

# ASAN REPORT

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## Measuring A Giant

South Korean Perceptions of the United States

PUBLIC OPINION STUDIES PROGRAM

APRIL 2015



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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

## About

**The Asan Institute for Policy Studies** is an independent, non-partisan think tank with the mandate to undertake policy-relevant research to foster domestic, regional, and international environments conducive to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, East Asia, and the world-at-large.

**The Public Opinion Studies Program** at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies conducts some of the most widely cited public surveys in international relations and political science. Its regular polls produce reliable data for political leaders and the general public, creating more informed policy debates and decisions. The Program also publishes survey reports dealing with both international and domestic issues in Korea.

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## Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not reflect those of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

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## Executive Summary

For over 70 years, the United States has been regarded as the unquestionable leader in global affairs. However, the 2008 global financial crisis exposed US vulnerabilities and many have begun to speculate that the US may no longer be the dominant hegemon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Signs of a US decline have coincided with the meteoric rise of China, whose growing influence has challenged the status quo in Asia and around the world.

Most recently, however, US economic recovery and the shale gas revolution have hinted at the possibility that the US is making a comeback. At the same time, Chinese economic growth appears to have slowed down. These developments present an interesting opportunity for South Korea given its unique relationships with the two countries.

The US-China competition can be narrowed down to the following: will China continue to rise and challenge the US? Or will the US retain its primacy? Proponents of the former suggest that China will continue to expand its economic power to challenge the US. Supporters of the latter point out that global leadership requires more than economic power. They argue that a combination of political influence and the ability to promote global norms and values are requirements as well. This report examines which of the two countries South Koreans see as the global leader and as South Korea's future partner.

According to the Asan Institute's public opinion surveys, South Koreans maintain a favorable attitude toward the US. Since the Asan Institute first began surveying country favorability in 2010, the US has remained above the neutral score of 5.0 on a zero-to-ten scale, which far exceeds the scores of other

neighboring countries. Even as South Korea improves economic ties with China, only 50-60% of South Koreans described ROK-China relations as being cooperative while 70-80% said the same about the current ROK-US relations.

What South Koreans associated the most with the US were capitalism (28.6%), military strength (26.7%), and democracy (20.6%). These responses make sense given the American political, economic, and military influence in global affairs. When asked about the United States' historic relationship with South Korea, the answers were mixed. For example, there was an overwhelming agreement that the US made South Korea's economic development possible. Also 63.2% disagreed with the statement that the US was an obstacle to democratization. At the same time, 61.4% of South Koreans blamed the US for the division of Korea. When asked about shared interests, a surprising number (44.5%) stated that the two countries did not share the same interests. The results indicate that South Koreans today assess the relationship in a pragmatic manner.

Regarding the US-China competition, South Koreans were in general agreement that the US remains the global superpower. 84.6% of South Koreans believed that the US currently possesses the greatest political influence and 63.6% said the same about its economic influence. Only 4.9% and 29.9%, respectively, thought China has the greatest political and economic influence. However, South Koreans assessed that China will one day surpass the US economically and reach relative parity in political influence. Specifically, 70.5% thought China will become the future economic superpower while only 20.2% said the same about the US. In terms of future political influence, 47.6% chose the US while 39.5% sided with China.



We found that South Koreans consider the two countries as superpowers for different reasons. For the US, 53.0% pointed to its economic and military strength (size of economy + military spending) and 24.5% to its science technology and culture as main reasons. On the other hand, 52.2% identified China's potential (world's biggest population + massive territory) as its biggest asset. 37.0% said China was a superpower for its economic and military strength (size of economy + military spending).

While the competition for hard power remains fierce, South Koreans sided with the US in terms of soft power. First, they were more favorable toward the expansion of US culture (68.9%) than Chinese culture (57.2%). This was especially the case among South Koreans in their 20s and those who were 60 and older (20s: 77.4% for the US, 54.8% for China; 60 and older: 76.2% for the US, 56.1% for China). When asked about the importance of the two countries' languages, 66.7% of South Koreans answered that English was the more important language. In contrast, less than half (27.2%) said the same about Chinese.

Another crucial factor for South Koreans was their favorability of President Barack Obama. Unlike President Obama's domestic approval rating, South Koreans' leadership favorability ranks him higher than any other world leader. Since 2013, when the Asan Institute first began measuring leadership favorability, President Obama has scored over 6.0 on a zero-to-ten scale. This is an impressive feat especially given the rising popularity of President Xi in the midst of an improving ROK-China relations. As of March 2015, President Obama's favorability rating stands at 6.21, which is even higher than the rating for the United States (5.93). President Xi's rating is 5.24.

South Koreans valued the US as the better international leader in large part

due to its soft power. 72.4% positively assessed US leadership in global affairs while 52.1% said the same about China in 2015. While China's number increased from last year, it still lagged behind the US. This is one of the reasons why many remain skeptical of China's ability to replace the US. If the US and China continue their competition, South Koreans preferred the US (58.7%) over China (30.5%) as South Korea's future partner.

Concerns of a US decline appeared to have little impact on South Koreans' view of US leadership. This was particularly the case for young South Koreans who assessed US leadership much more positively than China's. In particular, 79.9% and 72.8% of those in their 20s and 30s, respectively, assessed the US as a better global leader than China. Moreover, 74.8% chose the US over China as South Korea's future partner. Regarding the importance of the two countries languages, 75.5% of South Koreans in their 20s chose English over Chinese (19.9%).

The so called G2 competition between the US and China has intensified in Northeast Asia but South Koreans have continued to support US leadership. Even with the understanding that China will one day surpass the US economically, they still chose the US as the country better equipped to exhibit global leadership due to its political influence and soft power. These findings tell us that while superpower status can be obtained with a big economy, global leadership requires more than economic superiority. In that sense, the United States, despite its imperfections, remains *the* global leader for South Koreans.

## Introduction

Since World War II, the United States has been “the one indispensable nation in world affairs.”<sup>1</sup> Even during the Cold War, this proved to be undoubtedly true. However, the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought along growing concerns that the US may no longer be the dominant rule setter in global affairs. Critics point to an exponentially rising government debt level, declining military spending, the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression, foreign military interventions that have cost billions of dollars and hundreds of lives, and a myriad of domestic political problems as evidence.

Concurrently, the world has witnessed an ancient power return to relevancy. Since opening up its economy, China has risen at breakneck speed, replacing Japan in 2010 as Asia’s number one economy and becoming the world’s second largest economy behind the US. Last year, its GDP reached \$10 trillion and, if the current trajectory holds, it will soon replace the US as the global economic superpower. Moreover, China has gained memberships into various international organizations in an effort to expand its influence in the world stage. The initial success of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) appears to be a sign of things to come.

Such a flux in balance of power has been most evident in Asia. President Obama’s rebalancing toward Asia has been countered by President Xi’s declaration of a “One Belt, One Road.” The rivalry between the two countries has

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1. President Barack Obama first described the US as “the indispensable nation” during a graduation speech at the Air Force Academy in 2012. Since then, the phrase has been used on numerous occasions by the Obama Administration.

been made credible not only by China’s growing influence but by the perception that the US is no longer the ‘one indispensable nation.’ On one hand, some see China challenging the US for regional and global primacy. Given China’s tremendous potential in the form of its population, territory, and resources, they see China eventually catching up to the US.

On the other hand, there are those who argue that US decline must be taken with a grain of salt. They make the case that while China may overtake the US economically, it will never surpass the US in military power, soft power, and, ultimately, global leadership. Recently, this stream of thought has been supported by a recovering US economy. At the same time, China has experienced a significant drop in economic growth, further complicating the debate.

For South Korea, this presents an interesting dilemma given its unique relationship with the two countries. As such, this report aims to analyze the rivalry from the South Korean perspective. By doing so, it will gauge how South Koreans view and understand the current developments taking place and how this understanding impacts their evaluation of global leadership.

## South Korean Perceptions of the United States

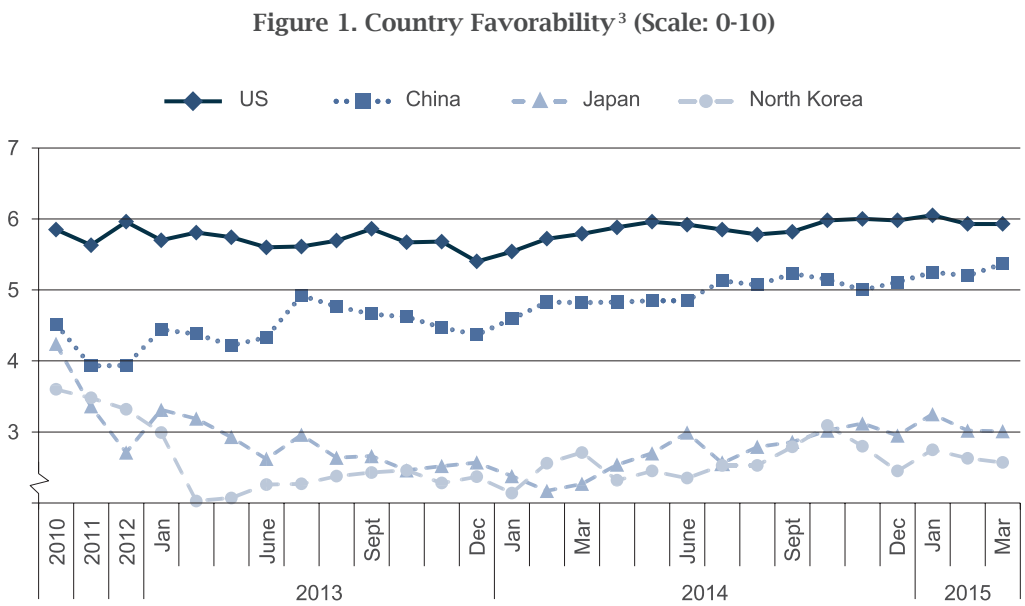
### *US Favorability and ROK-US Relations*

Previous reports published by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies have shown that South Koreans hold a favorable view of the United States. In fact, the US has consistently enjoyed an overwhelming lead over other countries included in Asan’s country favorability ratings.<sup>2</sup> Since 2010, the US never fell below the neutral point (5.0) and its lowest score (5.40, December 2013) still

ranked above the highest score of the next favored country, China (5.37, March 2015). The numbers are even more convincing when compared to those of North Korea and Japan.

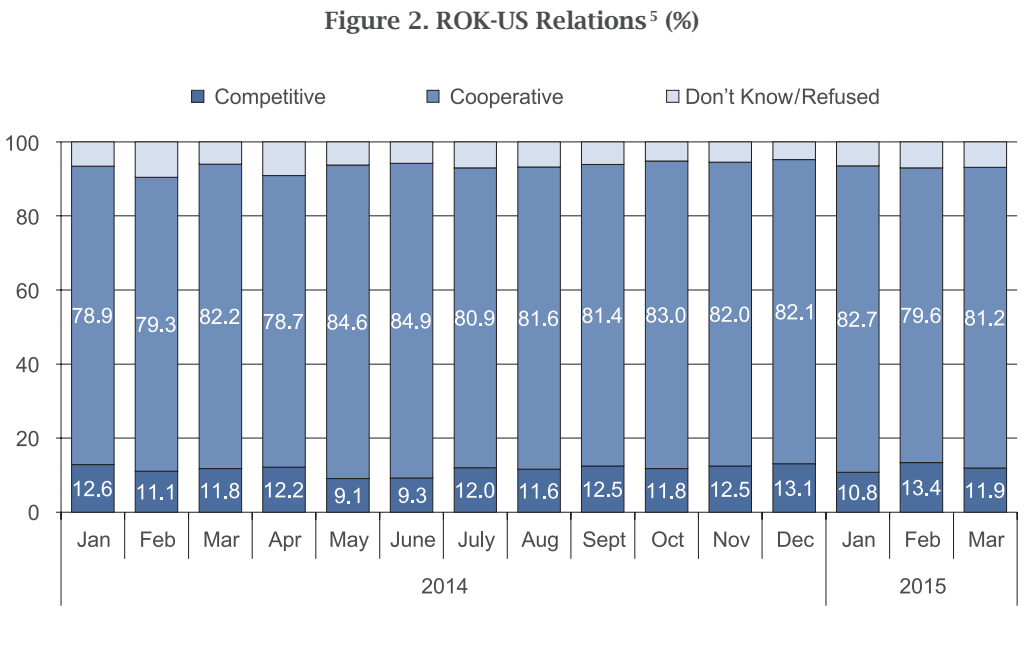
South Koreans' view of China, however, has undergone a noticeable shift as of late. Highlighted by President Park Geun-hye's state visit to China in 2013 and President Xi Jinping's subsequent visit to South Korea in 2014, ROK-China relationship appears to have reached a new juncture. This translated into improvements in China's favorability ratings, which reached its highest score (5.37) in March 2015. The strained relationship that developed in the aftermath of the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the bombing of Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 appears to be a thing of the past.

While China has successfully played a game of catch-up, its ratings have been more volatile to events taking place on and around the Korean Peninsula. On



the other hand, US ratings have hinged upon a number of factors that have been battletested over the course of the bilateral relationship.<sup>4</sup> How an improving ROK-China relations will impact South Korea's relationship with the US remains to be seen. At this point in time, however, the US retains the title as the most favored country by South Koreans.

South Koreans' favorable view of the US has led to a positive assessment of the ROK-US relationship. When asked about the nature of the relationship,



2. We asked respondents to rate their favorability of the US, China, Japan, and North Korea from 0 to 10 (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable).

3. Asan Poll (Jan. 2013-Mar. 2015).

4. US favorability ratings have been consistently high since the Asan Institute first began measuring it in 2010. China's favorability ratings, however, have improved dramatically since the President Park Geun-hye took office in 2013.

5. Asan Poll (Jan. 2013-Mar. 2015).

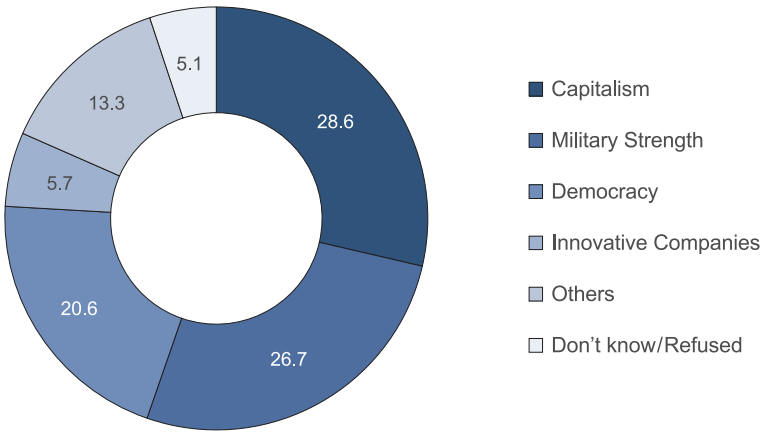


70-80% of respondents identified it as being *cooperative*, rather than *competitive* (roughly 10% stated the opposite). This assessment has been consistent since 2013.

*Image of the United States*

Following the Korean War, South Korea and the US have maintained an extensive relationship that has stood the test of time. Given such history, we wanted to see how South Koreans today view the US. We asked respondents what they associated the most with the US.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 3. Image of the United States<sup>7</sup> (%)



6. Asan Poll (Mar. 11-12, 2015). We asked respondents to answer the following question: “Which of the following do you most associate with the US?” They were given the following choices: 1) Capitalism; 2) Military strength; 3) Democracy; 4) Innovative companies; 5) Hollywood movies and pop music; 6) Celebrities and tourist attractions; and 7) Others. These answer choices were drawn from open responses to same question in Asan’s 2014 poll.

7. Asan Poll (Mar. 11-12, 2015).

The majority of South Koreans answered capitalism (28.6%), military superiority (26.7%), and democracy (20.6%). An additional 5.7% and 5.2%, respectively, associated the US with innovative companies (i.e. Apple, Google, and Facebook) and cultural products (i.e. Hollywood movies and pop music). The results suggest that while South Koreans view the US mainly in the framework of economy, security, and politics, the overall US influence on South Koreans is multifaceted.

*ROK-US Relations in Historical Perspective*

According to the Asan Institute’s 2014 report, over 90% of South Koreans agreed that the ROK-US Alliance must continue in the future.<sup>8</sup> This astounding support for the alliance, however, masks the occasional rough patches that the two countries have gone through since the Korean War. Many, if not most, South Koreans believe that Korea was the unfortunate victim of the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union. This sense of victimization has been exacerbated as the two Koreas continue to exist as remnants of a war that ended over twenty years ago. In the 1980s, South Koreans, particularly political dissidents, saw the US supporting the Korean authoritarian regime rather than supporting a popular cry for democracy. This led to the surge of anti-American sentiments among the youths, now known as the 386 generation.<sup>9</sup> This particular generation led the democratization movement in the 1980s.

8. Choi Kang, Kim Jiyeon, Karl Friedhoff, Kang Chungku, and Lee Euicheol, “South Korean Attitudes on the Korea-US Alliance and Northeast Asia,” Asan Report, 2014.

9. The 386 Generation refers to the generation of South Koreans born in the 1960s and attended university in the 1980s. They were politically active and were instrumental to the Korean democracy movement in the 1980s. They are considered to the most anti-American of the age groups.

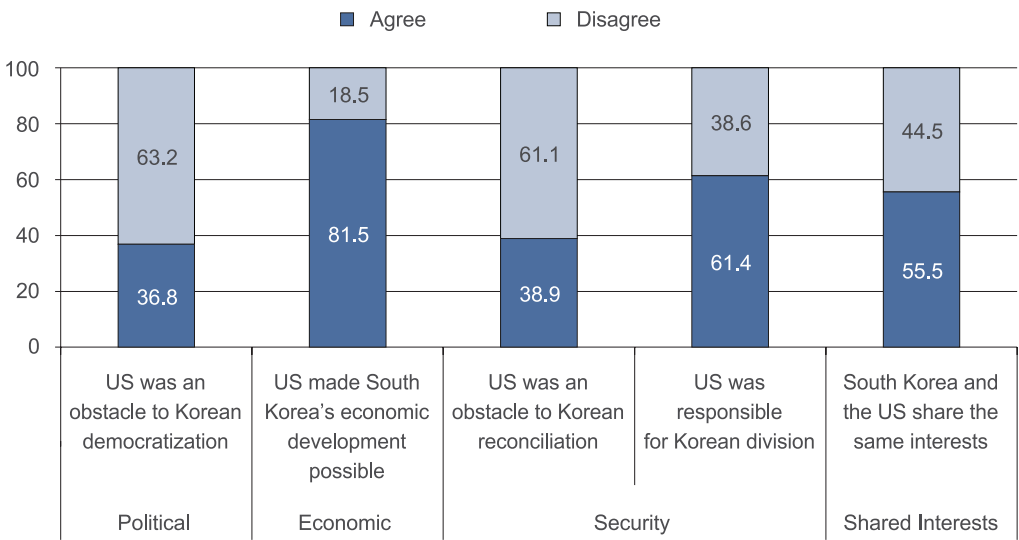
We asked South Koreans how they saw the US in historical perspective. Specifically, we gave them a set of statements about the US and asked if they agree or disagree. Unlike previous results, this particular set of questions resulted in mixed attitudes.

First, we asked South Koreans whether they agree with the following statement: “The US was an obstacle to Korean democratization.” 36.8% agreed with the statement and 63.2% disagreed. Breakdown of the results by age revealed that the group that was most supportive comprised of those in their 40s (44.0%). On the other hand, those who were 60 and older maintained their affinity for the US (agree: 27.4%; disagree: 72.6%). Similar results were found among the 20s (agree: 35.0%; disagree: 65.0%), which confirms the recent observation that young South Koreans have become increasingly conservative on security issues.

Next, we asked them about the US role in South Korea’s economic development. In response to the statement, “The US made South Korea’s economic development possible,” 81.5% of South Koreans agreed (18.5% disagreed). This overwhelming agreement was found across all age groups.

More than half of South Koreans (61.1%) disagreed with the statement that the US was an obstacle to Korean reconciliation while 38.9% agreed. Those who were 60 and older were most supportive of the US, as 71.4% disagreed with the statement. Once again, those in their 40s were most negative toward the US, as 55.0% of them agreed with the statement. There was also a noticeable disparity between progressives and conservatives, as 47.0% of progressives agreed while only 29.4% of conservatives answered the same. In response to the statement that the US was responsible for the division of Korea, 61.4% of South Koreans agreed while 38.6% said the opposite.

Figure 4. US in Historical Perspective<sup>10</sup> (%)



South Koreans in general appeared to have a positive understanding of the US in historical perspective. However, they were surprisingly pessimistic about the two countries’ shared interests. Although slightly more than the majority of South Koreans (55.5%) agreed that two countries shared the same national interests, a sizable number of South Koreans (44.5%) thought otherwise. This implies that South Koreans today view and evaluate the relationship in a pragmatic manner. The implications of this may not be significant at this time given that the countries have maintained a rosy relationship since the Lee Myung-bak era. However, they are worth noting given a number of salient issues that could disrupt the relationship in the future.

10. Asan Annual Survey 2014 (Sept. 1-17, 2014).

## G2 and Hard Power<sup>11</sup>

Many have claimed the decline of the US. China’s rise, the 2008 global financial crisis, spike in US debt level, US involvement in the Middle East, and the fight against extremist groups such as IS (Islamic State) have reinforced the idea that the US may no longer be the dominant hegemon. Others have argued that the decline has been relative and that the US has merely taken a step back.<sup>12</sup> They point to US immigration policies, the shale gas revolution, corporate innovation and R&D, and high quality secondary education as signs that the US is making a comeback.

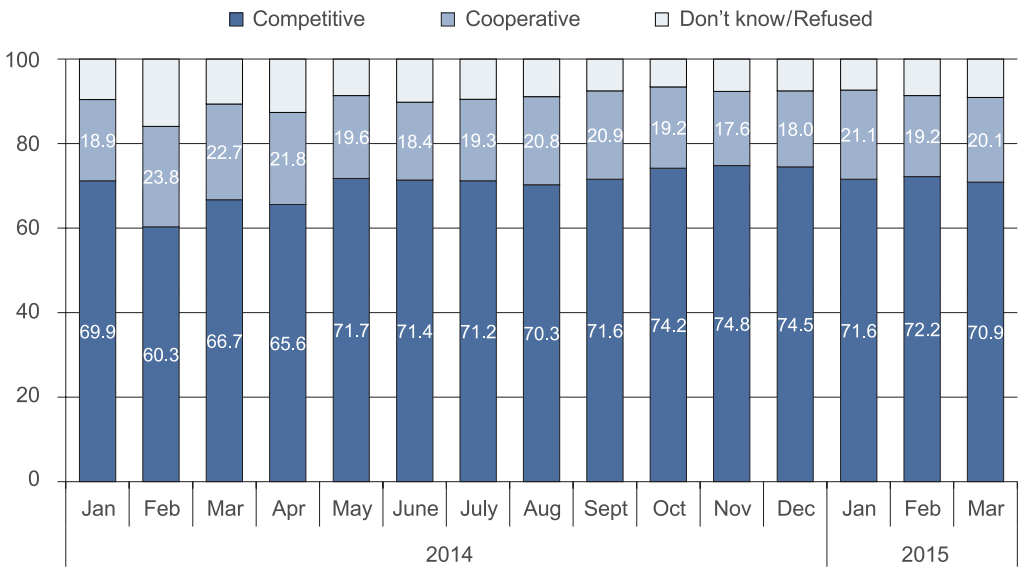
Whatever the case may be, we asked South Koreans how these developments affect their opinions of the US and China.

### US-China Relations

More than 70% of South Koreans viewed US-China relations as being competitive. With China’s economy continuing to grow at great pace and its military spending increasing annually by 10%, South Koreans saw China as the ultimate challenger to the US. This has coincided with the US reducing its military spending and its economic influence being tested by the 2008 global financial crisis. The success of AIIB has made the argument all the more believable.

11. Kang Chungku, “South Korean Perceptions of the US and China,” *Asan Survey*, 2014, <http://asaninst.org/contents/category/publications/public-opinion-surveys/daily-poll/> (in Korean).  
12. Joseph Nye, “The American Century will survive the rise of China,” *Financial Times*, 25 March 2015, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/48c84460-d250-11e4-ae91-00144feab7de.html#axzz3WmuAAOIz>.

Figure 5. US-China Relations<sup>13</sup> (%)



When North Korea conducted its third nuclear test in March 2013, the world witnessed the two countries manage the situation in a cooperative manner. This appeared to have influenced South Koreans, as 40% of them at the time saw the relationship as being cooperative. However, the more pervasive and consistent view has been that the two are in competition.

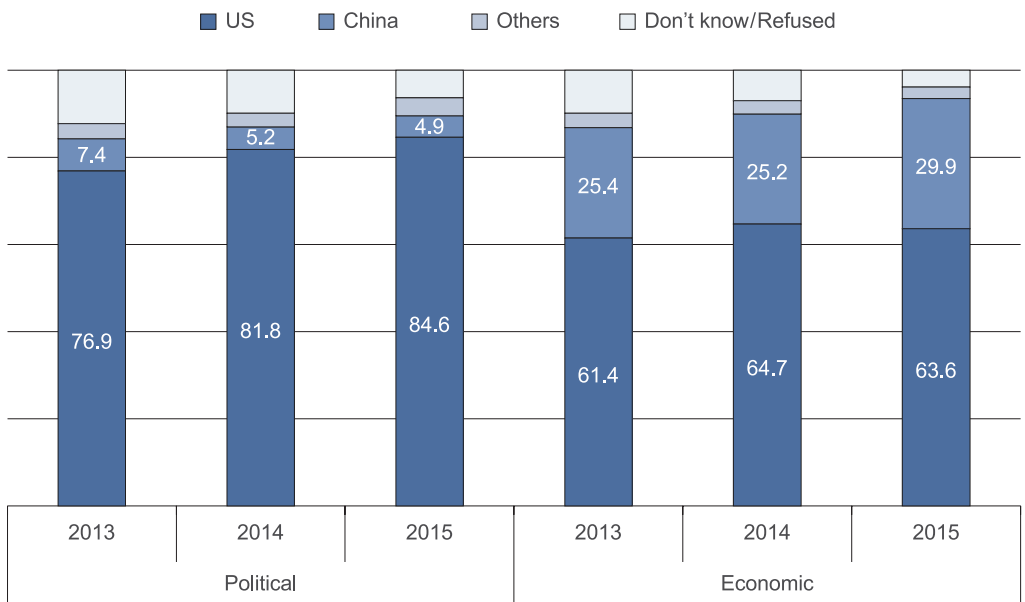
### The Measure of a Superpower

When we asked South Koreans to pick the country with the greatest political and economic influence, the race was between the US and China. Unlike the popular perception that US influence has been in decline, an increasing number of South Koreans were convinced that the US remained the undisput-

13. Asan Poll (Jan. 2013-Mar. 2015).

ed global superpower. This was particularly the case in terms of US political influence. In 2013, 76.9% of South Koreans were convinced of so. This number increased to 81.8% in 2014 and 84.6% in 2015. In terms of economic influence, 61.4% in 2013, 64.7% in 2014, and 63.6% in 2015 believed that the US was the global economic superpower.

Figure 6. Current Economic and Political Influence<sup>14</sup> (%)

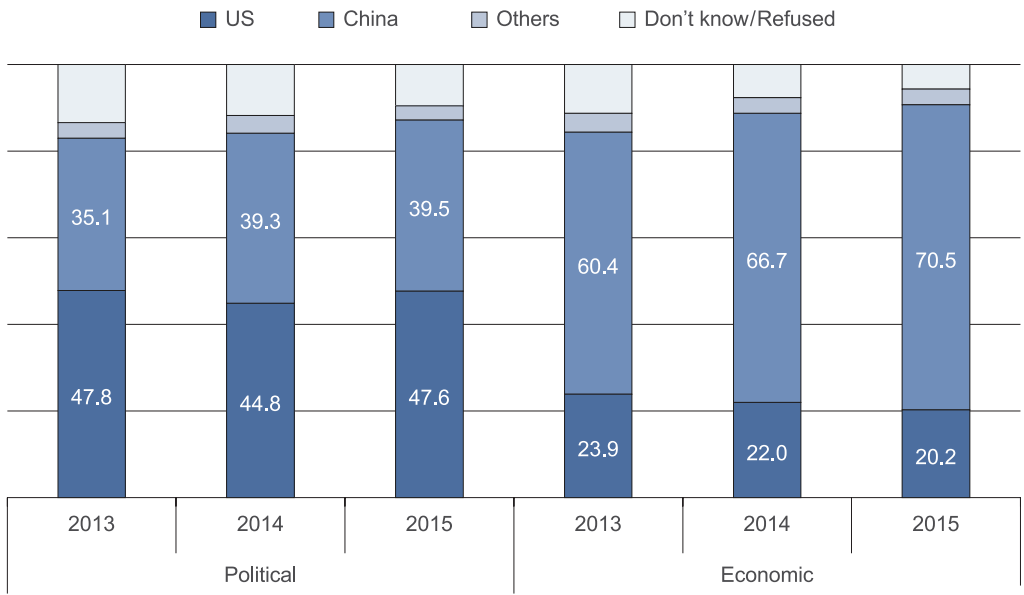


On the other hand, only 4.9% of South Koreans in 2015 answered that China had greater political influence. In terms of economic influence, China fared much better. In 2013, 25.4% thought China was the global economic influencer. This number rose slightly to 29.9% in 2015.

14. Asan Poll (Mar. 11-12, 2015).

How do South Koreans envision the power shifting in the future? In general, many South Koreans saw US influence declining. This was especially noticeable in terms of economic influence. In 2013, 60.4% of South Koreans saw China being the economic superpower of the future. This number increased to 70.5% in 2015. This is a considerable leap given that only 30% or so believe China is the current economic superpower.

Figure 7. Future Economic and Political Influence<sup>15</sup> (%)



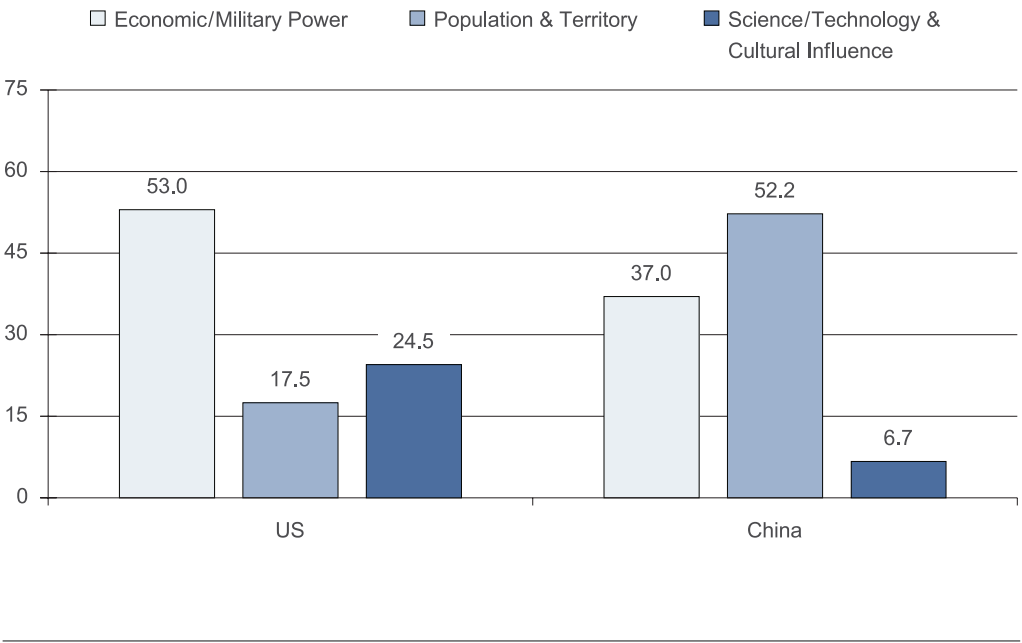
In terms of political influence, South Koreans saw the two countries reaching relative parity, led slightly by the US. In 2013, 47.8% of South Koreans said the US will be the political superpower while 35.1% said the same about China. In 2015, these numbers changed to 47.6% and 39.5%, respectively.

15. Asan Poll (Mar. 11-12, 2015).

*Battle Between Giants: US vs. China*

We asked South Koreans what factors make the US and/or China a global superpower. The results showed that while South Koreans see both countries as superpowers, they do so for different reasons. The US was perceived as a superpower for having the biggest economy (35.5%), for its consistent investments in R&D and science technology (21.1%), and for being the greatest military power (17.5%). China, on the other hand, was considered a superpower for its population (37.8%), for having the second biggest economy (31.0%), and for its massive territory (14.4%). Other reasons included China’s military spending (6.0%), science technology (3.5%) and old tradition and culture (3.2%), although these constituted only small fractions.

Figure 8. The Measure of a Superpower<sup>16</sup> (%)



16. Asan Poll (Mar. 11-12, 2015).

Despite cuts in US military budget, more than half of South Koreans cited US economic and military power as the reason why the US was a superpower. Only 37.0% of South Koreans saw China as a superpower for the same reason (economic + military power). Rather, they identified China’s population and massive territory (52.2%) as its greatest asset.

The results imply that South Koreans regard China’s potential (population + territory) as its greatest strength. This is perhaps the same reason why they foresee the US being challenged by China in the near future. However, the dominance of the US in absolute terms appeared to have convinced South Koreans today that the more powerful of the two countries at this point remains the US.

**Soft Power Competition**

South Koreans consider the US to be the current political and economic superpower of the world. They also believe that China is quickly catching up and, given recent developments, it is difficult to argue otherwise. Is China, however, ready to replace the US as the undisputed international leader? Strong political and economic influences are certainly important weapons in a leader’s arsenal. But to replace a country like the US, China must demonstrate other qualities that can entice other nations to follow.

The US has been able to maintain its international stature despite China’s rise. This has been made possible by its soft power. The way South Koreans view and appreciate, among others, US culture and the leadership of President Barack Obama lie at the center of American soft power in South Korea.

Cultural Influence

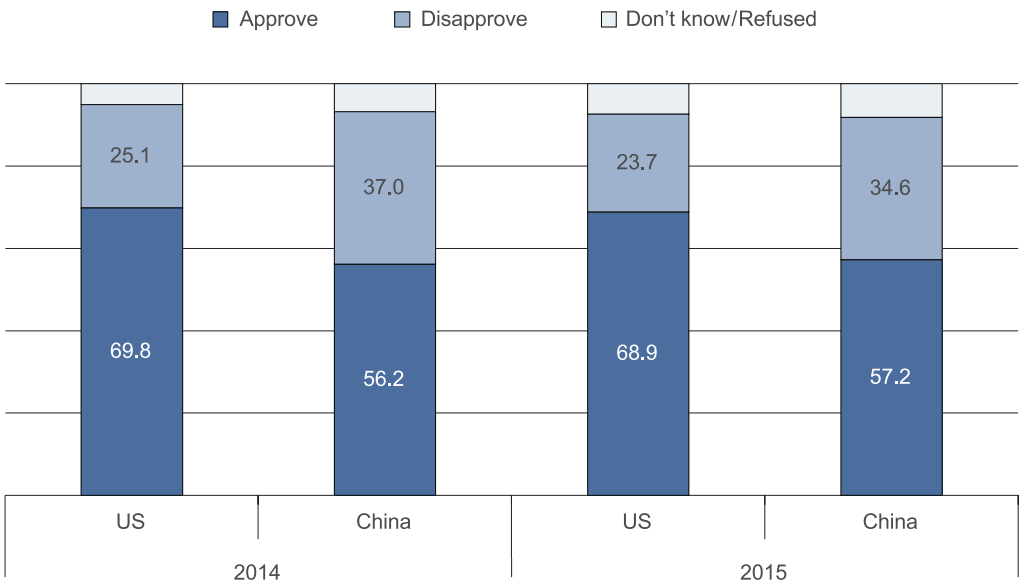
Soft power is “the ability of affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country’s soft power rests on its resources of culture, values, and policies.”<sup>17</sup> Many South Koreans perceived this as the source of US primacy. Their positive assessment of US soft power was particularly evident in their responses to the following question, “How do you assess the expansion of American (or Chinese) cultural influence?” 68.9% of respondents answered positively to the expansion of US cultural influence and 57.2% said the same about China.

Despite President Xi Jinping’s recent efforts to strengthen China’s soft power and improve its international image, South Koreans leaned toward what was already familiar to them. It may be the case that Chinese efforts have not yet translated into stronger Chinese cultural presence and appreciation in South Korea. Moreover, environmental pollution, human rights issues, and the influx of Chinese tourists into South Korea stand in the way of Chinese efforts.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, South Koreans continue to be attracted to various aspects of the American society, including its pop culture (i.e. Hollywood movies and music.), investments in R&D that lead to innovation and creativity, and high quality education that produce many of the world’s best and the brightest.

17. Joseph Nye, “Public Diplomacy and Soft Power,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March 2008, 616: 94-109.  
18. Kim Jiyeon, Karl Friedhoff, Kang Chunku, and Lee Euicheol, “South Korean Attitude Toward China,” Asan Report, 2014.

Figure 9. Expansion of American/Chinese Cultural Influence<sup>19</sup> (%)

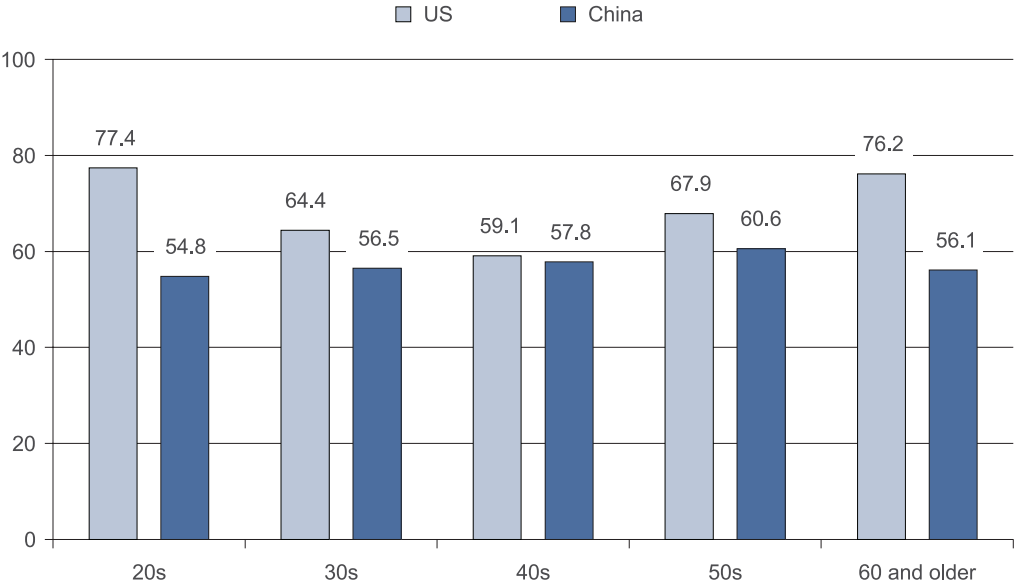


When we examine the above results by age, we see that younger South Koreans have a more positive attitude toward US culture. Regarding the expansion of US cultural influence, South Koreans in their 20s were most positive. 77.4% of those in their 20s approved the expansion of American cultural influence. In comparison, only 54.8% said the same about Chinese cultural influence.<sup>20</sup> Among the age groups, those in their 40s reacted most negatively but only in relative terms, since 59.1% still answered positively to US culture. This age group was also positive toward Chinese expansion of cultural influence with a 57.8% approval rate. Overall, South Koreans in all age groups reacted positively to US expansion of cultural influence.

19. Asan Poll (May 7-9, 2014; Mar. 11-12, 2015).  
20. 76.2% of South Koreans who were 60 and older also reacted positively to the expansion of US culture.



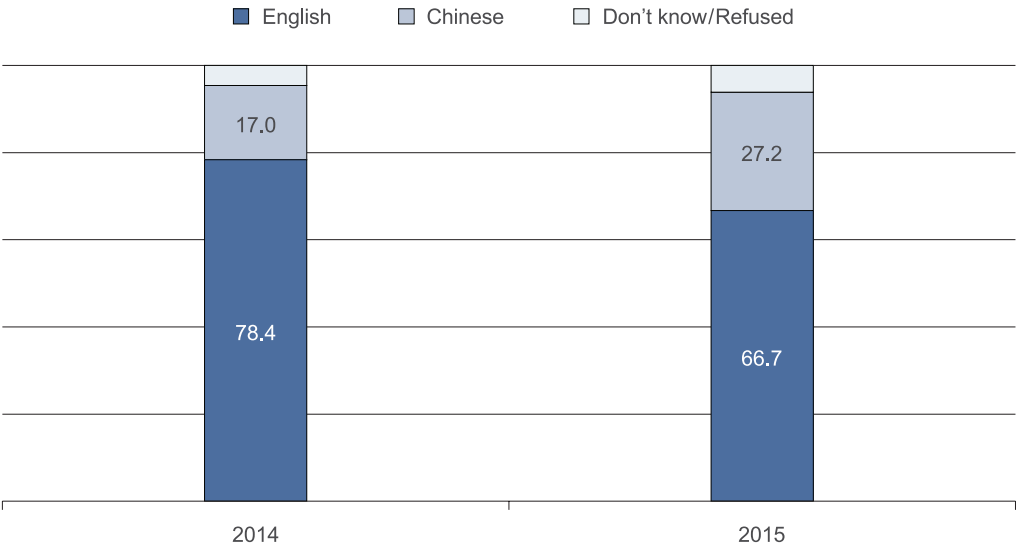
Figure 10. Positive Assessment of American/Chinese Expansion of Cultural Influence by Age<sup>21</sup> (%)



The preference of the US over China in cultural influence can also be seen in South Koreans' evaluation of the two countries' languages. When we asked South Koreans to pick the more important language, the majority answered English. Specifically, 66.7% chose English over Chinese in 2015. While this number dropped slightly from last year, it was still more than double the number of those who answered that Chinese was more important. This was most noticeable among South Koreans in their 20s, as 75.5% answered that English was more important while only 19.9% said the same about Chinese.

21. Asan Poll (Mar. 11-12, 2015).

Figure 11. Language Competitiveness<sup>22</sup> (%)

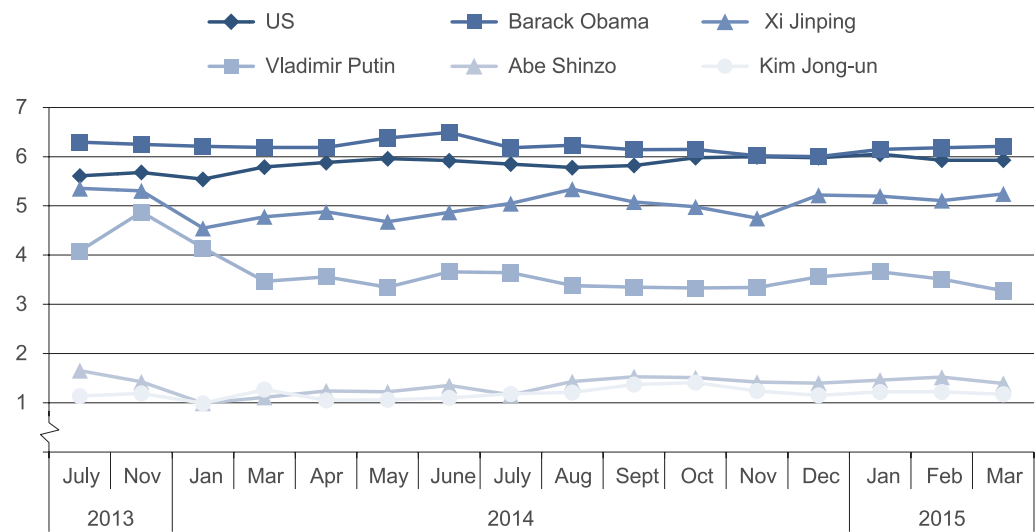


*The Obama Effect*

Recently in South Korea, much of US soft power has rested on the shoulders of President Barack Obama. Since the Asan Institute first conducted polls on leadership favorability in 2013, President Obama's favorability has never been contested. While President Xi Jinping has done a commendable job boosting his rating, President Obama has dominated as South Koreans' favorite leader. His lowest rating of 6.0 (December 2014) still ranked higher than President Xi's highest rating of 5.35, which came just before President Park's state visit to China. His numbers actually rank higher than the favorability scores for the US, which indicate just how popular President Obama has been and how that has added to the overall attraction South Koreans have toward the US.

22. Asan Poll (May 7-9, 2014; Mar. 11-12, 2015).

Figure 12. President Obama’s Favorability Rating<sup>23</sup> (scale 0-10)



South Koreans’ Choice

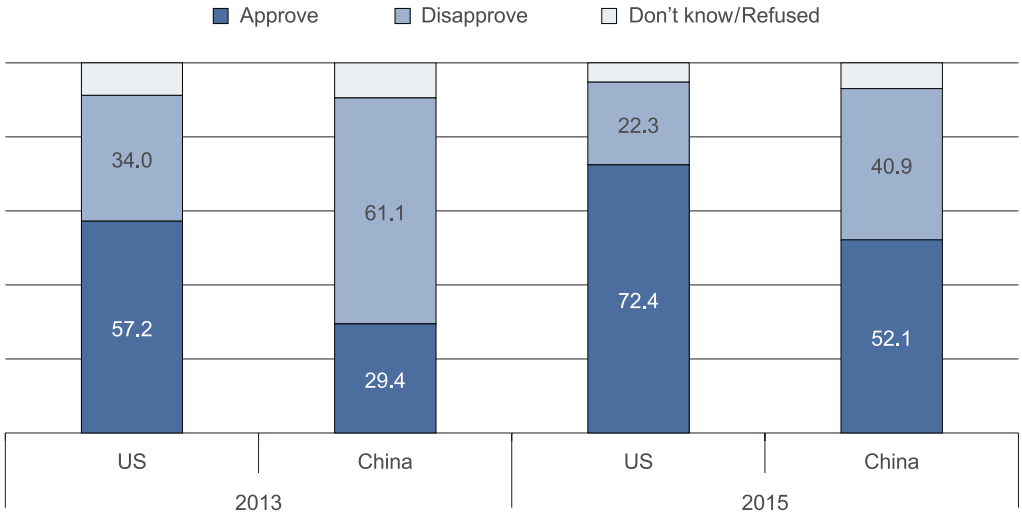
International Leadership

Despite the projection that China may one day surpass the US in terms of political and economic influence, South Koreans were consistent in their assessment of the two countries’ international leadership. China’s increasing activities around the globe have not influenced South Korean view of the US as the ultimate leader of the international community. In 2013, 57.2% approved

23. Asan Poll (July 2013-Mar. 2015). We asked respondents to rate their favorability of Barack Obama, Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Abe Shinzo, and Kim Jong-un from 0 to 10 (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable).

US leadership in global affairs, almost double the number for China (29.4%). In 2015, China’s number rose to 52.1% but 72.4% approved US leadership. While the relative disparity between the US and China has been reduced somewhat, the US leadership enjoyed an overwhelming support of South Koreans.

Figure 13. International Leadership<sup>24</sup> (%)



The above results varied by age. While South Koreans in general were approving of US leadership, younger respondents were particularly enthusiastic. 79.9% of South Koreans in their 20s approved US leadership while only 34.9% said the same about China. 72.8% of those in their 30s also approved US leadership while only 31.6% said the same about Chinese leadership. On the other hand, those who were 50 and older leaned more toward China than younger South Koreans.

24. Asan Poll (Sept. 2-4, 2013; Mar. 11-12, 2015).

Table 1. Approval Rates of the US & China’s International Leadership by Age<sup>25</sup> (%)

	US (A)	China (B)	Difference (A-B)
20s	79.9	34.9	45.0
30s	72.8	31.6	41.2
40s	65.4	43.9	21.5
50s	71.6	47.8	23.8
60 and older	73.5	44.6	28.9
Total	72.4	52.1	20.3

While an average of 72.4% of South Koreans approved US leadership, they also identified a number of problem areas that prevent the US from performing better. For example, 31.5% of South Koreans identified military interventions in foreign countries as the biggest obstacle to US leadership. Domestic economic problems (24.2%), unilateral foreign policy (21.2%), domestic political issues such as polarization and racial discrimination (9.9%) also received significant votes.

South Koreans also identified the following obstacles to Chinese leadership. They pointed to environmental pollution (28.9%) as the biggest problem, followed by Sinocentric unilateralism (20.8%), human rights issues (20.7%), and Socialism (13.8%). While South Koreans appear to have given China the superpower status for having a big and growing economy, they do not yet approve China as the replacement to US leadership. Much of this is due to the lack of Chinese soft power, which South Koreans believe is a required quality of a

25. Asan Poll (Mar. 11-12, 2015).

leader as exhibited by the US.

*South Korea’s Future Partner*

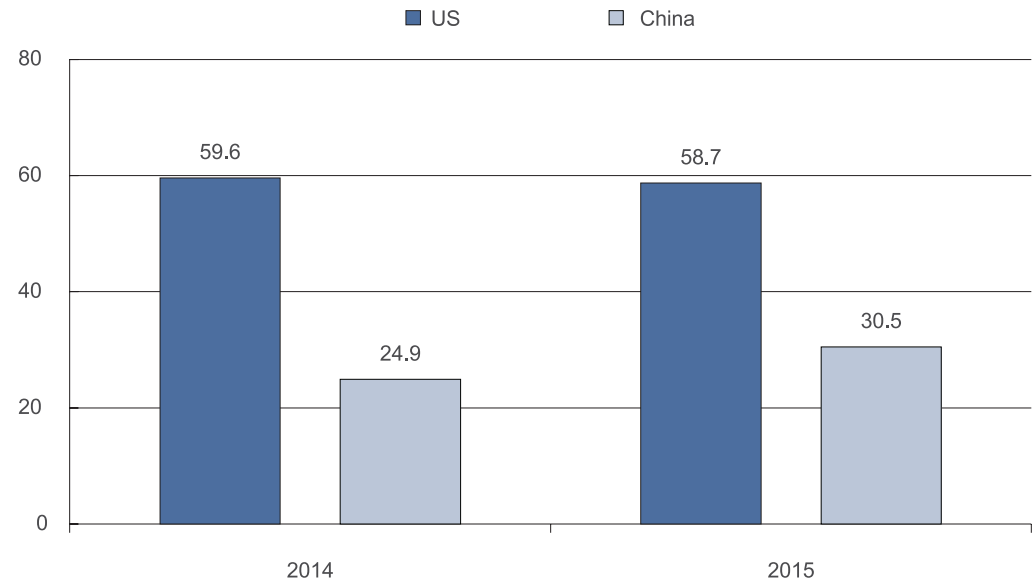
South Korea has historically been referred to as a shrimp among whales. While South Korea has grown into more than a mere shrimp this time around, its position, geographic or otherwise, remains firmly in between the US and China. The US today emphasizes the security alliance and has tried to strengthen the trilateral relationships among the US, Japan, and South Korea. On the other hand, China has strengthened its economic relationship with South Korea and has leveraged itself as the potential answer to the North Korea problem. From the outside looking in, it may appear that the two countries are asking South Korea to choose sides.

As such, we asked South Koreans which country they think South Korea should strengthen ties with if the US and China continue to compete for South Korea’s vote. In 2014, 59.6% of South Koreans chose the US over China (24.9%). A year later, 58.7% of South Koreans chose the US while 30.5% of them sided with China.

The results in this report suggest that South Koreans lean closer to China on economic affairs. Its decision to join the AIIB offers a prime example. At the same time, South Koreans valued US soft power and chose the US as the preferred global leader and the country with which South Korea should strengthen its partnership.

The above results differed by age and ideological inclination. 74.8% of South Koreans in their 20s chose the US over China as South Korea’s future partner, while only 21.2% of them chose China over the US. A similar trend was

Figure 14. Should South Korea strengthen cooperative ties with the US or China?<sup>26</sup> (%)



found among those who were 60 and older. Specifically, 68.7% chose the US and 18.0% chose China. Moreover, 52.8% and 55.6% of South Koreans in their 30s and 50s, respectively, chose the US over China while only about 30% chose China. South Koreans in their 40s remained the only group that chose China over the US, which implies that they are most progressive of the age groups. But the difference was within the margin of error.

26. Asan Poll (Sept. 2-4, 2013; Mar. 11-12, 2015).

Table 2. South Korea’s Future Partner by Age and Ideological Inclination<sup>27</sup> (%)

		US (A)	China (B)	Difference (A-B)
Age	20s	74.8	21.2	53.6
	30s	52.8	37.3	15.5
	40s	42.9	44.1	-1.2
	50s	55.6	31.7	23.9
	60 and older	68.7	18.0	50.7
Ideological Inclination	Progressive	49.2	42.1	7.1
	Moderate	56.8	31.7	25.1
	Conservative	65.4	25.9	39.5
Total		58.7	30.5	28.2

In terms of ideological inclination, the US was the preferred choice across ideological spectrum. However, more conservatives than progressives chose the US as the preferred partner. 56.8% of moderates picked the US while 31.7% chose China.

## Conclusion

The US has been South Korea’s most important political, economic, and social benefactor since the end of the Korean War. The two countries have walked the path of history together and South Koreans hold great appreciation for the way the US has helped South Korea grow into the country that it is today.

27. Asan Poll (Sept. Mar. 11-12, 2015).

Even as South Korea improves ties with China, especially since President Park Geun-hye took office, they have maintained an affinity for the US.

In the midst of an intense US-China competition, South Koreans were positive in their assessment of the political and economic leadership demonstrated by the US today. Although they foresee US economic influence being challenged by China, they still point to the US as *the* global leader. They appear unaffected by China's increasing involvement in international affairs. Rather, an increasing number of South Koreans view US leadership in a positive light. It appears that South Koreans are expecting the US to continue its global leadership.

The most important aspect of US leadership has been its soft power. South Koreans across all ages positively assessed the expansion of US culture and held an incredibly favorable view of President Obama and his leadership. They also valued English over Chinese as the more important language. Overall, Chinese economic power has proven insufficient in propelling China into regional and global leadership status. Strengthening its soft power will remain a critical task for China going forward.

An important point worth noting is the fact that these pro-American sentiments are being most strongly exhibited by young South Koreans, who form a formidable new conservative faction in South Korea. They chose the US over China in general favorability, cultural appeal, language, and global leadership. The historic relationship South Korea has maintained with the US likely plays an important role. Moreover, they see China as a rising country that faces tremendous obstacles, including its inability to address human rights issues. While they are accepting of China's increasing economic and political influence in global affairs, they point to China's domestic problems

and human rights issues as reasons why they do not foresee China supplanting US leadership. With the rise of China and the increasingly prevalent view that the US is in decline, the race for leadership in Northeast Asia has intensified. However, the Asan Institute's public opinion surveys show that South Koreans still prefer the United States. The US remains attractive enough to be their top choice.

## Survey Methodology

### Asan Annual Surveys

2010	Sample size: 2,000 respondents over the age of 19 Margin of error: +2.2% at the 95% confidence level Survey method: Mixed-Mode Survey employing RDD for mobile phones and online survey Period: August 16 – September 17, 2010 Organization: Media Research
2011	Sample size: 2,000 respondents over the age of 19 Margin of error: +2.2% at the 95% confidence level Survey method: Mixed-Mode Survey employing RDD for mobile and landline telephones Period: August 26 – October 4, 2011 Organization: EmBrain
2012	Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19 Margin of error: +2.5% at the 95% confidence level Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey Period: September 24 – November 1, 2014 Organization: Media Research

2013	Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19 Margin of error: +2.5% at the 95% confidence level Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey Period: September 4 – September 27, 2013 Organization: Media Research
2014	Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19 Margin of error: +2.5% at the 95% confidence level Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey Period: September 1 – September 17, 2014 Organization: Media Research

### Asan Poll

Sample size: 1,000 respondents over the age of 19 Margin of error: +3.1% at the 95% confidence level Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones Period: See report for specific dates of surveys cited Organization: Research & Research
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## Measuring A Giant

South Korean Perceptions of the United States

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