

Both the US and China have fallen short in their quest to win over S-E Asia

The 2024 ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute survey on regional sentiments reveals a mixed picture in the contest for influence.



Tommy Koh

Which country has greater influence in South-east Asia – China or the US?

The answer to the question is not as straightforward as the question suggests. If we are to rely on surveys, the answer can hinge on the choice of participants and also the nature of influence we are talking about. Influence is also dynamic in nature; annual temperature-taking exercises of regional sentiments are at best a snapshot in time.

Take, for instance, the recent results from ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute's annual survey in the 10 Asean countries. Those taking part in the survey are from sectors such as academia, think-tanks, civil society and media as well as government and regional or international organisations. The results are an elite opinion of the region, not the public opinion.

The difference between public and elite opinion can be quite dramatic. According to the ISEAS survey, elite opinion in Singapore is pro-US but, according to a 2021 Pew survey, the public opinion in Singapore is pro-China.

Here's my assessment of the state of play of the superpower contest for influence in this region as gleaned from the ISEAS survey.

MOST INFLUENTIAL BUT NOT MOST TRUSTED

Going by its findings, China is the clear winner in the influence contest, with the United States a distant second.

In terms of economic influence, China received a score of 59.5 per cent and the US only 14.3 per cent. The economic influence of Japan, the European Union, India, South Korea, Australia and the United Kingdom are negligible.

China is also No. 1 in political influence, with a score of 43.9 per cent. The US is in second place with just 25.8 per cent. The other countries, including Japan, have

barely any influence.

But influence is not the sum total of how a country is perceived by other countries. Trust also matters.

Which is the country most trusted by the region? The answer is Japan. Japan enjoys a score of 58.9 per cent. The US is in second place at 42.4 per cent, followed by the EU at 41.5 per cent. China is in fourth place with just 24.8 per cent. It topped the rankings for distrust, with a score of 50.1 per cent.

What do the trust scores tell us? In South-east Asia, unlike China and South Korea, the people have forgiven Japan for the painful experiences of World War II. They have forged a very good relationship with Japan. The Chinese and South Koreans will be surprised to learn that Singaporeans love Japan.

A key reason for the positive state of Japan-South-east Asian ties is the groundbreaking move in 1977 by then Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda to pursue a "heart-to-heart" relationship with the members of Asean, one that is built on trust and goodwill. To be sure, aid has helped, but the equality in Japan's relationship with Asean member countries plays an important role too.

CHINA'S TRUST PROBLEM

China is in the paradoxical situation of being the most influential country and the least trusted country. Why the distrust of China? There are three reasons.

The first is China's behaviour in the South China Sea. In 2009, China submitted a map with nine dashed lines to the United Nations. China has made extensive claims to the South China Sea, based on that map. Asean claimant countries reject the map and the claims based on that map.

In 2013, the Philippines referred its disputes with China to arbitration, under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (Unclos). China, a signatory to Unclos, refused to participate in the arbitration, claiming that the arbitral tribunal had no jurisdiction to consider the case. This question is for the tribunal and not for China to decide.

The tribunal decided that it had jurisdiction and proceeded to

consider the case in China's absence. In 2016, the tribunal delivered its unanimous award. It ruled that there is no legal basis for China's claims based on the map with nine dashed lines. In other words, China's claims are illegal. The award is binding on China even though it chose not to participate in the tribunal.

China has refused to abide by the tribunal's award. Instead, it has used its superior military power to enforce its illegal claims, against the Philippines and Vietnam.

The second reason for the lack of trust in China is its conduct on the Mekong River. The Mekong is an international river. In an

international river, a riparian state has qualified sovereignty and not absolute sovereignty. Before building a dam on the river, China is obliged to inform the other riparian states and to take their interests into account.

China has not done so. It has built 11 dams and is currently building its 12th dam. The dams have caused harm to the farmers and fishermen who live downstream in Cambodia and Vietnam. I urge China to accede to the 1995 Mekong Agreement and join the Mekong River Commission.

The third reason is that China has weaponised trade and tourism. They have been used to punish countries which have

defied China's wishes, such as the Philippines and South Korea.

DECLINE IN AMERICAN POPULARITY

One of the compulsory questions in the survey is to choose between China and the US, in a crisis. In the 2023 survey, 61.1 per cent chose to align with the US and 38.9 per cent chose China.

In the 2024 survey, 50.5 per cent chose to align with China compared to 49.5 per cent for the US. What happened? Why has the popularity of the US plunged so steeply in the course of a year. The reason is Gaza.

The people in the region, especially in the three

Muslim-majority countries – Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei – are shocked and horrified by what Israel has done in its war against Hamas.

Israel has the right to defend itself against Hamas. However, Israel's right of self-defence must conform to the principle of proportionality, international law and international humanitarian law. Israel has violated all three. Israel has killed more than 34,000 Palestinians in Gaza, most of them women and children. Israel has reduced much of Gaza to rubble. Israel has weaponised food, starving the people in Gaza.

All these actions have damaged the US' standing in the region. It is seen as an accomplice of Israel for providing the Israelis with funds, aircraft, missiles and bombs, the instruments of death. The US has used its veto power in the UN Security Council to protect Israel from being held accountable for its actions in Gaza. It is therefore not surprising that the popularity of the US has plummeted, dropping for the first time behind China in the ISEAS survey, now in its sixth year.

MESSAGE FROM THE REGION

The US and China are competing for influence everywhere in the world. The competition is most intense in South-east Asia. Using the latest ISEAS survey findings as a yardstick, it would appear that neither can conclusively claim to have come up tops.

The message to Washington is that you are losing the competition for influence to Beijing. Your unconditional support for Israel has lost you much goodwill.

The message to Beijing is that while you are winning the competition for influence, both political and economic, you are not trusted by the region.

For both superpowers, there is a broader overarching message: walk the talk, words are not enough.

It is not enough to talk about helping South-east Asian countries to maintain the rules-based order in places like the South China sea when international law is being trampled in the Middle East. It is also not enough to talk about having a win-win relationship with other countries when the territorial interests of smaller countries are ignored or, worse, met with shows of force.

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