

ASAN REPORT

A New Beginning for ROK-U.S. Relations:

South Koreans' View of the United States and Its Implications

PUBLIC OPINION STUDIES PROGRAM

JUNE 2017



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

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Introduction¹

Interesting developments are taking place on and around the Korean Peninsula. Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States, and the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, has brought about new regional dynamics. President Trump has abandoned the Obama administration's North Korea policy of "strategic patience" and has opted for a strategy of "maximum pressure and engagement." Following two nuclear tests in 2016, North Korea has continued its path towards becoming a "nuclear state." Its missile tests in the aftermath of President Moon Jae-in's inauguration in May have turned many South Koreans into hardliners. China is hopeful that President Moon's election will lead to improved Korea-China relations, although the country's favorability score among South Koreans has failed to recover since March, when it retaliated against South Korea for deploying THAAD.

The election of a progressive government in South Korea appears to have complicated the strategic calculations of the United States regarding THAAD. While U.S. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis and National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster stated that they understood South Korea's position on THAAD, others have been skeptical. For instance, U.S. Senator Dick Durbin of Illinois criticized the Korean government's decision to suspend further deployment of THAAD by stating that "If South Korea does not want the THAAD missile system, it is US\$932 million that we can spend some other place." U.S. Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado also expressed his disappointment at the Moon administration's idea to defer the THAAD issue to the National Assembly for ratification. Concerns over the way in which the progressive Moon government is conducting its foreign policy are spreading within the U.S. policymaking community.

Amidst growing uncertainties over ROK-U.S. relations, this report will analyze how South Koreans see the United States, the ROK-U.S. alliance, and various bilateral issues. More specifically, this report will look at how South Koreans view the United States in comparison to other countries in the region and how they evaluate the prospects for cooperation under the Moon administration in dealing with major

diplomatic and security issues.

This report makes the following conclusions. The U.S. remains South Koreans' most favored country even though President Trump's favorability ratings are much lower than former President Barack Obama's. The United States' numbers have been relatively steady, unlike China's, which dropped precipitously following its retaliation against South Korea for the deployment of THAAD and its lukewarm participation in the North Korea sanctions regime after the North's consecutive nuclear tests in 2016. By contrast, mutual trust between South Korea and the U.S. over the past few years has led to the U.S.' consistent score. Regarding THAAD, more Koreans approve of the American missile defense system, as North Korea continues to conduct missile tests. At the same time, the majority agrees that the deployment must be decided by the National Assembly. The way in which former President Park Geun-hye hastily handled the issue is the most likely reason for this sentiment. The public remains divided over the issue of restarting the Kaesong Industrial Complex and prefers the conservative approach of refraining from providing humanitarian aid to North Korea unless the North changes its behavior. An overwhelming number of South Koreans project that ROK-U.S. relations will improve under the Moon administration. President Moon's popularity has instilled a strong sense of optimism regarding his presidency, including his impact on ROK-U.S. relations. Despite a number of issues that could strain the ROK-U.S. alliance, South Koreans still prefer the United States over China as their country's future partner. In terms of the upcoming summit meeting between President Moon and President Trump, the public believes that establishing trust between the two leaders is most important. They see this as an important stepping stone for improved relations. Therefore, the two leaders must establish a good personal rapport and affirm that the alliance remains strong. Based on this relationship, the two countries could try to find common ground on some of the controversial issues.

South Korean Perceptions of the United States

Country Favorability Ratings

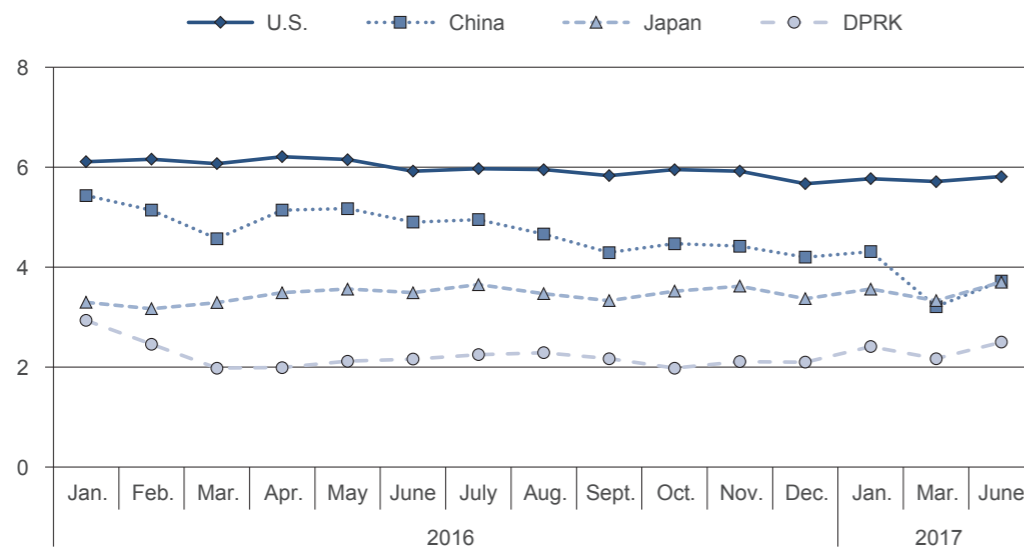
The United States' favorability score among South Koreans has remained relatively steady, despite recent controversies over THAAD and President Trump's provocative

1. Thanks to Mr. Ben Forney for his comments.

statements. On a scale of 0-10 (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable), the United States' score in June 2017 was 5.81. Although this was a slight drop from early 2016, when ratings were above 6, South Koreans viewed the U.S. more favorably than any other country in the region. In fact, the U.S. was the only country to score above 5 (5.81).

China's favorability rating among South Koreans in June 2017 (3.72) improved by 0.5 point since March (3.21), when rating was at its worst, following China's retaliation over South Korea's decision to deploy THAAD. With the election of President Moon, China appeared to have suspended its retaliatory policy, leading to improved numbers for China. Despite this, China's rating continues to be on par with Japan's (3.70). China's recent numbers draw stark contrast to previous years when its ratings were consistently in the 4-to-5 range and were approaching those of the United States. With the election of President Moon, China appears to be making an effort to improve

Figure 1. Country Favorability Ratings²
(0=least favorable, 10=most favorable)



2. Asan's regular survey (Date: January 2016-June 2017). Starting this year, we have reduced the number of polls from 12 (monthly) to 5 times a year (January, March, June, September, and December).

strained relations, but ratings suggest that China still has a long way to go.

Japan's favorability rating in June 2017 reached its highest since January 2016. It rose slightly to 3.70. North Korea's rating saw little fluctuation since last year and remained in the high-1 to low-2 range. The North's fourth and fifth nuclear tests last year and numerous missile tests this year have made North Korea the least favored country among South Koreans.

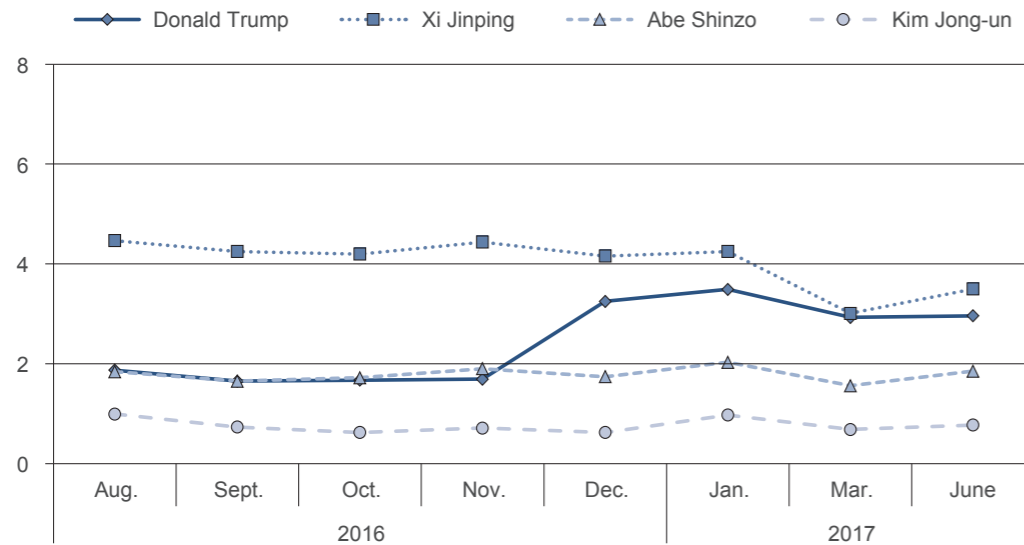
Leadership Favorability Ratings

One of the most interesting results of our survey was that President Trump's favorability rating trailed the United States' rating by a wide margin. Since his victory in late 2016, he was able to pull his ratings up to the mid-3 range, which peaked in January (3.49), just prior to his inauguration. However, he has failed to maintain that momentum, and his numbers continued to plummet. Given that President Trump has continued to ruffle feathers in South Korea by labeling South Korea a defense free rider that does not pay enough for American services, his lack of popularity does not come as a surprise. Recently in April, he added fuel to the fire during his interviews with *Reuters* and *The Washington Times* by stating that South Korea should pay one billion dollars for the THAAD system, even though that went against the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA). As a result, his favorability rating among South Koreans fell to 2.96 in June 2017.

President Xi Jinping's favorability rating followed a similar pattern to that of China's. His ratings dropped precipitously from the mid-4 range last year to 3.01 in March of this year, when China's retaliations for the THAAD deployment led to deteriorating bilateral relations. In the end, the circumstances surrounding THAAD have led to declining favorability ratings for both China and President Xi. Similar to China, President Xi's rating recovered in June to 3.50, which was highest among all leaders included in the survey.

As expected, Kim Jong-un's favorability rating among South Koreans remained the lowest among all leaders and failed to score above 1. Since August 2016, his ratings ranged from 0.62 to 0.99, which shows just how unpopular he has been in South Korea. Prime Minister Abe's ratings showed very little fluctuation, placing his popularity in between President Trump and Kim Jong-un. Unlike Japan's favorability, which rose slightly to the 3-range, Prime Minister Abe's ratings ranged from 1.56 to 2.03.

Figure 2. Leadership Favorability Ratings³
(0=least favorable, 10=most favorable)



Favorability Ratings of the U.S. and President Donald Trump

Based on the long-standing alliance, South Korea and the United States have developed a strong sense of mutual trust. As a result, the United States has retained the title of most favored nation since January 2013 when the Asan Institute first began tracking countries' favorability ratings. China (5.37) came close to catching up to the U.S. (5.93) in March 2015, when Korea-China relations were blossoming. However, the U.S. has maintained a comfortable lead ever since.

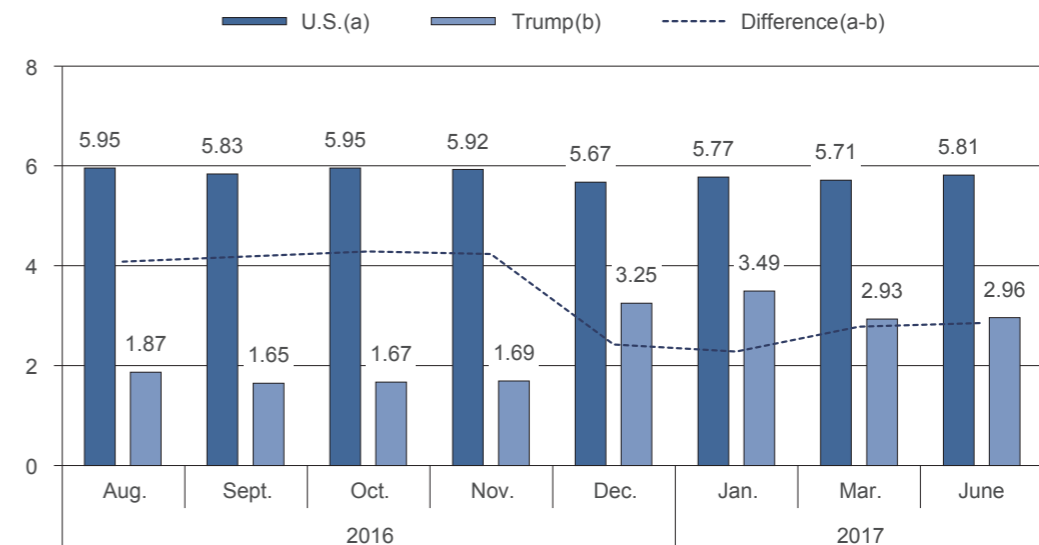
Former U.S. President Barack Obama contributed greatly to the pro-American sentiment in South Korea. Because of his popularity among South Koreans, his favorability ratings were always higher than those of the United States. In contrast, Trump's popularity ratings have been far below those of the United States. In January, when President Trump enjoyed his highest favorability rating among South Koreans, he managed to close the gap to 2.28 (United States: 5.77, Trump: 3.49). However,

3. Asan's regular survey (Date: August 2016-June 2017).

declining numbers resulted in a wider gap (2.85) in June (United States: 5.81, Trump: 2.96). A similar phenomenon can be observed in the case of Prime Minister Abe, whose favorability score trailed behind Japan's.⁴

One thing to note is that despite President Trump's low favorability score, especially compared to his predecessor's, the favorability score of the United States among South Koreans has remained relatively stable. This suggests that the United States' favorability is not determined solely by the favorability of its leader and that American soft power has had a positive impact on South Korean public opinion. It appears that South Koreans have learned to distinguish between the United States, the country, and Donald Trump, the individual, and have made a strategic decision to maintain a favorable view of the United States. It also appears that President Trump's statements about THAAD and the KOR-US FTA have not yet substantially influenced how

Figure 3. Favorability Ratings of the U.S. and President Donald Trump⁵
(0=least favorable, 10=most favorable)



4. See Kim Jiyoung, John J. Lee, and Kang Chungku, *In Troubled Waters: Truths and Misunderstandings about Korea-Japan Relations* (Asan Report, August 2015).

5. Asan's regular survey (Date: August 2016-June 2017).

South Koreans view the United States. Efforts by National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Defense Secretary James Mattis, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to clarify the United States' position likely had a positive effect.

However, the United States must understand that if President Trump continues his controversial statements or tweets regarding South Korea, the United States' favorability among South Koreans may eventually suffer. To examine the relationship between President Trump and the United States in terms of favorability, we conducted a cross-analysis of the two. We divided the favorability ratings (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable) into three categories: unfavorable (0-4), neutral (5), and favorable (6-10) (See Table 1). The cross-analysis showed that President Trump's favorability was clearly associated with how South Koreans perceived the United States. For example, 83% of South Koreans who were favorable towards President Trump were also favorable towards the United States. On the other hand, only 36.1% of South Koreans who were unfavorable towards President Trump were favorable towards the United States. Meanwhile, 23.9% of this group had an unfavorable view of the United States. While President Trump has not yet impacted how South Koreans perceive the United States, the above results show that his future statements and actions have the potential to

Table 1. Cross Favorability: President Trump vs. the United States⁶ (%)

		The United States' Favorability		
		Unfavorable (n= 175)	Neutral (n= 346)	Favorable (n= 438)
President Trump's Favorability	Unfavorable (n= 657)	23.9	40.0	36.1
	Neutral (n= 196)	7.1	35.2	57.7
	Favorable (n= 106)	3.8	13.2	83.0

6. Asan's regular survey (Date: June 1-3, 2017). We did not include in the calculation those who answered "don't know" or refused to answer.

determine the United States' favorability among South Koreans.

Challenges for the ROK-U.S. Alliance

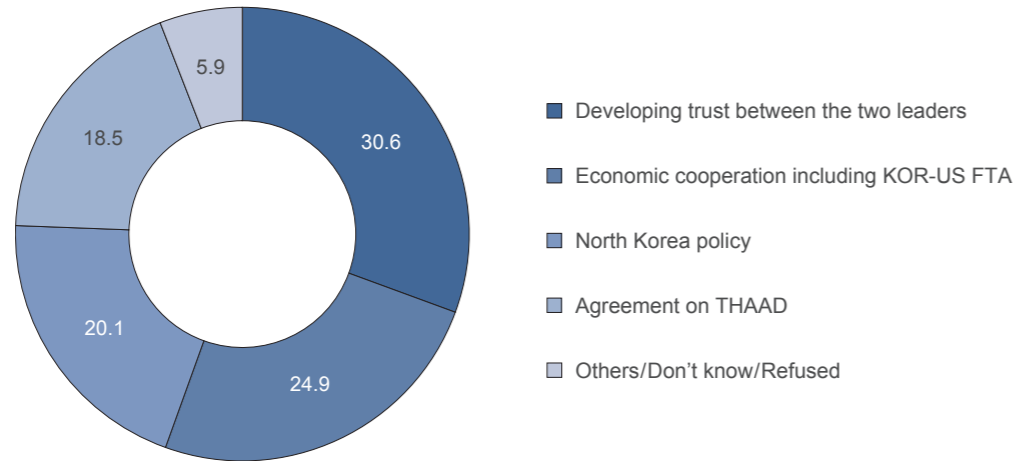
There are a number of issues that could impact ROK-U.S. relations. The deployment of THAAD, defense burden-sharing, OPCON transfer, the KOR-US FTA, North Korea policy, Korea-Japan relations, and Korea-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation are among the many issues that must be carefully addressed. With the first Moon-Trump summit approaching, THAAD and North Korea have continued to grab headlines. The following section will touch upon some of the major issues that President Moon must address with President Trump and examine how the South Korean public has come to view these issues.

Addressing Key Issues

South Koreans want the upcoming summit meeting between President Moon and President Trump to be an occasion for the two to develop rapport and trust that could last for the next few years. When they were asked to identify key issues that President Moon should pay special attention to, 30.6% said he should focus on developing trust with President Trump. 24.9% said he should focus on economic cooperation such as the KOR-US FTA, while 20.1% identified cooperation in dealing with North Korea's nuclear threat as an important item on the agenda. Surprisingly, only 18.5% said that THAAD should be addressed.

Despite what the Korean media has been reporting, South Koreans did not consider THAAD to be the most sensitive and difficult issue. Instead, more people emphasized economic issues, such as the KOR-US FTA, as more important for the upcoming summit meeting. The South Korean public considered THAAD to be a relatively minor issue within the two countries' security and economic framework and, therefore, regarded the issue as secondary in the upcoming summit. There was a noticeable disparity between the public and the media in terms of what they considered to be President Moon's priorities.

Figure 4. Key Issues for the ROK-U.S. Summit⁷ (%)



Deployment of THAAD and the National Assembly

1. Shifting Public Opinion on THAAD

Over the past few months, the Korean Peninsula has become a battleground between the United States and China over the deployment of THAAD. Moreover, President Trump's recent statements about the cost of the American defense system and President Moon's decision to suspend further deployment of THAAD due to domestic procedural issues have added a new dimension to the already controversial issue.

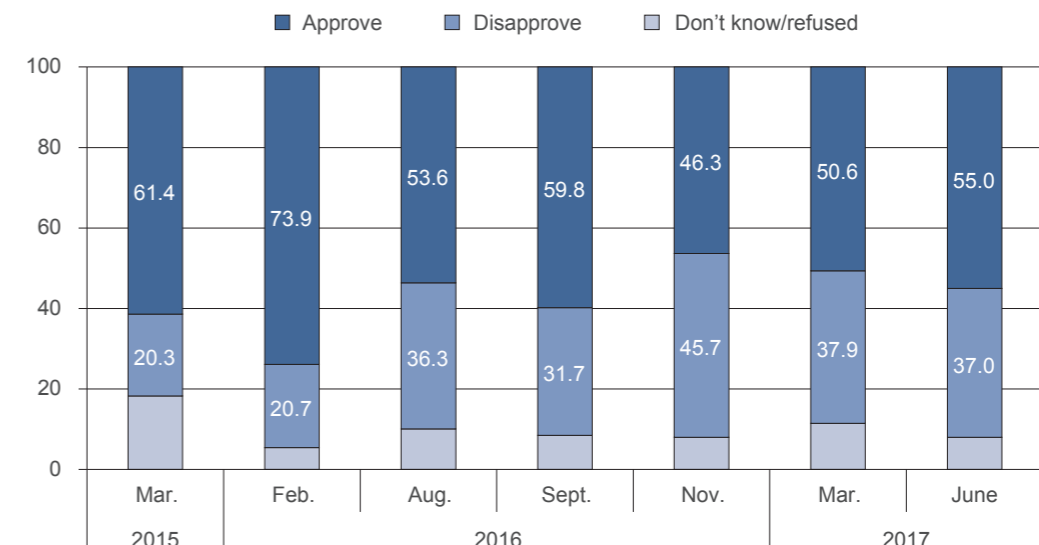
The Asan Institute conducted seven public opinion surveys prior to and after the announcement was made on 8 July 2016 to deploy THAAD. In order to track shifting public opinion over time, we asked the same question in each of our surveys. The approval rating for THAAD was highest in February 2016 when 73.9% of South Koreans approved of the missile defense system (20.7% disapproved). The high rating was the likely reaction to North Korea's fourth nuclear test. This was also the time when the issue had not yet been politicized and was not part of any ongoing public debates. Therefore, North Korea's nuclear test had the most influence on the approval rating.

7. Asan's regular survey (Date: June 1-3, 2017).

This changed when the South Korean and American governments announced in July 2016 that both sides had agreed to deploy THAAD. The issue then became fully politicized. In August and September of 2016, 53.6% and 59.8% of South Koreans, respectively, approved of the missile defense system. In November, however, the approval rate fell to 46.3% while the disapproval rate rose to 45.7%. At the time, South Korea was engulfed in a political scandal involving former President Park, and the level of public distrust towards her administration was skyrocketing. This inevitably impacted how South Koreans viewed the American missile defense system, whose deployment was abruptly announced by the Park government. North Korea's consecutive missile tests, however, put a halt to that momentum. The approval rating rose to 50.6% in March and to 55% in June 2017. The approval rating is now above 50% and is higher than disapproval rate (37%).

When we look at the changes by age, we see that South Koreans older than 50 have maintained a high approval rating regardless of the political developments on and

Figure 5. Public Opinion on THAAD⁸ (%)



8. Asan's regular and special survey (Date: March 18-20, 2015; February 10-12, 2016; August 16-18, 2016; September 21-23, 2016; November 22-24, 2016; March 6-8, 2017; and June 1-3, 2017).

around the Korean Peninsula. The only exception was in November 2016 when the approval and disapproval ratings were within the margin of error (see Table 2). Since the March 2015 survey, the approval ratings among South Koreans aged 50 and older have ranged between the high-50 and low-80 percentiles. On the other hand, South Koreans in their 20s, followed by those in their 30s and 40s, appeared to have changed their opinions over time. For instance, in February 2016, when North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test, 77.5% of people in their 20s, 66% in their 30s, and 68.4% in their 40s approved of THAAD. However, these numbers dropped by approximately 30% to 44.3% (20s), 32.9% (30s), and 40.3% (40s) in November 2016.

One important observation that can be made in our June 2017 survey was that, unlike in the previous surveys, more South Koreans in their 20s and 30s approved of THAAD. Compared to three months ago, the approval rating among South Koreans in their 20s and 30s rose by 10 percentage points, raising the overall approval rating to 55%. Given that South Koreans in their 20s are usually conservative on national security issues, it is natural for their support for THAAD to increase. It is interesting, however, to see that more South Koreans in their 30s, who are most supportive of the progressive Moon

Table 2. Public Opinion on THAAD, by Age⁹ (%)

	2015	2016				2017	
	Mar.	Feb.	Aug.	Sept.	Nov.	Mar.	June
20s	63.8	77.5	46.0	56.3	43.7	44.3	54.1
30s	53.3	66.0	41.8	40.0	34.6	32.9	42.7
40s	54.5	68.4	44.6	56.3	35.6	40.3	44.6
50s	68.9	74.7	60.3	67.8	56.0	56.0	59.9
60+	66.3	81.7	70.9	74.0	58.6	73.0	69.6
Total	61.4	73.9	53.6	59.8	46.3	50.6	55.0

9. Asan's regular and special survey (Date: March 18-20, 2015; February 10-12, 2016; August 16-18, 2016; September 21-23, 2016; November 22-24, 2016; March 6-8, 2017; and June 1-3, 2017).

administration, also approve of THAAD.

When asked about their reasons for approving of THAAD, an overwhelming 70.3% (550 respondents) in June 2017 said that THAAD was needed to counter North Korea's nuclear and missile threat. Once again, North Korea's provocations vis-à-vis its missile tests appeared to have made South Koreans uneasy about their security situation. Others identified the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance (13.2%), the importance of countering China's rise (8.5%), and the fact that THAAD had already been deployed (6.6%) as reasons for supporting THAAD.

On the other hand, among those who disapproved of THAAD (370 respondents), 45.1% said that the decision to deploy THAAD did not go through the proper procedural decision-making process. 27.1% of them also pointed to the recent controversy over THAAD payment, which proved that President Trump's recent statements had much to do with public disapproval. An additional 12.2% pointed to deteriorating Korea-China relations as the reason why they disapproved of THAAD. In the end, the lack of procedural legitimacy, rather than the deployment itself, has been at the center of public disapproval of THAAD.

2. National Assembly Ratification of THAAD

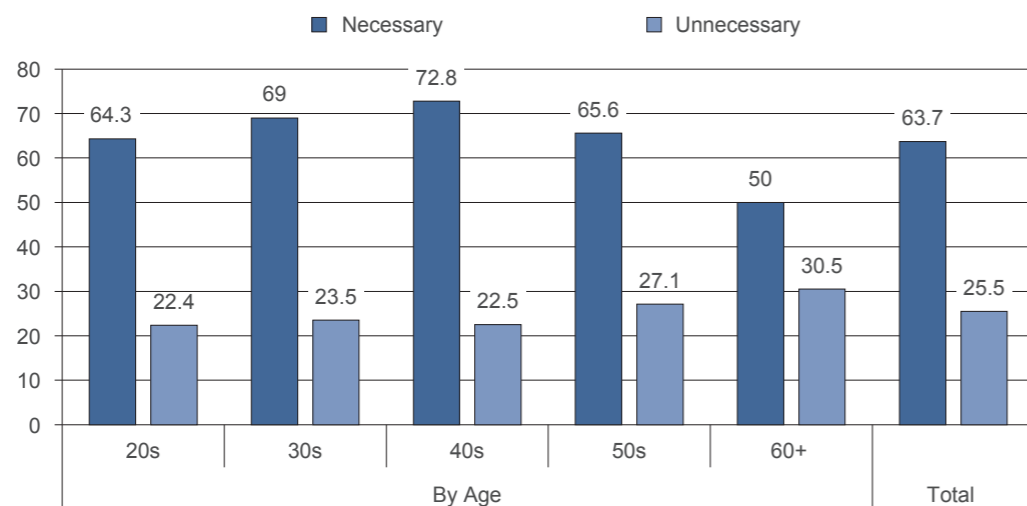
Since his election campaign, President Moon has questioned the procedural validity of the THAAD deployment. This concern was re-ignited when he found out that four additional THAAD batteries had been shipped to South Korea and that the Defense Ministry had failed to report to him. Immediately after the incident, President Moon ordered an environmental impact assessment of the missile defense system and, thereby, practically annulled the plan to have a fully operational defense system by the end of this year. While President Park last year cited North Korea's growing missile and nuclear threat as grounds for the urgent deployment of THAAD, President Moon has opposed President Park's approach to forgo appropriate legal procedures for the sake of national security.

Among the solutions that President Moon and the ruling party have devised is to take the issue to the National Assembly for ratification. We asked South Koreans if they agreed with President Moon's proposal. 63.7% of South Koreans agreed with President Moon that the decision must go through the National Assembly for procedural

legitimacy. Only 25.5% disagreed. Among the age groups, South Koreans in their 40s (72.8%) were most vocal about the need for National Assembly ratification. They were followed by South Koreans in their 30s (69%), 50s (65.6%), and 20s (64.3%). Compared to other age groups, South Koreans over the age of 60 had the lowest approval rating (50%), even though it was still significantly higher than the disapproval rating (30.5%). The majority of South Koreans, regardless of their age, approved of President Moon's proposal to defer the decision on THAAD to the National Assembly. They agreed that THAAD must be approved by the National Assembly for domestic procedural reasons, despite being in favor of the deployment.

Among the 637 respondents who were favorable to the suggestion, 50.2% of them said that they supported the idea because the decision did not go through a legitimate process last year. The abrupt nature in which the THAAD announcement was made, how the THAAD batteries were brought into South Korea during President Park's impeachment proceedings, and the failure by the Defense Ministry to report to President Moon about the additional four batteries have contributed to this popular sentiment. Another 15.8% pointed to the recent controversy over the cost of THAAD,

Figure 6. On THAAD: Need for National Assembly Ratification¹⁰ (%)

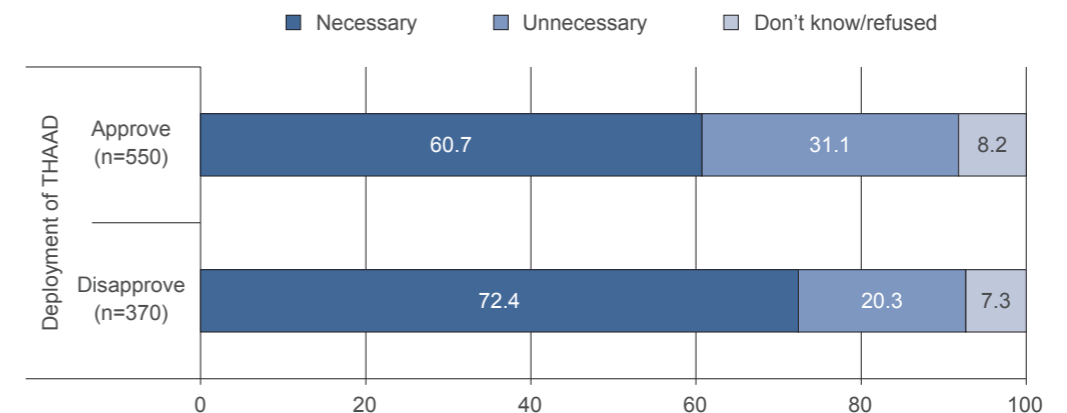


10. Asan's regular survey (Date: June 1-3, 2017).

while 15.1% cited deteriorating Korea-China relations as reasons for their support. At the same time, among the 255 respondents who disagreed with President Moon's proposal, 38.8% said that North Korea's nuclear threat was urgent. Another 21.6% worried that it might deteriorate ROK-U.S. relations while 19.9% admitted rolling back on THAAD was not realistically feasible.

Interestingly, while 55% of South Koreans approved of the deployment of THAAD, an even greater percentage of them approved of the National Assembly's involvement in the decision-making process. We conducted a cross-analysis in order to examine how South Koreans feel about National Assembly ratification according to their opinion of THAAD (see Figure 7). 72.4% of South Koreans who disapproved of THAAD said that National Assembly ratification was necessary. This was higher than the 63.7% overall approval. Even among those who approved of THAAD, 60.7% said that the National Assembly must be involved. This shows that there is a general consensus regarding the need for the deployment decision to go through a legitimate process regardless of whether South Koreans approve or disapprove of the deployment. The controversy over the deployment of THAAD, including growing calls for the

Figure 7. On THAAD: Need for National Assembly Ratification according to THAAD Approval/Disapproval¹¹ (%)



11. Asan's regular survey (Date: June 1-3, 2017).

involvement of the National Assembly, will likely continue as North Korea conducts more missile tests and as President Trump maintains a controversial attitude towards the ROK-U.S. alliance, especially towards burden-sharing for THAAD.

Approach to North Korea

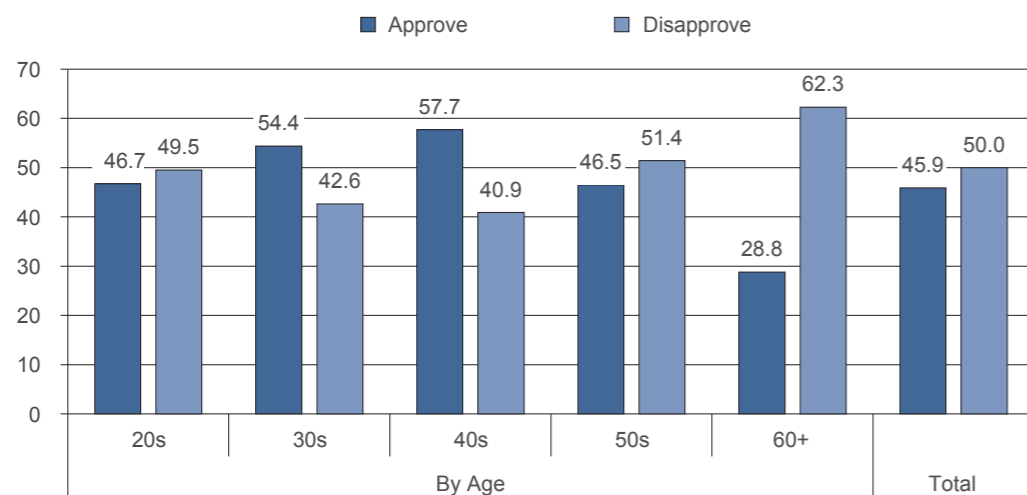
So far, President Moon has taken a cautious approach to North Korea. People in his administration have mentioned the possibility of restarting the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Mount Kumgang tours, resuming the joint inter-Korean June 15 declaration anniversaries, and lifting the May 24 Measures, all of which have impacted the overall atmosphere in South Korea. His administration also approved the resumption of civilian exchanges as long as those activities fall within the parameters of the international sanctions regime placed against North Korea. So far, North Korea has refused to participate.

Since President Moon's election, there have been movements to improve inter-Korean relations. However, South Koreans remain divided over the possibility of resuming

economic cooperation with the North. Specifically, 50% of South Koreans disagreed with the idea of restarting Kaesong while 45.9% agreed. When we examined the numbers by age, we saw that 54.4% and 57.7% of South Koreans in their 30s and 40s, respectively, approved of re-opening of the industrial complex. On the other hand, 51.4% of South Koreans in their 50s and 62.3% of South Koreans older than 60 disagreed. This can be explained by the fact that older Koreans are generally more conservative than people in their 30s and 40s on security issues. For young South Koreans in their 20s, 46.7% approved while 49.5% disapproved of the re-opening of Kaesong. The difference between the approval and disapproval ratings was statistically insignificant.

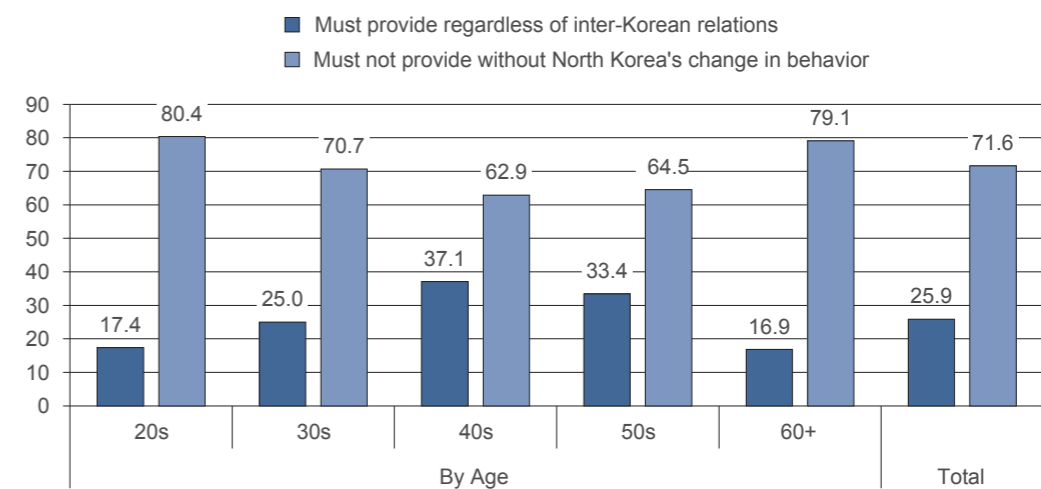
71.6% of South Koreans did not want the resumption of humanitarian aid to North Korea without witnessing a change in behavior from the North, while only 25.9% said the opposite. This conservative approach to North Korea was, once again, the likely reaction to the North's continued missile tests. Despite President Moon's effort to approach North Korea with both carrots and sticks, the public appears to hold a firm conservative position on this matter.

Figure 8. Public Opinion on Restarting Kaesong Industrial Complex¹² (%)



12. Asan's regular survey (Date: June 1-3, 2017).

Figure 9. Public Opinion on Humanitarian Assistance to North Korea¹³ (%)



13. Asan's regular survey (Date: June 1-3, 2017).

As stated above, North Korea's recent missile tests have conformed public opinion into a more conservative voice. This was especially the case for humanitarian assistance. This sentiment was shared across all age groups. Younger South Koreans in their 20s, who have a conservative mindset on national security issues, were especially firm in their disapproval. 80.4% of them said that their government should not provide humanitarian aid to North Korea without the latter's change in behavior. They were joined by 79.1% of South Koreans over the age of 60. On the other hand, 37.1% and 33.4% of South Koreans in their 40s and 50s, respectively, said that humanitarian aid must be provided to the North regardless of inter-Korean relations. Their numbers were higher than the overall percentage of South Koreans who wanted to provide humanitarian aid to the North (25.9%), although they were significantly lower than the overall disapproval percentage.

A New Beginning for ROK-U.S. Relations

Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations

On June 29, leaders from South Korea and the United States will meet for the first time since their elections. It is thus most important for the two leaders to establish a good personal rapport and to align the two countries' interests and understandings. The South Korean public is well aware of the importance of the upcoming summit meeting.

Despite the uncertainty caused by the THAAD deployment and the death of American college student Otto Warmbier, the majority of South Koreans were hopeful that ROK-U.S. relations will improve under the Moon administration. Specifically, 67% said that relations will improve while only 20.7% said the opposite. This optimism was visible across all age groups, with 74.3% of South Koreans in their 20s, 73.5% in their 30s, and 73.1% in their 40s agreeing as such. 53.6% of South Koreans over the age of 60 also agreed with them. This same age group was most pessimistic about the two countries' relationship, with 25.2% saying as such. They were followed by South Koreans in their 50s, with 24% expressing pessimism.

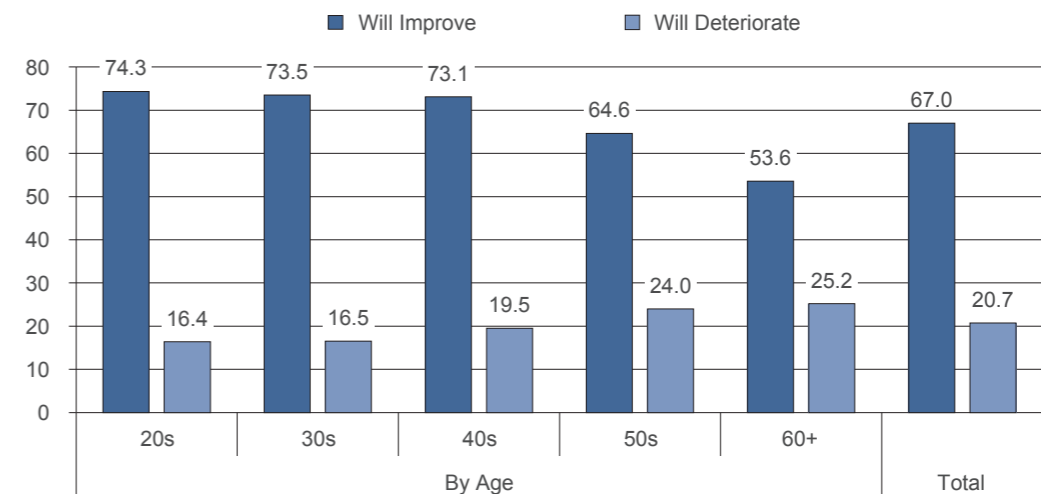
This was a huge turnaround from November 2016, when 64% of the public had concerns about the future of the bilateral relationship after the election of President

Trump.¹⁴ In the span of only 7 months, prospects for the alliance have shifted from pessimistic to optimistic. In addition, there was a visible shift among the age groups. In November 2016, younger South Koreans were most concerned about the alliance. In June of this year, however, older South Koreans became most pessimistic about the two countries' relationship.

This growing sense of optimism is associated with President Moon's popularity and the high expectations that the public has placed upon him. President Moon's approval rating among those who were optimistic about ROK-U.S. relations was extremely high at 8.20 (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable). On the other hand, his rating among the pessimists was 5.56. There was a strong correlation between President Moon's popularity and South Koreans' view that ROK-U.S. relations will flourish.

When respondents were asked to identify the reasons for their pessimism (207 respondents), 40.5% pointed to the deployment of THAAD. Another 24.8% said the

Figure 10. ROK-U.S. Relations under President Moon Jae-in¹⁵ (%)



14. See Kim Jiyoung, John J. Lee, and Kang Chungku, "Trump Time: Koreans View of ROK-U.S. Relations," (Asan Issue Brief, January 17, 2017).

15. Asan's regular survey (Date: June 1-3, 2017).

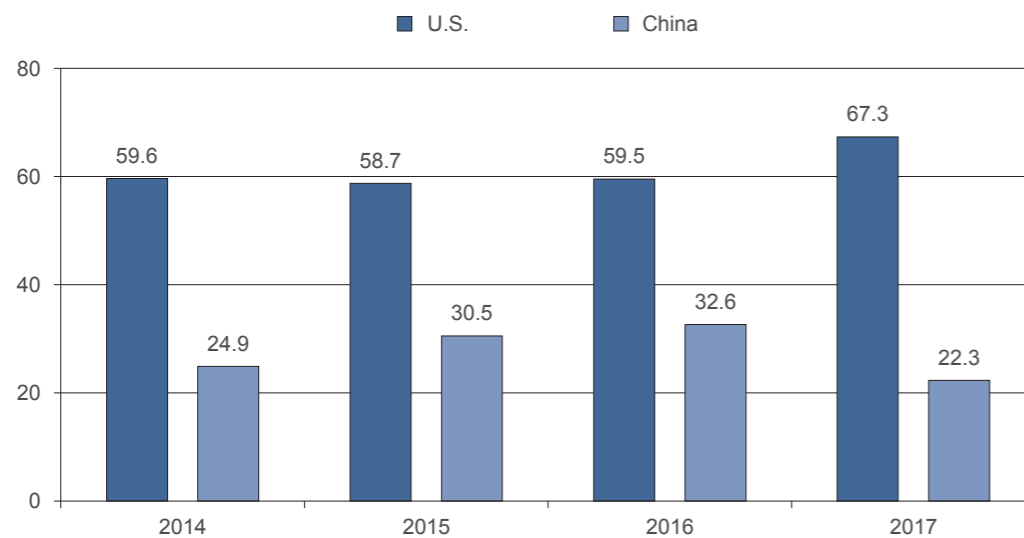
two countries' different approaches to North Korea will cause friction. Other reasons included defense burden-sharing (11.6%) and the KOR-US FTA (9.9%). While South Koreans were generally optimistic about the two countries' relationship moving forward, those who were pessimistic about the relationship firmly believed that THAAD and North Korea will pose the biggest challenges for the two countries.

South Korea's Preferred Partner

Since 2014, the Asan Institute has been tracking South Koreans' preference between the two global superpowers: the United States and China. Specifically, respondents were asked with which country South Korea should strengthen ties. China's rise has made this discussion an increasingly interesting one.

According to survey results, South Koreans still see the United States as South Korea's preferred partner. In fact, the most recent number (67.3%) was the highest of all our

Figure 11. South Korea's Preferred Partner¹⁶ (%)



16. Asan's regular survey (Date: March 13-15, 2014; March 11-12, 2015; March 22-24, 2016; and June 1-3, 2017).

survey results. Since the first survey in 2014, South Koreans have preferred the United States (lowest: 58.7%, highest: 67.3%) over China (lowest: 22.3%, highest: 32.6%). Even when Korea-China relations were flourishing, more South Koreans still chose the U.S. over China as their country's preferred partner. The highest number for China was 32.6% in 2016, which has dropped to 22.3% in 2017.

For China, the reason for the drop (of over 10%) was because of its retaliation against South Korean firms after the South Korean government announced the deployment of THAAD. China's reluctance to deal more firmly with North Korea following the North's fourth and fifth nuclear tests has also contributed to China's declining numbers. The series of moves made by the Chinese have pushed South Koreans towards the United States as South Korea's preferred partner.

We analyzed the above results by age groups. Specifically, we decided to look at the 2016 and 2017 data because the two countries' respective numbers peaked in those years. In the span of a year, the age group that showed the greatest change in favor of the U.S. was South Koreans in their 20s. Their approval of the U.S. rose by almost 16% from 57.9% in 2016 to 74% in 2017. They were followed by South Koreans in their 40s,

Table 3. South Korea's Preferred Partner, by Age¹⁷ (%)

	2016		2017	
	U.S.	China	U.S.	China
20s	57.9	35.1	74.0	20.7
30s	61.4	33.9	63.9	26.9
40s	49.7	41.3	59.8	27.6
50s	59.5	32.6	64.3	25.5
60+	68.2	21.6	73.8	12.7
Total	59.5	32.6	67.3	22.3

17. Asan's regular survey (Date: March 22-24, 2016; and June 1-3, 2017).

whose number rose by 10.1% from 49.7% in 2016 to 59.8% in 2017. Given that South Koreans in their 40s were particularly supportive of China in the past, this shows just how much China has fallen in the pecking order.

Conclusion

According to our survey results, the United States remains South Koreans' most favored nation. Its favorability rating has remained relatively high and steady despite President Donald Trump trailing far behind his predecessor, President Barack Obama, as well as current Chinese President Xi Jinping in terms of leadership favorability. Steady numbers for the U.S. draw stark contrast to China's, whose numbers have failed to recover after dropping precipitously in the aftermath of the THAAD controversy in March.

Numbers indicate that South Koreans have maintained a favorable opinion of the United States. The strong sense of mutual trust based on the long-standing military alliance and American soft power have contributed to this sentiment. This explains why President Trump's low favorability rating has not impacted how South Koreans see the U.S. as a country. However, this does not imply that such a sentiment will be sustained, especially if President Trump continues to question the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance, insists that South Korea pay more for American services, including THAAD, and disposes of the KOR-US FTA. South Koreans are very much capable of turning their backs against the United States.

Survey results also show that South Koreans have diverging opinions on controversial issues that could potentially cause friction between the two countries. More South Koreans approve of THAAD because of North Korea's continued missile tests. At the same time, they agree that the decision to deploy the American missile defense system must be approved by the National Assembly. This is likely due to the public agreement that former President Park's decision last year lacked procedural legitimacy. This shows that South Koreans see this as a domestic political issue rather than an alliance issue.

South Koreans appear cautious about the idea of extending an olive branch to North Korea. Specifically, they are divided over the issue of restarting the Kaesong Industrial

Complex, a symbol of inter-Korean economic cooperation. Moreover, they oppose humanitarian aid to North Korea without the North changing its behavior. If the South Korean government proceeds with an engagement strategy in spite of North Korea's continued provocations, it could end up facing a strong public backlash. Therefore, the South Korean government must consider the changing security environment before pursuing its policy towards the North.

South Koreans remain optimistic about the ROK-U.S. relationship under the Moon administration, despite growing uncertainties and concerns. South Koreans across all age groups were optimistic about the two countries' relationship. South Korea and the United States still face a number of challenging issues, including North Korea's nuclear threat, the deployment of THAAD, defense burden-sharing, and the KOR-US FTA. Despite this, South Koreans' strong preference for the United States over China as their country's preferred partner is a positive development for the ROK-U.S. alliance. Expectation is high for President Moon to display his diplomatic skills and build good relations with President Trump. As such, South Koreans want President Moon to prioritize, more than anything else, establishing a good rapport with President Trump in the upcoming summit meeting.

Survey Methodology

Sample size: 1,000 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: Random Digit Dialing (RDD) for mobile and landline phones

Period: See footnote of each figure/table

Organization: Research & Research

ASAN
REPORT

A New Beginning for ROK-U.S. Relations:

South Koreans' View of the United States and Its Implications

by **Public Opinion Studies Program**

First edition June 2017

Publisher Hahm Chaibong

Published by The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Registration number 300-2010-122

Registration date September 27, 2010

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Book design EGISHOLDINGS

ISBN 979-11-5570-185-0 93340

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Printed in the Republic of Korea



ISBN 979-11-5570-185-0