

# American Attitudes toward Korea: Growing Support for a Solid Relationship

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The Chicago Council on Global Affairs 2014 survey of American public opinion on foreign policy shows steadily growing American support for the US-Korea (ROK) alliance. This support is growing despite a tendency toward greater selectivity among Americans regarding how, when, and where the United States should actively assert itself in world affairs, especially through use of military force. Consistent with the public's cool feelings toward North Korea and a continued US-North Korean stalemate over its nuclear program, American willingness to support the US troop presence in Seoul to defend against North Korean aggression has steadily grown to its highest point yet recorded in Chicago Council Surveys. However, some notable gaps between American and South Korean perceptions of neighboring countries remain, which may shed light on the future limits of US-ROK alliance cooperation beyond deterrence against North Korea.

American favorability toward South Korea has shifted dramatically since 2006, improving by over 11 points on a scale of “feelings” toward other countries, from 44 out of 100 in 2006 to 56 out of 100 in 2014. This improvement in attitudes toward South Korea tracks with steady gains in South Korean attitudes toward the United States during the same time period. Pew Research Center polling of Korean public attitudes toward the United States during roughly the same time

frame shows an increase in favorability toward the United States from 58 in 2007 to 82 out of 100 in 2014.<sup>1</sup> The mutual improvement in American and South Korean perceptions of each other has allowed both sides to embrace a joint vision for US-ROK relations that extends beyond the peninsula to include regional and global objectives.

At the same time, American attitudes toward North Korea remain cool, with Americans rating the country only 23 out of 100 in favorability—the lowest of any nation in the Chicago Council's poll. American skepticism toward North Korea is further reflected in ongoing American support for the continuation of the US troop presence in South Korea, which at 64 percent is its highest level since 2002. Presumably because of American concerns about the magnitude of the North Korean threat, American support for a continued US troop presence in South Korea (64%) is higher than for the US presence in both Japan (55%) and the Philippines (51%). This result also tracks with a rising level of appreciation among Americans (62% in 2014 compared to 59% in 2012) for the US military presence in Asia as a contributor to regional stability. A 2013 Asan Institute for Policy Studies poll revealed that over 67 percent of South Koreans support the long-term stationing of US military forces in South Korea, virtu-

1. Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, <http://www.pewglobal.org/database/indicator/1/country/116/>.

ally mirroring the strong rate of American support for a continued military presence in South Korea.<sup>2</sup> In line with the increase in support for US troops stationed in Asia, American support for the US rebalancing policy toward Asia has grown to 60 percent in 2014 from 54 percent in 2012.

While a majority of the American public continues to see the US presence in South Korea as useful for the purpose of deterrence, fewer support US troop involvement in the event of a North Korean invasion of South Korea (47%, with 51% opposed). Nevertheless, the percentage supporting the use of US troops to defend South Korea has steadily increased since the 1980s to an all-time high. Interestingly, the level of support for using American forces in the event of a North Korean invasion of the south is essentially the same regardless of what type of mission is specified—a UN Security Council authorized military mission (48%), an intervention by the United States in which involvement by the UN or allies is not specified (47%), and a US intervention as part of a coalition of like-minded allies (44%). This suggests that Americans see the US-ROK alliance commitment itself as a sufficient rationale to justify American intervention should it become necessary. American willingness to commit troops in response to a North Korean invasion is considerably higher than American support for US intervention if China were to invade Taiwan (26%).

## Americans prefer diplomatic options for dealing with North Korea

On balance, most Americans (85%) continue to favor the use of diplomacy over military options for dealing with North Korea (DPRK). This is striking given the limited direct diplomacy that has occurred between the Obama administration and North Korea, which is widely regarded among policy elites as having been a failure. The primary result of US-DPRK negotiations, a joint “Leap Day” understanding between the United States and North Korea in which North Korea was to freeze its nuclear and missile-related activities in exchange for food assistance, was breached by North Korea’s announcement of a long-range missile test within weeks of its announcement on February 29, 2012. Given this failure, the Obama administration’s “strategic patience” approach gives the impression

that diplomatic options are nearly exhausted despite strong support from Americans, who say that their leaders should be ready to meet and talk with the leadership of North Korea (61%). However, this support has decreased from the 69 percent that supported dialogue in 2012.

In addition to diplomacy with North Korea, there is growing American support for interdiction of North Korean ships suspected of trafficking in nuclear materials and arms (66%, up from 60% in 2012). A legal basis for such interdictions has existed since passage of a 2009 UN Security Council resolution authorizing member states to conduct such operations. The survey results show strong public support for US military efforts to confront North Korea on suspected proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). This result is consistent with the relatively high priority Americans continue to give to “preventing the spread of nuclear weapons,” which ranked third in the 2014 survey behind “protecting the jobs of American workers” and “reducing US dependence on foreign oil” and above “combating international terrorism” as a top US foreign policy priority.

Americans continue to regard military options for dealing with the North Korean nuclear threat more skeptically than diplomatic options, although relative support for US military involvement in the event that diplomacy fails continues to grow. The option of using air power to strike North Korean military targets or suspected nuclear sites reached 41 percent support in 2014, four points higher than in 2012, and the option of sending in US ground forces to take control of the country was supported by only 18 percent of respondents, a three percentage point increase in support for this option compared to 2012. However, it is clear that Americans regard the use of force on the Korean peninsula only as a last resort, suggesting that despite past diplomatic failures, the American public does not yet perceive diplomatic options toward North Korea as having been exhausted.

## Views of the neighborhood

While favorability trends between the United States and South Korea are positive, a comparison of American and South Korean views of Korea’s Northeast Asian neighbors is also useful to gain an understanding of potential factors that might influence the durability

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2. South Korean Perceptions of ROK-US Relations and Foreign Affairs, Asan Institute for Policy Studies, June and November 2013.

of the relationship beyond the shared focus on deterrence against North Korea.

The biggest difference in views is on Japan. Chicago Council polling shows that American favorability toward Japan has increased to near record positive levels in 2014 (62 out of 100). Asan Institute polling, on the other hand, shows that South Korean attitudes toward Japan have dropped from the 30s (on a 100 point scale) prior to 2013 to the 25 to 30 range since the beginning of the Abe administration in 2013. This divergence in views of Japan between Americans and South Koreans is further reinforced by the fact that 80 percent of Americans surveyed see the United States and Japan as mostly partners, while only 11 percent of South Koreans in a July 2013 Asan poll viewed Japan as trustworthy.

The gap in views toward Japan is significant since the American rebalancing strategy toward Asia assumes that allies of the United States will increase their cooperation with each other. But serious obstacles to stable Japan-South Korea relations clearly remain, primarily over history and territorial claims.

On the other hand, views of China in both the United States and South Korea are more similar, if ambivalent, with Korean favorability toward China in the early part of 2014 averaging 48 out of 100, and American favorability towards China averaging 44 out of 100 in the Chicago Council Survey. American ambivalence toward China is further reflected in the almost even split among respondents on the question of whether the United States and China are mostly rivals or mostly partners (49% mostly partners vs. 48% mostly rivals). In contrast, roughly two-thirds of South Koreans in Asan Institute polling from 2013 say the US-China relationship is primarily competitive, while 55 percent of South Koreans view the Sino-South Korean relationship as primarily cooperative.

A plurality (45%) of Americans think that China has already surpassed the United States in terms of economic power (compared to 27% who think the United States is stronger economically), and a majority of Americans (54%) still believe the United States is stronger militarily than China. But Koreans have an even stonger sense of China as an economic power. A July 2014 Asan poll shows almost two-thirds of South Koreans are concerned about China's growing economic (72%) and military (66%) power. In reaction, 59 percent prefer to align with the United States and Japan to ensure South Korean security, versus 27 per-

cent who prefer to rely on Korea-China relations to preserve South Korean security.<sup>3</sup>

Asan's poll found that more than 60 percent of South Koreans say it would be necessary to increase security cooperation with Japan if China continues its rise.<sup>4</sup> Despite differing views with the United States on Japan, the continued concern of South Koreans about China's rise contributes to their desires for continued security cooperation with the United States. Americans echo this sentiment in Chicago Council polling, with 59 percent of Americans in favor of building up strong relations with traditional allies like South Korea and Japan, even if this might diminish US relations with China. Only 33 percent of Americans favor building a new partnership with China, even if it might diminish relations with traditional allies.

## Perceptions of relative influence

Americans and South Koreans are in rough agreement on the relative influence of the United States, China, the EU, Russia, and Japan in the world today (although Koreans perceive Russia to be more powerful than Japan, while Americans perceive Japan to be more powerful than Russia). However, when asked about the relative influence of the United States and China 10 years from now, South Koreans projected in a 2013 Asan Institute poll that China would surpass the United States within a decade, while Americans expect China to cut the relative gap in power between the two countries, but not surpass the United States. This difference in opinion regarding the pace of China's growth and its ability to overtake the United States within the next decade could be a natural result of South Korea's geographic proximity to China. It could also signal greater policy pressure in South Korea to hedge against downside risks from China's rising influence based on public concerns.

Americans view South Korea as maintaining the same level of influence in the global community in 10 years as it holds today. But South Koreans have a much more ambitious view of South Korea's potential influence, projecting that South Korea may surpass Japan

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3. Kim Jiyoung, et. al., "One Bed, Two Dreams: Assessing Xi Jinping's Visit to Seoul," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, July 16, 2014, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/one-bed-two-dreams-assessing-xi-jinpings-visit-to-seoul/>.

4. "South Koreans and their Neighbors," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, February 2014, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2014/>.

and equal Russia in the second tier of global influence within a decade.<sup>5</sup> If realized, a larger global role for South Korea would contribute to greater cooperation within the US-ROK alliance.

## Views of the US-ROK trade relationship

Gradually, more Americans recognize Korea as a top 10 trading partner of the United States, with 24 percent of Americans in 2014 (compared to 22% in 2012) correctly identifying South Korea as a top 10 trading partner. (South Korea was the seventh largest trade partner of

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5. "South Koreans and their Neighbors," Asan Institute for Policy Studies, February 2014, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2014/>.

the United States in 2013, while the United States is South Korea's fourth largest trading partner.) However, 44 percent identified South Korea only as a top 20 trading partner. This suggests that the South Korean national brand continues to lag behind the influence and market power of South Korean conglomerates such as Samsung, Hyundai Motors, and LG, whose products are ubiquitous in the lives of many American consumers. The misrecognition is particularly striking when compared to US recognition of the Japanese national brand: 62 percent of Americans identify Japan as a top 10 trading partner. The ratification of the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) in 2012 does not appear to have had a significant impact on American perceptions of Korea as a close trading partner of the United States.

## About the author

Scott Snyder is senior fellow for Korea studies and director of the program on U.S.-Korea policy at the Council on Foreign Relations. Snyder has authored numerous book chapters on aspects of Korean politics and foreign policy and Asian regionalism and is the author of *China's Rise and the Two Koreas: Politics, Economics, Security* (2009), *Paved With Good Intentions: The NGO Experience in North Korea* (co-editor, 2003), and *Negotiating on the Edge: North Korean Negotiating Behavior* (1999).

This report is based on a series of survey questions on Korea that is part of a larger 2014 Chicago Council Survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy. This essay is the author's own interpretation of the Council's survey results. For the full report, please visit [www.thechicagocouncil.org](http://www.thechicagocouncil.org).

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