

Troop Withdrawal Likely to Undermine South Korean Public Support for Alliance with United States

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Introduction

The United States and South Korea remain locked in negotiations over the Special Measures Agreement (SMA)—the agreement which formally determines how much South Korea contributes to the financial cost of stationing US troops in South Korea. In the past, these negotiations took place behind the scenes away from the public eye. But keeping details of this round of negotiations private proved difficult when it was disclosed that the United States requested \$5 billion dollars, an unprecedented 400 percent increase from the previous year. When the two sides failed to reach a deal by April 1, 4,000 Koreans who work on US bases in South Korea were furloughed.

The public attention to these negotiations—and the US request being [framed as extortive](#) by Korean media and US analysts—raised concerns that the South Korean public's positive views of the alliance would be damaged. But just-completed polling by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs suggests that is not the case. Little has changed in terms of South Korean attitudes towards the alliance. The South Korean public remains positive about the alliance, supportive of stationing US troops in South Korea, and confident that the US will defend South Korea if North Korea attacks.

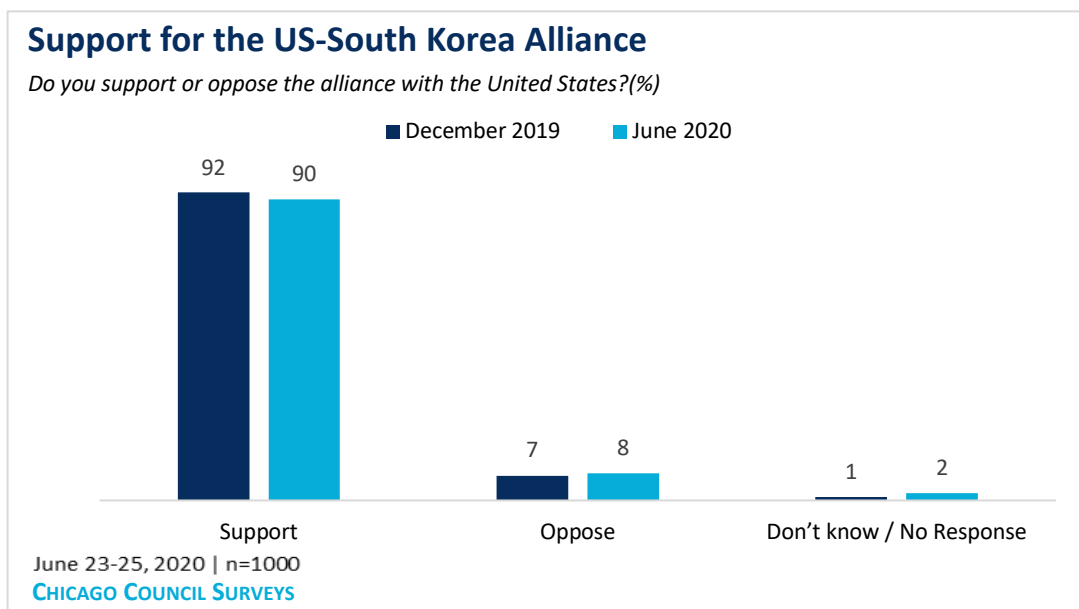
But the data also suggests that there are scenarios in which South Korean public confidence could be punctured. Confidence in the US commitment to defend South Korea if attacked by North Korea is strongly related to views that the alliance with the United States is mutually beneficial. This, in turn, implies that the biggest downside risk to support for the alliance stems from actions that would impact US credibility to defend South Korea if North Korea attacks. While a range of actions may trigger a decrease in confidence in US commitment to defend South Korea, one of the most immediate reported to be under consideration is a partial withdrawal of US troops. This move has the potential to shift South Korean attitudes away from seeing the alliance as mutually beneficial and towards views that the alliance benefits only the United States.

Awareness of SMA Negotiations Does Little to Sway Public Attitudes

Support for the Alliance Remains High

Public attention on the SMA negotiations created concern among experts and analysts in both the United States and South Korea that it would presage a shift in negative attitudes not only towards the alliance but also towards confidence in the US security commitment more broadly. But that does not appear in the data.

Despite the ongoing tensions in the US-Korea alliance and the unresolved SMA negotiations, nine in ten South Koreans (90%) say they either strongly support (32%) or somewhat support (58%) the alliance with the United States. This is largely unchanged from December when 92 percent stated support for the alliance and is in line with support since at least 2012. Moreover, it includes more than 84 percent of every age cohort and major party supporter.

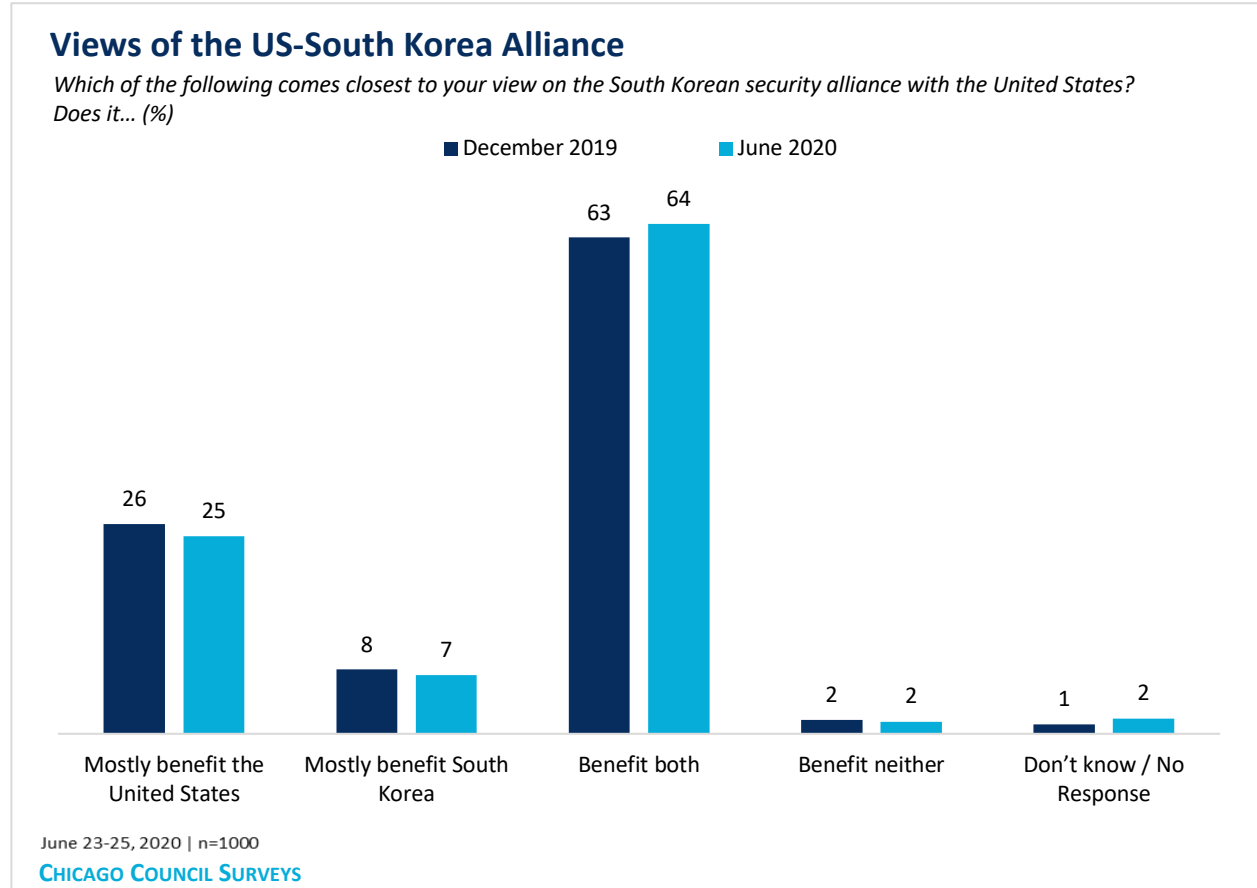


Awareness of the SMA negotiations specifically does not seem to negatively affect support for the alliance. Overall, 64 percent say that they have either heard or read a great deal (20%) or fair amount (44%) about the negotiations. Nearly three in ten (27%) say they have not read or heard very much and five percent say they are not at all aware of the negotiations. These numbers are largely unchanged from December 2019.

Among those that report having heard or read a great deal about the negotiations, support for the alliance is at 87 percent. For those that have heard or read a fair amount about the negotiations, that number is 92 percent. Support is similar for those who have not read or heard very much (90%) or nothing at all (81%) about the negotiations.

South Koreans Say the Alliance Is Mutually Beneficial

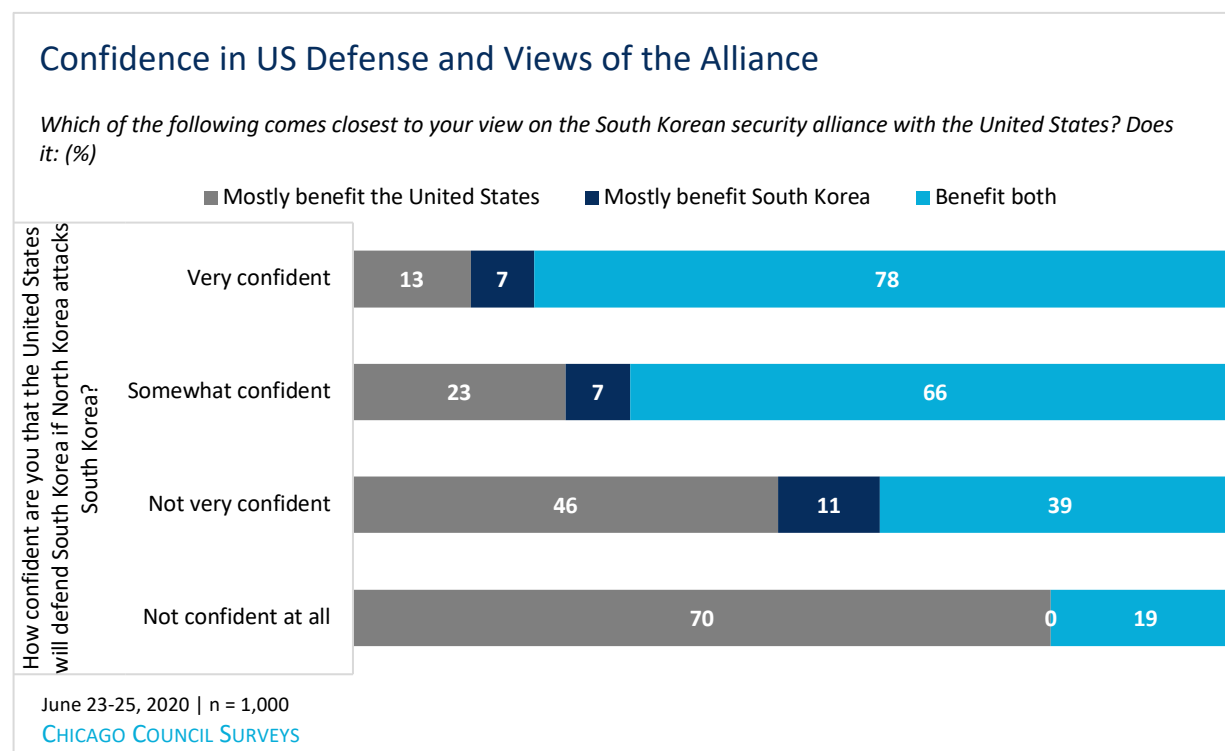
A majority of the South Korean public (64%) also sees the alliance with the United States as mutually beneficial. That finding cuts across major parties, with 60 percent of Democratic Party supporters and 79 percent of the United Future Party in agreement.



In the United States, President Trump has questioned the utility of America’s alliances, sparking a conversation about who benefits from the alliances and their cost. But Trump’s claim that allies are taking advantage of the United States is not backed by the American public. In January 2020, [a plurality \(48%\) of Americans](#) said that alliances in East Asia benefit both the United States and our allies. That finding was remarkably consistent across partisan groups, with 49 percent of Republicans, 50 percent of Democrats, and 46 percent of Independents in agreement. Two in ten Americans (22%) said that security alliances mostly benefited our allies and 13 percent said they primarily benefited the United States.

The US commitment to defend South Korea is critical to views of the alliance as mutually beneficial. In December 2019, 78 percent said they were confident that the United States would defend South Korea if it is attacked by North Korea. In June 2020, that number had moved up slightly to 82 percent with 30 percent saying they were very confident and 52 percent somewhat confident. Among those that are very confident that the United States will defend South Korea, 78 percent say the alliance is mutually

beneficial. That number declines for every step down in confidence. For those that are not confident at all that the United States would defend South Korea, 70 percent say that the alliance mostly benefits the United States, while just 19 percent say the alliance is mutually beneficial. These numbers were largely unchanged from December 2019.



Note: "Benefit neither" was 3 percent or less for all levels of confidence. It is not shown in the above graphic.

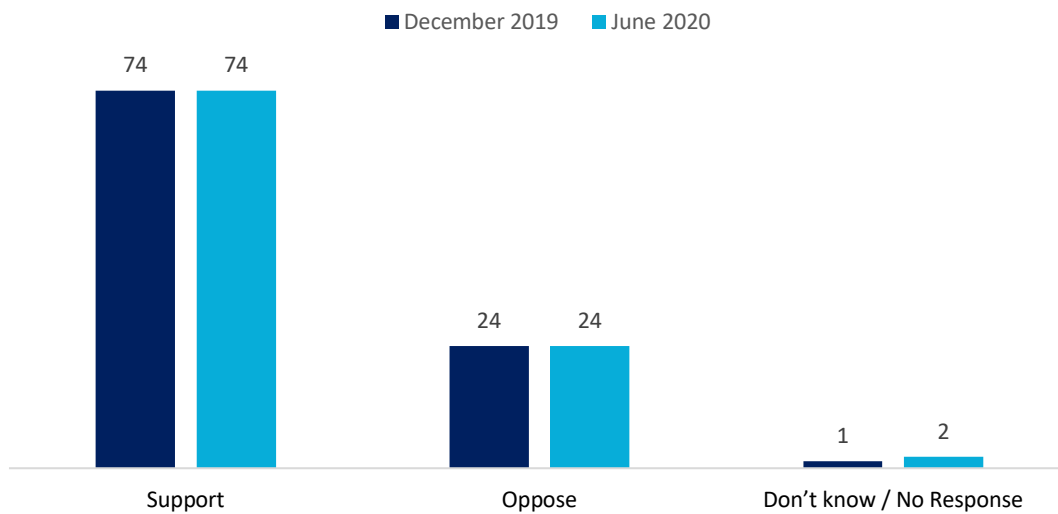
Confidence in the United States to defend South Korea if it were attacked by North Korea does not seem to have been affected at this point by awareness of the SMA negotiations. In fact, greater awareness of the negotiations is associated with greater confidence in the US security commitment. But a high-profile action that would erode confidence in the US commitment, such as a unilateral US troop drawdown, may start to shift the percentages of those that see the alliance with the United States as mutually beneficial. That would likely dent confidence in the US commitment to defend South Korea and likely decrease numbers that see the alliance with the United States as benefitting both countries.

Support for US Bases Remains Steady

A unilateral troop withdrawal would also undermine a key component of the US-Korea alliance—the long-term stationing of US troops in South Korea. There are currently 28,500 troops based in South Korea, and their presence has been controversial at times. However, three-quarters of the South Korean public (74%)—unchanged from December 2019—continue to support the long-term stationing of US troops in South Korea. Democratic Party supporters (64%) and United Future Party supporters (93%) are largely in agreement on this issue, as are at least 63 percent of every age cohort.

Support for US Troops on Bases

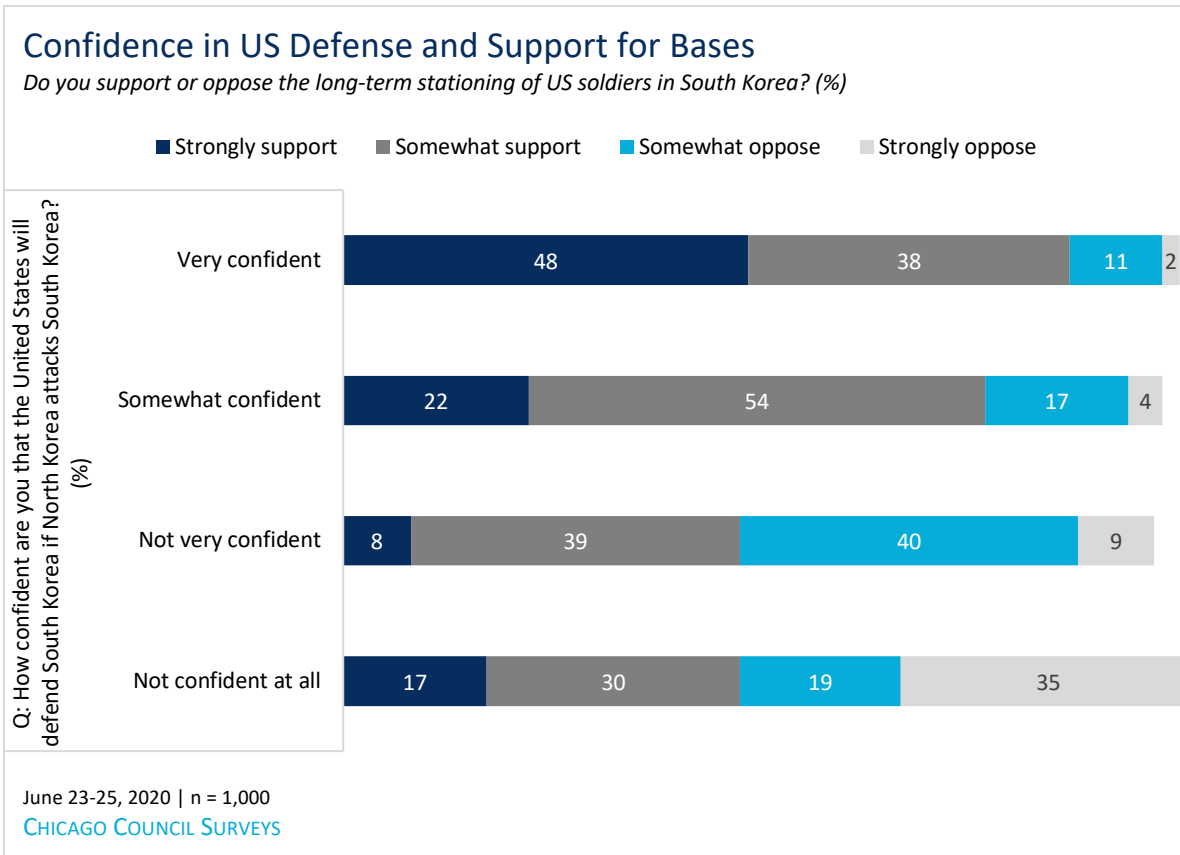
Do you support or oppose the long-term stationing of US soldiers in South Korea? (%)



June 23-25, 2020 | n=1000
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Again, awareness of the SMA negotiations does little to affect those views. More than 65 percent of all levels of awareness state support for the long-term stationing of US troops in South Korea.

Confidence in the US defense commitment to South Korea also appears to be an important factor in support for long-term US bases in South Korea. Among those that are very confident in the US commitment, support for bases is 86 percent. Those numbers decline as confidence lessens. Pluralities of those that are not confident in the US commitment oppose long-term US bases in South Korea.



Conclusion

The public airing of the SMA negotiations seems to have had little observable impact on attitudes towards the alliance with the United States, support for the long-term basing of US troops, or perceptions of US credibility as a security partner. All of those measures have remained steady over the last six months even as SMA negotiations have become very public.

Yet, confidence in the US security commitment appears to be critical to views that the alliance is mutually beneficial for both countries. An erosion in that credibility may lead to a reevaluation of how the benefits of the alliance accrue and may trigger a broader reevaluation of the importance of the alliance in light of its costs.

Support for the long-term basing of US troops remains steady. However, a unilateral, uncoordinated announcement of a pending withdrawal of US forces by the United States may erode confidence in US credibility and its commitment to defend South Korea if it is attacked by North Korea. It could potentially kick start a broader reevaluation of the benefits of the alliance, eroding public support and doing lasting damage to one of America's strongest alliances.

About the Survey

The survey was conducted June 23–25, 2020 in South Korea by Hankook Research among a representative national sample of 1,000 adults aged 18 and over. The sample was constructed using RDD for mobile and landline phones and the margin of error is $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence interval. The survey was made possible through funding from the Korea Foundation.

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