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Asia in 2020: Coping with COVID-19 and other crises

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni

viella



CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

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The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CHINESE AND US INFLUENCE IN THE «INDO-PACIFIC»

Simone Dossi
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Bonny Lin *et al.*, *Regional Responses to U.S.-China Competition in the Indo-Pacific. Study Overview and Conclusions*, Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2020, 141 pp. (ISBN 101977405185).

In several countries, expanding interactions with China have triggered intense discussions on China's influence in the economic, political and cultural spheres. While increasingly central to debates on China's rise, however, the issue of Beijing's influence remains largely opaque both from a theoretical and from an empirical point of view. The report reviewed here tries to move a step forward by providing an empirical analysis of Chinese influence in the countries of the Indo-Pacific region. Interestingly, the focus is not just on China's influence, but rather on a comparison between Chinese and U.S. influence in the region.

Written for RAND Corporation by a team of twelve researchers, the report is part of a broader research project that «assists the [U.S.] Air Force in evaluating U.S. and Chinese influence and assessing possible Air Force, joint force, and U.S. government options» (p. iii). The report intends to answer a set of interrelated questions: What are influence and competition for influence? How do countries in the Indo-Pacific region view U.S. versus Chinese influence? And how could the U.S. work more effectively with allies and partners to counter Chinese influence in the region? In line with U.S. policy documents from the Trump administration, the Indo-Pacific is identified as the region that «stretches from the west coast of the United States to India and is a primary theatre for US-China competition» (p. 1).

The report defines influence as an actor's ability to shape the behaviour of other actors, and competition for influence as competition over «partner alignment», i.e., «using available forms of influence to shape the behaviour and choices of partners to align with [the U.S. or China's] own respective interests» (p. 8). Based on these definitions, the report tries to assess the «relative influence» of China and the US in six Southeast Asian countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. In addition, it considers three key US allies and partners whose «ability and willingness to work with the United States [...] could be limited if China is able to exert significant influence on them» (p. 6): Australia, Japan and India.

The core of the report presents empirical evidence on the relative influence of China and the US in these nine countries. Data were collected

through the quantitative analysis of Chinese and US activities in the region, the qualitative analysis of official documents and academic publications, as well as interviews with local experts. The report first presents how relative Chinese and US influence is assessed by regional countries. Overall, the US is considered to have bigger relative influence in Singapore, the Philippines, Australia, Japan and India; relative influence is comparable in Indonesia, while China is considered to have more influence in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. The authors turn then to Chinese views of relative influence in the region: seen from China, US influence prevails in Japan, Australia and Singapore, Chinese influence prevails in Malaysia, while the two powers have similar influence in the remaining countries.

Based on this empirical analysis, the report discusses what Washington should do to work more effectively with allies and partners in the region. First, the US should remain focused on bilateral cooperation with Southeast Asian countries, and with Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam in particular. In doing this, Washington should not rely on its military influence to counter Chinese economic influence, but should rather increase economic investment in the region. Second, the US should step up cooperation with Australia, Japan and India in Southeast Asia, especially through pilot projects in specific third countries. In the conclusions, the main findings of the report are translated into a detailed set of policy recommendations for the US government.

The report is an illustrative example of policy-oriented research produced in support of the decision-making process. The goal is to provide «quantifiable» empirical evidence in order to produce «objective» knowledge that will inform policy decisions. As is often the case with this type of research, complex conceptual and theoretical issues tend to remain in the background, while the focus is on the «empirics» – data collection, measurement and quantification in line with positivist research designs and methodologies. As this report shows, unfortunately, this is not necessarily a fruitful combination.

In fact, weak conceptual and theoretical foundations risk undermining the research design's effectiveness. The concept of «influence» as used in this report is a case in point. In Chapter 3, the authors introduce their concise definition of «influence» as the «ability of one actor to shape the behaviour of another actor» (p. 8). In doing this, they do not engage with a set of issues that should be addressed when conceptualizing influence, most notably the relationship between influence and power – and the (material and ideational) sources of it. The result is a questionable theorisation of the sources of influence. According to the authors, influence depends on two sets of variables: 1) «*the extent of shared interests* – defined to include objectives, values, beliefs, and ideology – between the partner and the United States or China»; and 2) «*the capability of the United States or China to incentivize and coerce the partner to act in US or Chinese interests*» (p. 10, italics in

original). Shared interests are thus identified as «passive or unintentional» means of influence: «when a partner that has shared interests with the United States (or China) acts in its own interests, it is likely that the partner's activities will benefit the United States (or China) *without need for US (or Chinese) efforts* to convince the partner to do so» (p. 10, italics added). Yet it is not entirely clear how shared interests as a «passive» means of influence are reconciled with the authors' own definition of influence, which seems to assume some degree of action («shaping») from the side exerting influence in order to alter the preferences of the side that is exposed to it.

Problems become more complicated when this fuzzy conceptual and theoretical framework is pressed into a rigid, positivist research design focused on measurement and quantification. The «shared interests» and «capabilities» presented in Chapter 3 as sources of influence are classified in Chapter 5 into 14 variables «to measure and assess relative US versus Chinese influence across countries» (p. 29). For each of these variables, the authors identify either a (qualitative) indicator or a (quantitative) measure (table 5.1, p. 30), yet it is no longer clear whether these refer, in fact, to the *sources* of influence or rather to its *results*. Among the 14 variables, «economic dependence on the US versus China» (quantitatively «measured by aggregating trade, investment, and tourism») is clearly a source of influence. But what about «*support for US versus Chinese vision for the region*» (p. 30, italics added)? Is this a source of influence (ability to «shape») or rather a result of it?

It is based on this operationalization of concepts that the authors collect data, compare relative US and Chinese influence in different Southeast Asian countries, and eventually formulate their recommendations for US decision-makers. As is often the case in policy-oriented research, recommendations that are presented as based on «objective» research findings are in fact the outcome of a sequence of inherently subjective conceptual and theoretical choices that are largely left unproblematized.

While the «objectivity» of its research findings remains questionable, the report offers interesting clues on the views that inform the foreign policy decision-making process in the US. In particular, the report presents the region as a battleground for US-China competition where very limited room is left for the agency of regional actors. In their focus on regional support for the «divergent US and Chinese visions and objectives for Southeast Asia» (p. 12), the authors seem to forget that regional actors have their own «visions and objectives» for their region. In this respect, it is worth noting that the concept of «Indo-Pacific region» is never problematized in the report. This is surprising, if we consider that much of the ongoing competition in the region has to do with alternative views of the region itself, which in turn reflect the alternative geopolitical agendas advanced in this part of the world by the US, China, ASEAN, individual Southeast Asian states, and other Asian (as well as non-Asian) powers. Yet this inherently compet-

itive nature of «regionalization» is left out of the picture by projecting the US view of the region on other actors, including China, whose agenda is paradoxically presented as «China's vision *for the Indo-Pacific region*» (p. 23, italics added). By assuming the US point of view on the region, the report thus tends to convey an oversimplified account of regional geopolitics. That such an oversimplification might inform policy decisions in Washington is a reason for concern.