

Americans Positive on South Korea and Support to Defend It at All-time High

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As President Park Geun-Hye visits the United States, American opinion of South Korea is largely positive. Majorities say US-ROK relations are important and see South Korea as a reliable partner. Perhaps the most significant signal of American backing for the bilateral relationship is that US public support for the use of US forces to defend South Korea in the event of a North Korean attack is at an all-time high.

While a majority of Americans view the North Korean nuclear weapons program as a critical threat to the United States, most Americans favor a diplomatic solution. Should reunification of North and South Korea eventually take place, Americans favor maintaining the alliance but are split on keeping US forces on the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea: An Important, Reliable Partner for the United States

American public opinion of South Korea is largely positive. Eight in ten Americans (83%) say relations with South Korea are important and 62 percent support South Korea exerting strong leadership in world affairs. These findings largely echo those of the 2014 Chicago Council Survey where, on a 0 to 100 scale, Americans gave South Korea a favorable rating of 55. This was the highest rating for South Korea since the question was first asked in 1978.

In addition, two-thirds (66%) of Americans view South Korea as a reliable partner. The reasons for these views are closely tied to the traditional pillars of the US-Korea alliance—security and trade. Among those that consider Korea a reliable partner, 38 percent say the security alliance helps to explain a lot of their view and 32 percent said economic and trade ties explains a lot. Just one in ten (13%) say Korea's culture and people explain a lot of their view.

Despite the importance of economic and trade between the two countries, recognition of South Korea's importance as a trade partner likely remains less understood. In the 2014 Chicago Council Survey, only 24 percent correctly identified South Korea as a top ten trading partner of the United States. Instead, a plurality (44%) identified South Korea as belonging in the top 20 but not the top ten.

While attitudes are positive overall, there is evidence of a confidence gap among Americans when considering South Korea. Even though a majority want it to exert strong leadership in world affairs, only 36 percent believe South Korea will responsibly handle world problems.

Majority Cite North's Nukes as Threat, Majority Favor Diplomatic Solution

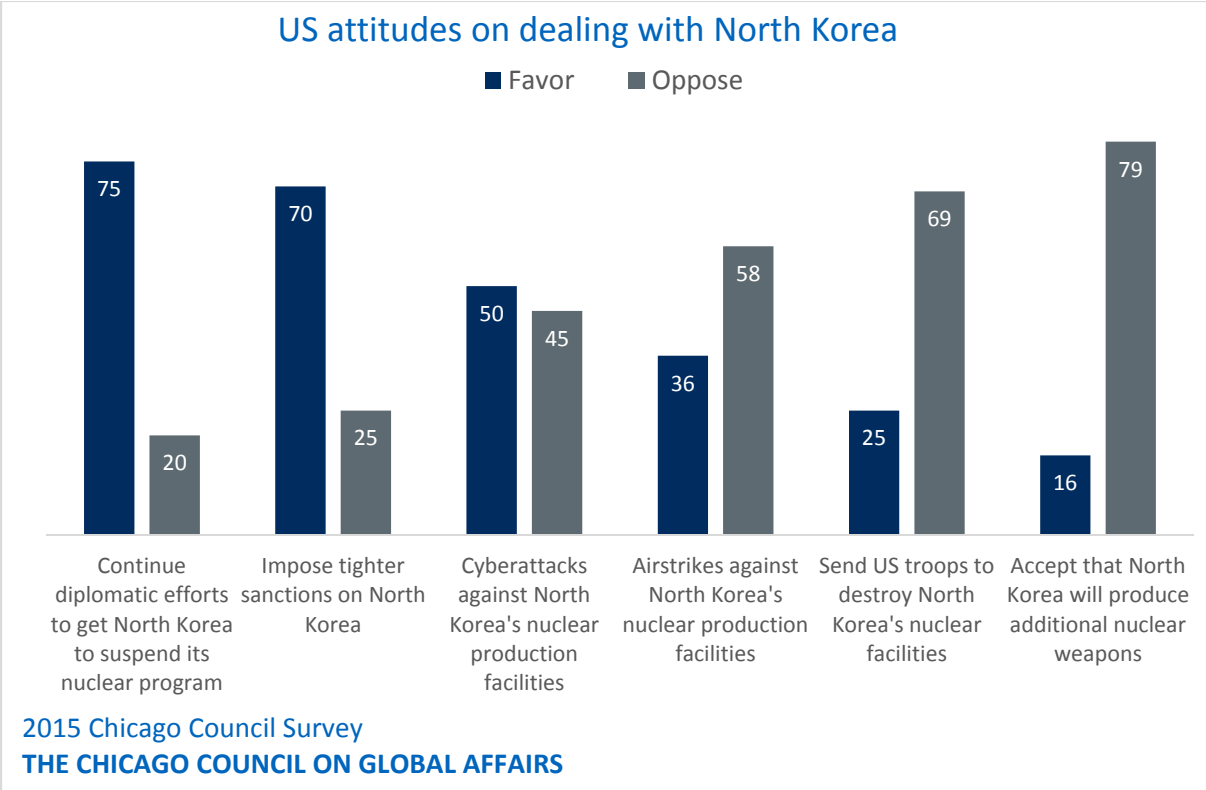
Though press coverage of North Korea has been relatively muted of late, tensions between North and South Korea remain high and of concern to both President Obama and President Park. Similarly, as North Korea continues to expand and improve its missile and nuclear weapons program, a majority of Americans (55%) cite North Korea's nuclear weapons program as a critical threat. This places it on par with the perceived threat of Iran's nuclear weapons program, which 57 percent cite as a critical threat.¹ But while Americans view the program itself as a critical threat, other polls show that many are skeptical that North Korea could actually deliver a nuclear payload to the United States. A 2013 Pew survey found just slightly more thought North Korea was capable of hitting the United States (47%) than thought it was not capable (43%).

Previous efforts to denuclearize North Korea have failed to yield results. While diplomatic efforts have failed across presidencies, sanctions have proved hard to enforce due to North Korea's limited connections to the international economy and various lapses in enforcement. Despite these challenges the American public continues to favor diplomatic efforts (75%) and increased economic sanctions (70%) to pressure North Korea to denuclearize.

Moving beyond diplomacy, one-half of the public favors conducting cyberattacks against the North's nuclear production facilities, but only one in three (36%) support US airstrikes against those facilities. Even fewer support sending US ground troops to destroy them. The least popular option of all presented is for the United States to accept that North Korea will produce additional nuclear weapons.

However, if all non-military options have failed the American public may be more ready to use force. In the 2013 Transatlantic Trends survey conducted by the German Marshall Fund, respondents were asked if they would accept a nuclear North Korea if all non-military options had been exhausted. In this scenario, 67 percent of Americans supported the use of force.

¹ This survey was conducted before the nuclear deal was reached with Iran.



Support to use US Troops to Defend South Korea at All-Time High

While the armistice on the Korean Peninsula has lasted for more than 60 years, recent incursions by North Korean troops across the DMZ to lay mines remind us that a kinetic provocation against South Korea is still a possibility. If that provocation escalated, the United States is bound by treaty to defend South Korea. Despite just 29 percent saying that a confrontation between South and North Korea is a critical threat to the United States, in a hypothetical North-led invasion of South Korea, 47 percent of the American public support the use of US troops to defend South Korea (49% opposed). This marks support at an all-time high. When the question was first asked in 1974, fewer than two in ten stated support.

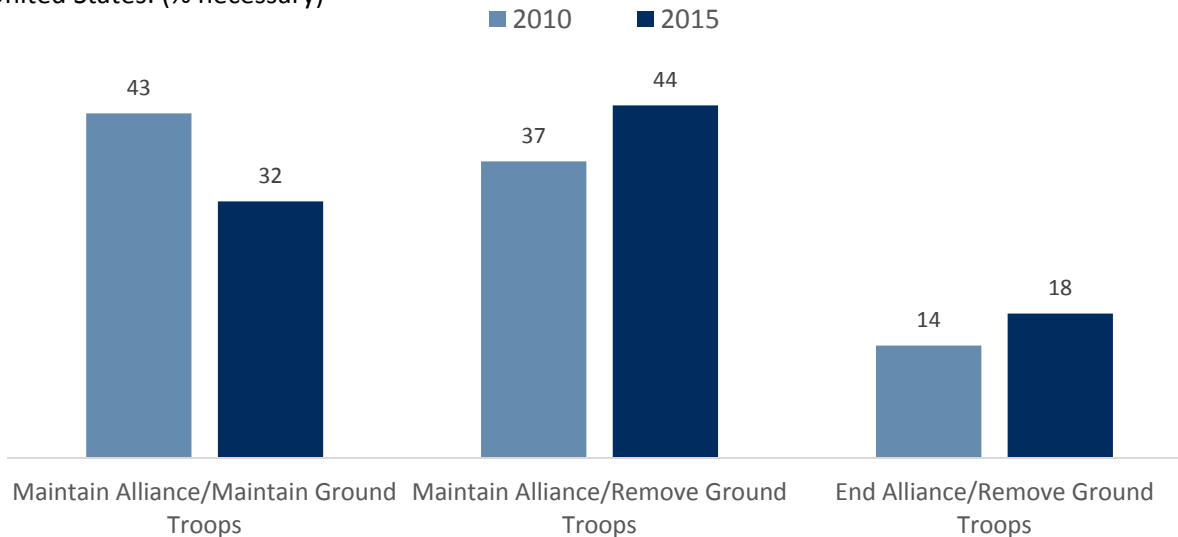
Americans Favor Maintaining Alliance after Reunification

Americans support long-term bases in South Korea. In 2014, 64 percent of Americans supported long-term military bases in South Korea—up from 60 percent in 2012—without the prospect of reunification.

However, in the event of reunification of the two Koreas—a diplomatic priority for President Park’s administration—Americans say they would continue to support maintaining the US-Korea alliance, but they might want to change the shape of that alliance. While 32 percent favor maintaining both the alliance and the US troop presence in Korea, 44 percent favor maintaining the alliance but removing US troops. This has shifted since this question was last asked in 2010. At that time, 43 percent thought ground troops should be kept in South Korea versus 37 percent that favored maintaining the alliance and removing troops.

The Alliance after Reunification

If North Korea and South Korea were to reunify as a single nation, should the United States: (% necessary)



2015 Chicago Council Survey

THE CHICAGO COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

About The Chicago Council Survey

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 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 using the KnowledgePanel, GfK's largescale, probability-based, nationwide online research panel. The margin of error ranges from ± 2.2 to ± 3.1 percentage points depending on the specific question, with higher margins of error for partisan subgroups.

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