

ASAN
REPORT

South Koreans' Perceptions of
President Trump's State Visit and
Neighboring Countries

PUBLIC OPINION STUDIES PROGRAM

JANUARY 2018



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

Table of Contents

Introduction	06
ROK-U.S. Summit	07
Evaluation of the ROK-U.S. Summit	07
Favorability Rating	10
<i>Country Favorability</i>	10
<i>Leadership Favorability</i>	12
ROK-U.S. Relations after the Summit	13
Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations	13
South Korea's Preferred Partner	16
ROK-U.S. Alliance and the North Korean Nuclear Issue	18
Most Important Partner to Solve the North Korean Nuclear Issue	18
ROK-U.S.-Japan Security Cooperation	19
Conclusion	21
Survey Methodology	23

List of Figures

Figure 1.	ROK-U.S. Summit Evaluation	07
Figure 2.	Country Favorability	11
Figure 3.	Leadership Favorability	12
Figure 4.	Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations	13
Figure 5.	Most Important Country to Solve the North Korean Nuclear Issue	18
Figure 6.	Opinions on Upgrading ROK-U.S.-Japan Military Cooperation to a Military Alliance	20

List of Tables

Table 1.	Relations between President Moon's Favorability and the ROK-U.S. Summit Evaluation	09
Table 2.	ROK-U.S. Summit Evaluation, by Age and Ideology	10
Table 3.	Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations, by Age and Ideology	14
Table 4.	Relations between President Moon's Favorability and Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations	15
Table 5.	South Korea's Preferred Partner, by the Favorability of Neighboring Countries and Its Respective Leaders	17
Table 6.	Opinion on Upgrading ROK-U.S.-Japan Military Cooperation to a Military Alliance, by Age and Ideology	21

Introduction

In November 2017, President Donald Trump made a state visit to South Korea and had his third bilateral meeting with President Moon Jae-in.¹ He was the first U.S. leader in 25 years to be honored with a state visit in South Korea. His state visit came at a critical period as the threat of war loomed over the Korean Peninsula. During the summit, the two leaders discussed their joint strategy against North Korea and reaffirmed the strength of the ROK-U.S. alliance.

Particularly, President Trump's parliamentary speech at the National Assembly of South Korea was highly anticipated. South Koreans were bracing for confrontational rhetoric over North Korea. In September 2017, he referred to Kim Jong-un as "rocket man" and threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea in his speech at the United Nations. Despite these concerns, President Trump took a more restrained tone and showed his willingness to peacefully resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

This report analyzes South Koreans' perceptions of the ROK-U.S. November Summit. Specifically, the report examines how the bilateral summit affected South Koreans' favorability of neighboring countries and their leaders. It also assesses how South Koreans view a potential trilateral military alliance among the ROK-U.S.-Japan, and which country South Koreans perceive as the most important partner to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue.

The report makes the following conclusions. The ROK-U.S. summit was considered a success by a majority of South Koreans. President Trump's and the United States favorability rating significantly increased after his state visit. An overwhelming number of South Koreans project that ROK-U.S. relations will improve. Despite the closing gap, South Koreans still prefer the United States over China as their country's future partner and believe the U.S. is the most important partner to solve the North Korean nuclear issue. In response to the North Korean threat, nearly a half of South Koreans

1. President Moon had his first bilateral meeting with President Trump at Washington D.C. on June 30, 2017, and had his second bilateral meeting at the UN General Assembly on September 22, 2017.

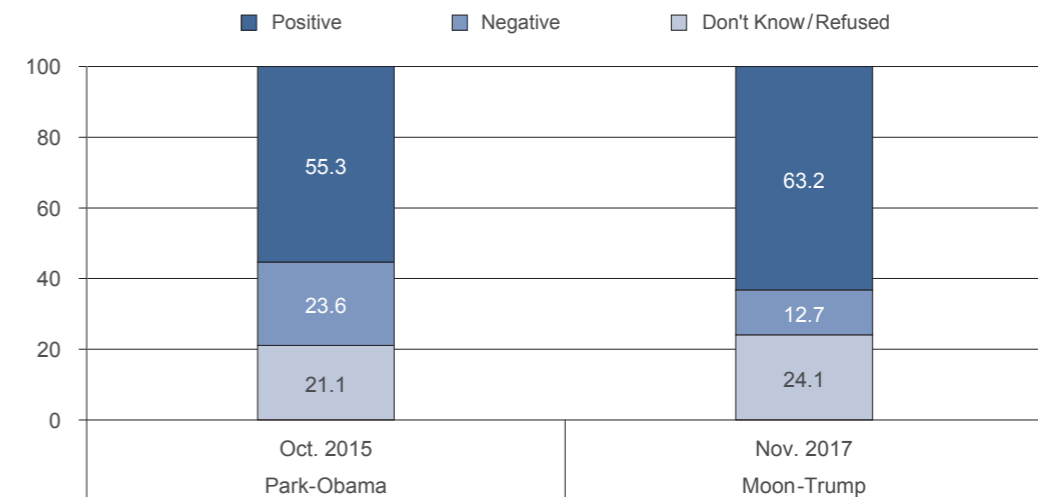
positively viewed forging a trilateral military alliance among the ROK-U.S.-Japan. Ultimately, this survey concludes that summit diplomacy has a positive effect on South Koreans' perception of neighboring countries.

ROK-U.S. Summit

Evaluation of the ROK-U.S. Summit

The ROK-U.S. November 2017 summit received mixed evaluations from Korean experts. Many assessed that President Moon adequately addressed the growing security concern by receiving President Trump's reassurance that the U.S. would resort to peaceful measures to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. President Moon also successfully upgraded South Korea's deterrence capabilities by negotiating a deal to lift the payload limit on South Korean ballistic missiles and to purchase U.S. strategic assets. However,

Figure 1. ROK-U.S. Summit Evaluation² (%)



2. Source: Surveys of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: October 19-20 2015-November 14-16 2017).

many analysts were also quick to point out that the economic and political burden of purchasing these assets outweighed their benefits. Others were also critical of President Moon's decision to "speed up" the ongoing renegotiation of the Republic of Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA).

In light of these developments, the majority of South Koreans perceived the bilateral summit a success (63.2%). This year's summit was widely considered successful, even when compared to the last ROK-U.S. summit in 2015. 55.3% of South Koreans deemed the Park-Obama summit a success, while 23.6% objected. Considering that the evaluation of summits generally tend to be positive, it is noteworthy that the percentage of those who viewed the Moon-Trump Summit (12.7%) in a negative light was significantly lower than the Park-Obama summit (23.6%).

When asked about the reasons for their positive evaluation ($n=632$), 33.8% pointed to strengthened trust between the two leaders. 21.5% answered the reassurance of the ROK-U.S. alliance, while another 20.1% referred to the reaffirmation of a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue. The decision to introduce U.S. strategic assets and to renegotiate the KORUS FTA only received 12.4% and 10%, respectively.

On the other hand, those who gave a negative evaluation ($n=127$) stated that the friendship between the two presidents was superficial (22.7%) and that the U.S.' domineering position on renegotiating the KORUS FTA (22.4%) was harmful to the bilateral relationship. Other reasons included the lack of new measures to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue (19.4%) and South Korea's domestic political situation (17.5%).

Interestingly, President Moon's favorability had a direct correlation to South Koreans' opinion on the ROK-U.S. summit (see Table 1). In order to examine the relationship between the two, we conducted a cross-tab analysis by dividing President Moon's favorability ratings into three categories: unfavorable (0-4), neutral (5), and favorable (6-10). The results showed that those that were favorable towards President Moon also had a positive perception of the ROK-U.S. summit. On the other hand, those that were unfavorable toward President Moon disproportionately had a negative evaluation of the ROK-U.S. summit. More specifically, 91.7% of South Koreans who were favorable towards President Moon viewed the summit as a success. However, among those who were unfavorable towards President Moon, only 53.6% approved the summit.

Table 1. Relations between President Moon's Favorability and the ROK-U.S. Summit Evaluation³ (%)

		Evaluation of ROK-U.S. Summit		N-size
		Positive	Negative	
President Moon's Favorability	Unfavorable	53.6	46.4	110
	Neutral	70.8	29.2	106
	Favorable	91.7	8.3	541

The evaluation of the ROK-U.S. summit also diverged across different age groups and ideological stances (see Table 2). Highest approval came from the younger generation (40s=74.2%, 30s=68.3%, 20s=64.6%). While the majority of the older generation also viewed the summit as a success (50s=60.5%, 60s and over=51.8%), the ratings were relatively lower. Politically, the strongest approval came from the progressives (72.8%). 64% of conservatives also viewed the summit in a positive light, but the numbers that disapproved was the greatest among the differing ideological groups (20.2%).

The 2015 bilateral summit between former presidents Park Geun-hye and Barack Obama also showed similar patterns. At that time, Park enjoyed widespread popularity among the older conservatives. As expected, positive evaluations of the summit were extremely high for these age groups (50s=72.2%, 60+=74.3%). However, the number of people in younger generations who actually viewed the summit negatively was higher than those that viewed it positively. Politically, 64.8% of conservatives viewed the summit a success, while 43.9% of progressives viewed it as a failure. The results below show that South Koreans' perception of a bilateral summit is directly affected by ideologies and support for their incumbent president.

3. Source: Survey of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: November 14-16, 2017). We did not include those who answered either don't know or refused to answer in the calculation.

Table 2. ROK-U.S. Summit Evaluation, by Age and Ideology⁴ (%)

		2015		2017	
		Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative
Total		55.3	23.6	63.2	12.7
Age	20s	46.5	21.1	64.6	8.7
	30s	36.0	38.9	68.3	10.1
	40s	43.4	37.7	74.2	10.0
	50s	72.2	15.0	60.5	20.1
	60+	74.3	7.6	51.8	13.4
Ideology	Progressive	38.5	43.9	72.8	9.4
	Moderate	58.7	20.1	60.4	11.7
	Conservative	64.8	18.0	64.0	20.2

Favorability Rating

Country Favorability

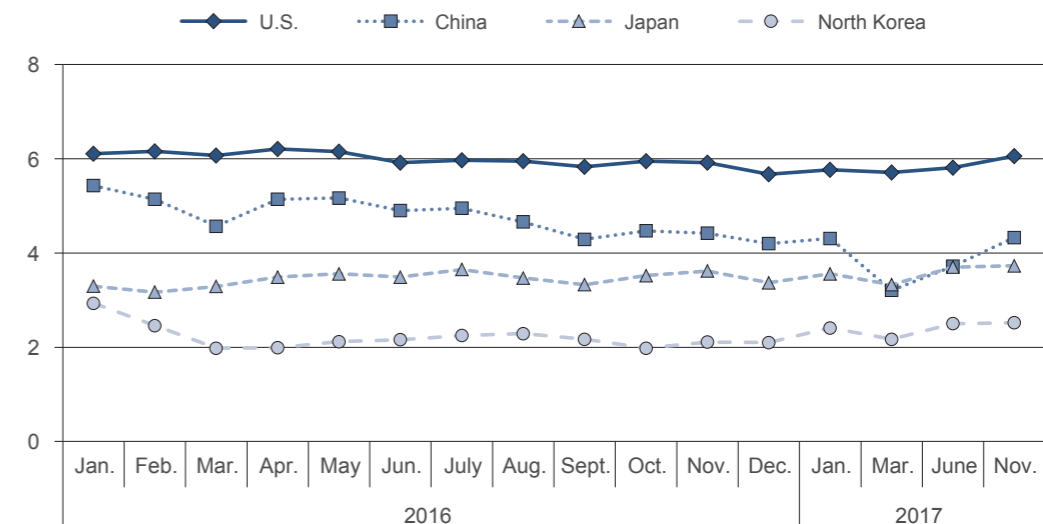
President Trump's visit and his reassurance of a peaceful resolution to the North Korean threat positively influenced South Koreans' perceptions of the United States. On a scale of 0-10 (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable), the U.S.' score in November 2017 was 6.06. This was an increase of 0.25 since June 2017, and the first time since May 2016 (6.15) that the U.S.' favorability rating recovered to the 6-point mark. The U.S. was the only country to score above 5, making it the most favorable country by South Koreans in the region.

China's favorability also increased in November. China's rating was at its worst in March (3.21), when China economically retaliated against South Korea for its decision to deploy THAAD. South Koreans' trust in China was seriously shaken and for the first

4. Source: Surveys of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: October 2015-November 2017).

time, China's favorability rating dropped below Japan's (3.33). However, with the signing of the new ROK-China agreement to normalize relations in late October, and the successful bilateral summit between presidents Moon and Xi during the APEC Summit in early November, China's favorability rating recovered to the 4-point mark (4.33).

Japan and North Korea have never been popular among South Koreans. The trend continued in November as Japan's favorability rating was 3.73, while North Korea's was 2.52. Both countries' favorability rating remained low and saw little fluctuation since June. This is most likely because South Koreans do not view the "final and irreversible" deal on the "comfort women" issue between the ROK-Japan in a good light and because of North Korea's continual military provocations. Without any major political breakthrough, South Koreans' perceptions of Japan and North Korea will continue to remain low.

Figure 2. Country Favorability⁵ (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable)

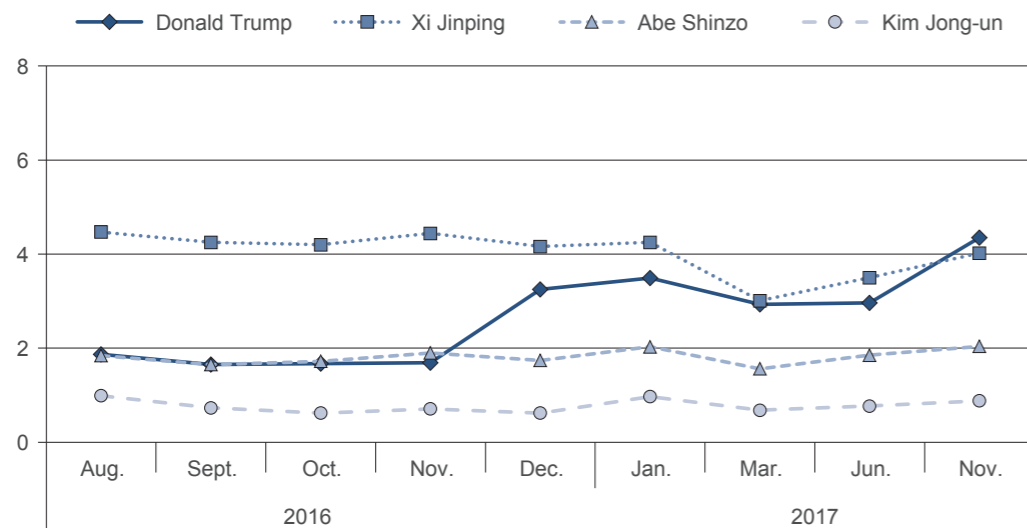
5. Source: Surveys of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: January 2016-November 2017). Since 2017, we adjusted the number of surveys that we conducted on South Koreans' views of its neighboring countries and its leaders. Please take into consideration that the period between dates of data collection are different.

Leadership Favorability

The most striking result in the favorability survey was President Trump’s November favorability rating. He received a record high of 4.35, which was a 1.39 increase since June (2.96). His score is even more impressive when compared to his ratings during the 2016 presidential election (1.69).⁶ President Trump’s rating jumped in November 2017 because he alleviated the fear of war among South Koreans during his state visit. His confident demeanor was also well received. Specifically, his score experienced large increases from the younger generation (20s=2.89→4.56, 30s=2.55→4.00, 40s=2.35→3.79). It is also noteworthy that President Trump outscored President Xi for the first time and became the most favorable leader in the region.

President Xi’s favorability rating also experienced a significant increase in the second half of 2017. In March, President Xi’s favorability rating reached a record low (3.01). His rating slightly increased in June (3.50) after China temporarily weakened its retaliation

Figure 3. Leadership Favorability⁷ (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable)



6. This was also a stark contrast to President Obama’s high favorability rating, which averaged 6.33 from July 2013 to December 2016 (standard deviation: 0.206).

7 Source: Surveys of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: August 2016-November 2017).

after President Moon Jae-in, who promised to suspend further THAAD deployment during his campaign, was elected. President Xi’s rating finally recovered to the 4-range, in November (4.02), with the two states reaching a deal that would normalize relations in late October. Specifically, his favorability rating increased the most among those in their 20s (2.75→3.52) and 60s (3.65→4.30).

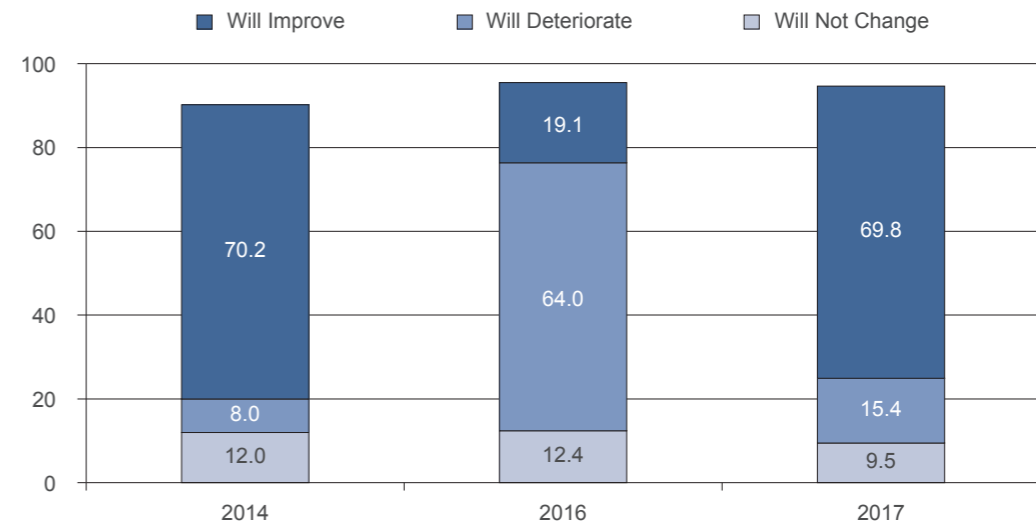
Similar to their respective countries, Prime Minister Abe’s (min=1.56, max=2.04) and Chairman Kim’s favorability rating (min=0.62, max=0.99) experienced little change since August 2016. Among the leaders in the region, Prime Minister Abe was found to be only more favorable than Kim Jong-un, and both trailed the favorability of all other leaders by a large margin.

ROK-U.S. Relations after the Summit

Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations

South Koreans’ prospects for ROK-U.S. relations experienced a huge turnaround in 2017. President Trump’s remarks on South Korea being a security free-rider and his

Figure 4. Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations⁸ (%)



threats to terminate the KORUS FTA during his presidential campaign raised serious concern among South Koreans. In November 2016, 64% predicted that ROK-U.S. relations would deteriorate, while only 19.1% believed that the relationship would improve. However, as the majority of South Koreans positively viewed the November bilateral summit, an overwhelming number (69.8%) were hopeful that ROK-U.S. relations would improve. Only 15.4% answered that the relationship will deteriorate. In just one year, optimistic prospects recovered to past levels.

One thing to note is that pessimistic outlooks shifted to optimistic prospects in all age groups and ideological stances (see Table 3). The change was significant especially in the 40s and under. A strong majority of South Koreans in their 40s and under believed relations would improve in November 2017, while only a few predicted so exactly a year ago. Politically, the greatest change was among the progressives. In November 2016, only 19.2% answered that ROK-U.S. relations would improve. However, in November 2017, a whopping 79.5% predicted that relations would improve.

Table 3. Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations, by Age and Ideology⁹ (%)

		2016		2017	
		Will Improve	Will Deteriorate	Will Improve	Will Deteriorate
Total		19.1	64.0	69.8	15.4
Age	20s	19.4	68.4	78.1	10.8
	30s	17.8	71.6	78.7	14.1
	40s	14.4	67.1	74.8	12.2
	50s	19.8	62.5	61.2	22.7
	60+	23.4	53.5	60.7	16.2
Ideology	Progressive	19.2	65.2	79.5	8.7
	Moderate	15.5	66.3	68.6	15.5
	Conservative	25.8	61.0	64.8	22.4

This growing sense of optimism is associated with President Moon's popularity and the high expectations after the summit. The optimism on the ROK-U.S. relations was dominant among those who have a favorable view of President Moon (82.7%). On the other hand, a greater number of respondents who were unfavorable toward President Moon had a pessimistic view (40.7%). There was a strong correlation between President Moon's favorability and South Koreans' view of ROK-U.S. relations. Thus, those that were favorable toward President Moon also viewed the summit positively, which led to an optimistic outlook. In vice-versa, those that were unfavorable toward President Moon viewed the summit negatively and had pessimistic prospects for the ROK-U.S. relationship.

Table 4. Relations between President Moon's Favorability and Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations¹⁰ (%)

		Prospects for ROK-U.S. Relations			N-size
		Will Improve	Will Deteriorate	Will Stay the Same	
President Moon's Favorability	Unfavorable	46.9	40.7	12.4	145
	Neutral	63.9	20.3	15.8	158
	Favorable	82.7	9.7	7.6	630

South Korea's Preferred Partner

President Moon has been pursuing a "balanced diplomacy" since his inauguration. The key point of President Moon's "balanced diplomacy" is strengthening cooperation with

8. Source: Surveys of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: March 7-9, 2014, November 22-24, 2016, November 14-16, 2017).

9. We excluded "will not change" and "do not know or refused to answer" in Table 3 because the change was not significant. We also wanted to emphasize the significant turnaround from 2016 to 2017.

10. Source: Survey of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: November 14-16, 2017).

China while maintaining the ROK-U.S. alliance. Since 2014, the Asan Institute has been tracking South Koreans' preference between the two superpowers: the United States and China. We specifically asked our respondents with which country South Korea needs to strengthen its ties. More than a majority preferred the U.S. over China in June (67.3%) and November (66.4%). Only 22.3% preferred China in June and 23.3% in November over the United States.

The majority of respondents favorable toward President Trump and the U.S. selected the United States over China as South Korea's partner (see Table 5). More specifically, 83.6% of respondents, who were favorable towards the U.S. perceived the United States as a more important partner than China. Similarly, 84% of respondents, who favored President Trump also chose the United States over China. The only outlier that preferred China over the U.S. was those that had an unfavorable attitude toward the United States. Of this group, 51.2% answered that South Korea should strengthen its ties with China instead of the U.S.

Interestingly, even South Koreans, who were favorable toward China and President Xi, saw the U.S. as a more important partner for South Korea than China. Only 35.2% of South Koreans who had a favorable view toward China selected China as South Korea's partner over the United States. Similarly, only 31.5% of respondents who were favorable toward President Xi chose China over the United States.

It appears that U.S.' favorability rating was the key variable to South Koreans' decision to choose the U.S. over China. 66.3% of respondents that were unfavorable toward President Trump still selected the U.S. over China. This is a stark contrast to the fact that 51.2% of respondents that did not like the U.S. picked China over the United States. As shown below, favorability of China or President Xi did not have a strong influence over a respondent's decision. More than a majority picked the U.S. over China even among those that positively viewed China and President Xi.

Table 5. South Korea's Partner by the Favorability of Neighboring Countries and Its Respective Leaders¹¹ (%)

		South Korea's Partner		Test statistics
		U.S.	China	
U.S. Favorability (n=891)	Unfavorable	48.8	51.2	$\chi^2=65.400$ $df=2$ $p=.000$
	Neutral	70.0	30.0	
	Favorable	83.6	16.4	
Trump Favorability (n=883)	Unfavorable	66.3	33.7	$\chi^2=24.423$ $df=2$ $p=.000$
	Neutral	75.4	24.6	
	Favorable	84.0	16.0	
China Favorability (n=887)	Unfavorable	81.6	18.4	$\chi^2=20.650$ $df=2$ $p=.000$
	Neutral	71.0	29.0	
	Favorable	64.8	35.2	
Xi Favorability (n=875)	Unfavorable	80.7	19.3	$\chi^2=65.400$ $df=2$ $p=.000$
	Neutral	66.4	33.6	
	Favorable	68.5	31.5	

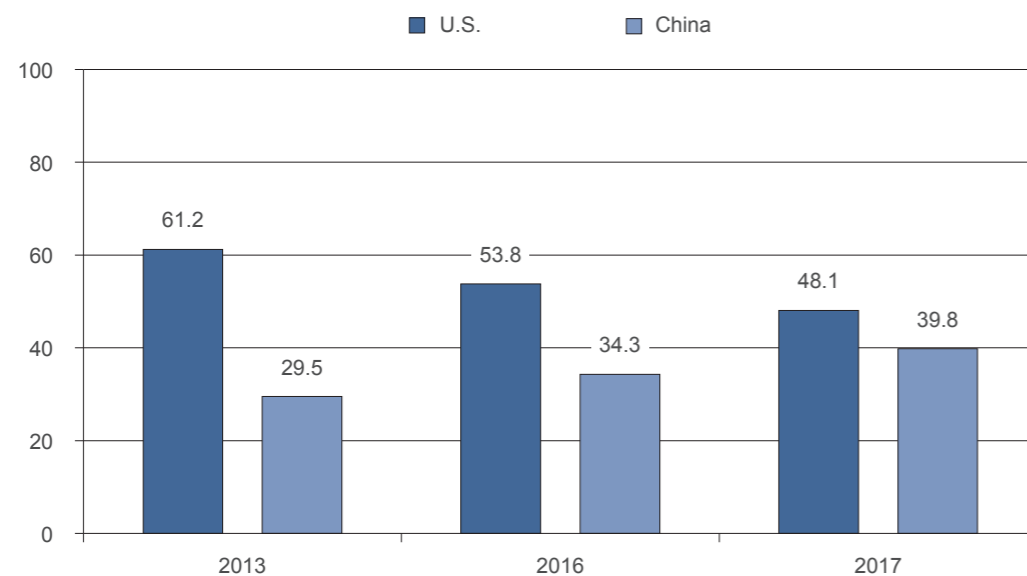
11. Source: Surveys of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: January 2016-November 2017). We did a cross-tab analysis to see the relationship with South Koreans' perception of the U.S. and China and their preferred partner. For "Neighboring Country" and "Leader," we divided the favorability (0=least favorable, 10=most favorable) into three categories: unfavorable (0-4), neutral (5), and favorable (6-10). We excluded do not know or refused to answer as a missing value.

ROK-U.S. Alliance and the North Korean Nuclear Issue

Most Important Country to Solve the North Korean Nuclear Issue

Since the end of the Korean War, South Korea and the United States built an enduring alliance based on mutual interests and shared principles. The long friendship and shared values of the two countries have forged a strong bond and sense of mutual trust. As a result, the U.S. and its presidents have always ranked at the top in favorability ratings since we first started tracking them in 2013.¹² The U.S. has also always been South

Figure 5. Most Important Country to Solve the North Korean Nuclear Issue¹³ (%)



12. The only exception was President Trump's favorability rating from December 2016 to October 2017. He surpassed President Xi in November 2017 and became the most favorable leader by South Koreans.

13. Source: Surveys of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: February 13-15, 2013, September 21-23, 2016, November 14-16, 2017). Japan, Russia, and other states were always under 5% and was therefore excluded from Figure 5.

Korea's preferred partner. However, the percentage of South Koreans who viewed the U.S. as the most important country to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue has been in steady decline. Nearly half of South Koreans still consider the U.S. as the most crucial player, but the rate of decline is steep as it dropped approximately 13 percentage points in the last four years. More specifically, the percentage of respondents who chose the U.S. dropped from 61.2% in 2013 to 53.8% in 2016, and to 48.1% in 2017.

More South Koreans are becoming aware of China's critical role in preventing North Korea from developing its nuclear weapons. As a result, the numbers of those that believe China is the most important country to resolve this issue is steadily increasing. While only 29.5% selected China in 2013, the number rose to 34.3% in 2016, and to 39.8% in 2017. Since the respondents that chose other countries besides the U.S. and China was less than 5%, it appears that the increasing numbers of those that preferred China directly came from those that previously favored the United States.

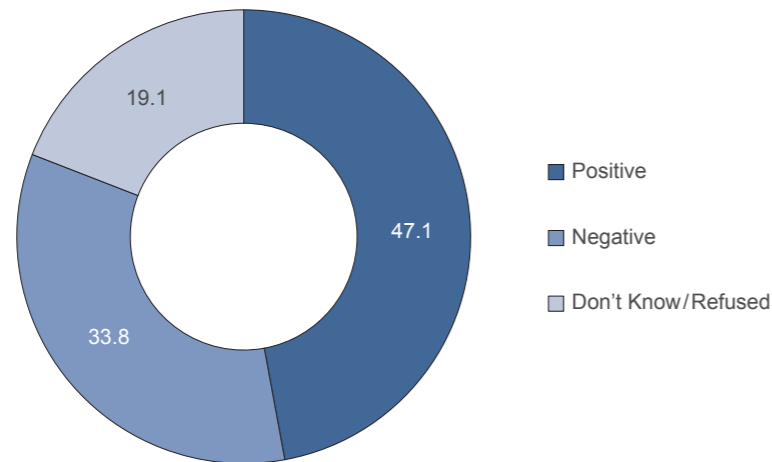
ROK-U.S.-Japan Security Cooperation

As the threat from North Korea increases, South Koreans' perspective on military cooperation with the U.S. and Japan is shifting. When asked whether South Korea should upgrade its current military cooperation with the U.S. and Japan into a formal, full-fledged trilateral military alliance, surprisingly, nearly a majority of South Koreans (47.1%) viewed this development positively. Only one-third perceived this development negatively, while 19.1% said they did not know or refused to answer.¹⁴ Just over two years ago, in August 2015, 52.4% of South Koreans stated that Japan has a negative influence on South Korea's security.¹⁵ This result also comes as a surprise as President Moon made clear that he opposes the idea of the trilateral security cooperation reaching the level of a military alliance in his interview with *Channel NewsAsia*, a Singapore-based English news network. During this interview, he also emphasized that public sentiment would not tolerate an alliance. But this recent survey begs to differ.

14. Respondents who answered "do not know/refused to answer" were relatively high because they were not familiar with jargons such as "security cooperation" and "security alliance." It seems that they did not fully understand the implications of forging to an alliance would entail.

15. Source: Kim Jiyoung, Lee John, Kang Chungku. *In Troubled Waters: Truths and Misunderstandings about Korea-Japan Relations*. Seoul: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2015.

Figure 6. Opinions on Upgrading ROK-U.S.-Japan Military Cooperation to a Military Alliance¹⁶ (%)



When we analyzed the data by age cohorts, the 20s and 60s and older were the only age groups that supported the trilateral alliance among the three countries with statistical significance. All other age groups had mixed perceptions of this development. Those in their 60s were the most ardent supporters of this development as 53.9% positively viewed the development, while only 19.4% objected. Nearly half of those in their 20s (47.8%) also agreed that the potential alliance would be beneficial, while only one-fourth opposed the idea (27.3%). The most logical reason behind this strong support by these age groups is their tendency to hold conservative views on national security issues.

Opinions also differed by ideological stances. The majority of conservatives (56.1%) and moderates (50.9%) were in favor of the trilateral military alliance. However, among the progressives, 38.2% were in favor, while nearly half objected (47.0%). Opposition was strongest among the progressives because the Moon administration is pursuing a “balanced diplomacy,” which entails strengthening ties with China. The development of a security alliance with Japan and the United States would be viewed as a threat by China and would further encourage China to strengthen its ties with Russia and North Korea.

16. Source: Survey of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies (Date: November 14-16, 2017).

Table 6. Opinion on Upgrading ROK-U.S.-Japan Military Cooperation to a Full-Fledged Military Alliance, by Age and Ideology (%)

		Positive	Negative	Don't Know/Refused
Total		47.1	33.8	19.1
Age	20s	47.8	27.3	24.9
	30s	42.9	44.0	13.1
	40s	45.1	42.0	12.9
	50s	43.6	40.2	16.2
	60+	53.9	19.4	26.7
Ideology	Progressive	38.2	47.0	14.8
	Moderate	50.9	28.6	20.5
	Conservative	56.1	32.6	11.3

Conclusion

Summits rarely fail. These meticulously planned diplomatic events capture the hearts and attention of the public. President Trump exploited this opportunity and showed the potential of becoming a polished statesman. His speech at the National Assembly and his promise that South Korea will not be overlooked positively influenced South Koreans' perception of him and the United States. Once again South Koreans have an optimistic outlook for ROK-U.S. relations.

However, the positive effects of President Trump's visit to South Korea will eventually dissipate over time. It is particularly important to note that President Trump's favorability rating experienced the most increase from President Moon's supporters (progressives and those in their 40s and younger). It seems that President Trump's amicable attitude toward President Moon during the summit influenced this change. Thus, there is a possibility that this improved perception of the U.S. among South Koreans can quickly shift if there seems to be a rift between the two leaders. Disagreement on how to deal

with North Korea and the upcoming renegotiations of the KORUS FTA can also potentially diminish the summit's positive effect. In order to maintain this positive atmosphere, it will be critical to show that the two leaders are on the same page and that the alliance remains strong in the coming months.

Survey Methodology

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

Margin of error: +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

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