94	5.12%	2.99	1.54%	1.87	0.96%
2014	11.81	5.67%	3.63	1.74%	2.70	1.29%
2015	10.42	5.16%	3.39	1.68%	1.05	0.52%
2016	8.56	4.70%	3.15	1.73%	1.18	0.65%
2017	7.83	4.19%	3.54	1.90%	1.49	0.80%
2018	6.98	3.50%	4.20	2.11%	1.58	0.79%
2019	9.33	4.36%	4.57	2.13%	1.70	0.79%
2020	10.58	4.27%	5.45	2.20%	1.43	0.58%
2021	9.17	4.71%	3.61	1.80%	1.50	0.77%
2022	9.87	5.12%	5.28	2.27%	2.24	0.94%
2023	10.89	5.78%	6.02	2.48%	2.46	1.18%

Source: United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database ^[8]

The export data of China's sporting goods industry in 2023 shows that the United States is still the largest destination of China's sporting goods exports, accounting for more than one-third of the share. This shows that the US market has a strong consumption power for Chinese sporting goods. In addition, India, the United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Russia, and other countries are also the main markets of China's sporting goods exports, and have long been among the top ten export countries ^[7].

2.3. Export patterns and trade channels

At present, China's sports goods export trade patterns are mainly divided into two kinds: the first is OEM (Original Equipment Manufacturer) mode, that is, the original equipment manufacturing mode. In this mode, our country's sporting goods enterprises produce according to the requirements of foreign brands, and the products are finally sold in the name of foreign brands. The advantage of this model is that enterprises can use their own production advantages to reduce production costs while avoiding the risks of brand building and market promotion. However, the profit under this model is relatively low, and the company's control over the market is weak ^[9]. The second model is the self-owned brand export model. In this model, China's sporting goods enterprises through independent research and development, design, production, and their own brand to promote and sell in the international market. The advantage of this model is that enterprises can obtain higher profits, while enhancing brand influence and market competitiveness. However, this model requires companies to have strong research and development capabilities, brand promotion capabilities, and market operation capabilities ^[10].

At present, China's sporting goods export trade channels mainly include the following: the first is a foreign trade company. As a professional trade intermediary, foreign trade companies can help sporting goods enterprises to find overseas customers, conduct trade negotiations, handle export procedures, etc. The second kind is the exhibition. Exhibition is an important platform for sporting goods enterprises to display products, find customers, and expand the market. By participating in well-known sporting goods exhibitions at home and abroad, enterprises can directly contact overseas buyers, understand the market demand, and find cooperation opportunities. The

third is an e-commerce platform. With the rapid development of the Internet, e-commerce platform has become a new channel for sporting goods enterprises to expand the international market. Through internationally renowned e-commerce platforms such as Alibaba and Amazon, companies can quickly enter overseas markets, reduce trade costs, and improve trade efficiency. The fourth type is overseas agents. Sporting goods companies can quickly enter the local market and increase product sales by looking for overseas agents and using the resources and services of agents ^[11].

3. Opportunities and challenges of RCEP for China's sporting goods export trade

3.1. Opportunities brought by RCEP for China's export trade of sporting goods

3.1.1. Tariff reduction and remission

The implementation of the RCEP agreement will significantly reduce tariffs among member countries, which is a huge opportunity for China's foreign export trade of sporting goods. The tariff reduction will directly reduce the export costs of Chinese sporting goods companies and improve the price competitiveness of their products. Against the backdrop of lower tariffs, the prices of Chinese sporting goods in RCEP member countries' markets will be more attractive, especially in price-sensitive markets, which will help boost the market share of Chinese products. The tariff reduction will also help promote trade facilitation, simplify customs clearance procedures, and speed up the flow of goods, thereby improving trade efficiency. This will help Chinese sporting goods companies better seize market opportunities and expand into the international market ^[12].

3.1.2. Investment facilitation

The investment facilitation measures in the RCEP agreement provide new development opportunities for Chinese sporting goods enterprises. The investment facilitation will help Chinese sporting goods companies better "go global" and make direct investments in overseas markets. By establishing local production bases or sales networks, companies can more directly understand and meet the needs of the local market, while also circumventing some trade barriers and localizing production. This will help improve the competitiveness of Chinese sporting goods in the international market and push enterprises to achieve a global layout. Investment facilitation will also help promote international exchanges of technology and management experience, and enhance the innovation ability and management level of Chinese sporting goods enterprises.

3.1.3. Expand market access

The expansion of market access means that Chinese sporting goods will face more potential customers and a larger market space, which will help enterprises achieve economies of scale, reduce unit costs, and improve overall benefits. The RCEP agreement will enable Chinese sporting goods companies to access the markets of other member countries more conveniently. The expanded market access will also help promote brand building and market promotion of Chinese sporting goods enterprises, and enhance the visibility and influence of Chinese sporting goods in the international market. In the context of expanding market access, Chinese sporting goods enterprises should actively adjust their strategies, seize opportunities, expand the international market, and enhance global competitiveness ^[13].

3.2. Challenges brought by RCEP for China's sporting goods export trade

3.2.1. Intensified competition

With the implementation of the RCEP agreement, trade barriers between member states will be gradually reduced, which will lead to more intense market competition for China's sports goods export trade. Chinese sporting goods companies will face competition from companies in other member countries, which may have lower production costs, more advanced technology, or stronger brand influence. The implementation of the RCEP agreement will attract more foreign companies to the Chinese market, which will intensify competition in the domestic market. Under such circumstances, Chinese sporting goods companies need to improve their competitiveness and cope with the competitive pressure by improving product quality, strengthening brand building, and enhancing innovation capabilities.

3.2.2. Increased trade frictions

The implementation of the RCEP agreement may bring some trade frictions, which is a challenge for China's sports goods export trade. The increase in trade between the member countries will lead to some trade disputes and frictions, such as anti-dumping and anti-subsidy. These trade frictions may have a certain impact on the export of Chinese sporting goods enterprises ^[14].

The implementation of the RCEP agreement may cause some member countries to have doubts about China's trade policy, fearing that a large number of Chinese products may have an impact on their own industries. Under such circumstances, Chinese sporting goods companies need to strengthen communication and coordination with other member countries and actively deal with possible trade frictions.

3.2.3. Heightened technical barriers

The implementation of the RCEP agreement may bring about an increase in some technical barriers, which is a challenge for China's sports goods export trade. On the one hand, with the increase in trade between member states, there may be some technical barriers to trade, such as technical standards and certification requirements. These technical barriers may have a certain impact on the export of Chinese sporting goods enterprises. On the other hand, the implementation of the RCEP agreement may cause some member countries to have doubts about China's technology policy, fearing that a large number of Chinese products may have an impact on their own industries. Under such circumstances, Chinese sporting goods companies need to strengthen their research and development capabilities and upgrade the technical content of their products to cope with possible technical barriers ^[15].

4. Suggestions on China's sporting goods export under the background of RCEP

4.1. Optimize market competition strategies and innovate marketing methods

Optimizing market competition strategy is the key to the development of China's sporting goods export trade. Enterprises need to formulate differentiated market positioning and competitive strategies according to their own characteristics and the needs of target markets. For example, companies can stand out in the market by researching and developing products with unique features and designs that meet the needs of specific consumer groups. In addition, companies can improve customer loyalty and market share by providing quality products and services, building a good brand image, and reputation. To better implement these strategies, companies can make use of market research and data analysis tools to gain an in-depth understanding of the demand and competition

conditions of their target markets and formulate corresponding market entry and expansion plans.

With the development of digitalization and networking, enterprises can also make use of modern technological means, such as social media and e-commerce platforms, for precision marketing and brand promotion. In addition, enterprises can also carry out online sales and cross-border e-commerce through e-commerce platforms to expand sales channels and market coverage. To better implement these innovative marketing means, enterprises need to cultivate talents with digital marketing capabilities and innovative thinking, while strengthening cooperation with other enterprises and industries to share resources and market information for mutual benefit and win-win results.

4.2. Strengthen trade facilitation and deepen international cooperation and exchanges

Strengthening the construction of trade facilitation is the key to the development of China's sporting goods export trade. Trade facilitation includes simplifying import and export procedures, improving customs clearance efficiency, and reducing trade costs. By strengthening the construction of trade facilitation, trade barriers can be reduced, and the competitiveness of Chinese sporting goods in the international market can be improved. The government can further simplify the procedure of export tax refund, improve the efficiency of tax refund, and reduce the burden on enterprises. On the other hand, cooperation with other RCEP member states can also be strengthened to promote intra-regional trade facilitation measures, such as establishing a unified electronic customs clearance system and simplifying requirements for certificates of origin, so as to reduce intra-regional trade costs and boost exports of Chinese sporting goods.

4.3. Improve the innovation capacity of enterprises and build their brand image

Enterprises should attach importance to product innovation to meet the changing market demand. Enterprises can invest more resources in the research and development of high-tech sporting goods with independent intellectual property rights, such as smart wearable devices and sports equipment made of environmentally friendly materials. At the same time, companies can also introduce fashion elements to enhance product appearance and user experience by cooperating with internationally renowned design teams. For example, Anta Sports launched a running shoe with the latest cushioned technology in 2023, which received a warm response from the market. In addition, companies can use big data and artificial intelligence technology to analyze consumer demand, achieve personalized customization of products, and increase the added value of products.

5. Conclusion

Under RCEP, China's sporting goods exports gain opportunities, tariff cuts lower costs, investment facilitation supports overseas layout, and expanded market access opens up broader space, while facing challenges like intensified intra-regional competition, more trade frictions, and heightened technical barriers.

This study systematically sorts out the industry's export status, including scale, structure, markets, and clarifies RCEP's impact paths, offering practical strategies for enterprises and enriching research on regional trade agreements and specific industries.

However, the study has limitations: discussions on opportunities and challenges are mostly qualitative (e.g., only noting tariff cuts reduce costs without quantifying export scale growth). Future research can use quantitative methods (e.g., econometric models, competition indexes) to measure RCEP's specific impact on export volume or competition intensity, providing more precise support for industry development.

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