

PERSPECTIVE

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Southeast Asians' Declining Trust in China

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Chinese medical supplies to the ASEAN Secretariat in April 2020. Photo: Kusuma Pandu Wijaya, ASEAN Secretariat)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The State of Southeast Asia 2021 survey indicates that Southeast Asians' trust in China continues to trend downward, in contrast to the US' improved trust ratings.
- China's success in containing the pandemic domestically, its "mask and vaccine diplomacy" in the region and Southeast Asians' acknowledgement of Chinese support on COVID-19 have had little effect on their trust deficit towards Beijing.
- Southeast Asians' appreciation of China's significant influence in the region is accompanied by their profound anxiety over China's ability to constrain their countries' sovereignty and foreign policy choices.
- This persistent trust deficit not only undermines China's "discourse power", it is a cognitive bias that may influence Southeast Asian countries' foreign policy towards China.
- The survey findings, including on the South China Sea issue, behoove Beijing to recalibrate its approach to the region, especially on recognising both China's responsibility and Southeast Asian countries' agency in moving relations forward.

INTRODUCTION

The past year has perhaps been the most turbulent and disruptive one since the end of the Cold War, with the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping across the world, claiming millions of lives, ravaging economies and accentuating geopolitical tensions between major powers, especially US-China rivalry. Early in and early out of the pandemic, China has further consolidated its position as the most influential economic and political-strategic power in Southeast Asia. Beijing also actively extended “mask and vaccine diplomacy” towards ASEAN and its member states to promote China’s image as a responsible major power and shake off the stigma of the “Chinese origins” of the coronavirus.

Has China’s successful pandemic containment and its charm offensives towards Southeast Asia helped to increase the region’s trust towards Beijing? Has the pandemic induced any major positive shift in the region’s confidence in Beijing to “do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, governance and prosperity? How does China’s trust rating in the region compare to that of the US, given the Trump Administration’s abject failure to rein in the pandemic, economic depression, and racial and political violence? Responses from 1,032 respondents to the *State of Southeast Asia* (SSEA) 2021 survey,¹ which tracks the trust and distrust ratings of major powers in the region since 2019, confirms two juxtaposing trendlines with regard to Southeast Asian perceptions towards China, as simultaneously the most influential and the most distrusted power in the region.

Even though the survey report authors correctly indicate that this survey is not meant to present “the definitive Southeast Asian view” – there is no single Southeast Asian view anyway given the diversity of regional countries’ outlooks – the survey findings are worth pondering as the majority of its respondents are targeted audience from the policy, research, business, civil society and media sectors in the ten ASEAN countries. They are considered as having access to the making of foreign policy and/or having influence in shaping public opinions in the region. This *Perspective* examines the survey findings on the region’s persistent trust deficit towards China, which should behoove Beijing to introspect and recalibrate its foreign policy towards the region.

CHINA’S CHARM OFFENSIVES TOWARDS SOUTHEAST ASIA

One of the most profound geopolitical impacts of COVID-19 is that it has accelerated the power shift in Asia further towards China. The Lowy Institute’s Asia Power Index 2020 reported that the US registered the largest fall in relative power of any Indo-Pacific country and that Beijing’s power differential with Washington has narrowed accordingly.² Raw power aside, China’s biggest gain from the pandemic is arguably political. With its successful containment of the pandemic and sustained economic growth at 2.3%,³ Beijing has become even more assertive domestically and vindicated internationally in the control of its one-party, authoritarian state. Buoyed by this momentum, China has aggressively engaged in “wolf warrior diplomacy” in mostly Western countries while undertaking charm offensives across the world, including in Southeast Asia.

In both economics and optics, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought Southeast Asia and China closer together. China remains ASEAN’s largest trading partner for the past decade while ASEAN has overtaken the EU to become China’s largest trading partner in 2020 with bilateral trade increasing by 7% in 2020.⁴ Despite the global FDI collapse in 2020,⁵ China’s FDI inflows

to ASEAN in the first three quarters of 2020 reached USD10.72 billion, a 76.6% year-on-year increase, whereas investment from ASEAN to China increased by 6.6%.⁶ The conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) Agreement in 2020 is expected to “reinforce(s) the economic interdependence of Asia” and “bring the region closer into China’s economic orbit”.⁷

On the diplomatic front, Chinese leaders have not only engaged in “cloud diplomacy” with their ASEAN counterparts but also made efforts to visit ASEAN countries for “ground diplomacy” despite COVID-19 travel restrictions (Table 1). All these visits were aimed at amplifying the narrative of “a closely-knit China-ASEAN community with a shared future”⁸ and pacifying the South China Sea (SCS) issue at a time when all key Southeast Asian claimant states as well as the US and other Western powers have put up a robust legal defence at the UN against China’s maritime claims in the SCS. These direct diplomatic engagements also seek to solidify Beijing’s geopolitical gains from the pandemic, projecting China as a successful and responsible major power in contrast with the US still in the grip of a deadly pandemic and withdrawn from global leadership under the Trump Administration.

Table 1: High-level visit exchanges between China and ASEAN member states (2020-2021)⁹

Jan 2020	Xi Jinping’s state visit to Myanmar
Feb 2020	Visit to China by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s visit to Laos and attendance in the ASEAN-China Special Foreign Ministers Meeting on COVID-19
Aug 2020	Visit to Singapore by Yang Jiechi, member of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China
Sep 2020	Visits to Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines by Chinese Defence Minister Wei Fenghe Yang Jiechi’s visit to Myanmar
Oct 2020	Visits to Cambodia, Malaysia, Laos, Singapore (transit visit) and Thailand by Wang Yi Visit to China by Indonesian President’s Special Envoy, Coordinator for Cooperation with China and Coordinating Minister Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan Visit to China by Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Teodoro Locsin
Jan 2021	Wang Yi’s visits to Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines

Most notably, China has turned the COVID-19 crisis into a strategic opportunity by stepping up cooperation with ASEAN countries on pandemic response. ASEAN and Chinese foreign ministers convened a special meeting on COVID-19 in February 2020, pledging to enhance cooperation in pandemic response through sharing information, mitigating supply chain disruptions of medical goods and promoting research and development of medicines and vaccines. At the virtual ASEAN-China foreign ministers’ meeting in September 2020, Wang Yi proposed a “China-ASEAN vaccine friends” initiative which will put “ASEAN countries as a priority after the vaccine is put into use” and “enhance information exchange and cooperation in production, development and usage of vaccines”.¹⁰ Southeast Asia has become a prime destination of Chinese “mask diplomacy”¹¹ and “vaccine diplomacy”¹² (Table 2). Chinese media has rallied in full swing for Chinese “vaccine diplomacy”, saying that

“promoting vaccine cooperation not only paves the way for a faster economic rebound, but also enhances mutual trust among China and all ASEAN countries.”¹³

Table 2: China’s Vaccine Diplomacy in Southeast Asia¹⁴

ASEAN countries	Chinese Vaccine Support
Brunei	Among 14 countries receiving Chinese aid in the form of COVID-19 vaccines
Cambodia	China’s offer of initial 1 million doses, 600,000 doses of which have been donated to Cambodia.
Indonesia	Sinovac partnering with Indonesia’s PT Bio Farma to produce vaccines locally, accounting for 40% of Indonesia’s vaccine supply First country outside China approving and rolling out Sinovac vaccination Order of 143 million doses from Sinovac with 1.2 million doses already delivered
Laos	300,000 China-donated COVID-19 vaccines have been delivered.
Malaysia	Agreement on Malaysia’s priority access to Chinese vaccines with 23.3 million doses
Myanmar	China’s promise to donate 300,000 doses
Philippines	China’s promise to donate 500,000 doses A purchase of 25 million doses from Sinovac under negotiation
Singapore	Signed advanced purchase agreement with Sinovac but so far only Pfizer and Moderna vaccines have been approved for local inoculation.
Thailand	Order of 2 million doses of Sinovac, with 200,000 doses to be received by February 2021
Vietnam	In negotiation with Chinese, Russian, American and British suppliers to buy COVID-19 vaccines
Through multilateral channels	China is a member of the WHO-led COVID-19 Vaccine Global Access (COVAX) Facility. China’s USD1 million contribution to the ASEAN COVID-19 Response Fund

CHINA’S DISMAL TRUST RATINGS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Have China’s charm offensives over the past year paid off in terms of raised trust in the region towards Beijing? The SSEA Survey 2021 findings do not suggest so. On the contrary, the survey demonstrates a continuing deterioration of trust in China among Southeast Asian respondents, which should be disquieting to Beijing, especially in the following aspects.

Growing trust deficit in China despite recognition of its COVID-19 support

Most Southeast Asians are currently preoccupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, viewing it the top challenge facing the region, and duly recognise China’s COVID-19 support in this respect. 44.2% of respondents choose China as the Dialogue Partner that has provided the most help to the region on COVID-19, well above second-place Japan (18.2%). China is the top choice in

eight ASEAN countries, except Vietnam which choose the US as providing the most help and Myanmar whose top choice is Japan.

Recognition of China's COVID-19 support, however, has done little to improve China's trust ratings among Southeast Asians which have been trending downward every year since this survey started. The percentage of respondents who distrust China¹⁵ increased from 51.5% in 2019 to 60.4% in 2020 and 63% this year. In all ASEAN countries, the levels of distrust towards China are higher than the trust levels. Additionally, the share of respondents who think that "China is a revisionist power and intends to draw Southeast Asia into its sphere of influence" also increased from 38.2% in 2020 to 46.3% this year. Meanwhile, despite Chinese "mask and vaccine diplomacy", only 1.5% in both last year and this year' surveys view China as "a benign and benevolent power".

Trust in the US on the rise, against all odds

To the surprise of many, the survey results show a clear contrast between China's deteriorating distrust ratings and the US' improving trust ratings which increased from 30.3% in 2020 to 48.4% in 2021. Likewise, the share of respondents having confidence in the US as a strategic partner and provider of regional security increased from 34.9% to 55.4%. Washington also joins the EU as the two major powers in which Southeast Asians have the strongest confidence to provide leadership in maintaining the rules-based order and upholding international law and championing the global free trade agenda. This is despite the fact that China actively pushed through the RCEP Agreement and recently expressed intention to join the CPTPP while Washington chooses to stay out. As regards the forced "binary choice", 61.5% of the respondents choose the US, up from 53.6% last year whereas 38.5% choose China, down from 46.4%. At the country level, seven ASEAN countries chose China last year, which has reversed to seven siding with the US this year.

The survey report attributes this positive view of the US to the prospects of the new Biden Administration with its "Build Back Better" promise, including revitalising American global leadership and engagement with the region. In the 2020 survey, 60.3% of the respondents said that their confidence in the US would increase if there was a change in American leadership. This year's survey results verify just that. Even if many analysts have argued that the world and the region have changed and there is no way back to a pre-Trump time,¹⁶ this survey shows that the Biden Administration will nonetheless enjoy a big reservoir of goodwill and welcome among Southeast Asians.

Between economic interdependence and strategic dependency

The survey carries forward two juxtaposing trendlines from its previous editions with regard to Southeast Asian perceptions of China's influence. On the one hand, Southeast Asians overwhelmingly view China as the most influential economic power in the region (76.3%). Yet, 72.3% of respondents in this cohort are concerned about China's growing regional economic clout. The same anxiety with even a higher degree (88.6%) applies to China's political-strategic clout, and it is pronounced in both the mainland and maritime parts of Southeast Asia. Underlying this perception is the worry shared by 51.5% of respondents that China's economic and military power could be used to threaten Southeast Asian countries' interest and sovereignty, including the use of economic tools and tourism to punish their foreign policy choices.

When asked about what China can do to improve relations with regional countries, 68.9% of the respondents suggest that “China should respect my country’s sovereignty and not constrain my country’s foreign policy choices”. This is the top choice for respondents from five ASEAN countries—Cambodia (100%), Malaysia (87.5%), Myanmar (76.5%), Singapore (68.4%) and Thailand (70%). The top choice for The Philippines (90%) and Vietnam (84.4%) is that “China should resolve all territorial and maritime disputes peacefully in accordance with international law”, which essentially boils down to sovereignty concerns as well. It is clear that Southeast Asians are acutely aware of the growing strategic vulnerabilities facing their countries as they increasingly bend towards China’s economic orbit. This interdependence-dependence conundrum explains their persistent ambivalence towards Chinese growing influence in the region.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR CHINA

The above survey results are worth pondering, but they are not surprising. Power asymmetry and geographic proximity between China and Southeast Asia naturally entail awe and anxiety in the region over China’s power. This reality is well captured by Bilahari Kausikan: “As a contiguous big country, China is always going to be influential in Southeast Asia. For the same reason, because it is a contiguous big country, China is always going to evoke concerns in Southeast Asia. In this apparent contradiction lies the essence of the relationship. [...] China is undoubtedly influential but distrusted.”¹⁷ Recognising these structural factors, however, does not mean denying the importance of agency in China-Southeast Asia relations. Beijing needs to reflect upon its neighbourhood strategy and take proactive steps to address its trust deficiency among Southeast Asians because “a shortage of empathy towards its neighbours has further hampered China’s welcome in the region.”¹⁸

The survey results expose the limitations of economic determinism embedded in Beijing’s neighbourhood strategy which relies on the structural factors of geography, history and Chinese economic gravity as its anchors.¹⁹ Although perceptions do not equate to policies, the underlying cognitive bias against Beijing among the respondents continues to inform and influence the process of foreign policy-making in Southeast Asian countries. Consequently, while strengthening economic relations with China, these countries also seek to maximise the space for the exercise of their strategic autonomy and diversify their foreign policy options, be it about securing multiple channels of access to COVID-19 vaccines²⁰ or pursuing open regionalism through ASEAN-led mechanisms to keep the regional order open and inclusive.

Southeast Asians’ persistent and growing trust deficit towards China is both a drag and a blow to Beijing’s ongoing efforts to develop its own “discourse power”. Thomas Joscelyn views it as the power to control and set the narrative so as to influence how people should think about the world.²¹ In the same vein, Nadège Rolland defines it as “the ability to exert influence over the formulations and ideas that underpin the international order”.²² Promoting this discourse power requires more than finetuning China’s communication tools or trying to come up with some more persuasive formulations than the “community of common destiny/shared future”. Rather, it must start with a fundamental recognition that Southeast Asian countries have a mind of their own in defining and pursuing their national interests. Therefore, their defiance to or disagreement with China on certain issues must first of all be attributed to their indigenous concerns over their national interest as they define it, and not because they are acting as lackeys

of foreign powers. As pointed out by Donald Emmerson in his edited book *The Deer and the Dragon*, “Structure matters. But agency is not a property of the strong alone.”

The SCS issue is a case in point. Chinese leaders and diplomats often dismiss the SCS tensions as externally induced, blaming foreign forces for “stirring up trouble and creating tensions in the SCS”²³ and “driving a wedge between China and ASEAN [which] goes against the will of the people in our region”.²⁴ The survey findings, however, defy this narrative. When asked about their top two concerns about the situation in the SCS, the majority of respondents (62.4%) choose “China’s militarisation and assertive actions”, followed by “Chinese encroachments in the exclusive economic zones and continental shelves of other littoral states” (59.1%). Beijing’s maritime encroachments is the top concern for the directly affected littoral states (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam) while its militarisation and assertive actions create the biggest worry among respondents from Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand.

Meanwhile, only 12.5% express worry over the US’ increased military presence in the area. Whether Beijing truly believes in its own propaganda or not, it is obvious that its narrative of blaming the SCS tensions on external involvements does not work in changing the region’s perceptions towards China’s actions or alleviating their legitimate concerns over the SCS situation. Continuing to engage in this narrative will not only deny the agency of Southeast Asian states but also deny China a chance for introspection and recalibration of its foreign policy, including in the SCS.

CONCLUSION

Southeast Asia’s skepticism towards China did not emerge in a vacuum. The *SSEA Survey 2021* findings share some key trendlines with other international surveys concerning China. The Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2020 recorded China’s slight gain in economic relations (+1.4) but a bigger loss in diplomatic influence (-5.1).²⁵ The Pew Research Centre’s report in October 2020 pointed to historic highs in unfavourable views of China in the developed countries.²⁶ A survey conducted by the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) in September-October 2020 in 13 European countries also indicated that European public opinion on China in the age of COVID-19 has gone more negatively with the exceptions of Russia, Serbia and Latvia.²⁷ In Australia, the most prominent target of China’s “punish diplomacy” and “wolf warrior diplomacy” over the past year, trust in China has reached its lowest point: Only 23% of Australians said they trust China to act responsibly in the world, and 9 out of 10 wanted Australia to find other markets to reduce economic dependence on China.²⁸ In its drive to strengthen its discourse power, China should reckon that its behaviour in other parts of the world is keenly observed by Southeast Asian countries. This may discourage them from going out of the way to provoke China, and at the same time continue to motivate their ongoing effort to diversify their foreign policy options as part of the hedging strategy in dealing with China.

¹ Seah, S. et al., The State of Southeast Asia: 2021 (*Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute*), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-State-of-SEA-2021-v2.pdf>.

² Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2020 Edition, *The Lowy Institute*, <https://power.lowyinstitute.org/>.

³ “Covid-19: China's economy picks up, bucking global trend”, *BBC*, 18 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-55699971>.

⁴ ASEAN becomes China's largest trading partner in 2020, with 7% growth, *Global Times*, 14 January 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202101/1212785.shtml#:~:text=ASEAN%20countries%20have%20jumped%20to,partner%20for%20the%20first%20time>

⁵ https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/diaeainf2021d1_en.pdf

⁶ Chinese investments grow in ASEAN as economic ties deepen, *Global Times*, 11 November 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1206535.shtml#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20Mission%20of,by%20Singapore%2C%20Thailand%20and%20Malaysia>.

⁷ Robert Ward, “RCEP trade deal: a geopolitical win for China”, *IISS Blog*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/11/rcep-trade-deal>.

⁸ Deng Xijun, “China and ASEAN are building a community with shared future”, *The Jakarta Post*, 9 March 2020, <http://asean.chinamission.org.cn/eng/stxw/t1754488.htm>.

⁹ Compiled by author from various sources.

¹⁰ Wang Yi Attends a Video Conference of China-ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting 2020/09/09, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1816611.shtml.

¹¹ Lye Liang Fook, “Covid-19: China's shifting narrative and the role of Southeast Asia”, *ThinkChina*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.thinkchina.sg/covid-19-chinas-shifting-narrative-and-role-southeast-asia>.

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¹³ “China vaccine cooperation pivotal for ASEAN economies”, *Global Times*, 7 December 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209255.shtml>.

¹⁴ Compiled by author from various sources.

¹⁵ The distrust level is measured by the percentage of respondents who have no or little confidence in China “to do the right thing” to contribute to global peace, security, prosperity, and governance, and the trust level is the percentage of those who have confidence or some confidence in this respect.

¹⁶ Ja Ian Chong, “The challenges in resetting US–Southeast Asia relations”, *East Asia Forum*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/12/10/the-challenges-in-resetting-us-southeast-asia-relations/>.

¹⁷ Bilahari Kausikan, “The diplomatic dance of South-east Asia”, *The Straits Times*, 20 August 2020, <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/the-diplomatic-dance-of-south-east-asia>.

¹⁸ Donald K. Emmerson edited, *Southeast Asia and China in the 21st Century: The Deer and the Dragon*, Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center (the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University, 2020), p. 4.

¹⁹ Ha, Hoang Thi. “Understanding China's Proposal for an ASEAN-China Community of Common Destiny and ASEAN's Ambivalent Response.” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 41 no. 2, 2019, p. 223-254.

²⁰ Claire Jiao, Ian C Sayson, and Yantoultra Ngui, “Moderna Gets Added to Southeast Asia's Vaccine Arsenal”, *Bloomberg*, 8 February 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-02-08/moderna-gets-added-to-arsenal-southeast-asia-vaccine-tracker>.

²¹ Thomas Joscelyn, “China's Discourse Power”, *The Dispatch Podcast*, 9 May 2020, <https://podcast.thedispatch.com/p/chinas-discourse-power-0ab>.

²² Nadège Rolland, China's Vision for a New World Order, The National Bureau of Asian Research, *NBR Special Report no. 83*, 27 January 2020, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/chinas-vision-for-a-new-world-order/>.

²³ “US deliberately stirs up trouble in S. China Sea: Chinese vice FM”, *Global Times*, 5 September 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1199985.shtml>.

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<http://asean.chinamission.org.cn/eng/stxw/t1813086.htm>.

²⁵ Lowy Institute Asia Power Index 2020 Edition, op. cit.

²⁶ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries", *Pew Research*, 6 October 2020,

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²⁷ Richard Q. Turcsányi, Matej Šimalčík, Kristína Kironská, Renáta Sedláková, et al., European Public Opinion on China in the Age of COVID-19, *Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) and partners*, https://ceias.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/COMP-poll-report_3.pdf.

²⁸ Lowy Institute Poll 2020, China, *The Lowy Institute*, <https://poll.lowyinstitute.org/themes/china/>.

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