

# U.S. Versus Chinese Powers of Persuasion

Does the United States or China Have More Influence in the Indo-Pacific Region?



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**U.S. policymakers** and experts are focused on two central questions about long-term strategic competition between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC): How do we assess how well the United States is doing relative to China, and which country has more influence in the Indo-Pacific region?

RAND Project AIR FORCE researchers addressed these two questions by first defining what influence means in the context of great-power competition and creating a framework to measure U.S. versus PRC influence. The result brings into focus a well-defined picture of the United States and China’s strengths and weaknesses in third countries in the Indo-Pacific—in short, a snapshot of whether the United States or China is “winning” the competition for influence and where.

## KEY FINDINGS

- In competition, influence—the ability of one actor to shape the actions of another—is relative, and depends on a partner’s shared interests with the United States (versus China) and what the United States can offer the partner (versus China).
- Across the Indo-Pacific region, China has more economic influence and the United States has more diplomatic and military sway, but partners generally value economic development over security concerns.
- The United States has more influence than China in Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, and Singapore; similar influence in Indonesia; and relatively less influence in Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

**To understand whether the United States or China is “winning” the competition for influence,** RAND researchers traveled to nine countries in the Indo-Pacific in late 2018 and early 2019 and interviewed and consulted with more than 100 U.S. and partner government officials and academic experts. Researchers analyzed official documents, academic reports, and data on U.S. and Chinese activities **to answer these four questions:**

## 1 What Are Influence and Competition for Influence?

The United States and China both hope to persuade other countries to partner with them. *Influence* is the ability of one actor to shape the behavior of another actor. When it comes to U.S.-China competition, relative influence is key: What interests do third countries share with the United States or China, and what resources or capabilities can the two countries use to incentivize or coerce partners?

Competition for influence is dynamic and continuous. In contrast to U.S. military conflict with China, where China is the primary target and adversary that the United States seeks to defeat, U.S. peacetime competition with China is focused on shaping a partner’s choices to favor the United States. There is unlikely to be a single, clear, and final victory in competition.

## 2 What Are the United States and China Competing Over?

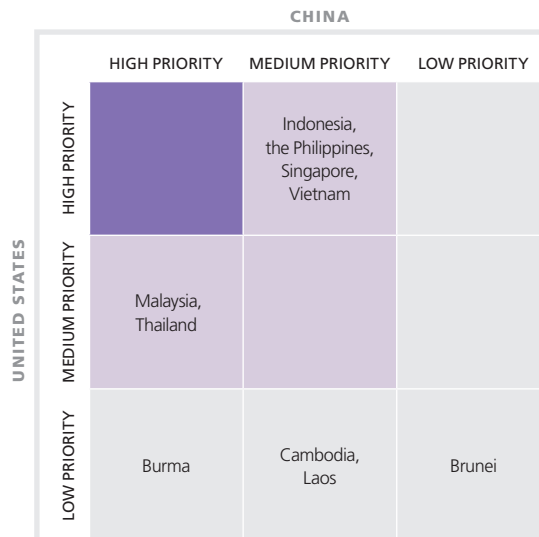
Competing visions and objectives for the Indo-Pacific drive U.S.-China competition. The U.S. vision is based on maintaining regional freedom and openness and ensuring security and stability. China’s vision involves expanding its power, fostering regional integration and dependence on China, limiting the role of outside powers, and bringing Southeast Asia under Beijing’s leadership.

These divergent goals cause the United States and China to prioritize expanding their influence among different partners. The research team examined the importance the United States and China attached to Southeast Asian partners and ranked countries as high, medium, and low priority. Overlapping U.S. and PRC priority countries allowed the researchers to identify where we expect the most intense U.S.-China competition: in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

### Peacetime Competition Differs From Military Conflict

	Peacetime Competition for Influence	Military Conflict
<b>Goal</b>	Encourage partner support for the United States on major issues.	Defeat China politically and militarily.
<b>Target</b>	Partner	China
<b>Means</b>	Extent of shared partner interests with the United States (compared with China) and relative U.S. capability incentivize or coerce the partner (compared with China).	Balance of interests and balance of capabilities between the United States and China.
<b>Desired End State</b>	No single, clear, and final victory. Instead, the United States continuously obtains partner support (“wins”) on major decisions.	Clear U.S. political and military victory over China.

### Competition Is More Intense Where Priorities Overlap



# 3

## How Can Relative Influence Be Measured and Assessed?

The researchers developed a basic framework with 14 variables to measure and assess how regional countries view U.S. and PRC influence. The framework consists of eight variables that measure a partner's shared interests with the United States (or China) and six variables that measure the relative diplomatic, economic, and military capabilities and resources the United States (or China) could use to convince partners to side with them.

The variables capture:

- Diplomatic and political influence (bilateral relationships, support for U.S. or PRC vision, views of U.S. commitment to the region, regional public opinion of both countries)
- Economic influence (economic dependence on either country, assessments of economic opportunity, economic threat perception, willingness to work with the United States versus China)
- Military and security influence (military threat perception, willingness to work with the United States versus China, support for U.S. efforts, military cooperation, military capabilities, U.S. willingness to aid the country in a potential conflict against China).



This brief serves as an overview for a series of studies about U.S. and PRC influence in the Indo-Pacific, including in Australia/ New Zealand, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam. The main report and the six country studies can be found at [www.rand.org/US-PRC-influence](http://www.rand.org/US-PRC-influence).

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## How Do Regional Countries View the United States and China?

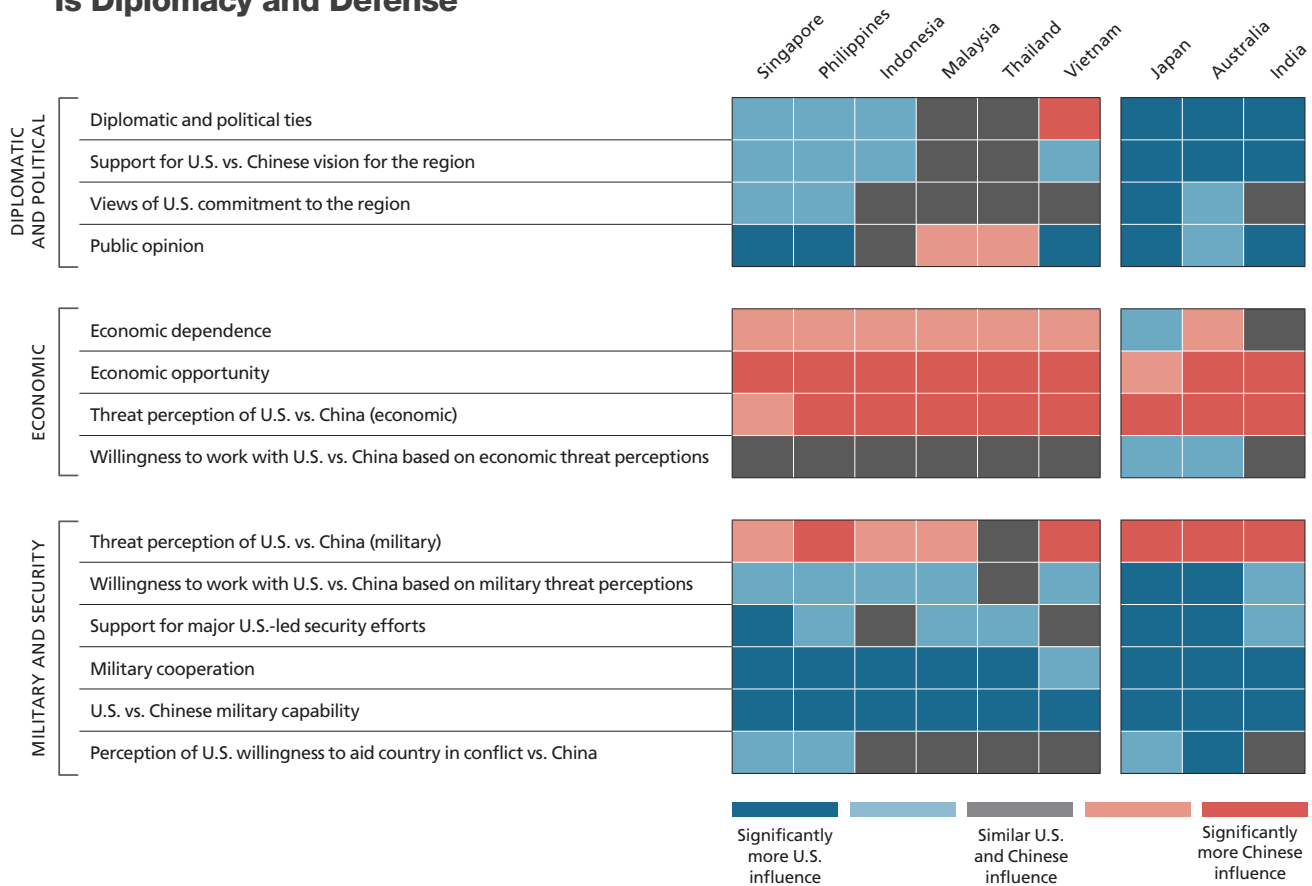
The RAND team applied the framework to the six Southeast Asian countries where competition is most intense and to three key U.S. allies and partners in the region: Australia, Japan, and India. The table on the following page displays the coding of each variable for all nine countries. Each variable captures where the partner is on a range between stronger U.S. influence on one end (blue) and stronger Chinese influence on the other end (red).

The table and the corresponding RAND analysis show that the United States and China have different strengths and approaches to competition:

- Regional countries view the United States as having more diplomatic and military influence than China. China, however, has more economic influence.
- Southeast Asian countries rank economic development over security concerns and are generally more worried about Chinese economic influence than Chinese military threats.
- China can leverage its economic influence for a variety of goals, including to weaken U.S. military influence. In contrast, there is little evidence that Southeast Asian countries believe that U.S. military influence is a counterweight to Chinese economic influence.
- Regional countries have more shared interests with the United States, but China has more tools it is willing to use against Southeast Asia, including more incentives (“carrots”) and coercive capacity (“sticks”).
- Regional countries prefer to not choose between the United States and China and may not side with the United States if forced to pick. Partner alignment is likely to be weak and incomplete.

Overall, neither the United States nor China is clearly “winning” the competition for influence in the Indo-Pacific region as whole, and they have varying levels of influence across countries. U.S. influence is greater in Australia, India, Japan, the Philippines, and Singapore than in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

### China’s Influence Is Economic, While America’s Is Diplomacy and Defense



For in-depth discussion and corresponding recommendations for the U.S. government and the military, download the full report at [www.rand.org/t/RR4412](http://www.rand.org/t/RR4412). To learn more about the U.S.-China competition in individual countries (Australia/New Zealand, India, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam), visit [www.rand.org/US-PRC-influence](http://www.rand.org/US-PRC-influence).

This research brief describes research conducted in RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific: Study Overview and Conclusions*, by Bonny Lin, Michael S. Chase, Jonah Blank, Cortez A. Cooper III, Derek Grossman, Scott W. Harold, Jennifer D. P. Moroney, Lyle J. Morris, Logan Ma, Paul Orner, Alice Shih, and Soo Kim, RR-4412-AF, 2020 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR4412](http://www.rand.org/t/RR4412)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RB10137](http://www.rand.org/t/RB10137). The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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