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American Support for the U.S.-ROK Alliance: Steady As She Goes Analysis of 2012 Chicago Council Survey on American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy

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This report is based on a series of survey questions on Korea that is part of a larger Chicago Council survey on American public opinion and U.S. foreign policy. The essay that follows is the author's own interpretation of the Council's survey results. For the full report, please visit www.thechicagocouncil.org.

The U.S.-ROK relationship has arguably reached a high point under the stewardship of U.S. President Barack Obama and South Korean President Lee Myung-Bak. A new framework for the alliance was set during President Lee's first visit to Washington in June of 2009, when the two leaders announced a U.S.-ROK Joint Vision Statement committing the two sides to comprehensive cooperation on peninsular, regional, and global issues on the basis of shared interests and values. The alliance was reaffirmed and celebrated during a state visit by President Lee to Washington in October of 2011, at which time the U.S. Congress ratified the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) along with U.S. trade agreements with Colombia and Panama. The positive personal relationship between the two presidents has enabled U.S.-ROK cooperation on a wide range of issues. Seoul has hosted gatherings of the G-20 and the Nuclear Security Summit that have made President Obama a relatively frequent visitor to Seoul, and the two presidents have consulted regularly at international meetings. The United States coordinated closely with South Korea to deter North Korean aggression in response to two serious North Korean provocations: the sinking of a South Korean naval vessel in March of 2010 and North Korea's shelling of the Yeonpyeong Island in the West Sea near North Korea in November of 2010.

The 2012 Chicago Council Survey provides an opportunity to understand the American public's views on America's role in the world as well as American responses both to developments in the U.S.-South Korea relationship and to South Korean efforts to enhance its own standing in the international community. The survey results provide a snapshot of the state of the relationship. When paired with data from previous years regarding Korea-related issues, the survey also provides a measure of the

direction and value that Americans place on the relationship with South Korea as American recognition of the importance of Asia to U.S. interests grows.

The survey results show that American perceptions of South Korea are strongly positive, with two in three (65 percent) Americans viewing South Korea as a partner of the United States rather than a rival. These views of South Korea as a close partner are reinforced most clearly by the fact that two out of three Americans (64 percent) are willing to contribute U.S. troops to a UN-led force to back South Korea in the event of a North Korean attack.

Notably, almost half of Americans view South Korea as sharing similar values and a way of life with the United States, compared to only 35 percent in 2008. This increase in American perceptions of common values between the United States and South Korea tracks closely with the improvement in area expert perceptions of the quality of the relationship in recent years and is an important indicator of the depth and durability of the U.S.-ROK alliance going forward. Perceptions of common values strengthen the potential for deeper and more comprehensive cooperation on the basis of shared interests.. In contrast, diminishing American perceptions of common values with South Korea would be a warning sign, reflecting difficulties in the U.S.-ROK relationship and thereby limiting the potential for strengthening it.

As Americans shift their priority to Asia, South Korea is poised to continue as an important security and economic partner of the United States. Americans anticipate South Korean influence to increase modestly over the course of the next decade (4.8 on a 10-point scale) compared to its perceived influence today (4.4). At the same time, American recognition of Asia's importance to U.S. interests compared to Europe has steadily increased from 27 percent to 52 percent over the past decade. These views suggest that Americans will continue their support for a strong and growing relationship with South Korea as a longstanding partner in a region that has grown in importance to the United States.

The U.S.-ROK Alliance and the "Pivot"

American support for a long-term military presence in South Korea remains tied primarily to the U.S. commitment to defend South Korea against North Korean aggression. In an era in which Americans are more conscious of fiscal constraints on their ability to invest in an overseas military presence, South Korea enjoys the greatest support as a location for U.S. troops in Asia. Three-fifths (60 percent) of Americans support a long-term military presence in Korea, compared to 51 percent who support a long-term U.S. presence in Japan and 40 percent who support a long-term presence in Australia. Although the level of American support for the U.S. presence in South Korea has gradually declined over the past decade from 67 percent in 2002 to 60 percent in 2012, U.S. troops in South Korea are

still viewed as a necessary deterrent against North Korean aggression. Interestingly, American support for the U.S. military presence in South Korea remains higher than the level of American support for the U.S. plan to pivot diplomatic and military resources to Asia (54 percent). Almost half of Americans (48 percent) view the current level of U.S. troop deployments (slightly less than 30,000) to be “about right.” This result suggests that Americans still view deterrence against North Korean aggression as a compelling justification for U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula.

The preferred priorities in America’s relationships with both South Korea and Japan reflect the same objectives. This suggests that Americans see the relationships with Japan and South Korea as fulfilling largely the same strategic purposes. Despite relatively modest support for the pivot concept cited above, specific elements that comprise the pivot rank highly as priorities for the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK relationships. The top priorities for the U.S.-South Korea relationship (as either “somewhat high” or “very high” priorities) are the objectives of preventing North Korea from building its nuclear capabilities (76%, with 48% very high priority), protecting freedom of navigation of sea lanes between the United States and East Asia (73%, with 35% very high priority), and the building of a regional security alliance between the United States and East Asian countries (71%, with 23% very high priority). Building a regional free trade area with the United States and East Asian countries drew support from two out of three Americans (64%, with 18% very high priority). Given that Americans support the building of a regional security alliance between the United States and East Asian countries, it also stands to reason that Americans would welcome greater security cooperation between South Korea and Japan to the extent that those countries are able to move past long-standing differences over historical and territorial issues to increase cooperation as part of a regional alliance framework.

Aside from the long-standing objective of denuclearizing North Korea, each of the priorities listed above represent specific elements of the U.S. pivot, or rebalancing strategy, that was unveiled by the Obama administration during and after President Obama’s trip to Asia in November of 2011. On the other hand, the objectives of bringing about regime change in North Korea and limiting the rise of China’s power drew support as at least “somewhat high” priorities from over 50 percent of Americans, but were the lowest ranking among the priorities asked about in the survey. The findings suggest that in the public mind, the American commitment to deterrence against North Korean aggression remains a more compelling rationale than the potential rise of China as a military power for the U.S. presence in South Korea. In addition, there is clearly limited American support for imposing regime change in North Korea, which would presumably involve a military-led strategy.

The rank of priorities suggests an order of preference that is different from the military-related elements of the pivot that have drawn the most media attention. [This may account for the relatively modest level of support for the pivot compared to the specific economic and political priorities

contained as part of the strategy.] Protecting freedom of navigation and the building of a regional security alliance and a free trade area between the United States and East Asian countries involve military considerations, but are primarily political and economic in nature. As suggested above, the elements of the pivot that appear to draw the least American support are those that would rely primarily on military means: limiting the rise of China's power (such as the stationing of rotational marine deployments to Darwin) and bringing about regime change in North Korea.

These findings, along with American responses to questions about the rise of China's power, strongly suggest that at least for now, Americans view the China challenge to be primarily political and economic, with a preference not to overemphasize a military response to China's rising power. Three-quarters of all Americans anticipate that China's economy will equal or surpass the economy of the United States, and some are concerned that China's economic growth may have negative effects. However, the preferred American response is cooperation and engagement rather than containment. This is reflected in the preference of 69 percent of Americans to undertake friendly cooperation and engagement with China rather than to actively work to limit the growth of China's power.

Americans Support a U.S. Military Presence in South Korea AND Renewed Diplomacy with North Korea

Over three-fifths of Americans support a long-term U.S. presence on the Korean peninsula, but only 41 percent favor the use of U.S. troops in response to a North Korean invasion of South Korea when multilateral action is not specified. The level of American support for U.S. troop involvement rises to 64 percent if U.S. troops are part of a UN-sponsored effort to reverse North Korean aggression if South Korea were attacked. This distinction clearly suggests that Americans feel considerably more comfortable joining a UN-sponsored international coalition versus responding unilaterally to North Korean aggression, despite continuing high levels of support for maintaining a U.S. presence in South Korea.

With regard to the objective of denuclearization of North Korea, Americans overwhelmingly prefer continued diplomatic efforts to convince North Korea to suspend its nuclear program despite the past failure of negotiated efforts to achieve this. Over 82 percent of Americans support continued U.S. diplomatic efforts to get North Korea to suspend its nuclear program, and 69 percent support the idea that U.S. leaders should be ready to meet and talk with the leaders of North Korea. This result is particularly striking in light of "negotiation fatigue" with North Korea that has resulted from two decades of failed efforts to halt North Korea's nuclear development, exemplified by the apparent failure of the Obama administration's latest diplomatic efforts with North Korea. Following the latest round of U.S.-DPRK negotiations in Beijing in February of 2012, both countries issued parallel statements on February 29 indicating that the United States would provide food aid in return for the

return of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors to oversee North Korean nuclear activities at Yongbyun. But implementation of those statements was upended by North Korea's April 12, 2012, failed satellite launch, which violated UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874 and was condemned in a statement from the president of the UN Security Council. Nonetheless, most Americans continue to prefer renewed diplomacy over coercive measures or military pressure as instruments by which to achieve North Korea's denuclearization.

While three-fifths of Americans (60 percent) support interdiction and searches of North Korean vessels suspected of carrying nuclear-related cargo (in line with actions called for under UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874 that require member states to pursue such measures), 58 percent of Americans oppose air strikes against North Korean military sites or suspected nuclear sites, and 80 percent oppose U.S. ground troop involvement in efforts to take control of the country. Although Americans were not questioned about use of U.S. troops to respond to a political vacuum or instability in North Korea, the overwhelmingly negative response to using ground forces to pressure North Korea to denuclearize might well carry over to involvement of U.S. ground forces in such an event. If spillover effects from North Korean instability were to raise South Korean desires to intervene militarily to stabilize North Korea's internal situation, American public reluctance to support such a military operation might become a potential source of friction in the U.S.-ROK alliance.

The South Korea-United States Economic Relationship Remains Underappreciated

Over half of Americans (53 percent) view South Korea as a country that practices fair trade with the United States. This majority of positive views of South Korea as a fair trader is an important factor that most probably enabled U.S. congressional ratification of the KORUS FTA, especially given that Americans continue to underestimate the importance of Korea as a top ten trading partner of the United States. (A Pew poll taken in November of 2010 reported mixed American perceptions of the benefits of freer trade with South Korea and China.)¹

Given the ubiquity of Hyundai and KIA automobiles; LG washers and dryers; and Samsung cell phones, laptops, and tablets in the U.S. market; one can only assume that Americans do not automatically associate these everyday household goods with Korea. Regardless, the fact that only 22 percent of Americans think South Korea is one of America's top ten trading partners (South Korea is the seventh largest trading partner of the United States) suggests that Americans continue to underrate the importance or impact of the U.S. economic relationship with South Korea on their daily lives. It remains to be seen whether American awareness of Korea's economic importance as a trade partner

¹ <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1795/poll-free-trade-agreements-jobs-wages-economic-growth-china-japan-canada>.

of the United States will change as a result of closer cooperation envisioned now that the KORUS FTA is in place.

Conclusion

The 2012 Chicago Council Survey results suggest continued American commitment to defend South Korea against aggression from North Korea and a growing appreciation of South Korea as a country that shares American values. Americans view South Korea as an important partner in promoting Asian stability and prosperity, and support a U.S. military presence there as a necessary instrument for achieving those objectives as a deterrent against North Korean aggression and as a guarantor of regional stability. But Americans remain skeptical of unilateral strategies toward either North Korea or China that involve the use of military instruments for coercion or containment. The level and breadth of U.S.-ROK partnership beyond the peninsula, including opportunities for enhanced economic cooperation and the convergence of U.S. and South Korean interests in maintaining international stability and prosperity, remain relatively underappreciated.

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