

Shifting Tides in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Changes in Southeast Asian Perception of China over Time



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Introduction/Abstract

Much has been made internationally about China's increasing global influence and progressively assertive foreign policy. Yet for many Southeast Asians, this is nothing new, merely a continuation of an almost decade-long trend they have seen play out right in front of their eyes. The early and mid-2010s saw Chinese foreign policy in Southeast Asia become markedly more aggressive and assertive. China entered into various maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea, most notably with Vietnam and the Philippines. It also significantly increased its military presence in the region. The advent of the Belt and Road Initiative and many accompanying controversies surrounding delays, worker safety, unsustainable debt, and unfair contract awarding have also greatly influenced public opinion. At the same time, China has firmly entrenched itself as the dominant economic power in the region.

Meanwhile, the ratcheting of strategic competition between the U.S. and China has left many Southeast Asian states in a dilemma, as smaller states feel increasingly trapped between two superpowers. How their citizens view China will become increasingly important as they try to straddle the line between the two countries. Given the various economic and security interests that lie in Southeast Asia, policymakers from both countries require a comprehensive understanding of Southeast Asia's public perceptions.

Objective

The objective of this study is to determine how public perception of China has shifted over time in Southeast Asia. It seeks to demonstrate qualitatively how increasingly assertive Chinese foreign policy has influenced the way that Southeast Asians view China's impact on their own countries as well as the region at large over a ten-year period from 2010-2020.

Methodology: Calculating Impact

This study is centered around public opinion data collected by the Asian Barometer Survey, which surveys almost 20 different Asian countries on a variety of topics. It focuses on data from three different survey periods: Wave 3 (2010-12), Wave 4 (2014-16), and Wave 5 (2018-20). The survey asks respondents to rate the impact that China and the United States have on both their countries and the region at large, on a scale ranging from "Very positive" to "Very negative". There are six possible answers, so for each country, the average score is calculated by assigning each qualitative answer a numerical value (Very positive = 6, Positive = 5, Slightly positive = 4, Slightly negative = 3, Negative = 2, Very negative = 1) and dividing by the number of respondents. These were then graphed to understand how each country's perception of China's national impact has changed over time. For example, in 2018 the weighted average of China's impact in the Philippines was almost exactly a 4, meaning the average view of Filipinos was that Chinese national impact was "Slightly positive".

Methodology: Calculating Gaps

In addition, several calculations have been performed to understand perception gaps between China's regional and national impact as well as between Chinese and American national impact. The regional-to-national gap figure is especially important because it helps understand how much more positively citizens view China's impact on their own countries compared to how they view China's impact on the region as a whole. The same process was used to find the weighted average of responses to how respondents viewed China's impact on the region as a whole. For each survey wave, the national average was then subtracted from the regional average and then converted into the percentage change. For example, Singapore in Wave 3 had a regional-to-national gap of -7.9, meaning Singaporeans viewed China's impact on the region as 7.9% more negative than China's impact on Singapore.

The China-U.S. national impact gap figure compares the gap between countries instead of scale. It takes the weighted average impact of the United States nationally and subtracts it from the weighted average impact of China nationally, and the converts into the percentage change. For example, Singapore's Wave 4 value of -7.4 meant it viewed Chinese national impact as 7.4% worse than the US, while its Wave 5 value of 19.85 meant it viewed China's national impact as almost 20% more positively than that of the U.S.

References and Acknowledgements

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Southeast Asian Public Opinion Towards China's National Impact

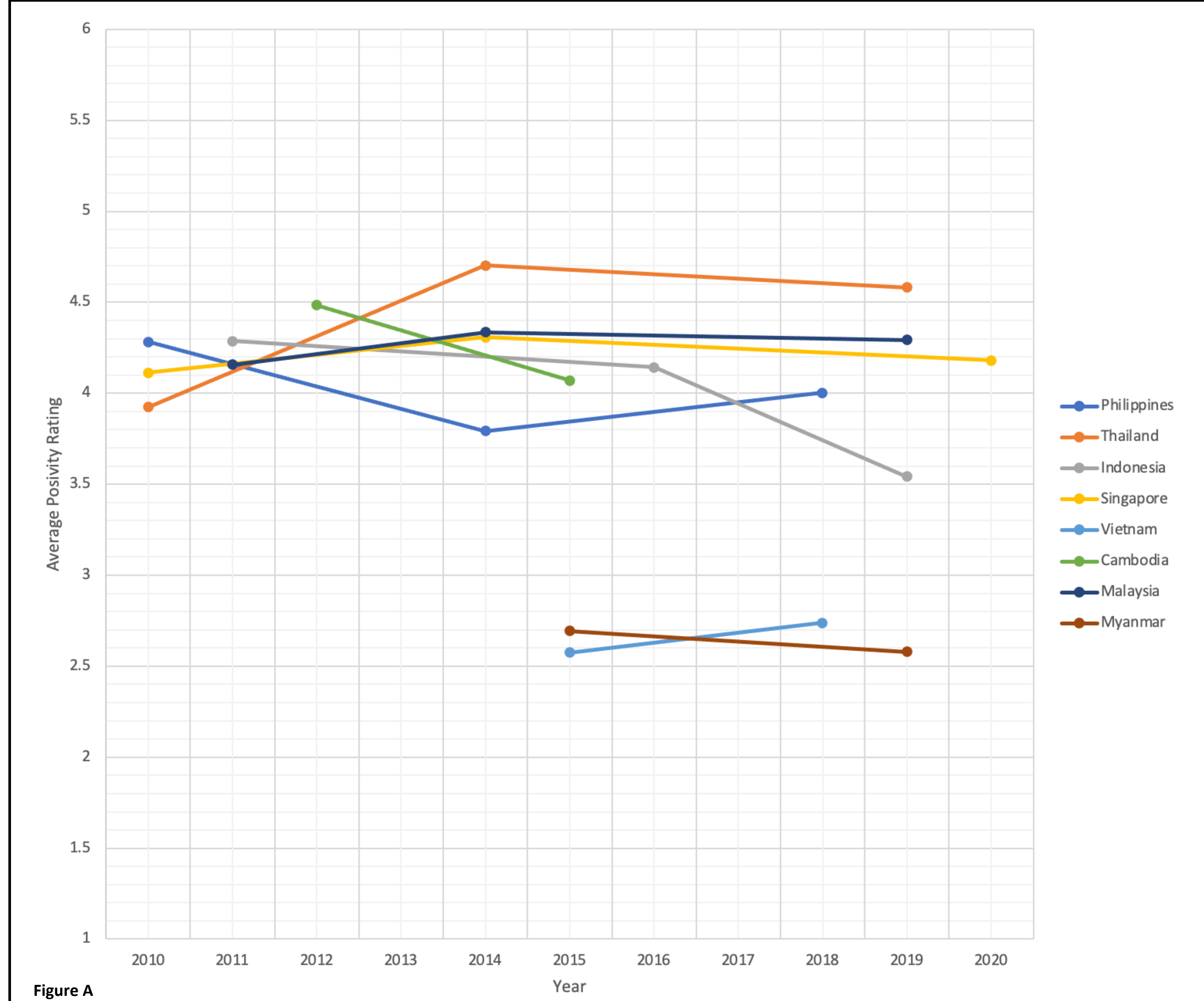


Figure A

Chinese Regional-to-National Impact Gap

	WAVE 3	WAVE 4	WAVE 5
Philippines	-16.5	-22.4	-22
Thailand	-8.66	-6.5	-9.41
Indonesia	-12.06	-10.13	-6.88
Singapore	-7.9	-10.49	-10.98
Vietnam	N/A	-5.413	-10.99
Cambodia	-8.58	-7.17	N/A
Malaysia	-1.24	-9.28	-8.65
Myanmar	N/A	-2.28	-2.46

Figure B

China-U.S. National Impact Gap

	WAVE 4	WAVE 5
Philippines	-30.08	-17.45
Thailand	6.42	7.63
Indonesia	12.83	0.85
Singapore	-7.4	19.85
Vietnam	-60.92	-60.12
Cambodia	-8.58	N/A
Malaysia	17.98	23.5
Myanmar	-20.37	-29.59

Figure C

Conclusions

The most important conclusion to note is that Southeast Asian countries maintain a slightly positive view on China's impact on their individual nations. This tracks given China's vast economic profile in Southeast Asia as the largest trade partner and investor in the region. It is not surprising that Vietnam, with whom China has had an extensive history of maritime disputes in the South China Sea, is an exception. However, it is worth noting that the Philippines, with whom China has had similar tensions with regarding territorial claims and the Nine-Dash Line, maintains a relatively positive view of China's domestic impact. Attitudes towards China have declined in most countries over time, yet China's increasingly assertive foreign policy and expansive presence in SE Asia has not dramatically altered how most countries view Chinese impact. Despite the variety of negative attention that China has received regionally for everything from territorial disputes to labor abuses on BRI projects, its economic dominance has allowed it to maintain a slightly positive perception in the eyes of most Southeast Asians.

However, China's regional impact is an entirely different story. As Figure B demonstrates, every single country views China's regional impact as worse than China's impact solely on themselves. This is an indication that most Southeast Asians disapprove of China's broader foreign policy actions as well as its vision for the region, but still approve of China's presence in their individual countries and the domestic benefits they capture from that relationship. This trend is particularly important to note for the outlook of ASEAN and potential collective efforts to counter rising Chinese influence. If countries view China's impact domestically as more positive than its regional impacts, they may be less willing to engage multilaterally with other SE Asian countries to resolve security issues or maritime disputes, believing they stand to gain more from cordial relations with China.

Overall, the data confirms many of the claims that qualitative research has espoused, but provides a wide-ranging, quantitative, empirical description of the nature of public perception in Southeast Asia towards China. Public opinion correlates with official government positions in many Southeast Asian countries regarding China, while also revealing a potential collective action issue towards multilateral efforts in the region.