

In Focus

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

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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](http://www.asianbarometer.org)

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# Democratic Distance and Asian Views of Chinese and American Influence

## By Min-Hua Huang & Mark Weatherall

**Ideology, culture and domestic politics all play a role in how people in Asian countries view the influence of the United States and China. In the most recent Asian Barometer Survey, the three factors are all at work, write Min-Hua Huang and Mark Weatherall, but China may be gaining an edge as views of the US could suffer under President Donald Trump and China's economic strength makes up for concerns about its authoritarian political system.**

In Focus: Huang & Weatherall

IN RECENT YEARS, citizens in Asia have become increasingly aware of China's political, economic and military rise, and concerned about the impact on their own societies. But perceptions about China's rise and its impact on the region are determined by a multitude of factors, including contextual factors and domestic cleavages. In addition, since the rise of China challenges the United States as the pre-eminent power in the region, it is also important to measure how people view the influence of the US in the region.

In terms of contextual factors, data from the Fourth Wave of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) show that three factors are primary influences on the way that citizens in each country view the influence of China and the US: political ideology, economic openness and cultural values. However, these general contextual explanations are also subject to the influence of domestic political cleavages centered on issues such as national security and the distribution of economic benefits, as well as ethnic divisions within societies.

At a national level, political ideology, measured as perceived democratic distance between the surveyed country and either China or the US, has a strong positive effect on favorable evaluations of America, but no effect on favorable evaluations of China. At the same time, economic openness has a positive effect on evaluations of China, but a negative effect on evaluations of the US. The cultural distance between each of the surveyed countries and China and the US also has a divergent effect on citizens' evaluations of the two countries — a closer cultural distance to China is associated with more positive views of

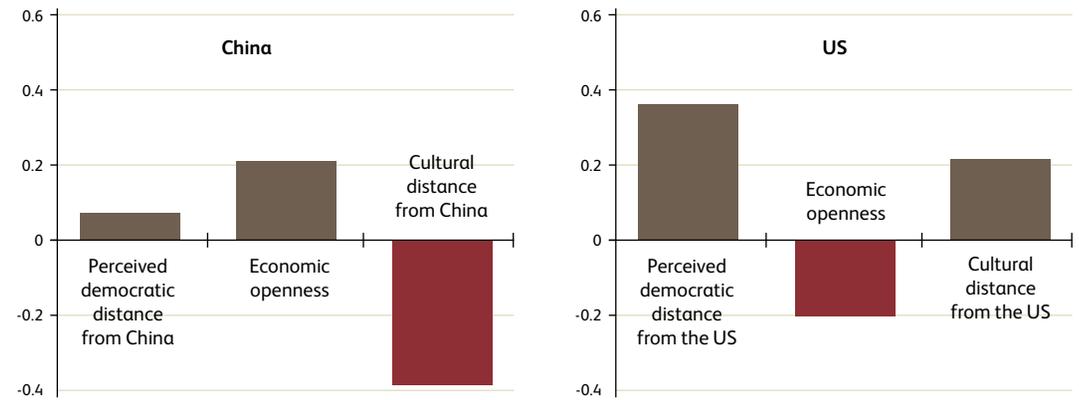
<sup>1</sup> Note: The perceived distance between China and one's own country is calculated for each respondent by taking the difference between where one places one's own country on a 10-point scale

of democratic development (where 1 represents "completely undemocratic" and 10 "completely democratic") and where one places China on the same scale.

**FIGURE 1 CORRELATION OF FAVORABLE PERCEPTIONS OF US AND CHINESE INFLUENCE ON THE REGION**

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

Respondents were asked their perceptions of China's and the US's influence and the results correlated against three contextual factors. Positive and negative scores correspond to positive or negative correlations.



China's influence; the reverse is true for the US. Finally, in societies with major domestic cleavages related to the political, economic or cultural impact of China or the US, we observe greater polarization over the evaluations of the influence of the two countries.

### CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

In Figure 1, we identify three contextual factors that influence perceptions of the influence of China and the US in the region. The first factor is political ideology, measured as the perceived democratic distance between one's own country and China and the US.<sup>1</sup> We find there is no relationship between perceived democratic distance and positive perceptions of China's influence across the 13 country samples. However, when we apply the same measure to the perceived democratic distance between one's own country and the US, we find a strong positive correlation. This indicates that many Asians still look to America as a model of democracy, an important factor in determining whether the influence of the US is viewed in positive or negative terms. In contrast, perceived levels of democratic distance make no difference to whether the influence of authoritarian China is perceived in positive or negative

terms. This suggests that China's one-party authoritarian system is no longer an obstacle to its ascendance in the region.

Previous studies have shown that East Asian citizens may view China's rapidly growing economy as either a threat or an opportunity. For instance, some might blame cheap Chinese imports for making domestic producers uncompetitive, while others may benefit from access to cheaper consumer goods or the opportunities provided by Chinese investment. We measure this by taking the aggregated mean of supportive attitudes toward economic openness in each country. As Figure 1 shows, supporting economic openness at the national level is associated with positive evaluations of China, but negatively associated with positive evaluations of the US. This suggests that many citizens in the region view China, rather than the US, as the main driver of regional integration and greater economic openness, and when citizens view these developments as an opportunity rather than a threat, they are more likely to view China in positive terms.

Cultural proximity is another salient factor in views of China and the US. Logically, we would expect that people in countries that are cultur-

<sup>2</sup> This finding may be related to the measures we use for cultural proximity. For cultural proximity to China, we measure the distance (either positive or negative) between each country and China on a battery of items measuring traditionalism. However, since we lack

comparative data for the US, we measure cultural proximity to the US through scores on a battery of questions measuring liberal democratic values, assuming that greater adherence to liberal democratic values indicates closer cultural proximity to the US.

ally in tune with China or the US would be more predisposed to view the role of China or the US in positive terms. As Figure 1 illustrates, this is true for people in countries that are culturally closer to China (shown by a lower average score on the vertical axis). Surprisingly, this does not apply for the US — citizens in countries that are culturally proximate to the US are actually less favorably disposed to American influence in the region.<sup>2</sup>

**DOMESTIC DIVISION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHINA AND THE US**

Factors such as political ideology, economic openness and cultural values have an impact on attitudes toward China and the US at the national level. However, this does not explain differences in attitudes *within* each country. As this section will show, the populations within many countries in the region are sharply polarized over their views of the US and China. In many cases, divergent views on the impact of a rising China have become important political cleavages — for instance in Hong Kong, where there is a sharp divide on whether economic integration with mainland China is viewed in favorable or unfavorable terms; similarly in Taiwan, citizens are divided over whether they see Beijing as a security threat to the island and if closer cross-strait economic integration is desirable. Furthermore, as we show for the case of Malaysia, views on the influence of China and the US are also influenced by the ethnicity of respondents.

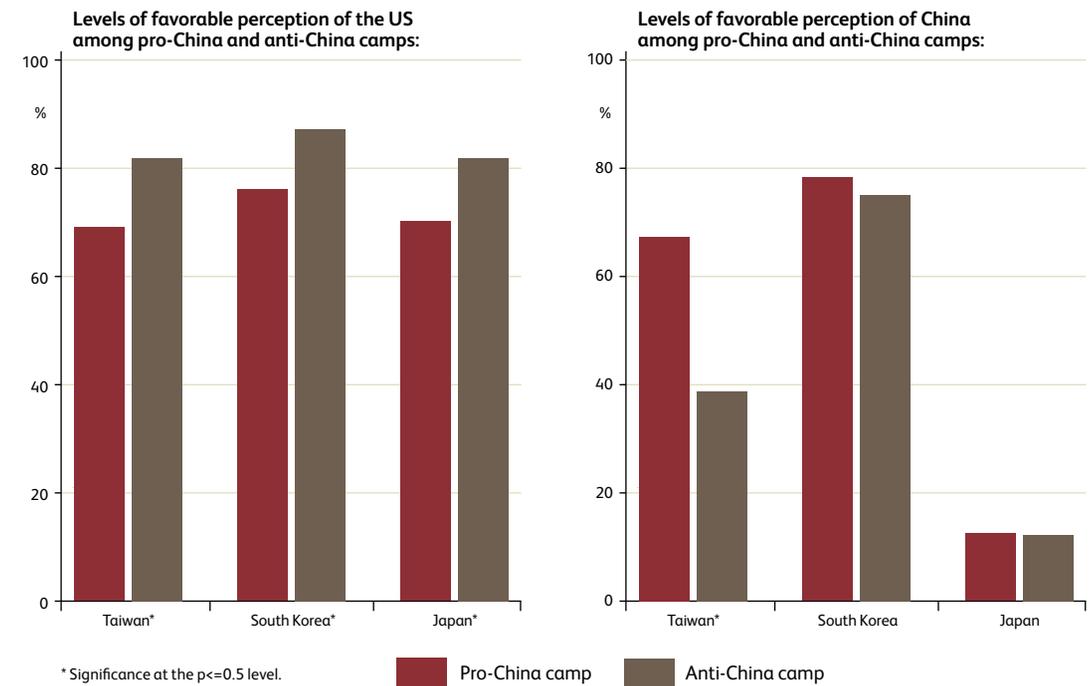
Figure 2 shows differences in views about the influence of China and the US by partisan orientation in three East Asian democracies. We code respondents according to whether they support a party or candidate that has traditionally taken a “pro-China” or an “anti-China” stance. In both Japan and South Korea, right-wing parties have traditionally been more skeptical of China and pro-American, while left-wing parties have often

advocated closer ties with Beijing. However, in Taiwan, the reverse is true, with the main liberal party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), adopting a more anti-China platform, while its conservative rival, the Kuomintang (KMT), has pushed for closer ties with Beijing. How do the traditional party platforms affect the attitudes of their supporters toward China and the US? First, in Taiwan, there is a large gap in favorable views of China between supporters of the DPP and supporters of the KMT, showing the continued importance of the China factor in Taiwan. However, we find no such gap in either South Korea or Japan, with South Korean citizens generally holding positive views of Chinese influence regardless of their partisan preferences, while their counterparts in Japan consistently view Chinese influence in negative terms. Second, in each of the three countries, support for “pro-China” parties is associated with more negative views of the influence of the US in the region. This finding suggests that for some citizens, there is a tradeoff between Chinese and American influence.

China’s rise has coincided with rapid globalization across the region and increasing income inequality within countries, even as the overall income gap between Asia and the West continues to narrow. As the region’s economies have become increasingly integrated with China, “winners” and “losers” have been created. This has been perhaps most apparent in Hong Kong and Taiwan, whose economies have become rapidly integrated with the Chinese economy, a process driven by geographical and cultural proximity and political imperatives. As Figure 3 shows, while there is no significant difference on how the influence of the US is viewed between those who see income distribution as “fair” and “unfair,” we find a statistically significant difference by perceived fairness of income distribution for views on the influence of China. This finding shows that

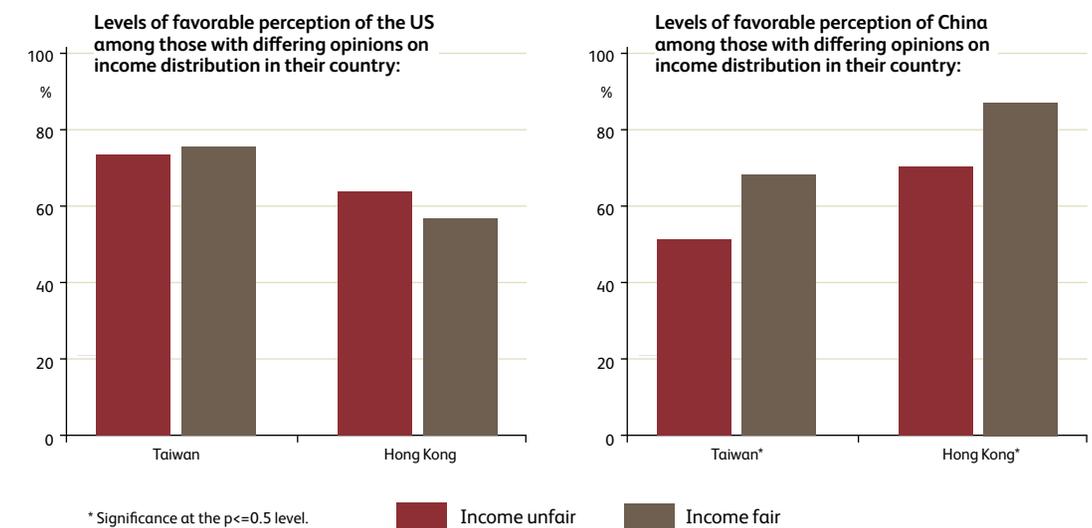
**FIGURE 2 PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF CHINA AND THE US ON THE REGION BY ‘PRO-CHINA’ AND ‘ANTI-CHINA’ PARTISAN GROUPS IN THREE ASIAN DEMOCRACIES**

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



**FIGURE 3 PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFLUENCE OF CHINA AND THE US ON THE REGION BY PERCEIVED INCOME INEQUALITY**

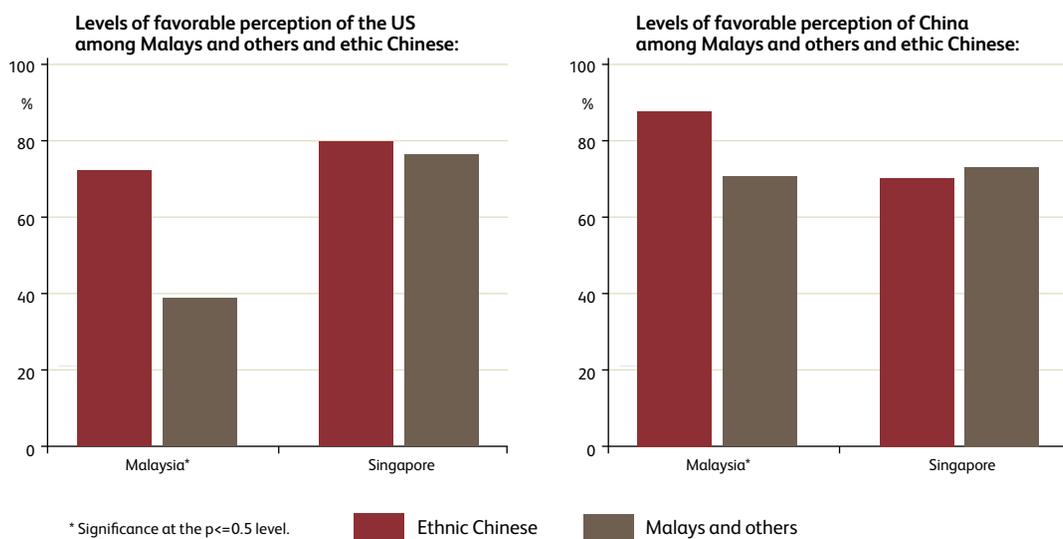
Source: Asian Barometer Survey Wave 4 (2014-16)



<sup>3</sup> Malaysia and Singapore ethnicity data is according to the CIA World Factbook, [www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/)

FIGURE 4 PERCEPTION THE INFLUENCE OF CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES ON THE REGION BY ETHNICITY

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



many citizens blame the growing influence of the Chinese economy for rising income inequality.

Views of China's influence may also be shaped by the ethnicity of respondents. For instance, Malaysia has a large Chinese minority, accounting for 22.6 percent of the population, together with other significant minorities including Indians (6.7 percent) and indigenous Malay or non-Malay tribes (11.8 percent).<sup>3</sup> Since independence in 1957, the Malay majority and the Chinese have shared the nation, with the Chinese exchanging economic resources for political security, and the Malays sharing some political power in return for economic benefits. But there has been very little assimilation between the different ethnic communities in Malaysia in terms of marriage, religion, language, customs and ethnic and cultural identity. Given their strong Chinese identity, we expect that Chinese Malaysians will have a more positive view of China's influence in the region. In contrast, Singapore has a Chinese majority, accounting for 74.2 percent of the population, with Malays and Indians accounting for 13.3 percent and 9.2 percent of the population, respec-

tively. However, in contrast to its neighbor to the north, Singapore has promoted a multi-cultural identity and ethnic integration. Therefore, we do not expect that ethnic differences will significantly predict Singaporeans' attitudes toward the influence of China and US.

As Figure 4 shows, Chinese Malaysians are more likely than their non-Chinese counterparts to view the influence of China as positive (88 percent vs. 71 percent). However, in Singapore, we find no difference between ethnic groups on assessments of China's influence. For views on the US, there was a large gap between Chinese and non-Chinese respondents, with 72 percent of Chinese respondents viewing the influence of the US as positive, compared to just 39 percent of the non-Chinese. This finding is likely driven by growing anti-American sentiment among the Muslim Malay population due to the US-led War on Terror. In contrast, there was no significant difference in perceptions of American influence between ethnic groups in Singapore, once again showing the effect of Singapore's policy of multi-cultural identity and ethnic integration.

Many Asians still look to America as a model of democracy, an important factor in determining whether the influence of the US is viewed in positive or negative terms. In contrast, perceived levels of democratic distance make no difference to whether the influence of authoritarian China is perceived in positive or negative terms.

**POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

With the center of regional economic gravity shifting from Japan to China and the seeming abdication of economic leadership by the US under President Donald Trump, East Asia is destined to become one of the few regions in the world where a non-democratic power dominates the agenda of regional economic co-operation and perhaps the only region where newly democratic countries become economically integrated with and dependent on non-democratic countries. China's economic pull is so strong that its distinctive post-socialist political system no longer stands in the way of forming closer economic ties with its democratic neighbors. A similar trend is taking place in the steady deepening of economic ties between China and the newly democratized Central and Eastern European countries. This also implies that the overall regional political environment will become more hospitable for many authoritarian and hybrid regimes, such as Thailand, Cambodia and Malaysia.

While the ideological cleavage is withering away, economic cleavage might stand in the way, because the benefits and risks of economic integration with China are not distributed evenly. If China aspires to become a more respectable architect of regional integration and a champion of free trade, it will have to create a regional environment more conducive to inclusive growth. Otherwise, growing economic polarization will

take its toll on domestic support for a pro-China coalition in most of its trading partners. Chinese leaders also need to be aware of sensitivities in the two Muslim countries — Indonesia and Malaysia — where the ethnic Chinese minority has struggled in a fragile political cohabitation with the Muslim majority.

US influence is still more favorably perceived as long as Asians continue to identify America as their democratic model. However, this long-standing soft-power advantage is now cast in serious doubt as Trump's foreign policy might run the risk of squandering both America's policy credibility and its image as an icon of liberal democracy in the eyes of Asian people. Over the long run, however, the US can still improve its image in East Asia if it is able to improve its currently dysfunctional democratic system, and if it can serve as an economic alternative to China.

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