

Strong Alliances, Divided Publics: *Public Opinion in the United States, Japan, South Korea, and China*

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October 2015

Executive Summary

Officially, the trilateral relationship between the United States, Japan, and South Korea is strong, and governmental coordination and cooperation across a range of mutual interests and threats is ongoing. At the same time, mutual distrust between Japan and South Korea continue to hamper the relationship, even as the United States encourages focusing on the importance of strengthening relations among the three countries in the face of a rising China.

Public opinion among these three allied publics matches the official, government-level dynamics. Clear majorities in each country describe relations with each of the other countries as important, and majorities in all three countries support the continued presence of the US military in the region. Underneath the surface, however, there is discord between the publics that reflects larger issues affecting the solidity of the regional alliance.

One challenge is that the Japanese and South Korean publics view the security alliance as two separate, bilateral partnerships with the United States rather than as a tripartite bond. This reflects a significant level of distrust between South Korea and Japan. While majorities in both countries are confident in the United States, only minorities in South Korea and Japan are confident that the other country will responsibly handle world problems.

The opinion data suggest that a shared attachment to and confidence in the US security commitment is what ties the Korean and Japanese publics together. While majorities of South Koreans and Japanese favor the United States sending US troops to defend South Korea and Japan respectively, fewer favor the US coming to the defense of the other

country. This gap is particularly stark among South Koreans, where only a minority of the public would favor US troops defending Japan.

The second challenge for regional cooperation is how the US rebalance to Asia will develop. Although there is support for a continued US military presence, only one in ten across all three countries support an increased US military presence in the region. As the United States continues to reassure its two main Asian partners about its commitment to their defense, there is little public support for developments that would allow the United States to better meet those commitments, such as increasing US naval assets in the Asia-Pacific.

A third challenge lies further into the future, and relates to what would become of the US-Korea alliance if the two Koreas reunify. Among Americans, more than seven in ten would support maintaining the alliance. However, four in ten Americans say that ground troops should be removed even if the alliance is maintained with a reunified Korea. The Korean public is split on what should become of US troops in Korea, with 49 percent supporting maintaining the US military presence and 44 percent opposing.

Beyond these issues within the trilateral alliance, another critical challenge is how China's increasing influence will affect regional relations. Although public opinion in all four countries surveyed agree that China's influence is on the rise, there are widely differing expectations for how China will wield its increased influence. Fewer than two in ten Japanese and just one-third of Americans say China will handle world problems responsibly. In contrast, a solid majority of South Koreans are confident that China will deal responsibly with world problems.

Finally, East Asia looks considerably different from the Chinese public's perspective. While the Chinese public cites relations with the United States as most important of these three bilateral relationships, only a minority trust the United States to responsibly handle problems facing the world (45%). In contrast to opinion in South Korea and Japan, majorities in China think the US military presence in the region should be reduced (58%) and oppose the United States deploying American troops to defend regional allies in case of attack, with opposition ranging from 56 percent to 82 percent depending on the scenario. Poor relations and the potential for conflict with Japan are also concerns for Chinese (though much less so for the Japanese public).

Introduction

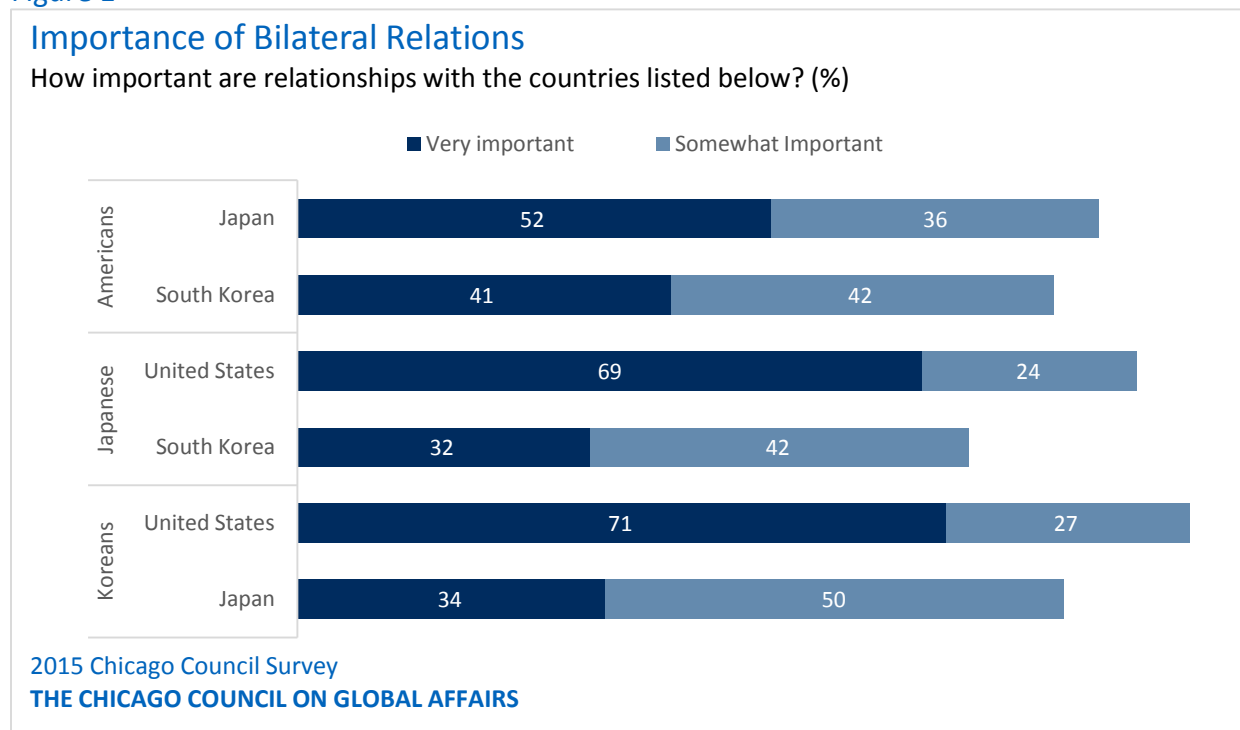
For more than 60 years, the United States-Japan-Korea trilateral relationship has remained a cornerstone of security for all three countries in East Asia. Despite ups and downs, the last five years have been comparatively smooth. The partners continue to work together to mitigate threats, tackle global issues, and promote their core interests around the world. Public opinion of the relationship is also positive on the whole, although a closer look reveals there are distinct cracks that require attention.

The survey results collected as part of this study reveal just how serious the mistrust is between South Koreans and Japanese. This remains the most crucial problem to be addressed, as public mistrust can limit what politicians are able and willing to do to advance security interests. Another gap that emerges from the data is on views of China. Perceptions of how China will wield its newly found influence is a clear point of divergence among the trilateral partners, especially for Japan and South Korea. Finally, the future of the alliance following a potential reunification of the Korean Peninsula needs to be put on the table for discussion, given the possibility of differing public views in the United States and South Korea on the future role of the alliance following reunification.

Relations among Trilateral Partners Important but Gaps Exist

The American, Japanese, and South Korean publics seem to agree that the trilateral alliance is important. Large majorities of South Koreans (98% important, with 71% “very” important) and Japanese (93% important, with 69% “very” important) view relations with the United States as important. While Americans describe relations with Japan (88%) and South Korea (83%) as important, they are less emphatic in their views, with a smaller portion saying that ties are “very” important (Figure 1).

Figure 1



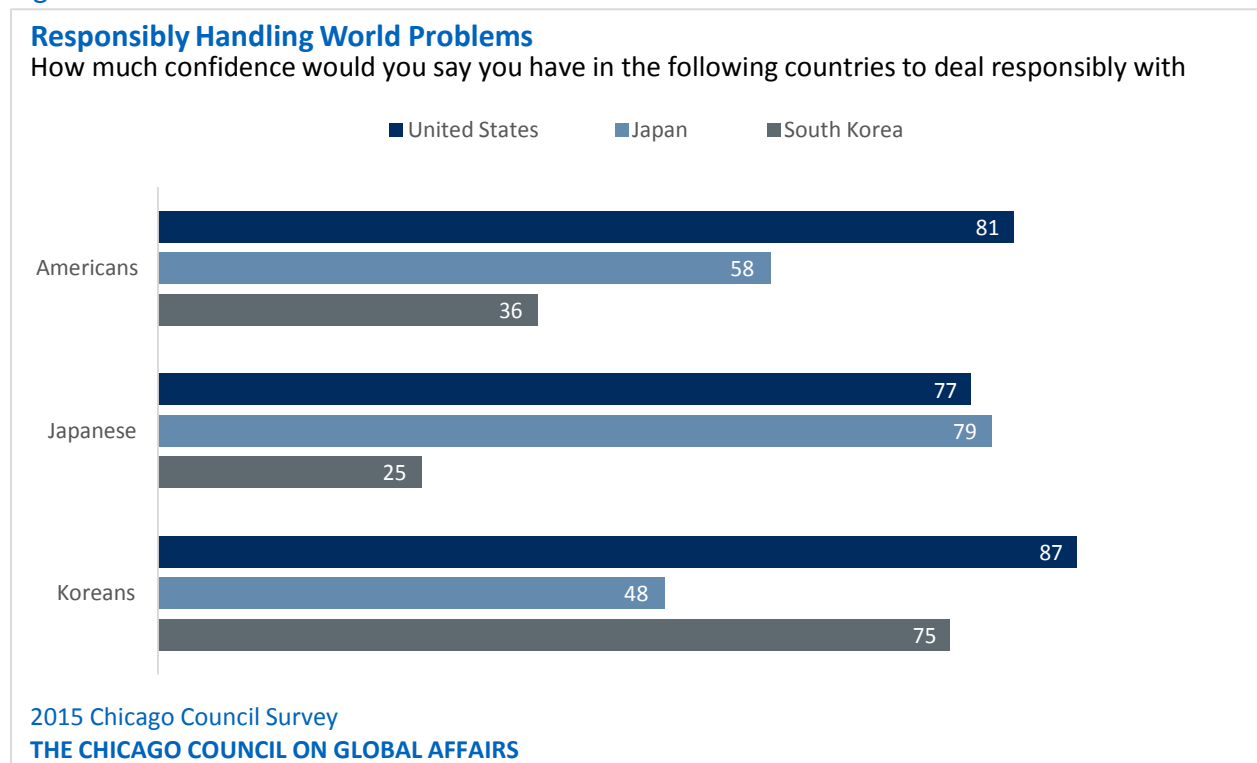
While political relations between Japan and South Korea continue to be rocky, both publics seem to take a pragmatic approach in considering their bilateral relationship. Majorities overall identify that relationship as important, even though minorities in both countries cite the relationship as very important. But distrust is also an important feature of Japan-Korea relations, including at the public level. While 48 percent of South Koreans cite

confidence in Japan to responsibly handle world problems, just 25 percent of Japanese say they trust South Korea to do the same (Figure 2).

Americans are also uncertain of South Korea's ability to responsibly handle problems facing the world. While 66 percent say South Korea is a reliable partner—78 percent say the same about Japan—just one-third (36%) cite confidence in South Korea to responsibly handle world problems compared to 58 percent who cite confidence in Japan. This creates a significant confidence gap with one of America's most important allies in Asia.

It is also notable that the South Korean public is significantly more confident in the ability of the United States and China to handle world problems than they are in their own country doing so. South Korea is the only country for which this is true, and this suggests an uncertainty about South Korea's role in the world and perhaps a lack of confidence in its elected leadership.

Figure 2



That the American public is more confident in the US ability to handle world problems than in its regional allies may explain strong American support for maintaining the US military presence in the region. In the 2014 Chicago Council Survey, 64 percent of Americans supported long-term bases in Japan and 55 percent stated support for those bases in Korea.

The Rebalance to Asia

The survey's findings on public views regarding the US rebalance to Asia highlight a significant challenge for regional policy makers. The United States continues to reassure the governments of Japan and South Korea about its readiness and ability to meet its alliance commitments, including the use of force if necessary to come to their defense. However, the United States faces publics in both South Korea and Japan—as well as at home—that are uneasy with increasing the US military presence in the region, which, given the rise of China, would allow Washington to more easily meet those commitments.

In the US survey, support for the US rebalance announced by President Obama in 2011¹ has been mixed. The rebalance was proposed at a time when conflicts in the Middle East seemed to be abating, and it was intended to confirm that Asia would emerge as the most important region for the United States. In the 2012 Chicago Council survey, 54 percent stated support for pivoting “our diplomatic and military resources away from the Middle East and Europe and more towards Asia.” By 2014, that number increased to 60 percent, but public support has since waned. In 2015, 49 percent of Americans surveyed expressed support for the rebalance, likely reflecting the increased anxiety about terrorism emanating from violent extremist groups in the Middle East.²

While the Japanese and South Koreans were not asked specifically about the US rebalance to Asia in the 2015 survey, other opinion polls suggest some degree of support among these allied publics. A 2012 Asan Institute survey found that 55 percent of the South Korean public expressed support for the rebalance,³ and a 2015 Pew survey⁴ reported 58 percent of Japanese and 50 percent of South Koreans—and 47 percent of Americans— saying that increased US military resources in Asia is “a good thing because it could help maintain peace in the region.”⁵ Further, in surveys conducted by the East Asia Institute between 2010 and 2015, support for the continued presence of US forces in Korea increased. While in 2010 support for the continued US presence was 48 percent, it reached 66 percent in 2015.

In the 2015 Chicago Council Survey, all three publics were asked about US force levels in the Asia-Pacific. Majorities in each country (53% in Japan, 61% in South Korea, and 64% in the United States) favor maintaining the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific at their current levels. At the same time, the survey showed very little support among the three publics for increasing US military levels in the Asia-Pacific. In fact, twice as many in the

¹ Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” November 17, 2011.

² For more on threats, see: Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, and Craig Kafura, “[America Divided: Political Partisanship and US Foreign Policy](#),” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2015.

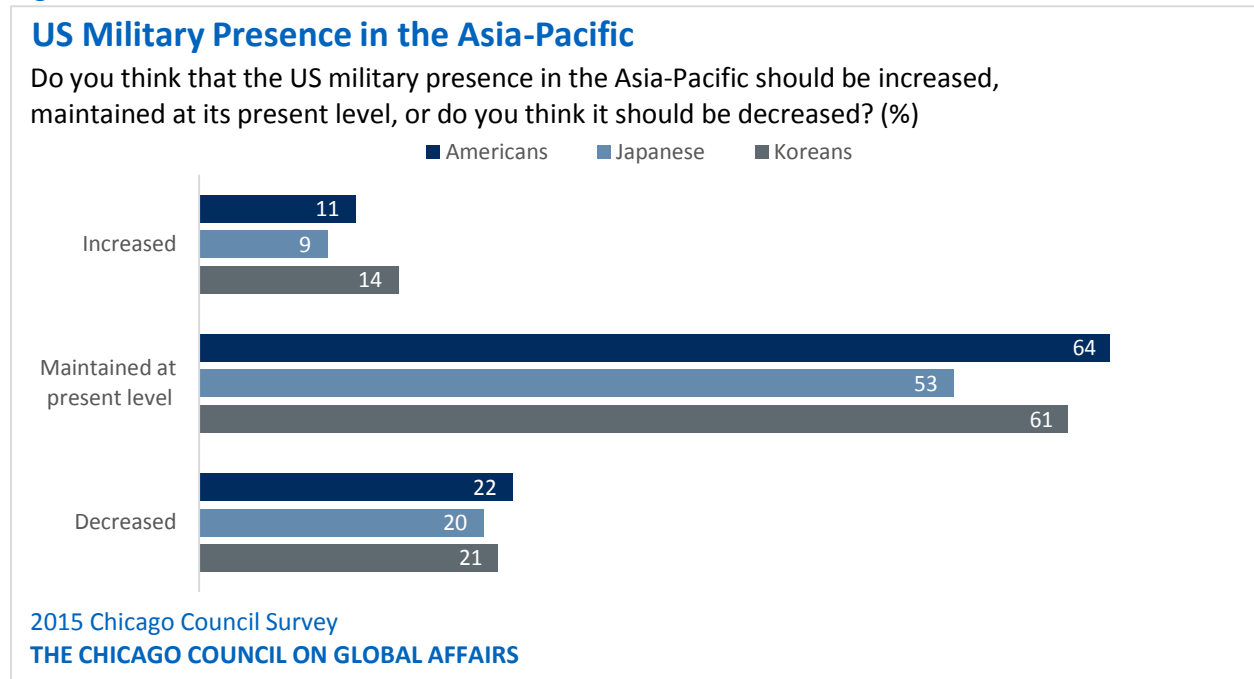
³ Karl Friedhoff, “South Korean Views on the U.S. Rebalance to Asia,” *On Korea*, Vol. 8, Korea Economic Institute, 2015.

⁴ Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, and Jacob Poushter, “Global Publics Back U.S. on Fighting ISIS, but Are Critical of Post-9/11 Torture,” Pew Research Center, June 23, 2015.

⁵ The Pew survey offered only one other response option: “Bad because it could lead to conflict with China.” Minorities of Japanese (31%) and greater portions of Koreans (45%) and Americans (43%) thought this was the case.

United States and Japan, and half as many Koreans said the US military level should be decreased as increased (Figure 3).

Figure 3

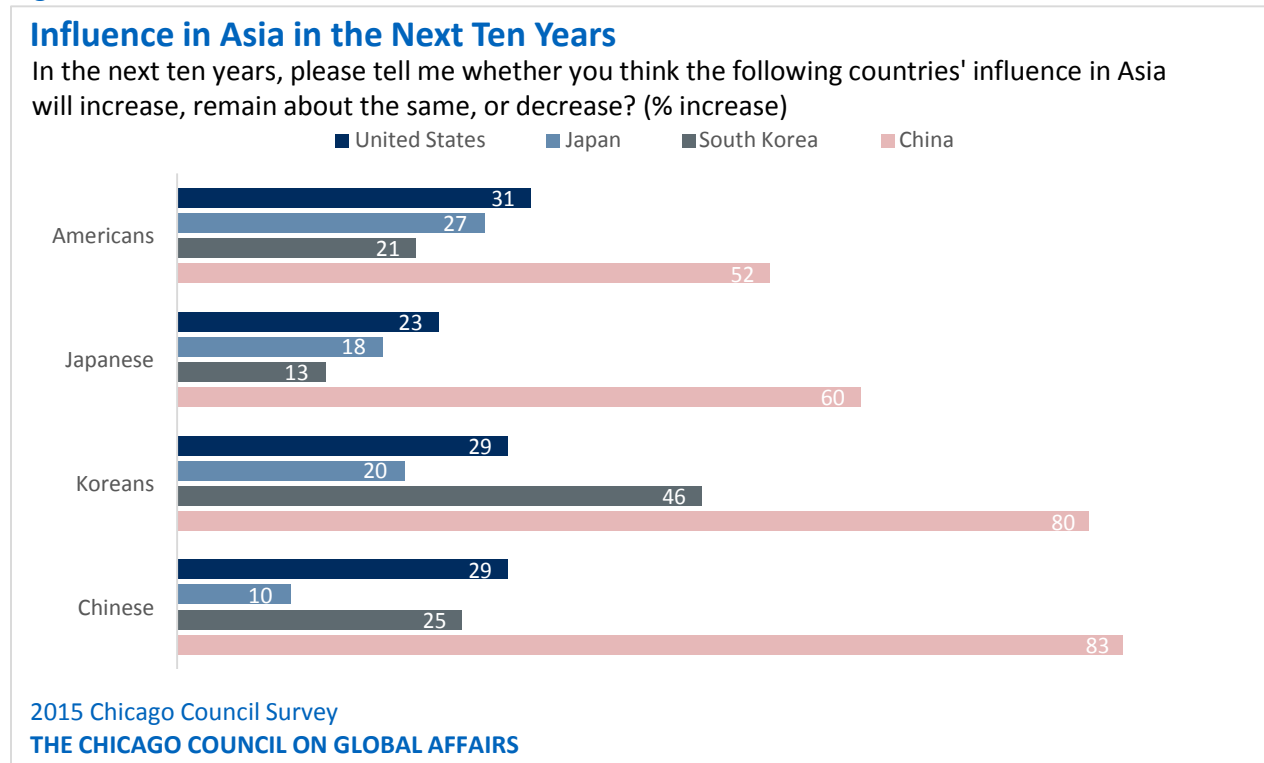


The China Challenge

China's relatively recent emergence as a great power in East Asia has spurred a shift in the dynamics of the region. The Chicago Council Survey data have clearly illustrated this shift over time. From 1998 to 2012, the survey asked Americans whether China or Japan was more important to vital US interests. In 1998, Americans cited Japan (as more important than China (47% Japan to 28% China). By 2012, 70 percent cited China versus 27 percent for Japan.

With China's increasing military power, growing technological sophistication, and economic clout, publics in the United States, South Korea, and Japan all expect Beijing's influence in the region to increase in the next ten years (Figure 4). Given this belief, it is no surprise that all three publics also describe relations with China as important. However, there are vastly different expectations of how China will wield that expanded influence, creating a point of divergence between South Korean and Japanese publics. In turn, these attitudes help to inform why South Korea and Japan have taken such differing political approaches toward China, with the United States staking out the middle ground.

Figure 4

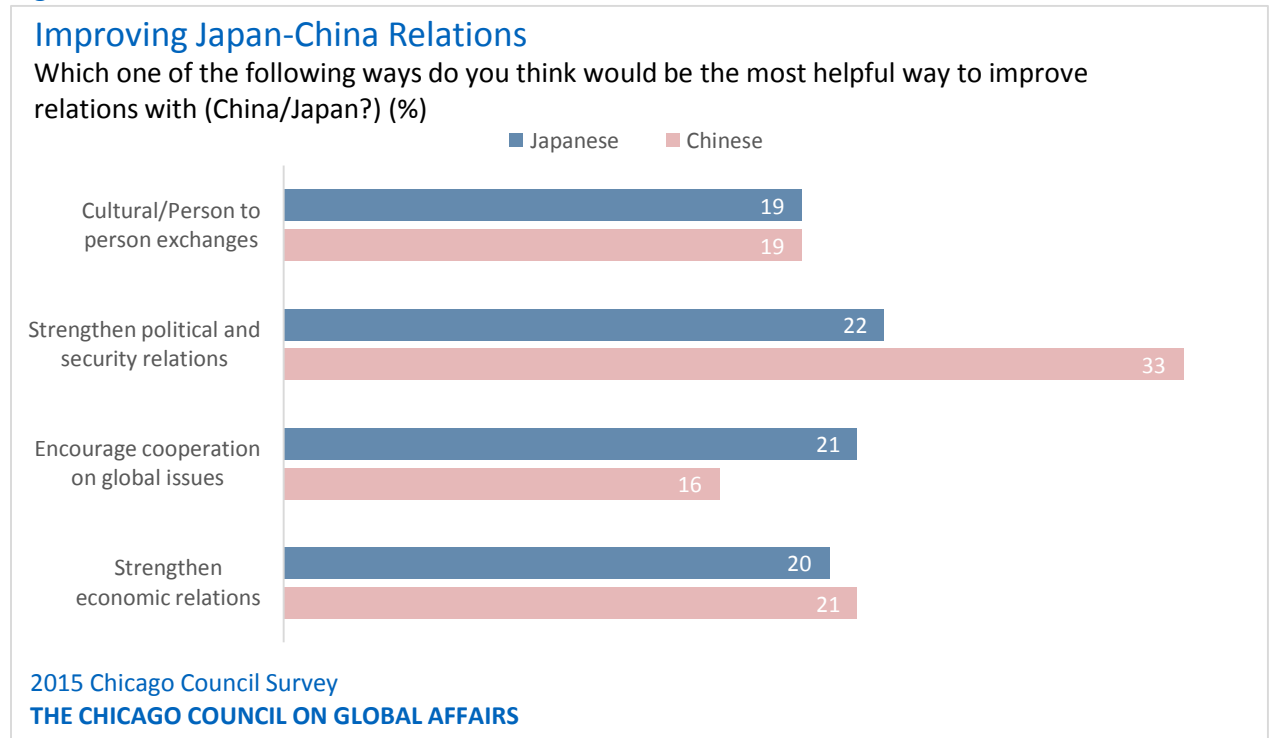


China and Japan

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the Japanese approach to China has occupied one end of the spectrum. Relations with China have been frosty—a fact reflected in Japanese public attitudes. The Japanese public is the only one of the trilateral partners in which a minority (42%) describe relations with China as very important. The feeling is apparently mutual—a minority of Chinese (12%) say relations with Japan are very important. Mistrust is also a key feature of public opinion in both countries. Just 15 percent of Japan’s public states confidence in China responsibly dealing with world affairs; 14 percent of Chinese say the same about Japan.

Among both publics, there is no clear consensus on the best way to improve Japan-China relations. For Japanese, two in ten state that cultural exchanges, strengthening political and security relations, cooperation on global issues and strengthening economic relations would be most helpful to improving relations. China’s public is somewhat less vague, with one-third stating that strengthening political and security relations as the best way forward. Regardless, the lack of a clear preference on either side highlights just how difficult improving the bilateral relationship could be.

Figure 5

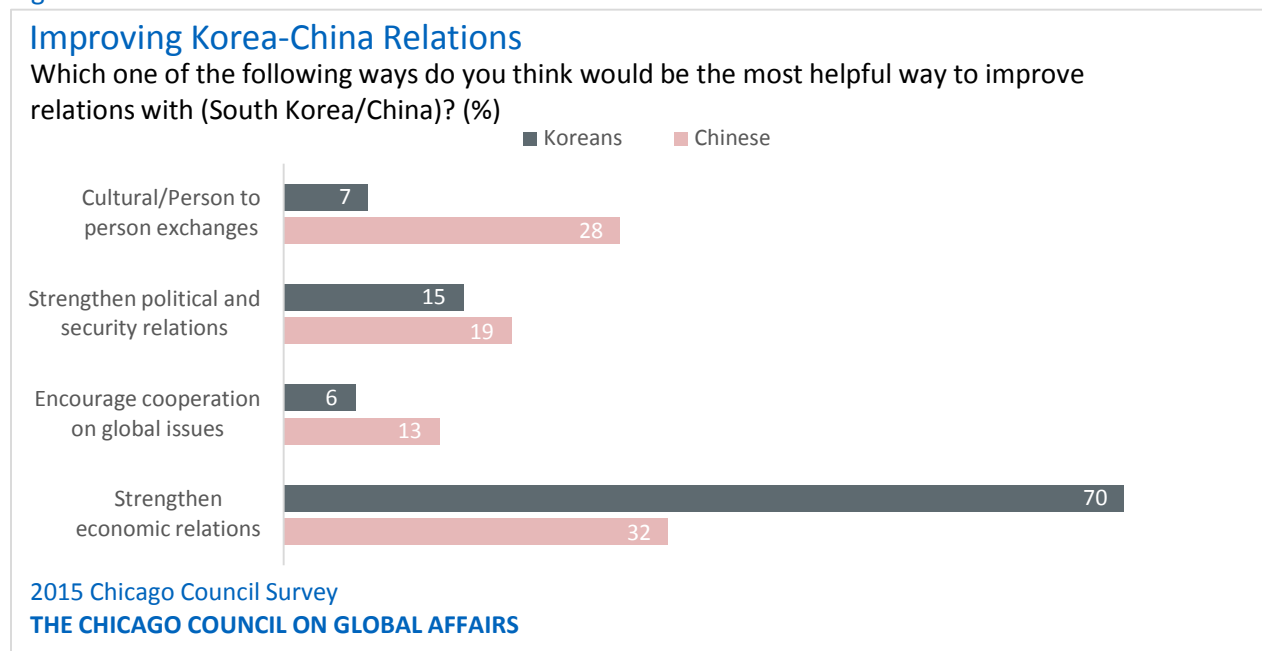


China and South Korea

On the opposite end of the spectrum from Japan is South Korea, whose relations with China continue to warm under the presidency of Park Geun-Hye. This congenial relationship coincides with high confidence among the public in South Korea that China will responsibly handle world problems, with 71 percent stating as such. Yet, that feeling is not entirely mutual. A plurality (47%) in China state the same about South Korea.

While the developing South Korea-China relationship has sparked concern among analysts that US interests could be damaged, the South Korean public views both relationships with China and the United States as equally important. But the public emphasizes different aspects of each. In contrast to the emphasis placed on security and political dimensions of the US-Korea relationship, views of the Korea-China relationship are almost solely focused on economics. Seventy percent of South Koreans state that improving economic relations with China is key, while just 15 percent say that improving political and security relations is the most important for improving Korea-China relations (Figure 6).

Figure 6



This focus on economic ties with China among South Koreans may act as a limit on relations, however, and the data highlight the dual perceptions they hold of China's economy. While China is obviously viewed as a huge market for Korean-made products and Korea's top trading partner—thus the need to strengthen economic relations—it is also seen as a potential threat. In a survey conducted in 2012 by the Asan Institute,⁶ 53 percent of South Koreans viewed China's economy as a threat, and by 2014 the number grew to 72 percent.⁷ As China's domestic companies erode the position of Korean companies both in China and abroad, views of China's economy as a threat will likely increase.

United States and China

US government policy has consistently stated that it has no intention of containing China,⁸ has publicly encouraged⁹ South Korea's improving relationship with China, and also welcomed Japan's move toward expanding the role of its military.

US public preferences seem to align with this approach toward China. Since 2006, two-thirds of Americans have consistently favored engagement with China over actively trying to limit China's rise. The 2015 results also show that a majority of Americans consider relations with China very important (55% "very," with an additional 33% "somewhat" important), though only a minority of Chinese (23%) say the same about the United States.

⁶ Jiyoon Kim, Karl Friedhoff, Chungku Kang, and Euicheol Lee, "South Korean Attitudes on China," The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2014.

⁷ In terms of China's military, 73 percent cited it as a threat in 2012. In 2014, it had decreased to 66 percent.

⁸ Daniel R. Russell, "[The Future of U.S.-China Relations](#)," Testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, US Department of State, June 25, 2014.

⁹ Daniel R. Russell, "[Remarks at 'Korea Going Forward' Conference](#)," US Department of State, June 3, 2015.

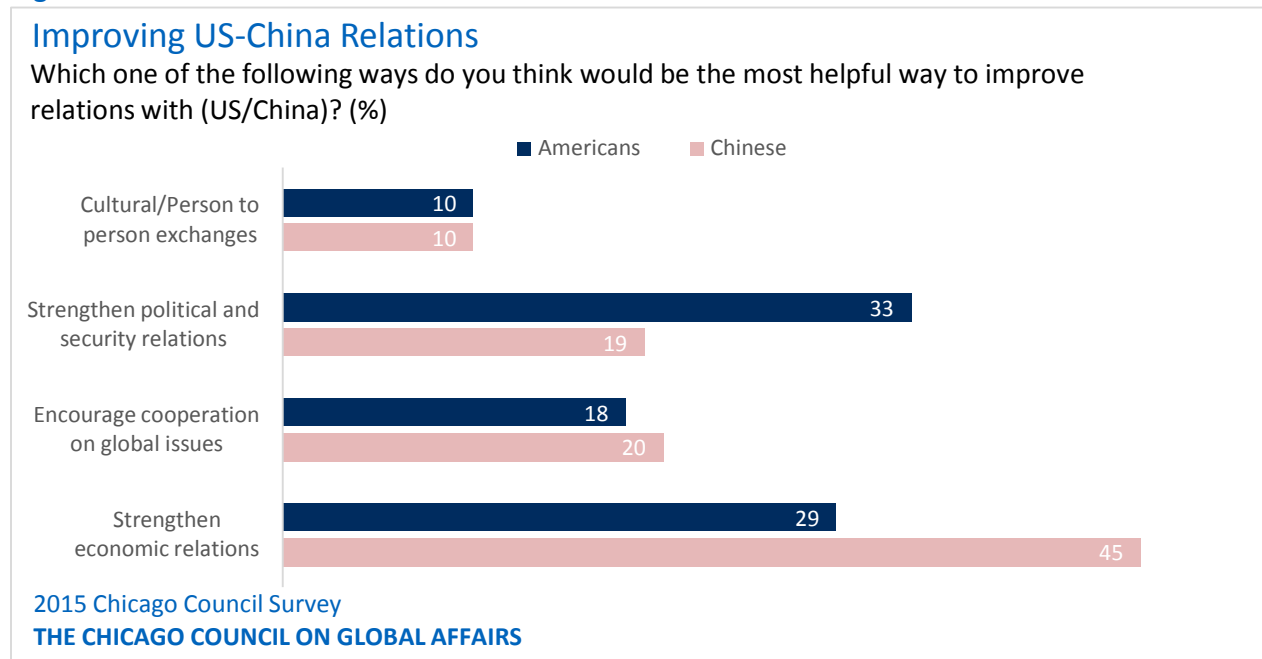
Even so, 79 percent of Chinese define the relationship with the United States as important overall, making it the most important of any bilateral relationship for China included in the survey.

Regardless of mutually perceived importance, lack of trust remains an issue. Among Americans, just 34 percent express confidence in China to deal responsibly with world problems. Among Chinese, 46 percent state the same about the United States.

Part of the Chinese public’s mistrust emerges on attitudes toward the US military presence in the region, which might be related to fears that the US is trying to contain China. A clear majority of Chinese (58%) say that the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific should be decreased.

Security relations remain the most often covered aspect of the US-China relationship, but there is relatively little belief among the Chinese public that improving political and security relations (19%) is the best way to improve US-China relations overall (Figure 7). Instead, the preference among Chinese is to strengthen economic ties with the United States (45%). Americans, however, are more divided on how to improve relations with China. While 29 percent favor strengthening economic relations, 33 percent favor strengthening political and security relations. The gap between the two publics on the efficacy of improving the relationship via stronger political and security relations is of particular concern considering the dangers of miscalculation in the region.

Figure 7



Potential Scenarios and Outcomes

While Asia analysts frequently warn that territorial disputes are the most likely triggers for conflict in the region, the publics in Asia and the US most often name broader issues as the

most likely to lead to conflict, including energy and economic competition, relations between North Korea and South Korea, and the spread of nuclear weapons to new countries. Generally speaking, relations between Japan and South Korea, relations between Japan and China, and relations between China and Taiwan are of lesser concern among both Japanese and South Korean publics (Figure 8).

The Japanese public is least likely of the four surveyed to see the potential for any of the possible sources to lead to conflict. Even though majorities of Japanese say that competition over vital energy resources (59%) and tensions between North and South Korea (59%) are at least somewhat likely to spark a conflict, they are significantly less likely to identify those as very likely as compared to other publics. Only four in ten say it is likely that relations between Japan and China are potentially dangerous (39%); only two in ten feel similarly about relations between Japan and South Korea (22%).

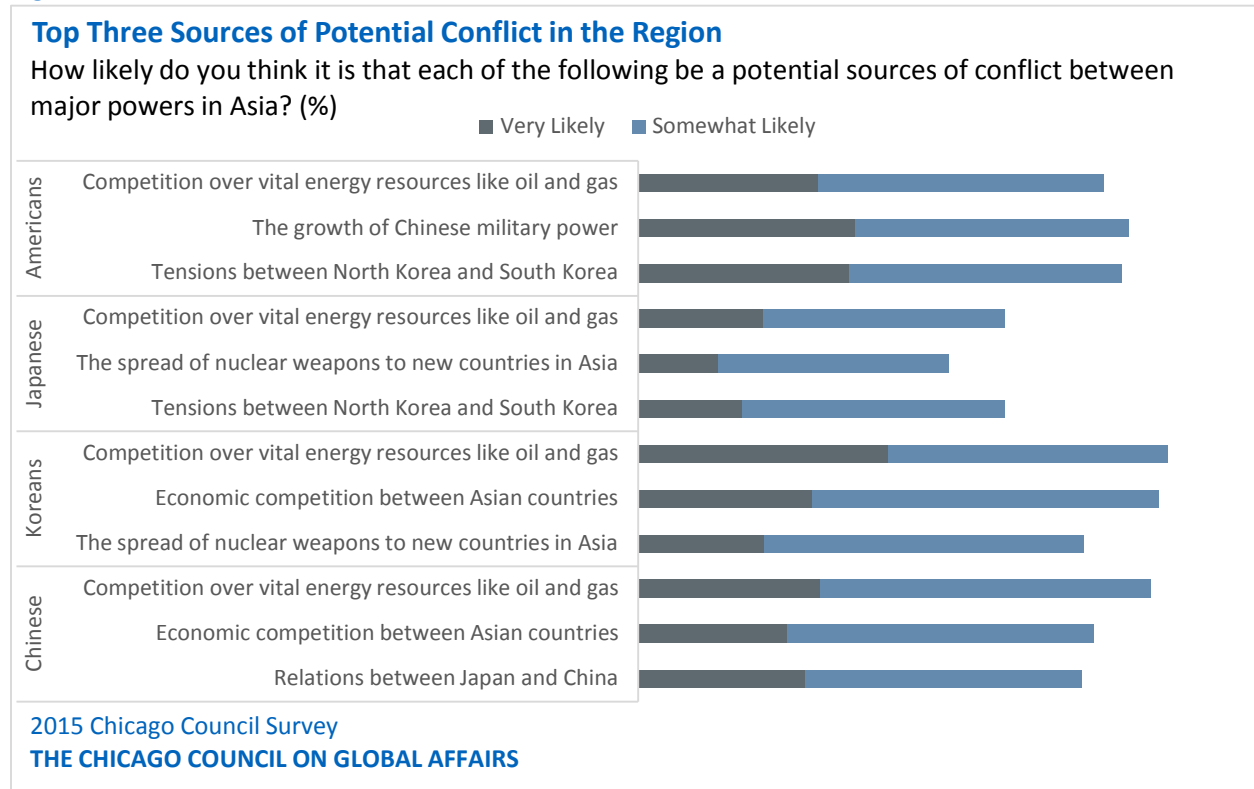
South Koreans are more likely than Japanese to sense volatility across a range of scenarios. For example, majorities of South Koreans believe it is somewhat or very likely that relations between Japan and China (56%) and Japan and South Korea (54%) could spark a conflict. However, much larger majorities view energy resource and economic competition, nuclear proliferation, and tensions between North Korea and South Korea as at least somewhat likely threats to lead to conflict between major powers in the Asia-Pacific.

The Chinese and American publics appear to see things differently, though the question options included in the US and China surveys varied somewhat from the other countries.¹⁰ While the Chinese also cite economic competition and energy as the top two issues most likely to create conflict, the next most likely is relations between China and Japan (72%), much higher than it is rated by the Japanese. Two in three Chinese also say that the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific poses at least a somewhat likely source of conflict (65%), along with nuclear proliferation (65%) and tensions between North and South Korea (63%).

The American public is not that different from the Chinese public in their expectations for potential conflict caused by energy and economic competition, relations between North Korea and South Korea, and the spread of nuclear weapons to new countries. While two in three Americans also consider the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific to be a potential cause for conflict (like the Chinese), Americans are much more likely than the Chinese to say that the growth of Chinese military power has the potential to create conflict (79% vs. 59% among the Chinese).

¹⁰ There were variations between countries in terms of potential conflicts presented in the survey as well as response options. In the United States, respondents answered along a 4-point scale. In all other countries response options were along a 3-point scale. There was also variation across the list of potential conflicts. While those in the United States and China were the same, the Japan and South Korea surveys did not include the growth of Chinese military power or the US presence in the Pacific. Instead, the Japan and South Korea surveys included relations between Japan and China and relations between Japan and South Korea.

Figure 8

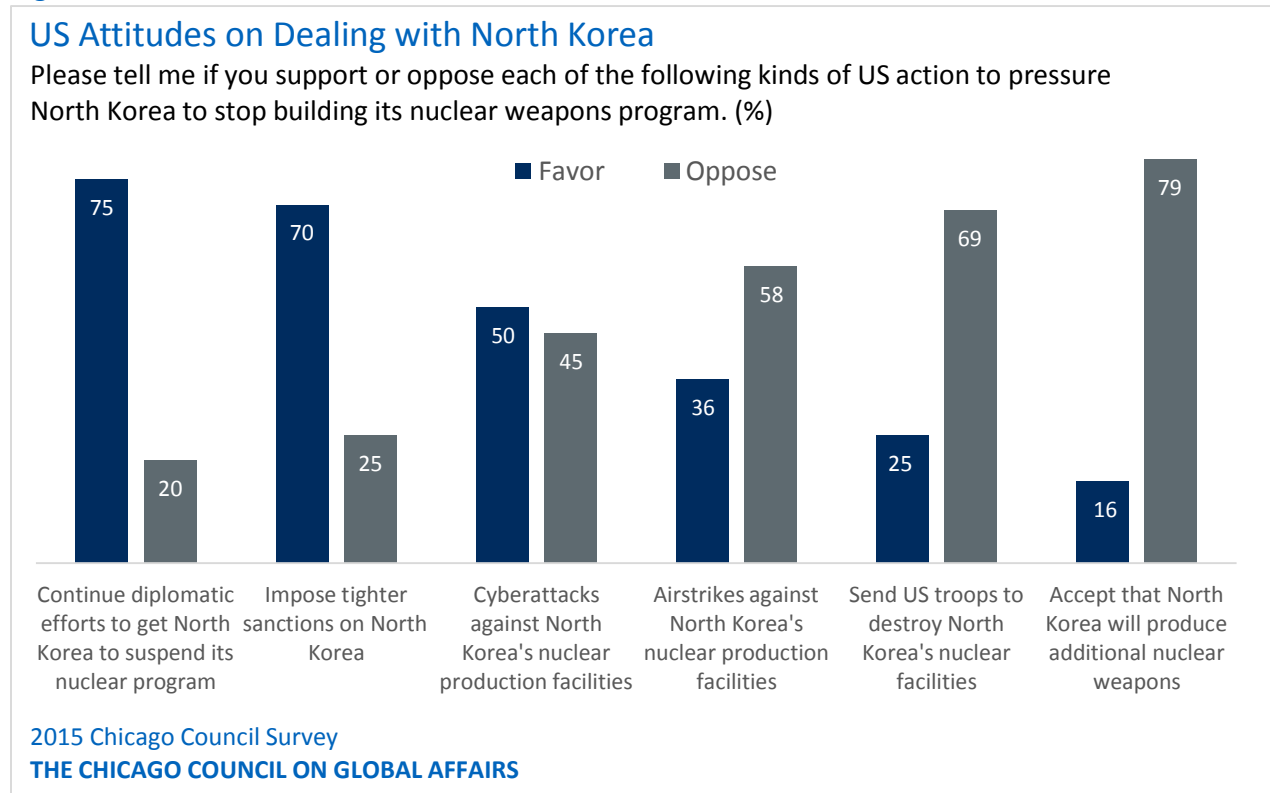


Attitudes on North Korea and Use of Force

As these data underscore, tensions between North and South Korea continue to be a flashpoint for the region and especially for the United States, South Korea, and Japan. In a separate series of questions, the 2015 Chicago Council Survey finds that a majority of Americans cite North Korea’s nuclear program as a critical threat, only slightly lower than the 57 percent that state the same about Iran’s nuclear weapons program.¹¹ To address the North’s continuing efforts to build a nuclear program, Americans broadly support diplomatic efforts, with much lower support for the use of military force to end the North’s nuclear weapons program (Figure 9). The only option that was less favorable than sending US troops to destroy the North’s nuclear weapons facilities was to simply accept that North Korea would produce additional nuclear weapons.

¹¹ This survey was conducted before the announcement of the nuclear deal between the United States and Iran.

Figure 9



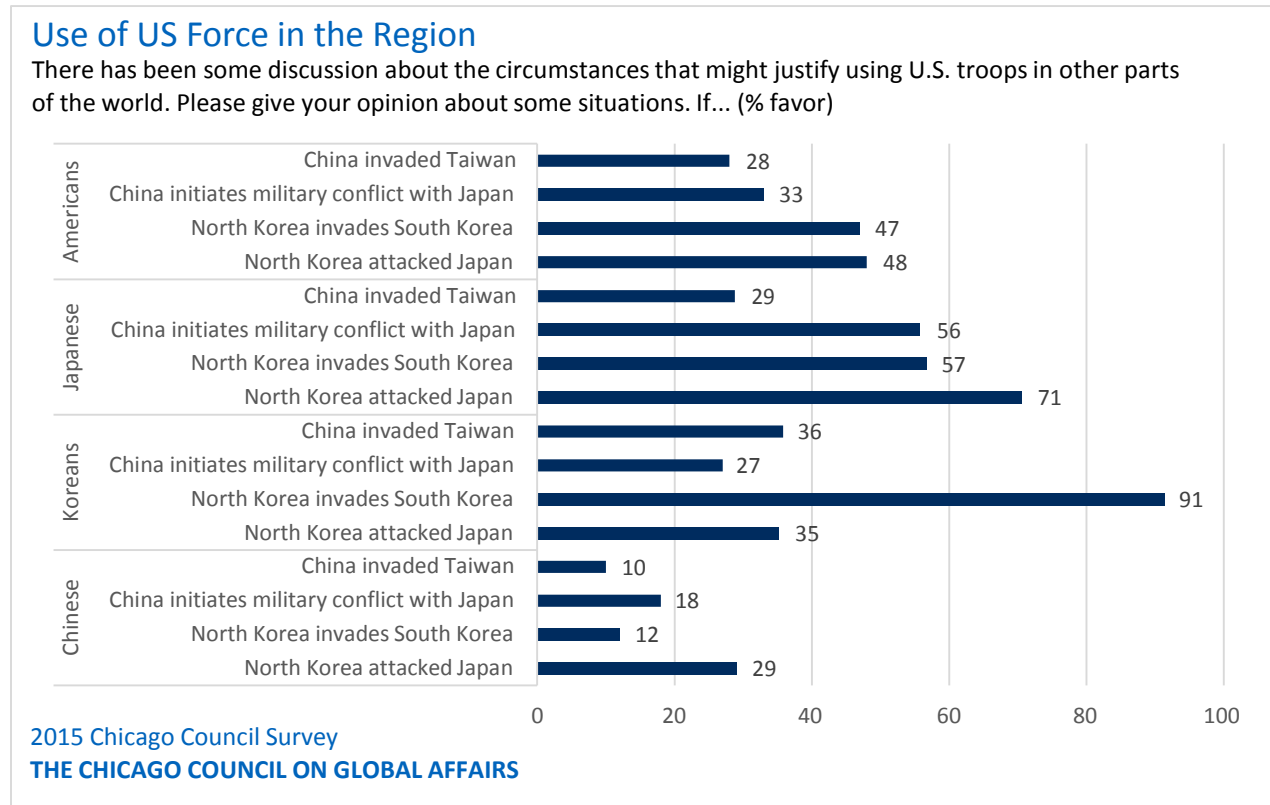
If the United States and North Korea come into military conflict, the most likely scenario would be through the unchecked escalation of conflict between South and North Korea. In a hypothetical question asking about using US troops if North Korea were to invade South Korea, Americans are split on the use of US forces to come to South Korea's defense (47% support, 49% oppose). In contrast, support for the use of US troops to defend Taiwan should China invade has remained largely unchanged over 17 years (just 28% support in the 2015 survey).

The limited level of American public support for defending South Korea could raise doubts in South Korea about US public commitment to South Korea's defense, but it also requires context. American public support for the use of US troops is at an all-time high, unchanged from 2014, and has increased steadily since 1974 when only 19 percent supported the use of US troops to defend Korea.

There are other scenarios across the region that could call for the use of US forces, and there are varying degrees of support across countries. No more than one-third of South Koreans would support the US sending troops to defend Taiwan if it were invaded by China (36%), to defend Japan if it were attacked by North Korea (35%), or if China initiated a military conflict against Japan (27%). However, 91 percent of South Koreans support the use of US troops if North Korea were to invade South Korea.

For their part, a large majority of the Japanese public would support the US sending troops to defend South Korea (57%) and Japan (71%) if it comes under attack from North Korea. In addition, a majority favor the use of US troops to defend Japan if China initiates a military action against Japan (56%).

Figure 10

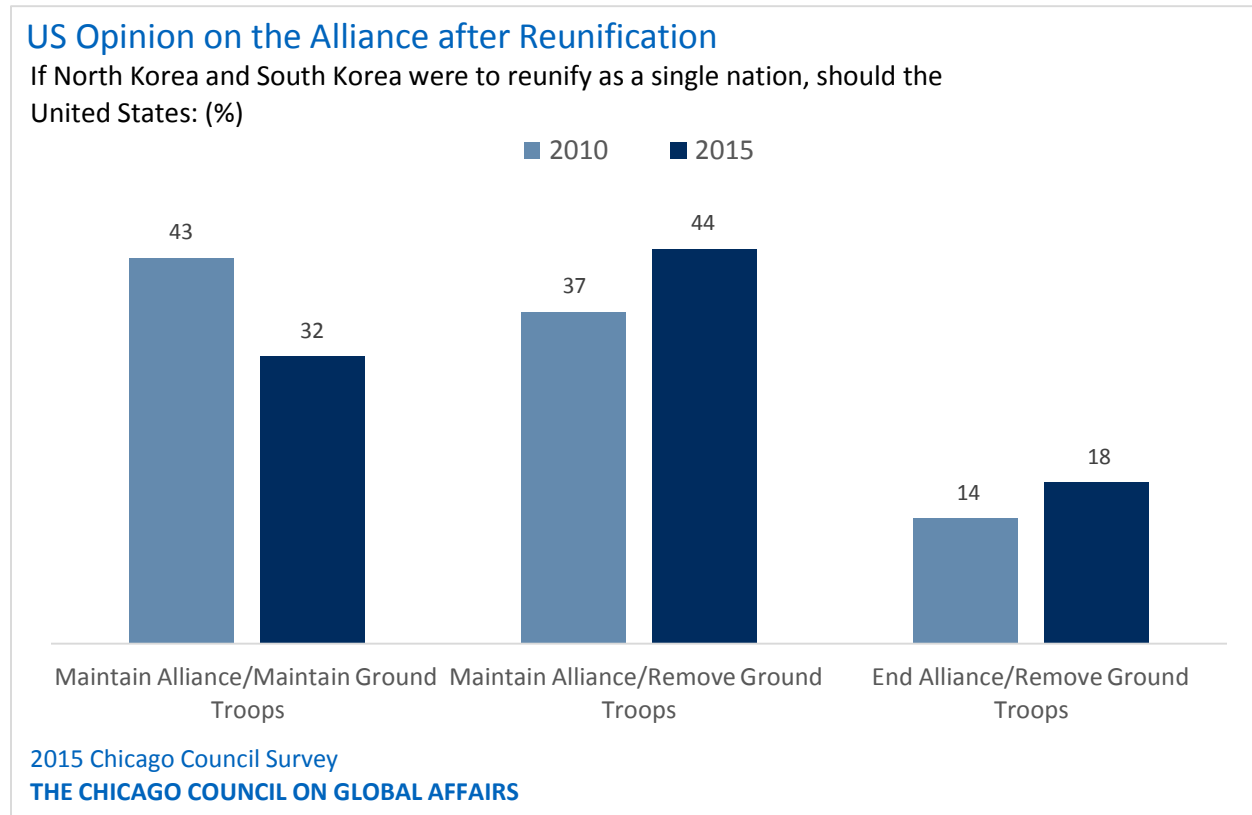


Ramifications of a Future Reunification

Reunification of the two Koreas remains an issue that is often discussed but on which virtually no progress has been made in recent memory. Reunification by choice would be the best case for all involved—assuming it is under the auspices of South Korea’s government—even though reunification by collapse is the most likely scenario. In the latter case, the US-Korea alliance would likely remain a necessity, at least in the short- to medium-term. If it were by choice, a lengthy social discussion on the necessity of the US-Korea alliance and its troop presence on the Korean Peninsula would take place on both sides.

Among the American public, only 18 percent state that the alliance should be ended if reunification took place. However, since the question was first asked in 2010, there has been a shift in thinking on whether or not the alliance should be maintained with or without keeping US troops in Korea. While a plurality in 2010 stated that troops should be maintained, in 2015 a plurality now state troops should be removed (Figure 11).

Figure 11



The most important debate on the future of the US-Korea alliance in a reunified Korea would of course take place in Korea. Although reunification is still an idea more than a tangible project, a slight plurality of South Koreans think “the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula after peaceful reunification should be maintained” (49% support, 44% oppose). Of course, any opposition to maintaining US troops on the Korean Peninsula after reunification does not address the continuation of the alliance, as the alliance could continue even without the presence of the US military.¹²

The Japanese public similarly would support maintaining the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula in the event of reunification, with 29 percent favoring removing troops and 45 percent favoring keeping US troops in Korea. The public in China sees things differently, with two-thirds (66%) stating there would be no need for US troops to remain on the Korean Peninsula following a peaceful reunification.

¹² There is one note on the question wording of the surveys and response options. In the US Survey, there was no clarification on whether reunification would be peaceful or otherwise. In the surveys conducted in South Korea and Japan, peaceful reunification was specified. For response options, South Korea, Japan, and China were only asked about maintaining the presence of US troops, not whether or not the alliance should continue.

Conclusion

While the US, South Korean, and Japanese governments continue to tout the strength of the trilateral alliance, public opinion reveals that there are clearly weak spots that need to be addressed. From overcoming the Korea-Japan rift, to confidence building measures for each country's approach to China, to issues revolving around unification, there is work to be done. But addressing each of these issues will be delicate.

Neither South Koreans nor Japanese wish to be lectured about the importance of their bilateral ties. Domestic leadership will be required if that relationship is to be repaired.

The alliance will also require adequate space and trust to allow for different approaches to China. South Korea's warming ties with China remain an area to watch, though there has been no indication of a longer-term, serious reorientation toward China and views toward the bilateral relationship with the United States remain very positive. Instead, South Korea's good bilateral ties with China should be welcomed and used as a way to continue to engage China across a range of issues.

Methodology

The Chicago Council Survey – United States

The analysis in this report is based on data from the 2015 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy. The 2015 Chicago Council Survey was conducted by GfK Custom Research using their large-scale, nationwide online research KnowledgePanel between May 25 and June 17, 2015 among a national sample of 2,034 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error ranges from ± 2.2 to ± 3.1 percentage points depending on the specific question.

The 2015 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Korea Foundation, the United States-Japan Foundation and the personal support of Lester Crown and the Crown family.

Genron NPO – Japan

The Genron NPO survey in Japan was conducted from April 9 to 30, 2015 among a national sample of 1,000 adults, 18 years of age or older. The survey was fielded in 50 regions of Japan, with 20 samples from each region collected based on a quota sampling method at the individual level using 2010 census data. The survey was conducted face-to-face, with the questionnaire left with the respondent and then collected a few days later. The margin of error ranges from ± 4.6 to ± 6.0 percentage points depending on the specific question.

East Asia Institute – South Korea

The East Asia Institute survey in South Korea was conducted by the Han-Kook Research Company between April 17 and May 8, 2015 among a national sample of 1,010 adults, aged 18 years and older. It uses a quota sampling method based on region, gender, and age and the interviews were conducted face to face. The margin of error is ± 3.1 percentage points.

Horizon Research Consultancy Group – China

Horizon Research Consultancy Group conducted the survey in China from August 25 to September 11, 2015 among an urban sample of 3,142 adults, aged 18 years and older. The survey used the PPS sampling method and was conducted face to face across all tier 1-4 cities in 29 provinces. The margin of error is ± 1.8 percentage points.