Keeping the U.S. Lead in Southeast Asia

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Washington has an opportunity to distinguish itself by pursuing initiatives that promote mutual prosperity, security, and above all the sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations and their populations.

Elites in the United States have reached a bipartisan consensus that the country is locked in a competition with China. During a November 2023 meeting with U.S. president Joe Biden in San Francisco, Chinese president Xi Jinping implicitly accepted that framing. The competition is likely to last decades and will include military, economic, and especially normative competition. It will be a struggle over the system itself—whether the rules-based order the United States helped craft, which most of the international community has come to embrace, will adapt and endure or be replaced, at least in part, by China’s preferred norms. The struggle over the way the system works cannot be won just in Washington, Brussels, or Tokyo, where the leaders of the so-called Global North are already in broad agreement. It will be determined in the Global South, where developing states and their five billion citizens will decide which rules best align with their interests and values.

China’s immediate neighbors in Southeast Asia are at the front lines of that competition. The contest for influence between China and the United States (and like-minded partners such as Japan and Australia) is arguably more heated and impactful than anywhere else. The countries of Southeast Asia are not aligning uniformly with either U.S. or Chinese preferences, and their future choices will vary from issue to issue. Contrary to the often gloomy, and almost always anecdotal, headlines of declining U.S. influence, the stated preferences of Southeast Asian publics and elites tell a different story. Neither China nor the United States can claim to be running away with the competition for regional influence. But many Southeast Asians express more affinity for the United States than for China. Given that soft power advantage, Washington is better positioned than Beijing to win the normative battle in Southeast Asia.

In early 2023, CSIS gathered and weighted all recent public and elite opinion polling in the region related to perceptions of China and the United States. There were considerable gaps, as there were throughout the Global South, where major polling firms tend to operate rarely if at all. But the data that exist are
good news for the United States. In the Philippines and Vietnam, large majorities prefer the United States to China. The United States also leads among Indonesians and Thais, though by narrower margins. In all those countries, China provokes much stronger negative feelings than the United States does. The United States maintains a soft power advantage in the four largest countries of Southeast Asia, which account for more than 550 million of the region’s nearly 700 million people. Only in Malaysia and Singapore do publics clearly prefer China to the United States, and in Singapore, this is mitigated by an elite preference for the United States.

The picture, however, is not entirely rosy for the United States. When asked which country is more economically important for the region, regional publics and elites choose China in every case except the Philippines, where the public is undecided. This is, unfortunately for the United States, an accurate reflection of reality. China is the top trading partner of every country in Southeast Asia, out-invests the United States everywhere but Singapore and Thailand, and is the leading bilateral provider of development assistance in every country except the Philippines. The silver lining for the United States is that China’s economic edge in the region does not seem to be boosting its popularity, which would suggest that it cannot necessarily buy its way to victory in the competition over international norms and institutions. Frequent calls from the region for enhanced U.S. economic and trade engagement demonstrate that Southeast Asian elites hesitate to rely too much on China and instead prefer to seek out and build a broader range of close economic ties with other partners.

The United States must focus its attention on better understanding Southeast Asian elite and public perspectives and fine-tune its engagement to meet the needs and demands of the region on their own terms. At a time when Beijing remains obstinate in disregarding the agency of its small-state neighbors, Washington has an opportunity to distinguish itself by pursuing initiatives that promote mutual prosperity, security, and above all the sovereignty of Southeast Asian nations and their populations. The future of U.S.-China strategic competition in Southeast Asia will rest, in part, on the extent to which the United States meets the moment, actively listens and engages with its partners, and develops and acts on an agenda that capitalizes on Washington’s soft power and normative advantage.