

## **China and the US: Who Has More Influence in Vietnam?**

**According to the latest Asian Barometer Survey, China has more influence – but a less positive image – in Vietnam compared to United States.**

By Mengzhen Xia and Dingding Chen

As the competition between China and the United States dramatically heats up, many Asian countries are feeling the pressure to potentially choose sides. But countries like Vietnam try to maintain a neutral stance between the two great powers and double-down on a delicate balancing act in order to benefit from two sides.

As soon as the Biden administration came into power in the United States, Washington decided to strengthen its Indo-Pacific strategy, intending to highlight its presence in Asia and to deter the rise of China. Vietnam, fresh off a year of serving as the ASEAN chair and currently a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council through 2021, is becoming increasingly important in this effort. Washington seeks to upgrade U.S.-Vietnam ties and deepen their “comprehensive partnership” with an eye toward balancing and confining China. Both China and the United States are competing to exert a positive – and bigger – influence on Vietnam through various economic and political policies, such as the Belt and Road Initiative from China and maritime security cooperation from the United States.

But how do Vietnamese people view the two powers? Which country has more influence? And is the contest for influence really a zero-sum game between China and the United States?

The latest Vietnam Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) data, released March 2, found that more than 50 percent of Vietnamese respondents believed that China has the most influence in Asia, while only 14.67 percent chose United States. Back in 2010, 43.32 percent of respondents regarded China as the most influential country in Asia, yet only around 10 percent opted for United States. It is interesting to note that, while both countries seem to have expanded their influence since 2010, the gap between China and United States has expanded and China has kept far ahead.

There are several reasons for this. The first is that China and Vietnam have long history of connecting and intercommunicating with each other, with mutual influences of each other’s culture, custom, languages, music, poems, and so on. China’s great influence on Vietnam has been grounded by thousands of years of history. The second factor behind China’s influence is that China has been the largest trade partner for Vietnam for 15 years, and Vietnam has benefited greatly from that. Finally, China and Vietnam share ideological values, and China’s economic and politic development model has had a great impact on Vietnam.

Although China has relatively more influence in Vietnam, generally speaking, the influence China has on Vietnam is not that positive. Based on the latest ABS data, only 25 percent of Vietnamese respondents believe that China has exerted a positive impact on their country, but for United States, the number goes up to 85 percent. In other words, the overwhelming majority of

respondents favor the United States and welcome Washington to come and expand its influence in Vietnam.

One of the biggest reasons for the discrepancy are the rising tensions in South China Sea disputes between China and Vietnam. Recently, China's growing assertiveness and actions in disputed waters aroused higher anti-Chinese sentiment and protests in Vietnam. For example, protests against China broke out in 2014 in response to China deploying oil rig in a disputed area. With this in mind, Vietnam is more likely to build a stronger partnership with United States and seek support from the U.S. to help it achieve its national interests in disputed waters.

More broadly, many in Vietnam perceive China as an invader, which waged multiple wars trying to dominate Vietnam. Vietnamese history textbooks have played a critical role in crafting people's thinking about and impressions of China; a large number of Vietnamese national heroes highlight in textbooks fought in the wars resisting invasion and aggression from China. Therefore, both historical factors and the current South China Sea disputes are behind Vietnamese people's negative impression of China.

Interestingly, the ABS data, and particularly the trends over time, suggest that the China and United States' contest for influence in Vietnam is not zero sum. In other words, increasing China's positive influence doesn't necessarily result in lowering United States', and vice versa. It is possible for the two players to simultaneously enhance their positive influence on Vietnam, leading to the tantalizing possibility that China and United States actually can cooperate with each other and achieve a win-win strategy in terms of increasing their positive influence in Vietnam.

However, despite what the data tells us, the reality is that both China and United States regard each other as players in a zero-sum game, and continue escalating tensions in various areas. Hopefully the new findings from the ABS could help the two giant players enjoy more cooperation and less conflict in this region.

Both China and United States have placed a heavier emphasis on Vietnam recently, and both countries strive to exert a more positive influence on Vietnam. The most effective way to do so is through economic policies, as more than half of the Vietnamese respondents in the ABS list the economy as their top priority. With China and Vietnam both having joined the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, Vietnamese, especially local farmers, could enjoy more favorable export policies like lower tariffs and barriers and attract more Chinese investment into Vietnam. China should capitalize on the opportunity to exert more positive influence in Vietnam and enhance its image and soft power in the region. The United States should also increase its investment in Vietnam and pursue a more peaceful approach with regard to regional security. Only through these policies can all three countries benefit from future stability and prosperity.

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