
KEY TAKEAWAYS

Public Debriefing: FPCI - ERIA Survey of ASEAN Peoples' Perceptions on China, India, Japan, and USA

Tuesday, 5 March 2024

Recording: <https://youtu.be/gK3rK7PmK-s>

A. ABOUT THE EVENT

In 2023, the Foreign Policy Community of Indonesia (FPCI), in collaboration with the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), conducted a regional survey titled “Survey of ASEAN Peoples' Perceptions on China, India, Japan, and the USA”. The survey gathered responses from 1,722 participants spanning from all ASEAN member countries, including Timor-Leste. Following the survey's release, this public forum aims to bring together experts from Southeast Asia, alongside experts from China, India, Japan, and the USA to delve into the survey results, explore the significance of these perceptions, discuss why they matter, and uncover further geopolitical insights that may arise from the survey findings.

B. SPEAKERS

1. **Dr. Sheila Devi Michael**, Head of the Department of International and Strategic Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Universiti Malaya - Malaysia
2. **Molika Sun**, Deputy Director of the Mekong Centre for Strategic Studies, Asian Vision Institute - Cambodia
3. **Seksan Anantasirikiat**, Researcher at the International Studies Center (ISC) - Thailand

C. DISCUSSANT

1. **Prof. Wei Ling**, Professor of the School of International Relations at the University of International Business and Economics.
2. **Dr. Kei Koga**, Associate Professor at the Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, School of Social Sciences, Nanyang Technological University.
3. **Dr. Denny Roy**, Senior Fellow at East-West Center.
4. **Dr. Premesha Saha**, Fellow at Observer Research Foundation.

D. MODERATOR

Calvin Khoe, Director of FPCI Research and Analysis

E. KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Overview of the Survey Result

Molika Sun

“Overall I find the survey results very useful, not only for researchers in Cambodia but for the whole region and especially the four countries that are the focus of the research. What I learned from this is that Japan and China are the most prominent partners in terms of economic and socio-cultural cooperation, while the USA is the most prominent in politics and security cooperation. India's influence in the region is relatively limited, except for an active role in research and education. I also find, like, maybe satisfying the diverse group of respondents. So you have like five different groups, that is why the result of the survey is accurate.

The CLV countries, like Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, have a different relationship with the four countries, specifically with the United States (US). If we talk about the economic side, the USA is one of the most important trading partners for Cambodia. But somehow **our relationship is spoiled by the political agenda, for example, human rights and democracy**. But if you look at Vietnam, the relationship between Vietnam and the USA is not that difficult compared to Cambodia. It is proved by the recent upgrade of the diplomatic relationship between the two countries from a strategic partnership to a comprehensive strategy partnership. Then the partnership itself does not cover only politics and security agenda, but also other economic and socio-cultural areas, for example, science, technology, trade and investment, environment, energy, and health cooperation. **So I think it depends on the previous and current relationship between each country, the external partner, and the foreign external partner.**”

Seksan Anantasirikiat

“I think this survey actually reflects the characteristics of ASEAN. **First, I think ASEAN is able to exercise its agency towards different dialogue partners**. Although there may be different levels of favorability, I would say that **ASEAN welcomes countries to engage with ASEAN at the regional and national levels**. I think this is clear. **This is evidence that ASEAN has a balance and we are not taking sides**. We are not kind to any player's backyard, so I think that is the kind of reflection that I see from the survey. Second, it seems that there is

commonality, although part of one presentation says there is kind of no commonality. I **found one, that soft engagement, including educational and academic activities always and mostly welcome to engage with ASEAN.** When it comes to political security issues, you will see that the survey says many ASEAN countries are reluctant to do so. For example, in the question on Quad and AUKUS, many respondents say there is no opinion. When it comes to BRICS and SEO, many respondents say neutral. When it comes to NATO, many respondents are neutral and opposed. So I think it is clear that soft engagement is always welcome and desirable here.

The second point is my recommendation. I think there is a kind of need for improvement, I would **recommend engaging with other dialogue partners** as well, such as the Republic of Korea because we are celebrating 50 years of ASEAN-ROK relations, Australia with the upcoming ASEAN-Australia Summit, EU perhaps. It can be a survey for dialogue partners. A message for ASEAN countries, I think we should emphasize that ASEAN has principles, and we are robust. Third point, I think you should add more sub-regional cooperation, Mekong cooperation. I heard many narratives saying that diversifying views amongst continental and maritime ASEAN countries, and would like to see if it is real or not.”

Dr. Sheila Devi Michael

“From this survey, I would say that there has been sort of an approach or a reception of being more positive towards Japan, and also least towards China. So **I believe that this disparity, first of all, is because of the concerns of the ASEAN people, the lack of approach or efforts from China,** especially in the issues that have been highlighted, especially the Myanmar crisis, the Taiwan Strait, and most importantly, the South China Sea dispute.

Compared to Japan, that has been more approachable, especially with its Fukuda doctrine, and it is very clear in its approach to maintaining peace and stability in the region. Not only with ASEAN, but I think globally.

So for Malaysia, I suppose all these four partners are important because Malaysia has had a good friendship with China for more than five decades, with China being Malaysia's largest trading partner and Malaysia being China's second-largest trading partner in ASEAN. With India, it is seen as the key player as well, but maybe the lease may not be as important for Japan and China but for Malaysia. Malaysia has always had this balanced approach because it wants this

mutual benefit with all its counterparts in the region. We do see the USA scoring quite low with everybody but as for Malaysia again, they may not significantly play a key player role compared to Japan, China, and India. Nevertheless, when it comes to politics and security for Malaysia, the USA is also important.

When everybody is important, I would like to highlight civil society's feedback, where they are very much, not satisfied at all when it comes to the important issues, the regional issues in Myanmar, the way these countries are handling the Myanmar crisis, the refugee crisis. So I think this is something that these dialogue partners have to pay attention to, because this crisis is very important, especially when we talk about development progress in the region, we should not neglect this crisis because it involves the ASEAN people.”

2. Perspective from the United States on the Survey Result

Dr. Denny Roy

“From the United States' point of view, the results are somewhat disappointing. It is not surprising to hear that the United States is still recognized and, by some countries, valued as an important security partner. I have recognized for a long time that it is essential for the United States to go beyond simply having fruitful security partnerships with countries in Southeast Asia. We need to expand our involvement to add other elements besides the military and the geo-strategic to the levers of influence that we can exercise in the region if we are gonna support U.S. interests.

There are areas outside of military security partnerships where the United States has the opportunity to expand its influence and how it is doing so far. **The first is support for ASEAN centrality. The United States government is committed to saying that it supports ASEAN centrality because there is no cost to saying this. Otherwise, there would be a cost to denying ASEAN centrality.** But it is plain to see that **mouthng support for ASEAN centrality does not prevent the United States from pursuing other relationships that do not necessarily first seek ASEAN's permission.** We saw this with the Quad and AUKUS, where there was some opposition in Southeast Asia.

Folks like myself recognize that the United States needs to have an economic aspect of its Asia strategy. Folks like me feel that it was a serious and strategic blunder, on the part of the United States to abandon the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) ... **The Biden administration has attempted as best it can to**

compensate for the lack of USA membership in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) by putting forth, as you know, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) beginning in May 2022, which is recognized, however, as a framework rather than a trade agreement. It was described by some as an invitation to negotiate, but lacking in much substance. **Most notably, the IPEF does not offer access to USA markets and a reduction in USA's trade tariffs to potential Southeast Asian partners.** So the problem here is that what **Southeast Asian governments want is asymmetrical tariff reduction by the United States, but the United States cannot do this anymore** because USA industrial capacity has declined to the point where letting in more imports would worsen USA de-industrialization.”

3. Perspective from India on the Survey Result

Dr. Premesha Saha.

“I will actually reiterate what Denny said when we saw how India is perceived in ASEAN. It was actually quite disappointing. But, you know, the fact that got my attention the most is the lack of awareness about the Act East policy. I can understand the moderate response on the (India–Myanmar–Thailand) Trilateral Highway because **it has been an ongoing project for many years and has faced a lot of hurdles, so the progress has not been as it was expected.** But with regard to the lack of awareness about India's Act East policy, that was a little - I was a little taken aback by that. **India's presence in Southeast Asia generally has to do with soft power.** That is why you see the social-cultural aspect got a much higher ranking than trade and investment. Another thing is also education and exchanges, especially, since there are a lot of scholarships for ASEAN students now at Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and so on. **With defense and security, India is just stepping into that zone, especially with the deal with the Philippines after that.** India campaigns, and how much of that will take shape in the future depends. If such similar deals are struck with, say, Indonesia, or Vietnam, then we can say that the ball is rolling forward. But if it just stops in the Philippines, again, this is just a one-off thing. So it has to be seen as to how defense partnerships grow similarly on similar agreements as reached with countries like Indonesia and Vietnam as well.”

4. Perspective from China on the Survey Result

Prof. Wei Ling.

The key issue as reflected by the survey in the current ASEAN-China relationship, I think, is trust. Indeed the survey captures a nuanced and multifaceted perception of China and its cooperation with ASEAN, reflecting both positive sentiments and concerns. While China is deemed the most relevant partner for the future of ASEAN, the most reasonable major power for Southeast Asia, it is also pinpointed as the least trusted partner by a significant 43% majority of respondents, and the top partner most likely to employ economic tools and coercive measures against ASEAN and AMS. Why so? I think the root cause is actually the rapid rise of China's economic power and overall national strength. It arouses both positive sentiments because China has been the growth engine for the region and shared its growth with ASEAN states.

“I think there are three points which are the reasons for a trust deficit with China. First is rapidly increasing power asymmetry and geography. The theory of power asymmetry argues that when the bigger player interacts with a smaller player, the attention and sensitivity they feel about the interaction and the relationship are significantly different. The smaller player always pays far more attention and is far more sensitive about the relationship and about the interaction, while the bigger player is far less so. Consequently, misperception arrives.”

“The second reason is power competition. After the global financial crisis, there has been significant change in the international power structure, featuring the rise of the global south with ASEAN states included. What follows the structural change has been the shift of global strategic gravity toward the Pacific and East Asia. ASEAN proudly hosts the East Asia Summit and sits at the center of regional cooperation mechanisms that have actually networked almost all major powers. All major powers have increased their strategic investment in the region. Some strengthened military presence and security arrangements have interrupted the momentum of regional cooperation processes led by ASEAN and put regional stability and growth at risk. And so not only power competition itself but also the narrative, which could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. **So Western standards and Western narrative hegemony are at play here. As China has been identified by some Western powers as a strategic rival and not only has the attention but also the ability to challenge the USA liberal hegemony, the power competition has been used specifically for the zero-sum game between China and the US.**

The third reason is nationalism, populism, and uncertainty, which we have witnessed after the global financial crisis and more recently in the past few years with the pandemic.”

“What approach could China take to nurture trust and to build friendship, to become a favorable country for Southeast Asian people? **The first thing is that China should manage, and sustain, first of all, its growth and continue to share growth with regional countries, with ASEAN.** And I think this is also the wish of ASEAN states, as we can see that people have positive reflections on the Belt and Road Initiative. **The BRI is the most well-known initiative of all the initiatives of the four partners. Also the GDI, Global Development Initiative, is rated very high among the ASEAN public. So that means it is also the wish of ASEAN that China could sustain its economic growth and share growth with the region.** China also has to manage as its growth continues. It needs to be very careful in managing the power asymmetry. And so it should continue to enhance its partnership, a comprehensive strategic partnership based on equality, but more importantly, think about equity. Take care of the concerns of the ASEAN, ASEAN states, and ASEAN people. In particular, their security and development concerns **I want to emphasize that we need to somehow reorient power competition for influence or even for dominance towards power competition for contribution. And then people-to-people exchanges are extremely important. And finally, the last very important point is to support ASEAN centrality.**”

5. Perspective from Japan on the Survey Result

Dr. Kei Koga

“**I think this is really comfortable to see because there are lots of positives in the ASEAN’s view on Japan. But the good thing about this survey is that they actually included the public kind of level of perception,** and then that confirms overall, like the society-wise and also the elites and policymakers, and then the academics, they also share a similar kind of perception towards Japan.”

“**The second point is the reason the positive view of Japan actually continues** ... I think the most important thing is that Japan actually had the agreement or tacit understanding through the Fukuda doctrine in 1977. **Japan actually declared that it would not be the major military power and would be an equal partner with all the ASEAN member states.** Those are really important because, at the time, Japan was actually getting more economic power. It could be

translating those economic powers into military power and then becoming more major powers in the Asia-Pacific.

But then still, Japan attempted to be the honest kind of equal partner with the ASEAN member states. **Then this was backed by ASEAN-Japan's action for facilitating infrastructure development and economic investment, to make the economic fundamentals right for the Southeast Asian countries.** I believe that is all about structural issues. Those kinds of surveys were taken after Japan was in decline in terms of its military and economic power. **Japan actually contacted many Southeast Asian countries not to pressure or force the Southeast Asian countries to do what Japan wanted, instead, Japan consulted with the Southeast Asian countries and then tried to be more kind to their equal partner.** So I guess these are the real reasons why Japan was trusted in that sense.

Lastly, the third point is how sustainable this is. I think this is going to be difficult if you take a look at the survey results. Then many countries or people actually talk about the positive things about Japan, but it does not really say that Japan is relevant or playing a great role in the economics or the military or security issues. I could push back on some of this because Japan plays an important role, but I still think to some extent that **there is a certain truth that Japan is declining in terms of its power resources.** So for that, I guess **Japan needs to be creative in providing regional economic goods or regional public goods to Southeast Asia, to facilitate more kinds of development and peace in the region.**”

6. How does Southeast Asian See a Response from China, India, Japan, USA?

Molika Sun.

“It is quite disappointing to see the less prominent role of India in the perspective of ASEAN people. But I think what really matters is the vision of the Indian leader. **If India really wants to improve its presence in ASEAN, Indian leaders have to be consistent with their actions and have a vision of what India really wants to do with ASEAN.** If India wants to improve its presence in ASEAN it is about the budget. Why I state this point is because I think in Cambodia, for example, there are many initiatives between the Cambodian government and the Indian government, but the problem is we do not have enough financial support to move those initiatives forward.”

“I also want to respond to the US. I think what the USA has done in ASEAN is not only about securities and political operations. It already proved itself to be one of the most important investors and economic partners for ASEAN countries. But maybe it is a lack of narrations or the media campaigns or the broadcast toward the general public. That is why when we think about the US, it is always overshadowed by the US-China rivalries and other power competitions, even though the role of the USA is already prominent in terms of economic sectors.”

Dr. Sheila Devi Michael.

“I think ASEAN people are more inclined to a soft approach. So, when Dr. Premesha Saha mentioned India's initiative and India's Act East Policy, I have to say that Malaysia is actually strongly aligning with India. I think Malaysia has a good relationship with India so it speaks well on India's Act East Policy. But I think it is about how it translates to the ASEAN member states. I think that is what the government should be looking at, especially scholars who can look at the avenues and how they can be translated.”

“I was very much also taken with Professor Wei Ling when she said that China is still important, but people are very much selective when it comes to China, because China is important. It is very important, especially when it comes to economic prosperity. Everybody wants to be on the good page of China. And I think even when Premier Li Qiang also stated back in September 2023, that it would like to listen to the voices of ASEAN people, and how they want this good relationship with China. The most obvious thing, even though I have mentioned the Myanmar crisis and the Taiwan Strait, I think the most sensitive issue will be the South China Sea dispute. Because it involves the ASEAN member states and some of us may not buy it but I think some of the Southeast Asian countries, especially the Philippines. So I think China has to pay attention to that, especially when it wants to be one of the most favorable, similar to Japan, Japan's most favored nation.”

Seksan Anantasirikiat.

“There is a gap between action and perception. I am confident that all four countries have done a lot in the region in order to establish a presence and also improve relationships both regionally and bilaterally. But it is not only about what we have done, it is about how people perceive it. So I think there is one

keyword here, public diplomacy. Perhaps we need to rethink it. I think Professor Wei Ling mentioned communication strategy. So I think it's more about how each dialogue partner could communicate to the target audience and create them or turn them into friends of your country. **Second point, perhaps we need to think about a kind of higher public diplomacy program, that not only focuses on giving scholarships but also engagement with the higher officials, and key public opinion influencers, then use or employ them to narrate the stories of your country.** I think that can help kind of communicate and also navigate the relationship that can be more sustainable and reliable in the future.”