

PERSPECTIVE

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Is the US being Eclipsed in Southeast Asia?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Overturning decades of conventional wisdom, the strategic influence of China in Southeast Asia has surpassed that of the US in the eyes of the region. More than half of the respondents to the State of Southeast Asia 2020 survey believe this to be so.
- While the Trump Administration has been active in Asia, observers think it has reduced its engagement with Southeast Asia in order to focus on North-east Asia and on its own domestic imperatives.
- Neither the Indo-Pacific Strategy nor the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that are advanced by the US are well understood or seen to have much impact. Instead, the increased competition between the US and China has driven Southeast Asia towards self-reliance and towards building ties with other powers.
- Nevertheless, the US still has more supporters who favour its strategic predominance than China does. In addition, the other preferred partners of the region are those more closely aligned with the US than China.
- The US also retains significant soft power influence which it can draw upon if it seeks to regain its position.

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INTRODUCTION

China has overtaken the United States as the most influential political and strategic player in Southeast Asia, according to the results of the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute’s State of Southeast Asia 2020 Survey.¹ This was already the case in last year’s survey, but it is even more so now. The advance made by China is mainly at the expense of the US, although most other major countries also polled lower this year relative to last.

Prior to the first survey results last year, most analysts would have expected the US to dominate in the politico-security sphere in the region, even if China were to prevail in the economic stakes. This is no longer the case as those picking China as the most influential strategic player have gone from a plurality of votes last year (45.2 per cent) to a clear majority (52.2 per cent) this year. The US was picked as the most influential strategic power by just 26.7% of respondents this year, compared 30.5% last year. ASEAN came in third at 18.1% in 2020, dropping from 20.8% in 2019. Another corroborating trend seen in the survey is the rise in the percentage of respondents who had little or no confidence in the US as a strategic partner or provider of regional security, from 34.6% in 2019 to 47% in 2020.

MIXED SIGNALS

How did this perception of decline in US influence come about? The Trump Administration had been quite active in Asia since it came into office. Besides its changes of approach in relations with China and North Korea which captured the headlines, it also stepped up “freedom of navigation” operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea,² pushed the boundaries on Taiwan and strengthened its ties with key countries such as Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam. Together with Congress, it also set up a new development agency and made a modest tranche of funds available³ to compete with China’s Belt & Road Initiative in funding infrastructure in the region. Despite this, the past year has seen growing scepticism in the region about US engagement with Southeast Asia. An astonishingly high proportion of almost eight in 10 respondents are of the view that US engagement has decreased during the Trump Administration as compared with the Obama period.

Respondents could have read the new directions that the Trump Administration had taken in relations with China and North Korea as tactical moves to serve the US’s own national interests rather than a strategy that serves broader regional interest. Indeed, this is the rhetoric that emerges most strongly from the White House, alongside the more balanced statements that come from the State Department and the Pentagon. Observers would also be aware that the highly politicised environment in Washington in recent years has limited the bandwidth available for foreign policy issues that do not have a strong domestic angle. In addition, these policy shifts, along with the changes on Taiwan and Japan pertain more directly to Northeast Asia rather than to Southeast Asia. The increase in FONOPs and strengthening of ties with the Philippines and Vietnam would be more pertinent and probably had some impact on regional perceptions, though they could not prevent a slide in the overall perception of US influence.

One factor that probably had a negative effect on respondents in this survey was the low level of US presence in regional meetings during the time of the survey. The survey took place soon after the 2019 East Asia Summit (EAS) when US representation was at its lowest

ever⁴. For that summit, President Trump sent National Security Advisor Robert O'Brien, a non-cabinet member, as his special envoy. This was a step down compared to all previous EAS meetings, where either the Vice President or Secretary of State would do the honours if the President could not attend. However, this could not have been the only factor at work—the 2019 poll that did not have a similar trigger still had seven in 10 saying that US engagement in the region had declined.

EMBRYONIC CONCEPTS

Another factor at play could have been a lack of clear understanding of the Trump Administration's policy towards the region. Over the last two years, the US had rolled out new strategic concepts and revived dormant ones. However, the moves have so far not been sufficiently convincing.

When asked, a majority of respondents (54%) still perceived the Indo-Pacific concept as lacking clarity and details. This was despite the roll-out of the Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Strategy Report in June last year. Nevertheless, the steps that the US took to flesh out the concept did gain it greater traction than before. More than one in four now think it a viable new regional order compared to just one in six before. The progress is most significant in Thailand, Vietnam, Myanmar and the Philippines. Most respondents were also inclined to agree with Washington's line that the Indo-Pacific concept is not to contain China.

However, there is an uptick in the number of respondents who are concerned that the Indo-Pacific concept may undermine ASEAN's relevance. While the US has repeated its commitment to ASEAN centrality on many occasions, those words may have appeared inconsistent with its actions, especially its low representation at the EAS. In the face of rising great power competition, the regional elite is banking more on building up the region's own resilience and unity in order to fend off pressures and stay neutral. Almost half (48%) chose building ASEAN resilience as the best response to the situation, while 31.3% chose to maintain neutrality and 14.7% to seek out third party powers. ASEAN's decision during the Summit meeting in June 2019 to issue a carefully worded "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" can be seen as an attempt to achieve all three objectives.

Similar to the reaction to the Indo-Pacific concept, less than half of the survey respondents (45.8%) are convinced about the positive impact of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), an informal arrangement bringing together the US, Japan, Australia and India. A large group (38%) think it will have no impact, while significant numbers (16.2%) think it will have a negative impact. At the country level, the Philippines and Vietnam are the most positive about the Quad with 70.8% and 65.8% respectively supporting it. Most sceptical are Indonesia and Malaysia with 68.9% and 67.5% respectively seeing it to have negative or no impact on the security of the region. The Quad held a ministerial meeting last September on the side-lines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. This is its highest level of discussions to date and signalled that momentum for the Quad is picking up.

Scepticism about the impact of the Quad, however, does not translate into reluctance to participate in its initiatives. Consistent with ASEAN's usual open and inclusive posture, more than six in 10 believe that their respective countries should participate in Quad

activities and exercises if invited to do so. Cambodia is the only country in which a clear majority reject the idea of participating in Quad activities. Underlying this is the strong desire of ASEAN states to preserve good relations with all sides and its prevailing preference not to choose sides if possible.

STILL THE PREFERRED PARTNER

While some of the sentiments expressed in the survey may set off alarm bells in Washington, the situation is not so pessimistic when one drills deeper into the findings. For one thing, far more of those who chose the US as the most influential power in the region welcome the situation than the corresponding group for China – more than five in 10 compared to just 15 per cent for China. Even when converted into absolute numbers, the respondents who consider the US most influential and welcome it still outnumber those who chose China by almost two to one.

In addition, when faced with the hypothetical choice of whom ASEAN should side with, more than half the respondents indicate a preference for the US over China. However, the level of preference differs significantly from country to country. China is the clear choice in five ASEAN member states (Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia and Myanmar), two are fence sitters (Indonesia and Thailand) and three choose the US (Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam).

The poll also reveals that events over last year affected both ends of the spectrum. Curiously, both those who had confidence in the US as a strategic partner as well as those who had little or no confidence in it grew at the expense of those who were neutral. However, growth in the latter group was four times that of the former. Most of the growth of those who had confidence came from one country, the Philippines. The US has done something right there in 2019 that may or may not be replicable elsewhere. While being a bit of an outlier, popular opinion in the Philippines is particularly important during the current situation where its President has a personal dislike for the US and may seek opportunities to downgrade the relationship. The recent abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the Philippines and the US is a stark example of what can happen. It remains to be seen whether public opinion can bring about a change of direction in the half-year period before the VFA formally expires.

LOOKING TO JAPAN AND THE EU

Another positive note is that trust in the US to do the right thing for global interest has improved albeit modestly since the poll last year. More than 30 per cent have confidence in the US this year compared to about 27 per cent last year. Philippines and Vietnam, which have the most visible territorial disputes with China in recent years, are the two countries where the majority believe that the US will act rightly. However, the level of regional trust in the US pales in comparison to trust in Japan, which polled more than 60 per cent. The US is also behind the European Union, which polled 39 per cent. Indeed, answers to another survey question show that these two powers are the ones Southeast Asians would most likely seek out as third parties to hedge against the uncertainties of US-China rivalry. Japan is the

clear choice of almost four in 10 respondents for this, while the EU is the choice of about one in three.

On specific areas of common good, the US continues to look strong when it comes to the rules-based order and international law, where it garnered one out of every four votes and comes in second behind the EU, who got one in every three votes. On free trade, however, the US lags behind both Japan and the EU. The tactics used by Washington in its trade war with China are one factor that may have eroded its free trade credentials, but perhaps more critical were the rhetoric it used against friendly countries and the concrete actions taken to undermine the WTO.

Interestingly, China is perceived to be on par with the US in providing leadership for free trade. This would have been inconceivable just a few years ago, but is now understandable in light of Washington's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and its stated preference for a bilateral approach on trade issues.

CONCLUSION

The US has seen a significant decline in regional perceptions of its strategic influence in Southeast Asia over the last few years. Whether the US can regain the lead in this depends on what it does going forward. Many (42.8%) of the respondents who lack confidence in the US attribute it to the US being distracted by its own internal affairs. This proportion is much higher than those who think that the US is inherently unreliable (19.1%) or lacking the capacity for global leadership (7.1%).

If the US emerges from its internal preoccupations, it can draw on a number of things to regain a stronger position. Firstly, the powers that the region trusts, namely Japan and the EU, are close allies that the US has worked well with in the past. Secondly, these two close partners of the US are also the top two choices that respondents who consider the US unreliable will turn to.

Finally, there are deep strengths in soft power that the US can tap into—in particular, the US remains the top choice for tertiary education and English is the overwhelming favourite among foreign languages in the region. The deferred ASEAN-US summit planned for sometime this year, if it still happens, may give an indication of what the trend of US influence will be like going forward.

Box: About the State of Southeast Asia Survey

- The survey is conducted by ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute annually in all 10 ASEAN countries. 2020 is the second survey in the series.
- The respondents are professionals from five different sectors: government, academia, business, civil society and media.
- There were 1,308 respondents and the margin of error for the survey is about 3%.

¹ The State of Southeast Asia: 2020 Survey Report, ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 16 Jan 2020.

<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/TheStateofSEASurveyReport_2020.pdf>. Accessed 18 February 2020.

² “In challenging China’s claims in the South China Sea, the US Navy is getting more assertive” by David B. Larter, Defense News, 5 Feb 2020.

<<https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/02/05/in-challenging-chinas-claims-in-the-south-china-sea-the-us-navy-is-getting-more-assertive/>>. Accessed 28 Feb 2020.

³ “The BUILD Act has passed: What’s Next?” by Daniel F. Runde & Romina Bandura, CSIS website, 12 Oct 2018. <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/build-act-has-passed-whats-next>>. Accessed 28 Feb 2020.

⁴ “US to Downgrade East Asia Summit Participation in 2019” by Ankit Panda, The Diplomat, 30 Oct 2019. <<https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/us-to-downgrade-east-asia-summit-participation-in-2019/>>. Accessed 28 Feb 2020.

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