

In Focus

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

In Focus

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

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Xi's Foreign-Policy Turn and Asian Perceptions of a Rising China

By Yun-han Chu & Yu-tzung Chang

In Focus: Chu & Chang

As the administration of US President Donald Trump formulates its policies toward Asia, especially China, policy-makers 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.

AS ONE OF the world's two largest economies, a rising China poses serious challenges to US hegemony in virtually every aspect. In response, the strategic pivot to Asia by US President Barack Obama clearly showed America's interest in consolidating its dominance in Asia, strengthening its alliance system and upgrading its engagement with and possible containment of China. Meanwhile, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, Beijing's increasingly assertive and ambitious foreign policy toward East Asia also reveals China's determination to ensure a favorable external environment for its further rise, enhance its influence over regional and global agendas and prepare for a possible strategic showdown with the United States and/or Japan.

Most media coverage and academic work has focused on how China and the US have deployed economic, political and even military tools for their competition in East Asia. Clearly, flexing their respective muscles plays a critical role in sending clear signals to each other in this strategic interaction, by demonstrating their capability and commitment. Showing off "hard power" also generates valuable information for their East Asian audiences, who continuously update their assessments and reflect on their strategic options and responses. Nevertheless, as Joseph Nye has famously argued, there is more than one way to influence the behavior of others and achieve a country's goals. China and the US also are keen on "soft power" competition in East Asia, seeking to win the hearts and minds of East Asians.¹

Over the last decade, Chinese policy elites have increasingly recognized that soft power and the

¹ Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York, NY: Public Affairs, 2004.

² "Hu Jintao calls for enhancing 'soft power' of Chinese culture," Xinhuanet, (Oct. 15, 2007), available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-10/15/content_6883748.htm

³ David Shambaugh, "China's Soft-power Push," *Foreign Affairs*, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-06-16/china-s-soft-power-push

⁴ The Asian Barometer Survey is a research network dedicated to

democratic studies through survey methodology. It comprises 14 country teams. 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

⁵ Stephen S. Roach, 2016. "Global Growth — Still Made in China," *Project Syndicate* (Aug. 29, 2016) www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/china-still-global-growth-engine-by-stephen-s-roach-2016-08?barrier=accessreg

management of national image are essential aspects of Chinese foreign policy. In 2007, Hu Jintao in an official address to the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party said that China needed to enhance "the soft power of its culture."² Since then, the Chinese government has invested billions of dollars to cultivate and upgrade its soft-power resources. As soon as Xi took over as president, he also reminded his cadres that "we should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's messages to the world."³

China's charm offensive — with its vision of a "harmonious world" and "the shared destiny of human beings" — presents itself as a responsible rising power with sincere and benign intentions to contribute to a new regional and global order. It has launched a public diplomacy campaign on a worldwide scale through the establishment of hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the world, running 24-hour CCTV news channels in major languages and offering scholarships for tens of thousands of international students. And yet, there have been few systematic investigations using public opinion data to evaluate how its neighbors view a rising China. In this article, we apply the latest two rounds of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) to investigate how Asian citizens evaluate the rise of China.⁴ We begin our analysis with an overview of the important developments in terms of the changing configuration of the strategic competition between China and the US during this critical juncture.

CHINA'S RISING GLOBAL INFLUENCE

Over the past four years, Beijing has shown a clear break from its longstanding low-key foreign policy. Today, China is not only promulgating its peaceful intentions as an ascending power and its willingness to contribute to the region's stability and prosperity, it is also launching new

initiatives of economic partnership and mechanisms of regional integration and multilateral co-operation, and hence, actively fostering a new order at both the global and regional level. Such distinctive change was widely perceived as the result of the change in China's leadership from Hu Jintao to Xi Jinping, who has carried out a wide-ranging anti-corruption campaign at home and become the most powerful Chinese leader since Deng Xiaoping.

The policy turn in China's global and regional strategy under Xi can be summarized by the following narrative: We are witnessing a more resourceful, more assertive, more ambitious, more aggressive China under his stewardship. To begin with, there are now many more policy instruments as well as greater economic leverage at China's disposal due to its rapid economic development. According to the International Monetary Fund, in 2014 China's GDP, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), reached US\$17.6 trillion, surpassing America's US\$17.4 trillion. The outflow of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) has grown dramatically, topping US\$120 billion in 2015, and since then China has become a net capital exporter. Further, China continues to be a major growth engine for the global economy, even as its own economic growth rate has slowed. In 2016, China accounted for an estimated 39 percent of the annual growth in the world economy.⁵

Another notable change in China's international strategy lies in its greater willingness to assert its demands, vision and policy objectives. China under Xi is eager to promote the "Chinese Dream" of national rejuvenation to the world and to claim China's global economic leadership among developing countries. Most notably, under Xi, China has made more explicit demands on other countries to respect its core interests, in particular its territorial integrity, including its sovereignty claims over the East and South

China Seas, as well as its long-standing positions on Tibet and Taiwan. Beijing has also become more assertive in playing an agenda-setting role with a much broader regional and global scope, for instance by proposing a “New Model of Great Power Relations” for Sino-US relations, peddling the initiative for an Asia-Pacific Free Trade Area through the APEC Summit, and driving the agenda of the 2016 G-20 Summit with its promotion of the so-called “Hangzhou Consensus.”

In a wide range of areas, China has undertaken ambitious new initiatives, something unthinkable and inconceivable just a few years ago. The launch of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative in 2013 has become the hallmark of Xi’s global strategy, with the ambition to reshape the region’s geopolitical as well as geo-economic landscape. Many important strategic moves emanate from the One Belt, One Road grand strategy. They include enlarging and upgrading the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO) by recruiting both India and Pakistan as new members and the launching of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to channel financial resources into the ambitious infrastructure projects abroad. All these strategic moves entail China’s ambitious goal to rewrite the rules of economic engagement and the parameters of globalization.

However, China’s rapid military buildup may also trigger negative views of its rise. In particular, 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

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.

⁶ ABS Wave 3 was administered between autumn 2010 and spring 2012, and the fieldwork of the ABS Wave 4 was implemented between autumn 2014 and spring 2016.

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 probability 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.⁶

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

FIGURE 1 INFLUENCE IN ASIA: HOW CHINA AND THE US COMPARE FROM ABS WAVE 3 TO WAVE 4

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3 (2010-12) and Wave 4 (2014-16).

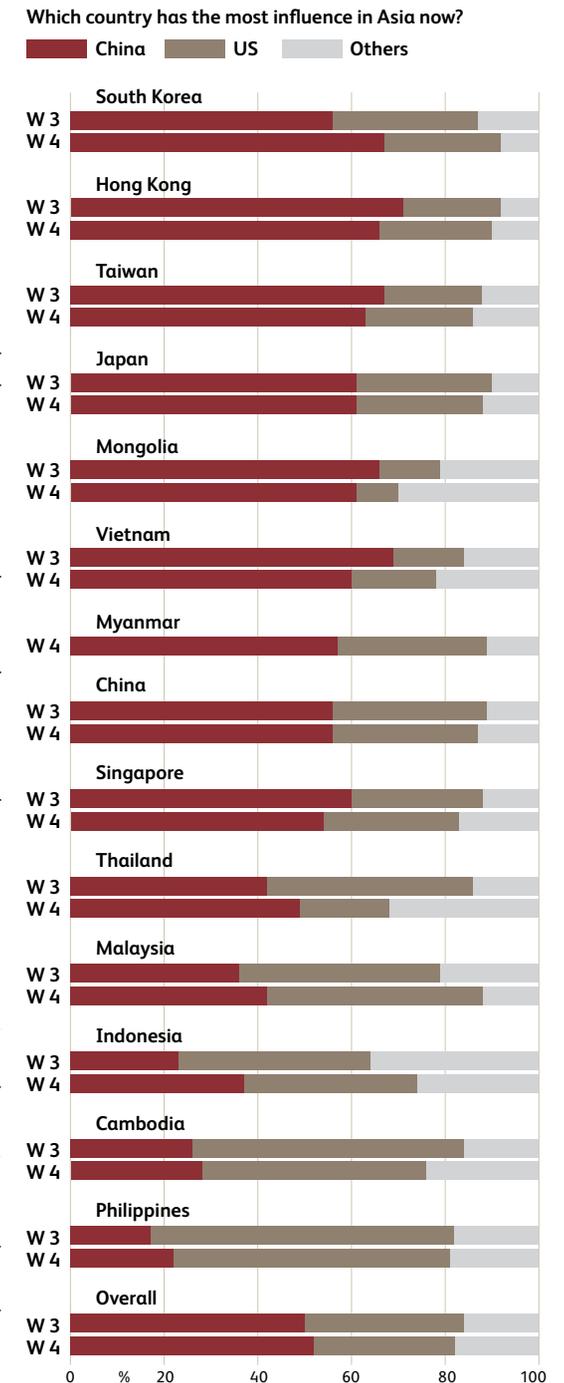


FIGURE 2 PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE AND US INFLUENCE ON THE REGION

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4 (2014-16).

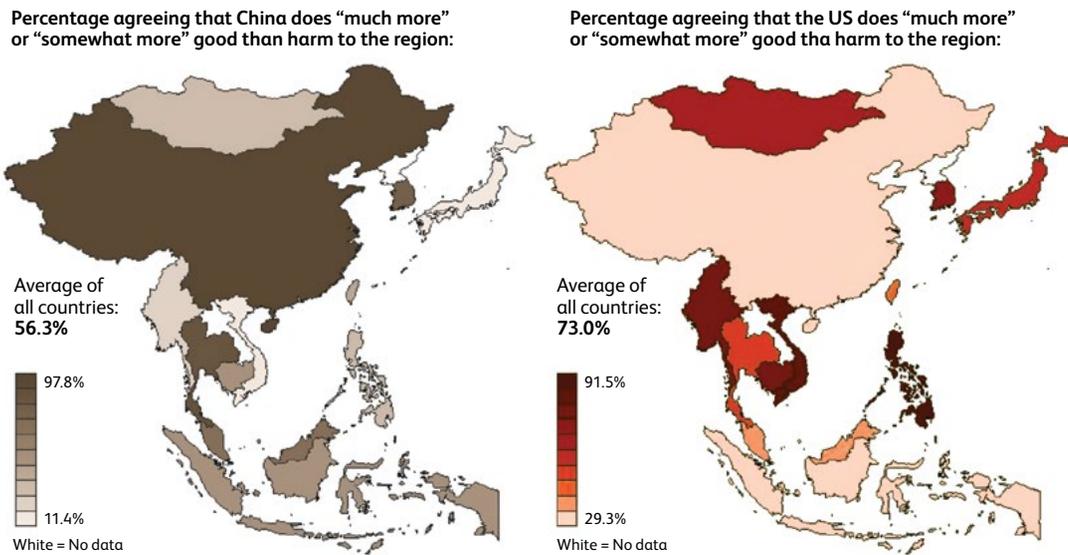
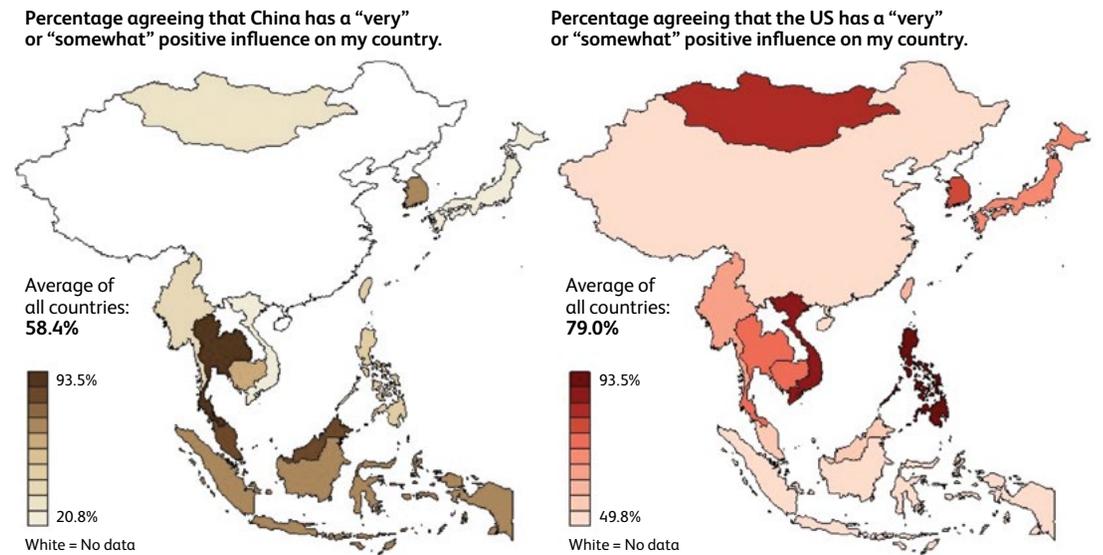


FIGURE 3 PERCEPTIONS OF CHINESE AND US INFLUENCE ON RESPONDENTS' OWN COUNTRY

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4 (2014-16).



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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 toward Asia on Obama's watch.

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).

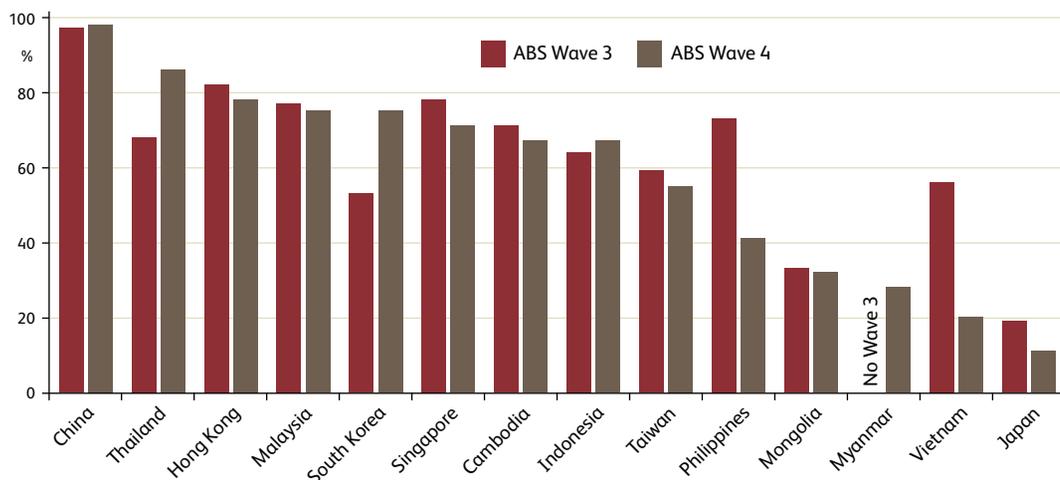
In the ABS Wave 3, the same evaluative questions were also asked about China's influence, and it is interesting to see the magnitude of change in popular perception toward the impact of China on the region. As illustrated in Figure 4 overleaf, in most countries, there was little change in popular views 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 on the basis of the perceived risks and benefits brought by a rising China. For countries that are geographically non-adjacent and without territorial disputes with China, the consideration is predominantly economic and focused on the pros and cons of expanding economic ties with

FIGURE 4 POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF CHINA ON THE REGION

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 3 (2010-12) and Wave 4 (2014-16).



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.

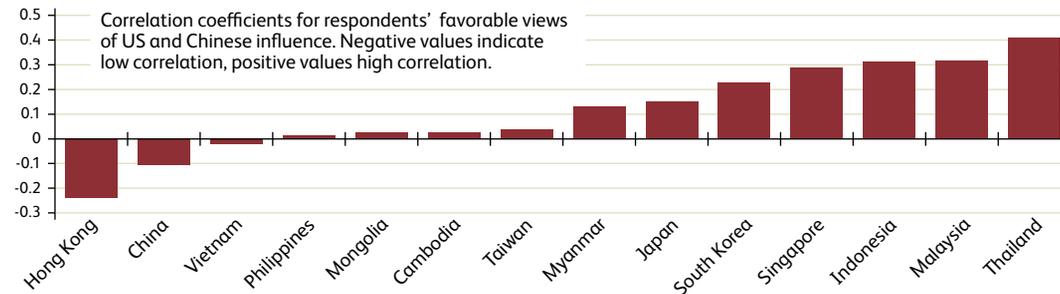
In the following, we correlate the measures of favorable perceptions of China and the US in selective country samples and report the result

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 great powers in the Asia-Pacific region might misrepresent what most of the countries think.

In most Asian countries, people welcome the strong presence of both, simply because the US cannot replace China as the locomotive of economic growth, while China can hardly replace the US as the ultimate guarantor of their coun-

FIGURE 5 SELECTED COUNTRY CORRELATIONS OF FAVORABLE PERCEPTION OF CHINA AND THE US

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4 (2014-16).



try's security. For more sophisticated Asians, they could all gain from Sino-US competition, and the balance of the two great powers in the Asia-Pacific region might serve their interests best. At the same time, in some countries, the popular backlash against globalization might unleash their anger at both. So, it is also not difficult to understand why certain Asians take a skeptical view of both the US and China. For people who are harmed by economic opening, financial instability and foreign competition, the US is viewed as the primary architect of this neo-liberal economic order, while China is the direct source of foreign competition.

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.

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