Battle for Influence: Perceptions in Asia of China and the US

Yun-han Chu & Yu-tzung Chang
Policy-makers take note: the latest Asian Barometer Survey shows tectonic shifts in the perceptions of Asians toward the United States and a rising China.

Kai-Ping Huang & Bridget Welsh
The battle for soft-power supremacy among Great Powers in East Asia holds surprises with regards to the relative influences of China and the US.

Min-Hua Huang & Mark Weatherall
Ideology, culture and domestic politics all play a role in how people in Asian countries view the super-powers’ influence. China may be gaining an edge.

The essays in this section are based on findings of the latest edition of the Asian Barometer Survey, an applied research program that aims to gauge public opinion on issues such as political values, democracy, and governance across Asia. The program’s regional survey network encompasses research teams from 13 East Asian states and five South Asian countries. Together, it covers virtually all major political systems in the region. Find out more at www.asianbarometer.org
Xi’s Foreign-Policy Turn and Asian Perceptions of a Rising China
By Yun-han Chu & Yu-tzung Chang

As the administration of US President Donald Trump formulates its policies toward Asia, especially China, policymakers in Washington would do well to take stock of tectonic shifts in the perceptions of Asians toward the United States and a rising China, as illustrated in the latest Asian Barometer Survey.

The battle for influence among these two superpowers over the hearts and minds of Asians has enormous implications for the region, write Yun-han Chu and Yu-tzung Chang.

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4 The Asian Barometer Survey is a research network dedicated to democratic studies through survey methodology. It comprises 14 countries. Its regional headquarters is co-hosted by the Institute of Political Science, Academia Sinica and the Center for East Asia Democratic Studies at National Taiwan University. For methodological details, please see www.asianbarometer.org
China has become visibly less self-restrained in flexing its muscles. The commissioning of its first aircraft carrier, Liaoning, in 2012 signified Beijing’s commitment to strengthen its power-projection capabilities far beyond its coastal waters. China has also undertaken a more confrontational approach in handling the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. For example, China conducts frequent military exercises in the area, sends out China Coast Guard vessels to patrol disputed waters, and is continuously enlarging the construction of manmade reefs in the name of providing public services for the international community.

HOW ARE CHINA AND THE US PERCEIVED BY EAST ASIANS?

Soft power is an important concept to explain how a great power can achieve political influence more effectively through appeal and attraction rather than inducements or coercion. From the message sender’s perspective, Chinese leaders have long understood the importance of how China is perceived by other countries and have thought ahead to cultivate its image. Since 2004, China has invested tremendous resources in public diplomacy, even before China’s rise was widely perceived as a hard fact. However, it is important to look at the picture from the message receivers’ side, since, as Nye correctly pointed out, soft power depends on willing interpreters and receivers. If the targeted receivers are not aware of the sender’s messages, the soft power simply does not exist.

Many observers believe that while Asians are increasingly aware of China’s growing political and economic power, they are not necessarily persuaded by its stated foreign policy objectives and strategic intentions, and much less attracted by its political system. To verify this received view, we need scientifically reliable public opinion data across Asian countries. Although a number of cross-national survey projects, such as the Pew Global Attitudes Survey and BBC Global Scan, are in place, they only cover a few Asian countries. The Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) fills an important void in our understanding of the phenomenon of China’s rise and its implications for policy-makers. The Fourth Wave of the ABS was administered in 14 East Asian countries and territories based on country-wide probabilistic sampling and face-to-face interviews. In its most recent two waves, the ABS has incorporated a battery containing several questions related to the rise of China. The results from this battery can help us understand how citizens in the region view China in the context of its growing economic influence and international stature.

The first question regarding the rise of China is to ask the respondents: “Which country has the most influence in Asia now?” The answer set provides the following five choices: China, Japan, India, the United States and Others. As Figure 1 shows, in countries that are territorially adjacent (such as Myanmar) or culturally proximate to China (such as South Korea and Singapore), more than 50 percent of people think China has the most influence in Asia in both Wave 3 and 4 of the survey. In most Southeast Asian countries, citizens continue to believe the US has more influence in the region. However, increasing numbers of Southeast Asians see China as the most influential. Between the two survey waves, the percentage of people who regard China as the most influential has increased from 44 to 55 percent in Myanmar, 52 to 57 percent in Thailand, 51 to 54 percent in Malaysia, and 59 to 60 percent in Singapore. China continues to dominate the perceptions of East Asians.
waves, this perception grew by a magnitude of at least 2 percent (in Cambodia) or as much as 14 percent (in Indonesia), while in all countries except Malaysia, the perceived influence of the US declined. There was a particularly dramatic change in Thailand, where the percentage perceiving that the US has the most influence in the region declined from 49 percent to 19 percent in the context of worsening US-Thailand relations following the 2014 coup and the strengthening of Sino-Thai economic ties. Our data suggest that US President Barack Obama’s pivot to Asia policy has done little to reverse the perception of America’s declining influence. However, one can also argue that the decline could have been steeper had it not been for the strategic rebalancing.

Do East Asians welcome China’s growing influence? ABS Wave 4 includes two sets of questions that ask respondents to evaluate Chinese and American influence in terms of whether it does more good than harm, or more harm than good, with reference to the region and to their own countries, respectively. If the reference point is the region (see Figure 2), we find that American influence was generally perceived as more positive (average 73 percent), with the country breakdowns ranging from 92 percent (the Philippines) to 45 percent (Indonesia). On the other hand, evaluation of China’s influence was not as favorable (average 56 percent) and was highly polarized: predominantly negative in Japan (11 percent), Vietnam (20 percent), Myanmar (28 percent) and Mongolia (32 percent); predominantly positive in Cambodia (67 percent), South Korea (75 percent), Singapore (71 percent), Thailand (86 percent), Hong Kong (79 percent), Malaysia (75 percent) and Indonesia (67 percent); and very much divided in the Philippines (41 percent) and Taiwan (55 percent). This suggests that most Asians view the presence and influence of the US in the region as largely benign, but their views of China’s influence are very divergent. While many clearly regard China as an opportunity and welcome it, some perceive it as a threat and regard its rise with apprehension. If the reference point is changed to each respondent’s own country (see Figure 3), we find similar results: unanimously positive for the US (above 60 percent in all countries, with an average of 79 percent) and very much polarized for China (varying from 20 percent to 94 percent, with an average of 58 percent). In the ABS Wave 3, the same evaluative questions were also asked about China’s influence, and it is interesting to see the magnitude of change in popular perception toward the impact of China on the region. As illustrated in Figure 4 overleaf, in most countries, there was little change in popular views of China’s influence, with the exception of significant declines of the favorable evaluation in the Philippines (73 percent to 41 percent), Vietnam (56 percent to 20 percent), and significant increases in Thailand (68 percent to 86 percent) and South Korea (53 percent to 75 percent). The decline in the first two countries is most likely associated with the escalation of territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea; while the increase in the latter two countries might be associated with the pro-China policy direction of the Thai military government and President Park Geun-hye’s administration. In the latter case, we have to bear in mind that the recent controversy between China and South Korea over the deployment of the American anti-missile system, THAAD, which began in March 2017, might lead to declines in positive evaluations of China’s influence. Speaking overall, Asian views of China’s influence over the region are rather divergent and depend very much on the contextual dynamics within each country.

The two important findings so far are the following: First, the rise of China has been recognized by the great majority of East Asians, and China’s growing influence in the region is more intensively felt by countries that are geographically or culturally proximate to China. Second, there is great divergence among East Asians regarding whether they welcome China’s expanding influence. In the most general sense, Asian people acquire their view toward China’s growing influence in the region as largely benign, but their views of China’s influence are very divergent. While many clearly regard China as an opportunity and welcome it, some perceive it as a threat and regard its rise with apprehension.
China. For countries that are geographically adjacent and/or geopolitically adversarial, the consideration might be more complicated and more emphasis is placed on the security and geopolitical consequences of China’s ascendance. Still for others, such as Taiwan and South Korea, the myriad factors that should be taken into consideration entail multi-dimensional calculations under the constraints of competing objectives and acute trade-offs. We need to carefully interpret the meaning of these data with due consideration of each country’s past and contemporary contextual dynamics.

**Ambivalent Attitudes Toward US-China Strategic Competition**

The conventional wisdom in foreign policy circles tends to treat the pro-US and pro-China attitudes as mutually exclusive. But this might not be the case in the Asia-Pacific region, even for those citizens whose countries are facing potential security threats from a rising China, because for most East Asians, the role of China and the US are not mutually replaceable.

In the following, we correlate the measures of favorable perceptions of China and the US in selective country samples and report the result in Figure 5. As can be seen, only Hong Kong and China show significant negative correlations between the two measures, which is perfectly understandable given their roles as one of the contesting parties. For the following five countries, including Vietnam, the Philippines, Mongolia, Cambodia and Taiwan, the correlations are not significant, which suggests that most people don’t make a sharp contrast between the US and China. For the remaining countries, including Myanmar, Japan and South Korea, the correlations are all significantly positive. It suggests that many people take a benign view about both the US and China at the same time, while other people might take a skeptical view toward both. In a nutshell, for many Asians, both US influence and Chinese influence could be desirable (as well as compatible) at the same time. Assuming a zero-sum nature to the strategic competition between the two powers in the Asia-Pacific region might serve their interests best.

**Policy Implications**

The most important takeaway from our analysis is that most East Asians are not prepared to take sides in the US-China strategic competition because they believe that the benefits and costs of American and Chinese influence are not mutually replaceable nor incompatible. In fact, a balance of the two great powers in the Asia-Pacific region might serve their interests best.

Our data also suggest that prior to the inauguration of Donald Trump as the new US president, most people in East Asia thought the US might still enjoy a reservoir of goodwill in the region, despite some of his harsh campaign rhetoric. The Trump administration’s perceived anti-Muslim propensity is likely to do the most damage to the image of America in the places where the US can least afford it: Malaysia and Indonesia.

His administration should not take the reservoir of goodwill for granted and should be alarmed by the fact that the perceptions of US influence relative to that of China are not in America’s favor. In our Wave 4 (2014-2016) surveys, the Philippines was the only country where a majority of those questioned believed that the US had the most regional influence at that time. Regarding other treaty allies, only 27 percent of Japanese and 25 percent of South Koreans surveyed thought that the US had the greatest influence. In this regard, Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade accord will only strengthen this impression of American decline and withdrawal from the region. If his administration decides to step up the containment game against China, Trump should not expect too much support from Asian countries, except Japan. All these countries are dependent on China economically and recognize that China will always be their neighbor, and therefore none would agree to be part of an effort to contain China. And, for better or worse, their citizens have already taken the view that China either is already the most influential power or it soon will be.