Winning the Heart of East Asians: 
Public Opinion on the US Image after the Pivot-to-Asia Policy under Obama Administration

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ABSTRACT

The Obama administration re-asserted the US influence in Asia by marshaling the Pivot-to-Asia policy to counter-balance the rising China since 2011. After all the efforts, it is not yet clear if the policy restores the US influence in Asia by winning the heart of East Asians in recognizing the US power status, popularity and level of democracy. Specifically, do East Asians regard the US as the most influential country in Asia? Is the US considered benign and even a role model to their own countries? Given the US’ moral high ground in democracy, how do they evaluate the level of the US democracy? To address the questions, we present public opinions of 13 East Asian countries in the 4\textsuperscript{th} wave dataset of the Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS4). Conducted from 2014 to 2016, ABS4 captures the US image in the eyes of the East Asians when the pivot-to-Asia policy was first proposed in 2011 during the 2\textsuperscript{nd} term of Obama presidency. The findings show that most East Asians perceive of the US as a weakening and undesirable, but still a benign and highly democratic country. In the perceptional level, China’s rise takes a toll of the US in East Asia.

KEYWORDS: pivot to Asia policy, Obama administration, the rise of China
Introduction

In 2011, The Secretary of State Hillary Clinton published the Pivot-to-Asia policy that urges the US government to redirect the focus of the US foreign policy with "a substantially increased investment – diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise – in the Asia-Pacific region” (Clinton, 2011). By aiming at rebalancing China in the Asia Pacific region, the Pivot-to-Asia policy is the intention to re-assert the US influence in shaping regional order in political, economic and military dimensions (Cheng & Chow, 2014; Dian, 2015; Logan, 2013; Manyin et al., 2012; Stuart, 2012). The policy covers six courses of actions, including strengthening bilateral security alliances, deepening the US relationship with rising China, engaging with regional multinational institutions, enlarging trade and investment, broadening military presence, and promoting democracy and human right (Campbell & Andrews, 2013; Clinton, 2011).

The Pivot-to-Asia policy has aroused controversies and debates with regard to whether the timing is premature (Etzioni, 2012; Kelly, 2014), whether it triggers China’s insecurity (Ratner, 2013; Ross, 2012), or how it influences the balance of power in the region (Glaser & Billingsley, 2011; Kelly, 2014). Nevertheless, it remains questionable if the policy wins the hearts of East Asians after all the efforts. As Robert Kelly (2014) points out, one of the major flaws for the Pivot-to-Asia policy is that “American cultural distance from Asia means little public support and understanding of its necessity”. Given the US presence has been a major force in shaping up the regional order in Asia since the end of World War II (Cossa, 2003), it is important to evaluate the power status of the US in the perceptual level when public opinion carries consequences to foreign policy making in both democratic (Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007) and authoritarian regimes (Bell & Kai, forthcoming; Weeks, 2008).

To evaluate the effect of Pivot-to-Asia policy, this paper investigates if the policy successfully conveys its message to the East Asians. To be specific, we address the following
questions. First, we ask the respondents: Is the US perceived to be the more influential country in Asia now and in the next ten years, respectively? Through both questions, we re-examine whether the power status of the US is shaken up or not in East Asians’ perception. Second, the respondents are presented with the questions that ask respondents to consider that the US influence positive force or even a role model to their own country. We check if the East Asians welcome the US influence and even regard the US way of life as desirable. Third, we ask the respondents the question: How do East Asians evaluate the level of democracy in the US? The US has been posing as a democratic role model and promoting democracy in East Asia since the end of World War II (Wang, 2007). Since democratic values have been the moral high ground for the US to exert its influence in East Asia, the ascent and wane in the level of democracy matter to the legitimacy of the US influence. These questions capture how East Asians perceive of the US after the Obama administration initiated and executed the Pivot-to-Asia policy to restore the US influence in the Asia Pacific region since 2011 until early 2017.

Based on the 4th wave of Asian Barometer Surveys (ABS4), we empirically evaluate if the Pivot-to-Asia policy restores the US influence in East Asia. Starting from 2014 to 2016, the survey period of ABS4 synchronized with the latter stage in Obama’s second term of the presidency as the Pivot-to-Asia policy has already been executed for five years. In the following paragraphs, we will first begin with the rise of China as the most important backdrop of the Pivot-to-Asia policy. Next, we move on elaborating how the US Pivot-to-Asia policy responds to. Thirdly, we report public opinion regarding how the US influence is perceived for East Asians after the US has been invested in East Asia for five years via the Pivot-to-Asia policy. To have a comprehensive appraisement of the US influence, we draw the China factor in the picture of the US influence on the account of the strategic competition for regional leadership between China and the US. Lastly, we conclude
by an overall evaluation of whether the pivot-to-Asia policy wins the heart of East Asians in recognizing the US as the most influential, popular and democratic country.

The rise of China

Before delving into public opinion data to understand how East Asians perceive of the US after the Pivot-to-Asia policy, we need to first discuss how the rise of China induces the redirection of the US foreign policy with a focus on Asia. Hence, East Asians’ perception of the US inherently experiences twists and turns along the trajectories of a power struggle between the two powers.

The topic of a rising China is nothing new to the general public, policymakers or academia around the world for the past decades since the economic reform in 1978. Over the decades, Chinese policy elites have increasingly recognized that soft power and national image management are essential aspects of Chinese foreign policy agenda. On the occasion of the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2007, the president, Hu Jintao (胡锦涛), announced that China needed to enhance “the soft power of its culture.”¹ Since then, the Chinese government has invested billions of dollars to cultivate and upgrade its soft power resources. Soft power has become an important concept in international relation since Joseph Nye coined the term in 1990. It is an important concept to explain why a great power can achieve its political influence more effectively through appeal and attraction, but not inducements or coercion. China has systematically invested tremendous resources to conduct a public diplomacy campaign since 2004, even before China’s rise was widely perceived as a hard fact. From the sender’s perspective, Chinese leaders have long understood the importance of the soft power and they were willing to think ahead to cultivate it.

However, the trend of China’s rising global influence evinces something more than the sheer fact of China’s national aggrandizement but rather associated with a clear break from its longstanding low-key foreign policy. Today, China does not only promulgate its peaceful intention as an ascending power and its willingness to contribute to the region's stability and prosperity but also begins to introduce its own agenda of economic partnership and new mechanisms of regional integration and multilateral cooperation. Hence, China launches new initiatives to bring about a new order in both of the regional and global levels. Such distinctive change was widely perceived as the result of China’s changing leadership from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping (习近平). President Xi has carried out a wide-ranging anti-corruption campaign at home and become the most powerful Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping (邓小平). Albeit nominally Xi still shares power with six other members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo the Communist Party of China (CPC) through a scheme of collective leadership. Xi nowadays has centralized the decision-making power over all important policy domains in his own hands and the image of his strong leadership also pertinently reflects in his confidence about the bigger role Beijing could and should play in the world affairs.

The policy turn of China’s global and regional strategy under Xi introduces a more resourceful, more assertive, more ambitious, and more aggressive China to the world. To begin with, nowadays there are many more policy instruments as well as economic leverage at China's proposal due to its rapid economic ascendancy just as the advanced industrial countries are mirrored in the so-called Great Recession, the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. According to the estimate of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China has surpassed the US in the gross domestic product (GDP) after the adjustment for the purchasing power of currencies in 2014. China’s GDP-PPP reached $17.6 trillion surpassing $17.4 trillion in the US; second, the outflow of China’s foreign direct investment (FDI)
topping the US by 120 billion USD has outnumbered the FDI inflow after 2015 by UNCTAD (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development). Third, China has become the number one country in terms of spending on outbound tourism since 2012 by UNWTO (World Tourism Organization). Fourth, more than 100 Chinese corporations entered the rank of Fortune Global 500 in 2016, trailing closely behind the United States. Despite the fact that China still falls behind many countries in its GDP per capita measure, the four indicators show that China’s overall economic power as a country has already become on parity with the United States in many aspects and undisputedly has become the most important economic locomotive of the world, accounting for more than one-third of global economic growth since 2006. China is no doubt economically more resourceful than ever to engage in and exert influence on international affairs.

Along with China’s significant presence in the global economy, the Chinese government under Xi’s leadership has become more assertive by undertaking a series of ambitious moves in (1) claiming China’s global leadership, (2) networking with regional multilateral institutions, (3) launching China-led economic initiatives, (4) demonstrating military might, and (5) bolstering China’s ideological footing. We will introduce China’s foreign policy with a focus on Asia accordingly.

**Claim China’s Global Leadership.** A notable change in China’s international strategy lies in its stronger willingness to assert its demand, vision and policy objectives. Under Xi’s leadership, the Chinese government is eager at playing an agenda-setting role with a much broader regional and global scope. Instead of being “responsible stakeholder” in fulfilling Washington’s expectation (Zoellick, 2005), Beijing began to steer the US-China relations with its own “New Model of Great Power Relations” (新型大国关系) (Zheng, 2005; Glaser & Billingsley, 2012). China’s revision of interaction mode with the US signals the equal partnership between the two great powers in shaping the world order. Additionally, in the face
of Washington Consensus (Williamson, 2009), China proposed “Hangzhou Consensus” (杭州共识) in the G20 agenda (Larionova, 2017). The Hongzhou Consensus re-direct the function of G20 from the short-term concerns for global economic recovery and financial stability to the long-term issues of reforming and upgrading the structure of global economic governance and fostering the new impetus of inclusive and sustainable growth in the global economy. China under Xi promotes the “Chinese Dream” of national rejuvenation to the world to claim China’s global economic leadership among the developing countries of the world.

**Network with Regional Multilateral Institutions.** China has made strenuous efforts in winning the support of members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Chirathivat, 2002). China concluded a series of cooperative projects with the ASEAN, including The ASEAN–China Free Trade Area (ACFTA), China-ASEAN Summit, and ASEAN plus three, including China, Japan, and South Korea. Moreover, China successfully dissuades Cambodia and Laos to block the joint communique issued by ASEAN foreign ministers in support of the international tribunal’s ruling against Beijing. China has acquired substantial influence on the ASEAN and as well as its member countries via various institutional networks.

**Launch China-Led Economic Initiatives.** China has aggressive pursued a series of economic initiatives to facilitate regional and global integration. First, the launch of the “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) initiative in 2013 has become the hallmark of Xi’s global strategy with the ambition to reshape the geopolitical as well as the geo-economic landscape of the vast Eurasia continent and open a new era of globalization anchored on the deepening of South-to-South cooperation (Wang, 2016). Many important strategic moves emanate from the OBOR grand strategy. They include enlarging and upgrading Shanghai Cooperation Organization through recruiting both India and Pakistan as new members to lay a firm political foundation for the economic integration across the Eurasia Continent. Second, the
Chinese government founded the first Asia-led international bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to steer the financial resources into the ambitious infrastructure projects that facilitate the cross-border movement of energy, merchandise, data, personnel, and capital (Chin, 2016). Lastly, China has been actively negotiating for the alternative Favorable Trade Agreement (FTA), Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which includes China but not the US (Sinha & Nataraj, 2013). All these strategic moves entail China's ambitious goals to rewrite the rules of economic engagements and the parameters of globalization.

_Demonstrate Military Might._ Undoubtedly, China has exercised less and fewer self-restraints over flexing its muscle and has behaved more aggressively in the recent past. The commission of the first aircraft carrier, Liaoning, into the Chinese Naval Forces in 2012 has demonstrated Beijing’s commitment to strengthening its power projection capability around the world.² China has also undertaken more confrontational approach in handling the territorial disputes in the East and the South China Sea (Guan, 2000; Valencia, 2007). For example, China often conducts military exercise and sends out fishery boats to patrol in the disputed water space, continuously enlarges the construction of the man-made reefs in name of providing public services for the international society, and enthusiastically pursues a grandiose program of anti-satellite weapons.

_Bolster Ideological Footing._ Xi has constantly shown strong resolve on developing, defending and even selling its ideology in international society. By maintaining China’s distinctive political values and resisting the western ones, the Xi government claims the success in economic development and social stability beyond the reach of most countries in

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the world. By enhancing China’s ideological appeals, the Chinese government does not only secure the CCP rule on the domestic front but also poses as an alternative regime paradigm in international society.

Given that China has been cultivating its distinctive ideological footing, the Beijing authority has consistently and sternly resisted the international pressure to abide by the liberal norms. For decades, the Chinese government demands other countries to respect China’s core interests, in particular, its territorial integrity, including its sovereign claim over the East and the South China Sea, Tibet and Taiwan (Fravel, 2008). Furthermore, China becomes more assertive in projecting its cultural soft power and conducting the campaign of public diplomacy on the worldwide scale (Paradise, 2009). Through establishing Confucian institutes in higher learning institutions worldwide, running 24-hours CCTV news channels in major languages around the world, advocating its vision of “harmonious world” and “the shared destiny of human beings.”

The US Pivot-to-Asia policy to counterbalance China

All the above evidence indicates that China’s foreign policy has transitioned from low-key to high profile over the course of four CCP presidents. Under Xi’s leadership, the Chinese government has challenged the US politically, economically and militarily. In response to the rising China, the Obama administration proposed the Pivot-to-Asia policy in 2011. According to Secretary of States Hillary Clinton, the policy covers six courses of action, including “strengthen bilateral security alliances, deepen America’s relationships with rising powers, engage with regional multilateral institutions, expand trade and investment, forge a broad-based military presence, and advance democracy and human rights.” By the guidance of six courses, we will introduce the US government’s East Asia policies accordingly.

*Strengthen Bilateral Security Alliances.* In 2014, Obama started his four-nation tour of Asia
to refresh the bilateral security commitments with the US allies in East Asia. During his one-month tour in April, President Obama first met Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan, President Park Geun-Hye of South Korea, Prime Minister Najib Razak of Malaysia, and President Benigno Aquino III of the Philippines. In the four meetings, the US government expressed its commitments to safeguarding the interests of its East Asian allies in confronting with the growing assertive China (Teo, 2014).

*Deepen America's Relationships with Rising Powers.* Since the Pivot-to-Asia policy was announced in April 2011, the US and Chinese presidents have seven official meetings, including (1) 2013 Obama-Xi California Summit, (2) 2014 G20 St. Petersburg Summit, (3) Obama’s 2014 state visit to China, (4) Xi’s 2015 state visit to the US, (5) 2015 Paris Summit on Climate Change, (6) 2016 Washington Nuclear Security Summit, and (7) 2016 Hangzhou Summit. The meetings between the top leaders of the US and China even takes place twice every year for three years in a row from 2014 to 2016. In particular, the US and China officially joined hand-in-hand in signing up the Paris Agreement to combat the climate change in Paris Summit on Climate Change in 2015.³ For the two great powers, the frequent meetings and joint cooperation in international affairs show the US efforts in deepening its relationship with a rising power like China.

*Engage with Regional Multilateral Institutions.* The US government looked for networking with Southeast Asian countries. As one of the most important regional organizations in Southeastern Asia, ASEAN became an important route for the US to engage with the countries in the region. Obama administration launched the US-ASEAN Summit in 2009, which is dedicated to pushing forward economic, military, political, and cultural cooperation

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between the US and ASEAN countries (Mauzy & Job, 2007). In 2016, the US even hosted the US-ASEAN Summit for the first time.

*Expand Trade and Investment.* The US intends to regain its economic leadership in East Asia by concluding Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiation. The guidelines were officially announced in Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 2011. Facing a series of the Chinese government’s initiatives like AIIB, OBOR, and RCEP, the Obama administration is eager to counter-balance China by concluding the negotiation of TPP during Obama’s second term.4

*Forge A Broad-Based Military Presence.* The US seeks to contain China’s rise by adjusting its military deployment in East Asia. Given the territorial disputes between China and its neighboring countries, the Obama administration upgraded and reinstalled its military bases in Japan, South Korea, Philippines, and Thailand. Together, under the Obama’s second term of presidency, the US has been dedicated to projecting more military power along its Pacific front to contain China’s military threat (Stuart, 2012). In addition, the US stood up to China on several occasions by demonstrating its military force. For instance, the US confronted China with the aircraft carriers cruising over the South China Sea to defend the freedom of navigation (Buszynski, 2012). In response to North Korea nuclear threats, the US swiftly deployed the anti-ballistic missile system (THAAD) in South Korea despite China’s solemn condemnation (Futter, 2012).

*Advance Democracy and Human Rights.* Since the US has been posing as the role model of democracy, the US government was dedicated to promoting democracy and policing the protection of human rights in East Asia in order to foster international pressure on China’s authoritarian regime. In order to promote democratization in Myanmar, Obama lifted many

4 Obama’s successor, Trump officially quit the TPP in 2017.
sanctions on Myanmar, which officially held the first contested national elections in 2015 (Holliday, 2013). In 2016, Obama raised the issue of human rights in Tibet to Xi during his state visit to Washington.\(^5\) Lastly, President Obama canceled the state visit in 2016 to the Philippines because President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines publicly insulted President Obama for his concerns over the human right issues on the extrajudicial killing in the name of the war on drug.\(^6\)

The records show that the US under the Obama administration has heavily invested in its Pivot-to-Asia policy in re-asserting its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. Although the US has been the major power to shape the regional order since the end of World War II, its sole dominance has been suspiciously at stake when East Asians’ perception may bet on a rising China. To be specific, we need reliable public opinion data across East Asian countries to evaluate whether the Pivot-to-Asia policy successfully restores the US influence in the minds of East Asians. Meanwhile, we need a dataset to simultaneously compare and assess that to what extent China’s rise challenges the US influence in Asia.

As of our knowledge, Pew Global Attitudes Survey and BBC Global Scan are the few of the many cross-national survey projects that collect public opinion data on people's image about the US and China on a regular basis. However, the coverage and question design of the two datasets is unsatisfactory in several regards. For the Pew Survey, the country set in East Asia is not only small in the country count, but also inconsistent over time except Japan and South


Korea. Thus, the two dataset is under-representative to make reference with regard to East Asia. The insufficient and inconsistent country set in the dataset can hardly make substantial evidence about the perception of the East Asians in general. Lastly, the two surveys are not necessarily suitable to draw in the China factor in evaluating the US influence after the Pivot-to-Asia policy. East Asians’ perception of the US is a result of not only what the US did, but also what China did in return. When the US proposed TPP, China initiated RCEP. As the US held the US-ASEAN Summit, China came up with the China-ASEAN Summit. While China built up new military facilities on islands in the South China Sea, the US sent an aircraft carrier to patrol over the disputed water in claiming the freedom of navigation. When China established the AIIB, several US allies including Britain, Australia, France, Germany and Spain chose to become the founding members of AIIB despite the US dissuasion. On the account of a series of power struggles between the two great powers during the implementation of Pivot-to-Asia policy, we have to understand the US influence in the context of the US-China competition. Thus, it is important for public opinion dataset to concurrently evaluate the US and China influence in a comparable fashion.

**Public Evaluation of the Pivot-to-Asia Policy**

In this paper, we introduce ABS4 dataset to evaluate the Pivot-to-Asia policy. The ABS4 is based on the country-wide probability sampling and face-to-face interview. As the most comprehensive Asian-wide survey datasets, ABS4 covers 14 Asian countries and territories, including Cambodia, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mongolia,

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7 Please refer to the website of Pew Global Research Center for the historical survey records of East Asians’ perception of the US or China: [http://www.pewglobal.org/search/?query=us%20china](http://www.pewglobal.org/search/?query=us%20china) Accessed on Nov. 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

8 Please refer to the website of BBC Global Scan for the historical survey records of East Asians’ perception of the US or China: [https://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbc06-3/](https://www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbc06-3/) Accessed on Nov. 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017.
Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. The ABS4 was conducted from 2014 to 2016, which falls on the last stage of Obama’s 2nd term in the presidency when the Pivot-to-Asia policy has been implemented for four to five years to build up an impression for the East Asians.

The ABS4 contains a battery of questions to evaluate if the Pivot-to-Asia policy successfully restores the US influence in the minds of East Asians. Specifically, we focus on East Asians’ perception of the power status, popularity and the democratic level of the US influence to evaluate the Pivot-to-Asia policy at the individual level. In addition, respondents have also presented the same questions with regard to China to explore how China factor comes in the mental picture. In the following paragraphs, we will present the statistical analysis of whether the Pivot-to-Asia policy reinforced the US image for East Asians and whether the US influence is at discount by China factor along three dimensions of power status, popularity, and the democratic level, respectively.

**Power Status.** First of all, we measure the power status of the US and China in Asia by asking the respondents two single-choice questions: (1) Which country has the most influence in Asia now? (2) Which country has the most influence in Asia in the next ten years? Respondents are provided with five options, including China, Japan, India, the US, and Others. We re-compute the two variables by calculating the percentages of respondents choosing “China”, “the US”, or “others” in the national level for each country in the dataset. Note that we exclude the observations for “don’t know”, “can’t choose”, and “don’t understand the questions”. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of respondents’ answers.

In Figure 1, three features stand out. First, the US influence in Asia is in decline in the eyes of East Asians. Across all of 13 East Asian countries, the percentages of respondents casting the

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9 We exclude the sample of China in our analysis. Please refer to Appendix 1 for detailed information about the survey period and sample size for the other 13 East Asian countries.
vote of confidence on the US influence in Asia in the next ten years is smaller than those for now. A lowering confidence in the US influence in Asia shows a warning sign for its supreme status in Asia since the end of World War II. Next, we take the China factor in the picture of the US waning influence. We find that China’s rising influence is in sharp contrast to the US. Only 3 out of 13 East Asian countries (Philippines, Cambodia, and Malaysia) choose the US rather than China as the most influential country in Asia now. However, over half of the respondents hold an optimistic view of China’s influence for about two-thirds of the East Asian countries. With regard to the most influential country in the next ten years, the Philippines remain the sole country betting on the US, not China. While Malaysia and Indonesia are polarized in the question that focuses on the current situation, Cambodia is polarized in answering the question that aim at the next ten years. In short, most East Asian countries, except the Philippines, lean toward China rather than the US by significant margins for now and for the future.

Second, a more clear-cut geographical difference emerges in terms of seeing the US influence. Among the 13 East Asian countries, the Philippines is the only country where the majority of people hold a strong belief in the US dominant influence in Asia now and in the next ten years whereas Mongolia has the lowest. Except for Vietnam and Thailand, respondents in other Southeastern countries show more confidence in the US influence in Asia now than those in Northeastern countries. As for the US supremacy in Asia in the next ten years, southeastern Asian countries systematically have greater faith than northeastern ones. As we take China into consideration, we find that where the US has a stronger hold is a weak link for China in general. Among the countries with a majority of people with greater conviction in China’s influence than the US, most of them located in northeastern Asian countries.

Third, liberal democracies, such as Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, do not place more confidence in the US than other regimes. Although playing an important role in the
democratic development for the three liberal democracies, the US does not win the old allies’ support for its leading role in Asia. Moreover, the gaps between the US vs. China becomes larger for all three democracies from now to the future. The US old democratic allies have lost their faith in the US power in Asia.

**Figure 1: The Most Influential Country in Asia**

![Chart showing the most influential country in Asia]

Source: ABS4

In sum, East Asians paint a gloomy picture for the power status of the US in Asia now and even more so in the future. Except for the Philippines, the rise of China takes a toll of the US power in having more faith in northeastern countries and even liberal democracies. Nevertheless, China’s rise also raises more reservations by having more people choosing others. Overall, the US is eclipsed by Chin in the leadership in Asia.

*Popularity.* The next question is whether the US (China) is perceived as a benign power or
even a desirable role model for East Asian countries? In other words, we ask if East Asians welcome the US vs. China influence to the region and to themselves. In ABS4, there are two sets of questions that ask the respondents to evaluate China’s and the US’s influence in terms of more good than harm or more harm than good, with reference to the region and to their own countries, respectively.

For the perception of benign power, the respondents are presented with the question: Does the United States (China) do more good or harm to the region? They have four options, including “much more good than harm”, “somewhat more good than harm”, “somewhat more harm than good”, and “much more harm than good”. By combing the percentage of respondents choosing the former two items, we attribute them as recognizing the US influence as favorable to the US. Note that we categorize “don’t know”, “can’t choose”, and “don’t understand the questions” as neutral. Based on the percentages of the response items, we produce the bar chart on the left-hand side in Figure 2.

Next, we assign the value of 5 to “much more good than harm”, 4 for “somewhat more good than harm”, 3 for “neutral”, 2 for “somewhat more harm than good”, and 1 for “much more harm than good” to the two variables of evaluating the respective influence of the US and China. Then, we calculate the difference between two ratings in which a higher rating refers to a more positive evaluation for the US over China regarding their influence in the region.

According to the left and middle charts in Figure 2, we have three major findings. First, the US is generally more welcome by East Asians than China. Except for Indonesia, Hong Kong, Myanmar, and Malaysia, most East Asian countries have an overwhelming percentage of people viewing the US in a positive light. The positive opinion of the US is even up to 89.3% for the Philippines. However, public opinion of the US is so polarized and clear in Malaysia that the percentages of seeing the US influence in positive and negative ways are about the same and the ratio of neutral is small. By comparing the US with China in the middle bar
chart, we find that Vietnam, Japan, Philippines, and Mongolia have a majority of people feel that the US is better than China while Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and Hong Kong have more people favorable of China over the US. Again, a sharp trade-off exists in the percentages of people favoring the US or China. Where the US has a preferable view, China is not and vice versa. Note that reservations are prevalent because a great chunk of people does not see the two strong powers differently for most countries.

Second, geography does not play a role in the preference for either country. There is not a systematic pattern for the distribution of the respondents’ preference for the US even when China is taken into account. Lastly, over 50% of people in all three liberal democracies show the positive opinion of the US, but they do not necessarily give the US a more positive force than China. In particular, South Koreans (23.6%) have the lowest margin in terms of their preference for the US over China, Taiwanese (34.6%) in the middle, and Japanese (73.7%) have the highest evaluation. Non-democracies also show great variation in this regard. Nevertheless, if the reference point is set in the region, we find that the US outperforms China in delivering a benign image in the region.

Given that the US is widely considered as a positive force for East Asians, do they look up the US as a role model to one’s own country? In the ABS4, the respondents are asked that which country should be a model for our own country’s future development? Respondents are given several options, such as ”the United States”, ”China”, ”India”, ”Japan”, “Singapore”, ”other” and “we should follow our country’s own model”. We sum up the respective percentages of respondents who mentioned about either the US or China and place the rest of options as others.

As we demonstrate the percentages across countries in the bar chart on the right-hand side of Figure 2, several trends are evident. First, most East Asian countries still look up the US as a role model in the perspective of their own citizens. But, the Philippine is the only country
where over half of the people choose the US as their country’s role model while most countries have less than a third of people see the US the same way. As opposed to China being a role model to one’s own country, most countries are inclined to choose the US rather than China as a role model. On the other hand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Thailand have a greater percentage people choosing China over the US. Again, a significant portion of respondents have reservations about both country and turn to other countries as role models for most countries.

Second, geography does not matter in fostering the preferable choice of role model. Thirdly, liberal democracies are all favorites of the US than China as a role model to their own country while non-democracies, such as Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Thailand, are more likely to choose China over the US. For liberal democracies, South Korea (47.3%) is the only democracy where the percentage of people who look up the US as a role model is closer to 50%. In Taiwan and Japan, the respective figures are 13.8 % and 21.3% where the majority of people actually choose other countries as a role model and thus reveals doubts on either the US or China.

The general picture suggests that most East Asians think that the US is a positive force, but not a role model to them. Across all East Asian countries, the Philippines welcomes and admires the US most while Malaysians mostly struggle with the polarized opinion about the US influence. Although the US has been posing as a democratic role model and promoting democracy in East Asia, democracies like South Korea still fairly regard the US as the country’s role model. People in Japan and Taiwan apparently think otherwise. In a synthetic view, the US is overwhelmingly popular in East Asia, but not to the degree of worthwhile emulating.
Figure 2. The Popularity of Influence

Source: ABS4

Level of Democracy: The US vs. China. Since democracy serves as the moral high ground for the US to exert influence in Asia, we examine the level of democracy East Asians attribute to the US and China. The US consistently scores one of the highest possible ratings on the scale of democratic level across all objective or expert-survey measures such as Freedom House10, Polity IV Project11, V-Dem12 and etc. Nevertheless, we have not yet systematically examine

if East Asians’ subject evaluation of the US democratic level echoes what these objective measures have shown. The subjective evaluation is arguably important because democratic values have arguably been the moral high ground for the US to exert its influence in East Asia. The greater the gap between the subjective and objective measures in the US democratic level, the more likely for East Asians to resist the idea of democracy as the source of legitimacy for the US to intervene in regional affairs.

On a scale of from 1 (completely undemocratic) to 10 (completely democratic), we ask each respondent: Where would you place the United States today on this scale? Next, we calculate the mean ratings in the national level for the US and China and take the difference of between the US and China. According to the country mean ratings in Figure 3, we observe several traits. First, the subjective measure of the US democracy is systematically and slightly lower than the objective measure of 10 although the US systematically outscores China. For the US, none of the ratings is below 5, the threshold of being a non-democracy. By bringing China in the discussion, we find that Malaysia has the smallest gap in evaluating the democratic difference between the US and China. This may result from the implicit discrimination against the Muslims in the US.

Secondly, northeastern Asian countries detect more discrepancies between the US and China in terms of democratic development than southeastern ones. Finally, all three liberal democracies under-rate the US democracy although they systematically show the highest gap between the US and China. Non-democracies have greater variation in their evaluation for the US and the gap between the US and China.

In a general look, East Asians have a consensus on the high level of democracy in the US but diverge on the gap of democratic levels between the US and China. Japan (4.8) and Taiwan (4.6) are in salient contrast with Malaysia (0.5) and Indonesia (0.8) in evaluating the
democratic distance between the US and China. The US still has the purchase of advanced democracy for Asian democracies, but so for non-democracies.

**Figure 3. Level of Democracy**

![Chart](source: ABS4)

**Concluding remarks**

From East Asians’ general point of view, the US is a weakening, benign and democratic power in Asia, but it is not necessarily a role model to their own country. The US appears to have a stronger hold in the Philippines, Japan, and Southeastern Asian countries, but not necessarily democratic allies. Moreover, the rise of China has taken some toll of the US influence in power status and role model alternative, but not democratic level. China’s growing influence in the region is more intensively felt across East Asian countries. However,
the pessimistic prospect regarding the US influence in the next ten years and the US unattractive role model shows a warning sign for democratic development in Asia.

With regard to future research, we expect to combine ABS4 and the upcoming fifth wave of the ABS and reformulate the topic from the issue of favorability to the issues how people weigh the risk and the benefit brought by the weakening US and its influence. For some countries (e.g. non-adjacent countries with a territorial dispute with China), the consideration is predominantly economic about the pros and cons of expanding economic ties with a seemingly protectionist US in the American-first doctrine rather than China posing as a guardian for globalization; for others (e.g. adjacent or geopolitically adversarial to China), the picture might be cloudier and the spotlight is more associated with the political consequence of Trump’s capricious policymaking and Xi’s strong leadership. Still, for others (e.g. Taiwan, Korea), the myriad factors that should be taken into consideration cover multi-dimensional calculations combine with competing goals of varying priorities in specific temporal scope. All the above scenarios complicate how we meaningfully interpret the gloomy view of US influence in particular country sample.

It has to be emphasized that many Asian people might not have prepared to take a side in the U.S.-China strategic competition. In fact, the conventional wisdom in foreign policy circle tend to treat the pro-U.S. and pro-China attitudes mutually exclusive, but this might not be necessarily so in the Asia-Pacific region, even for those citizens whose countries are facing a potential security threat from a rising China and for those whose countries are under the now shaky security commitment by the US. Such an ambivalent orientation could be simply the case that many East Asians either take a benign view of both U.S. and China or a skeptical view toward both, or they sophisticatedly hold a finer strategic view that the balance of two great powers in the Asia-Pacific region serves their interest best. Given the proportion of indecisive or neutrality across East Asians countries, assuming a zero-sum game between the
strategic competition between two great powers in the Asia-Pacific region might misrepresent what most of the countries think of it: they could all gain advantage from both sides throughout the competition process, and more competition of the two actually brings more benefit than the cost.

The findings revisit Obama’s Pivot-to-Asia policy in the following regards. First of all, the perception of the declining influence of the US has become more widespread except the Philippines. China does replace the U.S.’s role in East Asians’ mind to become their major political and economic challenges. Second, China’s more assertive foreign policy in Asia may have eventually taken over the leadership in Asia as the Trump’s retraction of TTP and the increasing burden of security expense on its Asian allies may have further dampens the weakening US image in Asia. In other words, the American-first doctrine may ironically marginalize the US in Asia. Third, many Asians welcome the U.S.’s and China influence on the region at the same time. The strategic competition between of the U.S. and China is not a zero-sum game. China could find a way to take over the US by winning the heart of most Asians.

As Donald Trump assumes the presidency, the US Asian policy turns to a new page, which encounters many daunting challenges. To exert its leadership role in the region, the U.S. is facing the headwind of a widespread perception of the declining influence of the U.S. vs. the rising power of China. This expectation will make the US policy commitment less persuasive. Besides, Trump’s American-first doctrine makes foreign policies way more unpredictable than before. Moreover, Obama’s Pivot-to-Asia policy may have salvaged the perception of American influence, but the outcome remains unsatisfactory. If a silver lining in the clouds exists during the Trump administration, the US role is so far more welcome and appreciated by the great majority of Asian countries with the exception of Thailand and the Muslim countries like Malaysia and Indonesia. With the growing apprehension of China’s strategic
intent, the US role may still be viewed as indispensable.
Reference


International Organisations Research Journal (IORJ), 12(3).


## Appendix 1: Timetable for ABS Wave 4 for 13 Asian Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Period Start</th>
<th>Period End</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>Oct-15</td>
<td>Nov-15</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>Feb-16</td>
<td>Apr-16</td>
<td>1,217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>Jan-16</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Mar-16</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>Sep-14</td>
<td>Nov-14</td>
<td>1,207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mongolia</td>
<td>Jun-14</td>
<td>Aug-14</td>
<td>1,228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>Jul-14</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>Oct-14</td>
<td>Dec-14</td>
<td>1,039</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>Oct-15</td>
<td>Dec-15</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>Jun-14</td>
<td>Nov-14</td>
<td>1,657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>Aug-14</td>
<td>Oct-14</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>Sep-15</td>
<td>Oct-15</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>Jan-15</td>
<td>Mar-15</td>
<td>1,620</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: China is the major competitor to the US in Asia so that it is excluded from our sample of analysis.
### Appendix 2: Corresponding Survey Questions to the Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Survey Questions</th>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Re-Scale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Most Influential Country in Asia Now</td>
<td></td>
<td>1: China</td>
<td>0: China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2: Japan</td>
<td>1: United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3: India</td>
<td>2: Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4: United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5: Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Most Influential Country in Asia in Ten Years</td>
<td>Which country has the most influence in Asia?</td>
<td>1: China</td>
<td>0: China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2: Japan</td>
<td>1: United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3: India</td>
<td>2: Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4: United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5: Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The US (China) Influence on One’s Country</td>
<td>Does the United States (China) do more good or harm to the region?</td>
<td>1: Much more good than harm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2: Somewhat more good than harm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3: Somewhat more harm than good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4: Much more harm than good</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Model to One’s Country</td>
<td>Which country should be a model for our own country’s future development?</td>
<td>1: United States</td>
<td>0: China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2: China</td>
<td>1: United States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3: India</td>
<td>2: Others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4: Japan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5: Singapore</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6: Others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7: We should follow our country’s own model</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Democracy in the US (China)</td>
<td>Where would you place the United States (China) today on this scale?</td>
<td>1: completely undemocratic</td>
<td>Rating for the US (China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10: completely democratic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ABS4