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In Focus

# Asian Barometer Survey

## East Asia Wrestles With Questions of Trust and Democracy

# Enter the Dragon: How East Asians View a Rising China

## By Yun-han Chu, Min-hua Huang & Jie Lu

The Asian Barometer Survey has captured a vast range of views held by East Asians on a number of subjects, but perhaps none has undergone such sharp and complex changes as perceptions in East Asia of China's rise and how this will influence the position of the US.

Yun-han Chu, Min-hua Huang and Jie Lu explore the evolving assessments across the region to China's emergence onto the global stage.

OVER the past decade, China's increasing economic power, military strength and political influence have been widely acknowledged in the world, particularly in East Asia. Significant changes in China's foreign policies, shifting from Deng Xiaoping's principle of "concealing our ability and biding our time" to Xi Jinping's most recent proclamation of a "new pattern of relationship between great powers," have shown that Beijing is now vigorously seeking to engage in international affairs, aiming to pursue China's national interests around the world. China's East Asian neighbors, in view of the high stakes involved in their inescapable geographical, economic and political connections with China, are keenly aware of the vigor and assertiveness associated with these foreign policy changes. The question of how East Asians view a rising China, therefore, does not just make eye-catching news headlines, it also has serious implications for international relations in East Asia and the world today.

Nonetheless, the change in China's foreign policy was not a sudden event, but rather an incremental process starting from the 2008 global financial crisis, caused by the US subprime mortgage crisis, and further accelerated in 2012 when Xi rose to power as the country's top leader. China's strong economy and robust performance during the global financial crisis gave Chinese policymakers a clear vision that the power gap between China and the US has rapidly narrowed. And if this trend continues, China can expect to catch up in economic power no later than 2030.<sup>1</sup> A school of thought, led by prominent Chinese scholars such as Yan Xuetong at Tsinghua University,

<sup>1</sup> Tabassum Zakaria, "US Intelligence Sees Asia's Global Power Rising by 2030," Reuters, Dec. 10, 2012: [www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/10/us-usa-intelligence-idUSBRE8B90HY20121210](http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/10/us-usa-intelligence-idUSBRE8B90HY20121210) [retrieved Aug. 13, 2015].  
<sup>2</sup> Yan Xuetong, *Ancient Chinese Thought, Modern Chinese Power*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press (2011).

<sup>3</sup> The Asian Barometer Survey's fourth wave includes 14 country

surveys from 2014 to 2016. By the end of July 2015, seven were completed: Mongolia, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia and Myanmar. The remaining six are Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, China, Vietnam and Cambodia. Myanmar is the only newly added country in wave four. See the previous three waves of ABS data at the official website at [www.asianbarometer.org/](http://www.asianbarometer.org/).

quickly emerged that called for China to prepare to become a responsible great power and argued that its power competition with the US is inevitable.<sup>2</sup> However, those voices remained in the academic community and did not significantly affect China's foreign policy until Xi completely took over political and military power in March 2013. Since then, China has revealed its ambition to act like a rising power by displaying its military capability to the world (commissioning its first aircraft carrier, the Liaoning), constructing a new international financial regime through such institutions as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), initiating global development strategies such as the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, and showing its toughness in the territorial disputes in the East China Sea and South China Sea.

Has China's changing policy in world political affairs altered how East Asians view China's rise? Do East Asians welcome or fear China's growing influence? Which model (Chinese versus American) do they prefer for future development? All of these questions are crucial to understanding how East Asians view a rising China, particularly whether East Asians may perceive China differently as it pursues multipronged foreign policies. In fact, the power transition from Hu Jintao to Xi provides a great opportunity to examine all of the above questions. And fortunately, the latest two waves of the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS), wave three and four, have collected some pertinent and valuable information in two critical moments associated with the transition, that is, the late period of Hu's era and early period of Xi's era.

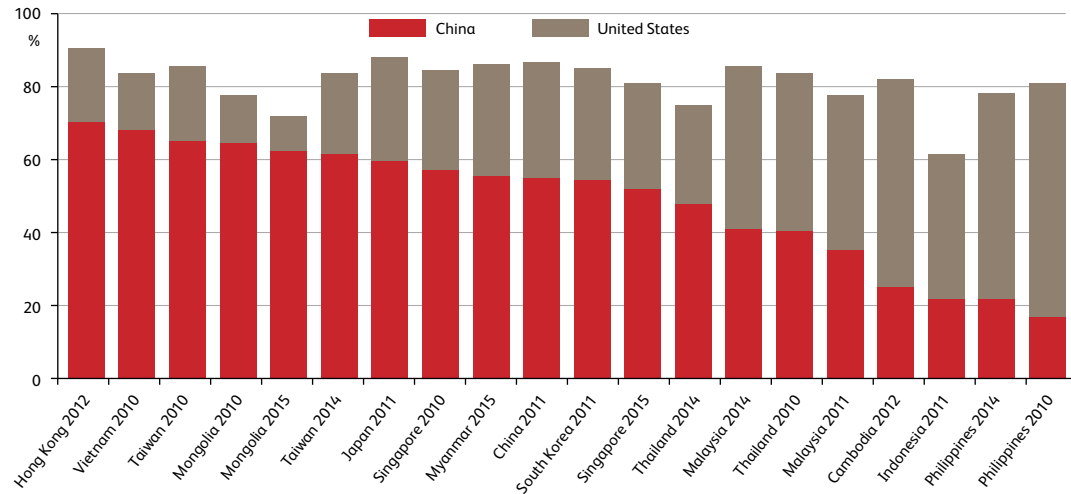
### PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA'S RISE

In both the ABS3 (2010-2012) and ABS4 (2014-now) surveys, there is the same battery of questions employed to measure how people think of the rise of China and related issues.<sup>3</sup> The first question is about perceived influence: "Which

**China has managed to hold up its largely positive image in the eyes of East Asians. The negative effect of its more assertive approach to territorial disputes has been perhaps neutralized by the anticipated economic benefits that could be brought about by Beijing's ambitious grand strategy of the One Belt, One Road initiative.**

**FIGURE 1 WHICH COUNTRY HAS THE MOST INFLUENCE IN ASIA?**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 3 (2010-2012) and 4 (2014-2016)



country has the most influence in Asia?” Related results are presented in Figure 1 by a descending order of the percentage of respondents who chose China. Overall, China’s growing power and influence in the region are widely acknowledged by East Asians. Specifically, there are three important patterns. First, in countries that are territorially adjacent or culturally close to China, the majority of their people believe China, rather than the US, has the most influence in Asia (from 71 percent in Hong Kong 2012 to 53 percent in Singapore in 2015). Second, however, in Southeast Asian countries that do not share borders with China, more people believe that the US has the most influence (from 46 percent in Malaysia in 2014 to 65 percent in the Philippines in 2010). Third, the transition of leadership from Hu to Xi did not shift the perceptions of East Asians in a significant way. The survey results are quite consistent in the countries where two waves of data are available: First, the relative standing of China and the US remained roughly the same in Taiwan, Mongolia and Singapore. Second, the US’s overall strength continues to impress more people in Malaysia and the Philippines; and particularly, slightly more Filipinos recognized the US as the most influential in 2014 than in 2010, thanks

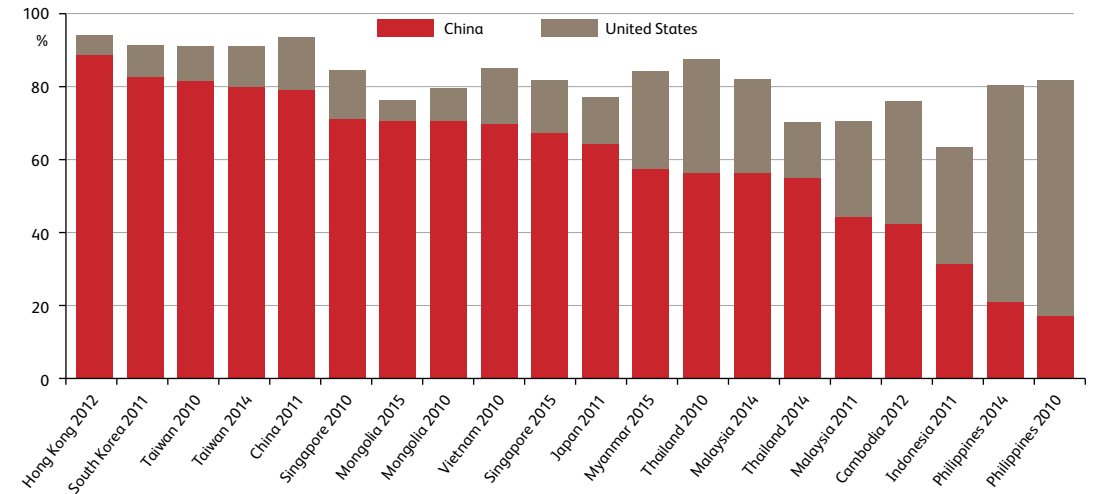
to the Obama administration’s “pivot to Asia” policy. The only exception is Thailand, where more people picked the US (44 percent) over China (42 percent) in 2010, but the result was dramatically reversed four years later. In 2014, only 19 percent of Thai respondents still considered the US as the most influential while 49 percent chose China.

It is fairly understandable that China’s neighboring countries (including Singapore in the cultural sense) are all intensively exposed to China’s growing power in multiple dimensions, particularly in the economic and security domains. However, even for those Southeast Asian countries that are territorially non-adjacent, they also have very close and multi-faceted economic and geopolitical relations with China. Why do people in Southeast Asian countries still regard the US as more influential than China in the region? The dramatic shift in popular perceptions in Thailand’s case sheds some light on this puzzle and provides some preliminary explanation: popular perceptions of the US’s influence could hinge on its political support for the current regime.

Most Southeast Asian countries are longtime security allies of the US, and this historical bond became more salient under Obama’s “strategic rebalancing policy” which has been vigorously

**FIGURE 2 IN TEN YEARS, WHICH COUNTRY WILL HAVE THE MOST INFLUENCE IN ASIA?**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 3 (2010-2012) and 4 (2014-2016)



promoted during his second term. Under this policy, the US government has reinforced its political and security commitments to the region and offered its Asian allies a credible hedging option in the face of a rising and more assertive China. This renewed commitment enhanced its popularity and even elevated its standing in the eyes of many Asian people. Thailand defied this regional trend probably because the US has downgraded its political and security support as a result of the 2014 military coup, which toppled democratically elected Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. In contrast, China reinforced its diplomatic and economic support after the coup and became Thailand’s most reliable strategic partner in a time of diplomatic isolation. This marked shift in Thailand’s diplomatic orientation and surrounding conditions has manifested itself in the visible increase of perceived Chinese influence (from 42 percent to 49 percent) and the significant drop of perceived US influence (from 44 percent to 19 percent) between our two surveys.

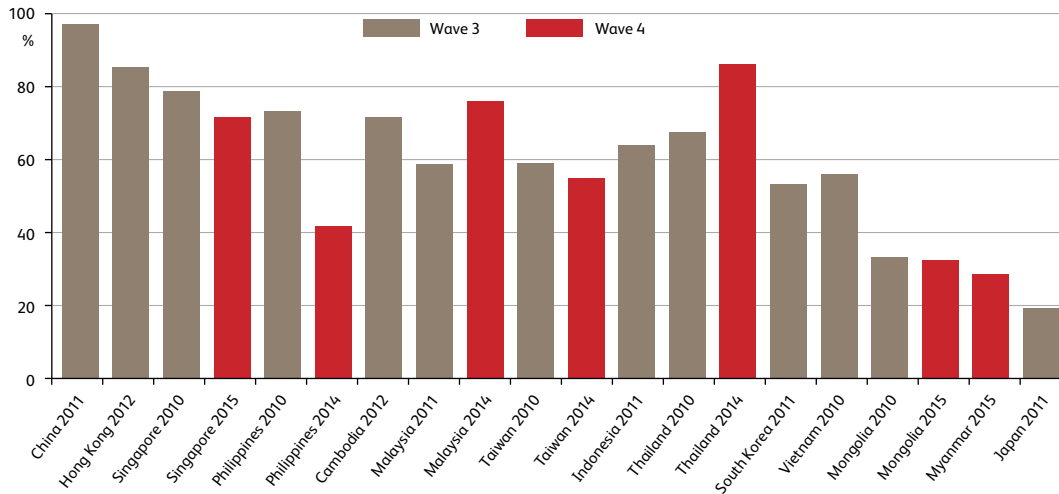
**A MORE INFLUENTIAL CHINA IN FUTURE?**

A country’s foreign policy is shaped by not just people’s perceptions of current power configurations but also their long-term expectations.

To detect Asian people’s long-term expectation about the region’s power reconfiguration, Asian Barometer also included a follow-up question: “In 10 years, which country will have the most influence in Asia?” The results are illustrated in Figure 2, showing an even stronger expectation about China’s overtaking the US in this regard. While the same conclusion holds that East Asians perceived stronger Chinese influence than Southeast Asians, the percentage of people who believe China will have the most influence in the future significantly increased, by more than 10 percentage points in many cases. For example, the percentage increased from 71 percent to 89 percent in Hong Kong in 2012, from 56 percent to 83 percent in South Korea in 2011, and from 67 percent to 82 percent in Taiwan in 2010. In stark contrast, most Filipinos believed the US would still be the most influential in 10 years, and the distinctly large margin (60 percent vs. 21 percent in the Philippines in 2014 and 65 percent vs. 17 percent in the Philippines 2010) reveals a strong popular belief in the US’s preponderant military and economic power and its continuous engagement in the Asia-Pacific region. This widely-shared popular perception about the enduring preponderance of the US is perhaps an important

**FIGURE 3 IS CHINA DOING MORE GOOD THAN HARM TO THE REGION?**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 3 (2010-2012) and 4 (2014-2016)



driving force behind the Philippine’s more confrontational approach to territorial disputes in the South China Sea, as President Benigno Aquino’s government takes cues from Washington’s explicit political backing. Other than the Philippines, East and Southeast Asians all believe that the trend of China’s growing influence will continue and China will become even stronger than the US in the foreseeable future.

Between 2010 and 2014, popular perceptions about which country is destined to become the most influential in the region did not change much. Among the six countries in which we have completed two waves of surveys, the percentage of respondents choosing China as the most influential country in 10 years’ time fluctuates only slightly: -4 percent for Singapore, -2 percent for Taiwan, -1 percent for Thailand, no change for Mongolia and +5 percent for the Philippines. The only exception is Malaysia, where the percentage favoring China increases from 44 percent to 56 percent between the two waves (albeit there is no change in the 26 percent favoring the US). This probably is due to a high-profile visit by Xi to Malaysia in October 2013 and the resultant strengthening of economic and political ties between the two countries.

While most East Asians believe that the trend of China’s ascendance will continue in the foreseeable future, this projection encounters some psychological barriers in countries experiencing a more problematic relationship with China, including Mongolia, Vietnam, Japan and Myanmar. In these four countries, the increment in the percentage of respondents identifying China as the most influential between now and 10 years from now tapers off. For instance, in our 2010 Japan survey, we found 61 percent of our respondents identifying China as the most influential now and 65 percent considering China to be the most influential in 10 years. The increment is quite limited, with a magnitude of four percentage points. In contrast, in South Korea, the comparable figure jumped from 56 percent to 83 percent. In Japan, this observed psychological resistance probably has something to do with the escalation of tension between Japan and China over both historical grievances and current strategic competition, especially on Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s watch. In the same vein, the historical bond between China and Vietnam emanating from the so-called socialist fraternity has been steadily worn thin by the China-Vietnam border war of 1979, and more recently the growing tension

over the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and a rising popular backlash against the labor practices of Chinese enterprises in Vietnam. Nevertheless, the aforementioned psychological resistance does not change the overall regional pattern showing that the majority of East Asians view China as the most influential in the region and that it will become even more so in 10 years, including people in Japan, Mongolia and Vietnam.

**DO EAST ASIANS WELCOME CHINA’S RISE?**

Does perceiving a rising China also imply welcoming it? The ABS includes a question that taps into attitudes toward the rise of China: “Does China do more good or harm to the region?” Figure 3 shows the percentages holding a positive attitude toward China’s rise. Generally speaking, except for Japan, Mongolia, and the Philippines, where anti-Chinese sentiment runs high, the positive response toward the rise of China surpasses 60 percent. This means a majority of East Asians accept China as a constructive power when it comes to the region’s peace and prosperity. The Philippines is an exception, where in early 2010 a great majority (74 percent) of Filipinos still held a favorable view about China’s influence. But many Filipinos have changed their view since then, witnessing a drop of 32 percentage points between our 2010 and 2014 surveys. This is not surprising at all, given the two countries’ recent squabble over fishing and drilling rights in the South China Sea.

For those countries that have a history of conflict-ridden relations with China, their attitude toward its influence remains largely negative. For instance, a small percentage of people in Japan hold a positive view on China’s influence (19 percent, the lowest in the region), according to our 2011 survey. China’s image does not fare well in Myanmar either, with only 28 percent of respondents there believing that China is doing

more good than harm in the region based on our 2015 survey. Despite China’s enormous influence over Myanmar, anti-Chinese sentiment has risen rapidly due to the widely-held belief that China has exploited Myanmar’s economy and damaged its environment through its unwelcome political and military influence.

Mongolians are evidently divided over the nature of China’s influence. Our surveys registered 33 percent and 32 percent of respondents holding a favorable view about China’s rise in the 2010 and 2015 surveys, respectively. In Mongolia, a lopsided asymmetrical relationship with China and a perception of China’s aggressive economic encroachment on its natural resources make China the most visible target posing a threat to the country’s independence, as well as an easy culprit for its domestic problems. The image of China held up surprisingly well in Vietnam, based on our 2010 survey. Despite the aforementioned frictions, a majority of Vietnamese respondents (55 percent) hold a favorable view of China’s rise. After all, China is one of the very few remaining one-party authoritarian brethren on the planet today. Speaking overall, our surveys suggest that most East Asians welcome a rising China and its influence on the region, except for people from countries that have long been at feud with China.

The multi-pronged diplomatic initiatives undertaken under the leadership of President Xi have elevated China’s standing in quite a few ASEAN countries, but not across the board. In Malaysia, where Xi visited in October 2013 and where many Chinese investors have since poured money into the manufacturing and real estate sectors, the percentage of respondent holding positive views toward China’s rise has climbed to a staggeringly high level of 76 percent from 59 percent. The most eye-catching change is the dramatic increase of positive responses in Thailand from 68 percent to 86 percent, indicating that China

is indeed perceived as a desirable alternative to the US when the US-Thailand relationship turned sour after the military coup. Furthermore, Thailand is poised to benefit tremendously from China's ambitious infrastructure project to construct the Pan-Asia freeway and high-speed train network, which in due course will make Bangkok the pivotal hub of a regional transportation network. Our data also reveal that Singaporeans remain overwhelmingly favorable toward China's rise, although positive response has dropped somewhat from 78 percent to 72 percent. This suggests that some Singaporeans have acquired reservations about the influx of Chinese immigrants and investment capital into the city-state over the last few years, as well as some lingering worry about the proposed outlandish plan by Chinese investors to construct a canal cutting across Kra Isthmus in Thailand to redirect the world's busiest shipping route away from the Malacca Strait.

Overall, except for the steep decline of favorable views among Filipinos, China has managed to hold up its largely positive image in the eyes of East Asians. The negative effect of its more assertive approach to territorial disputes has been perhaps neutralized by the anticipated economic benefits that could be brought about by Beijing's ambitious grand strategy of the One Belt, One Road initiative, which promises to accelerate economic integration among countries and upgrade transnational infrastructure networks covering the entire Eurasian continent, as well as countries along the Maritime Silk Road stretching from the South China Sea to the Mediterranean. However, China's assertiveness in pushing its territorial claims has damaged people's perceptions about its rise in Taiwan and Mongolia, where the One Belt, One Road strategy was met with skepticism. We identified a mild dip (in a magnitude of 4 percentage points) in the level of favorable views toward China's rise between

2010 and 2014 among Taiwanese respondents. When Beijing implements its new initiatives for the One Belt, One Road strategy and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, Chinese policy-makers will have to learn to reckon with how Asians view its rise, based on a realistic assessment and understanding.

**WHICH MODEL TO ADOPT?**

It has taken China only two decades to become a great power since the 1990s. Its success in rapid modernization and national development has become a potential model for latecomers in the Third World to emulate. After the Second World War, the US model was always the default choice for developing countries to learn and follow. There were also some Asian countries that achieved rapid economic growth and were regarded as a role model for national development, including Japan in the 1960s and 1970s and the four Asian Tigers in the 1980s. Given China's growing influence in the region, it is an interesting question whether China is poised to challenge the power of the US, whose model has been admired by most Asian countries for the entire post-war era. The ABS included a question in both wave three and wave four to find out the popular models for development among Asians: "Which country should be a model for our own country's future development?" Table 1 shows the percentage across all the surveyed countries of the top five choices: China, the US, Japan, Singapore or the respondents' home country.

The results are categorized into four groups of countries by top choice: the US model (South Korea, China, the Philippines and Cambodia), the Japan model (Taiwan, Indonesia and Malaysia), its own model (Japan, Thailand, Singapore, Mongolia, Vietnam and Myanmar), the Singapore model (Hong Kong). It is very easy to understand why the American model remains the

**TABLE 1 WHICH COUNTRY SHOULD BE A MODEL FOR OUR OWN COUNTRY'S FUTURE DEVELOPMENT?**

Source: Asian Barometer Survey Waves 3 (2010-2012) and 4 (2014-2016)

Country	China	US	Our Own	Japan	Singapore
<b>Surveys where US model was top choice</b>					
South Korea 2011	8%	39%	10%	23%	16%
China 2011	-	36%	25%	9%	21%
Philippines 2010	7%	68%	0%	17%	6%
Philippines 2014	6%	66%	1%	17%	8%
Cambodia 2012	20%	42%	5%	22%	6%
<b>Surveys where Japan model was top choice</b>					
Taiwan 2010	5%	15%	22%	31%	23%
Taiwan 2014	6%	14%	13%	32%	20%
Indonesia 2011	14%	26%	8%	35%	13%
Malaysia 2011	14%	8%	34%	31%	11%
Malaysia 2014	20%	11%	17%	32%	17%
<b>Surveys where respondents' own country model was top choice</b>					
Japan 2011	2%	19%	52%	-	10%
Thailand 2010	16%	16%	46%	12%	8%
Thailand 2014	25%	19%	8%	29%	13%
Singapore 2010	13%	24%	38%	17%	-
Singapore 2015	18%	23%	36%	17%	-
Mongolia 2010	10%	25%	29%	18%	8%
Mongolia 2015	8%	23%	16%	22%	11%
Vietnam 2010	22%	9%	42%	16%	10%
Myanmar 2015	11%	25%	28%	12%	20%
<b>Surveys where Singapore model was top choice</b>					
Hong Kong 2012	7%	13%	25%	8%	43%

most attractive in the case of South Korea and the Philippines, given their strong security, economic and cultural ties to the US. It is interesting to see that the US model commands such a sizable following (36 percent) in China today despite (or because of) their intensified strategic competition. Actually, more Chinese prefer the US model over China's own model (25 percent). This suggests that Xi will face a stiff challenge in selling the "China Dream" at home. This sentiment also manifests itself in the expanding flow of outbound migration and investment by families of the well-to-do from China to the US.

Japan is a strong competitor to the US despite its decades-long stagnation, perhaps due to the fact that Japan remains the richest country in the region, the most successful example in the post-Second World War economic catch-up game, and the most important source of foreign direct investment as well as official development assistance throughout ASEAN. More people in Taiwan, Indonesia and Malaysia favor the Japanese model over the US model. The Japanese model outcompetes the US model probably because it is regarded as a model that is more achievable or transportable.

Most observers would not expect China to be a strong competitor to the US or Japan as a model of development in East Asia — after all, China's per capita income has just reached the region's average. About half of our surveyed countries and territories, namely, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and Hong Kong, enjoy a living standard substantially higher than that of China. While the Chinese model is still far from being able to compete with either Japan or the US (or even Singapore), in the less developed Asian countries, such as Cambodia, Indonesia, Mongolia or Myanmar, it has steadily gained more admirers over time. In Thailand, following the collapse of the ill-fated democratic regime, 25 percent of Thai respondents favored the China model in our 2014 survey as compared to only 16 percent in 2010. This makes China a close runner-up after Japan (with 29 percent admirers) in the eyes of Thai people. The percentage of Malaysians who admire the China model has also increased, from 14 percent to 20 percent between 2011 and 2014.

However, the biggest question remains, what will China have become 15 or 20 years down the road? Our survey indicates a rift in the ideological space among the Chinese themselves. On the one hand, a sizable proportion of the Chinese population favors the US model; on the other, a variant of developmental authoritarianism still commands the allegiance of many Chinese people. If one combines the percentage of respondents who favor China's own model and people who pick Singapore as a model of development and compare this with those who favor either the US or Japanese model, we identify two equally sizable camps, with 46 percent (favoring some variant of developmental authoritarianism) vs. 45 percent (favoring some variant of Western liberal model). So, the future of China is still open-ended as far as our survey data can tell.

## CONCLUSION

China is no doubt a rising power in today's great power politics. Due to their geopolitical and cultural proximity, most East Asians perceive China as having greater influence than the US, both now and even more so in the foreseeable future. People who live in Southeast Asian countries that have US political and security support might still regard the US as most influential, but they also expect the continuing growth of China's influence in Asia. East Asians in general welcome a rising China, but people in countries that have a history of problematic relationships with China are evidently less enthusiastic, to say the least. The anticipated economic benefits that might be brought about by Beijing's ambitious, grand One Belt, One Road strategy have to some extent neutralized the negative effect of its more assertive approach to territorial disputes in some, but not all, ASEAN countries. Overall, East Asians view the rise of China positively and welcome China playing a more active role in sustaining the region's peace and prosperity, but most of them still favor the US's continued strong presence in the region. In the face of intensified strategic competition between China and the US, most of them want to avoid having to choose one side at the obvious expense of the other. Whenever possible, they are opting to maximize benefits from deepening economic ties with China while maintaining a close security relationship with the US in order to hedge potential risks.

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