



South Korean Public Opinion on North Korea & the Nations of the Six-Party Talks

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The following report uses results from three public opinion polls conducted by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.³ The purpose of this report is to give an overview on the opinions of South Koreans with regard to domestic and foreign policy issues and attitudes toward nations involved in the Six-Party Talks (excluding Russia). It is meant to act as background information to further the understanding of the dynamics involved in South Korea's approach to denuclearizing North Korea.

South Korea's Views on North Korea

North Korea's Impact on South Korea's Domestic Issues

In the past, national security issues relating to North Korea considerably affected South Korean politics. Yet, the trend over the past year has shown that South-North relations are of decreasing concern to the South Korean public and have only a limited influence on the domestic politics of South Korea. This is especially of note considering the upcoming 2012 general election and presidential election.

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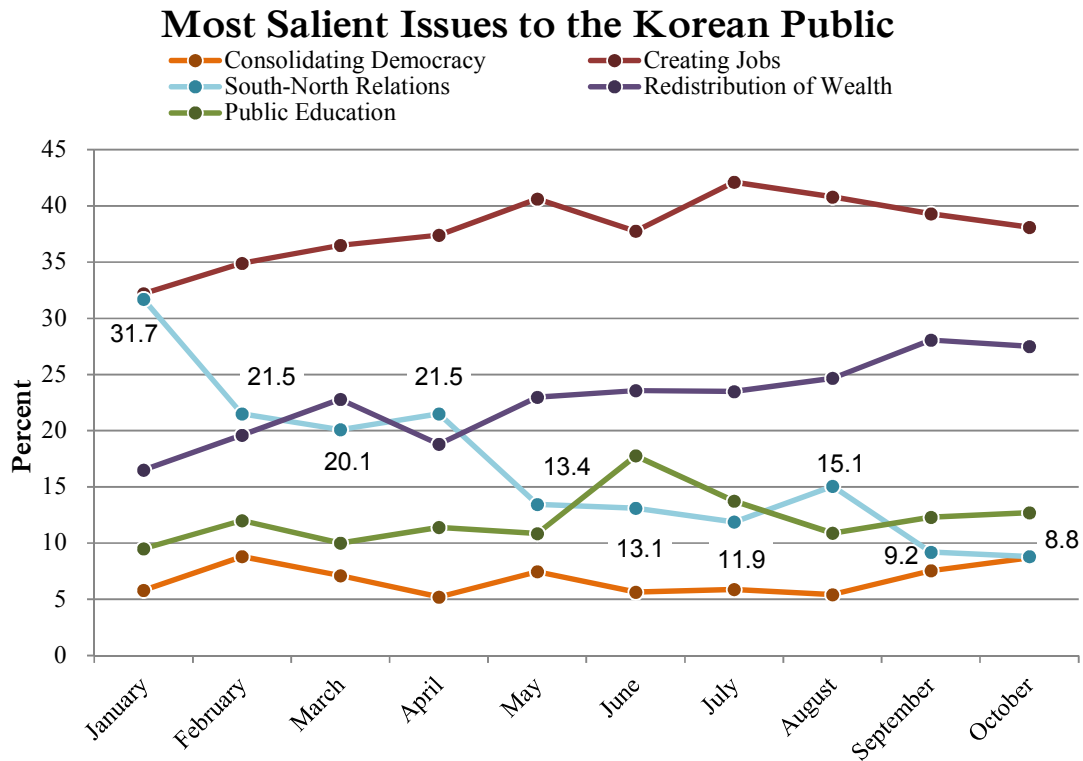
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³ For more information on these surveys please contact the authors.



The 2012 Elections

Figure 1



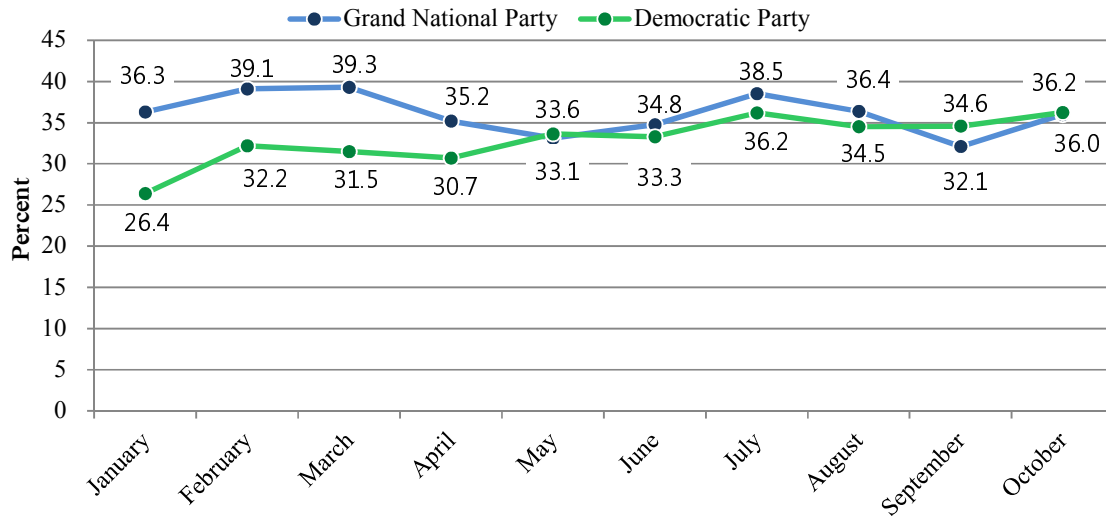
Source: October 2011 Monthly Survey

The most important issue for the South Korean public is creating jobs followed by the redistribution of wealth. The importance of inter-Korean relations as perceived by the Korean public has declined since January, as illustrated in Figure 1. Only 8.8% of respondents now perceive the issue as being the most important for the nation. From this perspective, South-North relations are not expected to play a pivotal role in the 2012 elections.



Figure 2

Party Perceived to be Most Capable of Handling South-North Relations



Source: October 2011 Monthly Survey

However, the unpredictability of North Korea could catapult this issue back to the forefront as the elections approach. The two major parties of South Korea—the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) and the Democratic Party—are seen as being equally capable of handling relations with North Korea (Figure 2). The GNP, which is President Lee Myung-bak’s party, held a sizable lead at the beginning of the year on this issue. While the harder-line approach toward North Korea adopted by President Lee has not experienced a significant loss of support, the more engagement-oriented approach preferred by the Democratic Party has made significant gains in approval among the public.

The conventional wisdom is that any provocation by North Korea would benefit the GNP and its hardline policy. Support for the Democratic Party’s engagement-oriented strategy took a serious blow following North Korean provocations in 2010 but has now rebounded. The spread between the two falls well within the 3.1% margin of error of the October survey.

Reunification

The issue of reunification is an important one in South Korea. Nevertheless, the degree of interest in reunification is declining. About 30% of respondents expressed no interest in the issue of reunification. This suggests that the reunification agenda, relying on ethnic



nationalism, has lost its importance in the recent past. The fact that South Koreans have much less brotherly sentiment toward North Koreans is also depicted in the survey results. Only 21% of South Koreans perceive North Korea as one of “us”,⁴ 26% perceive the North as a “neighbor”, and 22% perceive it as the “enemy”.

This sentiment toward North Korea by the South Korean public is also reflected in the opinion of how reunification should take place. While 57.1% of the public believes that reunification should take place under the South’s system, as high as 41.5% believe that reunification should take place by creating a federation. This clearly hints at the fact that a considerable number of South Koreans do not object to the idea of co-existing as two separate polities.

Table 1

How Quickly Should Reunification Take Place?

	Total	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
As Quickly as Possible	13.8	8.0	10.6	13.9	15.2	20.9
When Circumstances Permit	55.7	53.2	60.3	61.7	58.4	44.1
No Need to Rush	23.5	28.8	22.2	18.8	20.8	27.6
Don’t Need to Reunify	7.0	10.1	6.9	5.5	5.5	7.4

Source: Annual Public Opinion Survey

A second important component of reunification is timing. Table 1 illustrates how urgent the reunification issue is to South Koreans. Overall, only 13.8% of South Koreans think reunification should be accomplished as soon as possible. The rest have different degrees of reservation. There is also a generational gap in opinion on the pace of reunification. While 20.9% of those in their sixties think that reunification should happen as quickly as possible, only 8% of those in their twenties concurred. Respondents in their twenties are also most likely to say that there is no need to reunify.

⁴ That is, these respondents perceived North Korea and South Korea to share a deeper bond than just neighbors. They view the two nations as one ethnic group.



A major factor in this lack of urgency may be the perceived effects of reunification on the economy. When asked if reunification should be pursued even if it hurts the national economy, 58% responded that it should not be hurried in this scenario. Moreover, 65.4% believe that reunification will indeed hurt the national economy.

Nuclear Weapons

According to the Annual Survey conducted by the Asan Institute, 81.1% of respondents believe that North Korea does indeed possess nuclear weapons, and 92.9% believe that North Korea is unlikely to abandon those weapons. 67.4% of South Koreans think that the rationale behind North Korea's nuclear program is to increase its leverage in negotiations.

The ongoing failure to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis is widely seen as the fault of North Korea itself (60.7%). However, 20% believe that the United States is the country most responsible for the failure to denuclearize North Korea.

On seeking ways to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem, 40.5% of respondents believe that continued pressure, both military and economic, will be most effective in denuclearizing North Korea. On the other hand, 18.1% think that the United States must guarantee the survival of the Kim Jong-Il regime, and 41.5% believe that South Korea should pursue stronger economic cooperation with North Korea.

With so much of the public believing that North Korea will not denuclearize, the domestic conversation has turned to how South Korea should react. In some circles, there has been serious discussion of South Korea pursuing its own nuclear weapons program. Even though security experts from around the world have stated that this would be unhelpful for regional security, the South Korean public is surprisingly supportive: 62.6% of respondents think that South Korea should indeed pursue its own nuclear weapons program to counter North Korea (Table 2). These results were consistent across age groups.



Table 2
South Korea Should Develop Its Own Nuclear Weapons

	Total	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
Strongly Disagree	3.4	6.5	2.0	2.5	2.7	3.6
Disagree	34.0	37.3	34.4	30.2	32.2	36.3
Agree	55.0	47.5	54.7	57.9	58.7	55.5
Strongly Agree	7.6	8.7	8.8	9.3	6.4	4.6

Source: Annual Public Opinion Survey

There has also been discussion regarding what would become of North Korea's nuclear weapons in a reunification scenario where the South absorbs the North. While some scenarios assume that the entire peninsula would become denuclearized, this is not accepted by everyone. Some have stated that ownership of these weapons should be subsumed by South Korea. The South Korean public is split on this issue. While 59.5% do not believe that possessing nuclear weapons would be an asset, 40.5% believe that these weapons would be an asset.

Relations, Aid, & War

According to Annual Survey, 96% of South Koreans perceive the current relations between the two Koreas to be in trouble. Responding to the question of which nation is to blame for the current state of inter-Korean relations, 69.7% place the blame on North Korea. However, 10.6% and 10.0% blame China and the United States, respectively. While 67% of South Koreans believe that North Korea is to blame for the sinking of the *Cheonan*, of the remainder, 22% are not sure who was responsible for the incident and 11% believe that North Korea was not responsible.

Providing aid to North Korea has long been a contentious issue both in South Korea and the United States. While South Korea had been giving aid for the better part of the last decade, all aid was stopped following the sinking of the *Cheonan*. There have been discussions of resuming aid, but the South Korean public seems squarely set against this—73.4% stated that aid should not resume without an apology and a promise to abstain from future provocations. Only 27% of all respondents answered that economic aid should be carried out independently of South-North relations.

Koreans are evenly divided on the possibility of a fratricidal war between the two nations, with 50.2% of respondents saying that the possibility is relatively low and 49.8% saying that



the possibility of war remains. Among those who do not see the possibility of war, 46.4% attribute their view to the belief that North Korea's weak economy would preclude North Korea from initiating a conflict. Among those who think war is a possibility, 54.2% think North Korea might initiate a war in order to sustain the current regime.

Views on Other Nations

Interestingly, when asked to rate nations and their favorability, the respondents scored the United States the highest. On a scale of 0 (least favorable) to 10 (most favorable), the United States received an average score of 6.63. On the same scale China scored 4.93. North Korea's favorability score was 4.48, and Japan received the lowest score among the four with 4.36.

The United States

While relations between the United States and South Korea have been through rough patches over the past decade—and during the Roh Moo-Hyun administration (2003-2007) in particular—they are presently considered to be strong. The South Korean public agrees with this view, with 68.3% holding a positive view of current U.S.-ROK relations, and 91.1% stating that the alliance between the two nations will be necessary in the future. Even after reunification, 75.3% believe that the alliance will continue to be necessary.

The United States and South Korea also have an important economic relationship—one that the KORUS FTA seeks to expand. While the FTA was reportedly contentious in South Korea upon its negotiation, 77% of respondents indeed believe that the FTA is now needed. However, 53% think that the FTA will be most beneficial to the United States while only 4.6% believe it will be most beneficial to South Korea. In addition, 40% believe it will be equally beneficial.

China

China has a complicated relationship with South Korea. While it is South Korea's largest trading partner it is also the primary benefactor of North Korea. There are disagreements on historical legacies from the Manchuria area and rising ill-will among the nations' "netizens". If a war were to break out on the peninsula, 77.2% of South Koreans believe that China would intervene on behalf of North Korea. Moreover, when asked which country would pose the biggest threat to a unified Korea, 62.9% of respondents identified China, as shown in Table 3. It is of note that there is a generational gap in the results. Whereas China is perceived as the biggest threat to a unified Korea, the young generation and old generation do not share a similar view on the United States. As high as 21% of those who are in their twenties



answered that the United States is the most serious threat to a unified Korea, while only 6.6% of respondents in their sixties agreed.

Table 3
After Reunification, Which Country Will Pose the Biggest Threat?

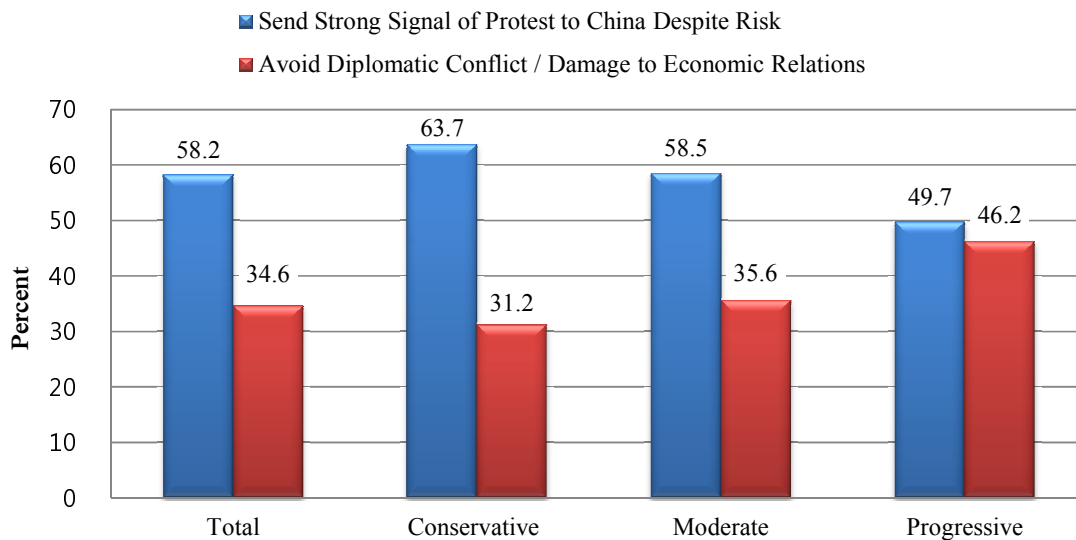
	Overall	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s
China	62.9	57.5	64.2	64.5	63.5	64.3
Japan	21.2	16.1	18.3	22.1	23.8	25.7
U.S.	11.8	21.1	15.1	9.2	7.7	6.6
Russia	3.4	4.9	2.0	3.6	3.9	3.0

Source: Annual Public Opinion Survey

The relationship has been further complicated by China's reaction to the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. Following the shelling, 91.9% of respondents stated that they were dissatisfied with China's response. As shown in Figure 3, 58.2% thought South Korea should take action to send a strong signal of protest to China even if it risked damaging the strong economic relationship the two nations share.

Figure 3

Policy Toward China - by Political Orientation



Source: The Asan Institute Opinion Poll in the Wake of the Attack on the Yeonpyeong Island





Japan

As stated above, Japan is the least favorable nation to the South Korean public, scoring even below North Korea. The two nations have a long history that includes invasion, the Japanese colonization of Korea, comfort women, and the territorial dispute over the Dokdo Islands. Among these issues, Dokdo is seen as the biggest hindrance to enhancing ROK-Japan relations (60.5%), while 32% cite factual distortions in Japanese history books, and 7.5% cite the issue of comfort women. Despite these ongoing issues the rise of China may reorient ROK-Japan relations. When asked if South Korea should seek a military alliance with Japan in the face of a rising China, 54.3% believe that such an alliance will be needed and 45.7% state that it will not be needed. Considering the South Korean public's general attitude toward Japan, this result shows how sensitive South Koreans have become to China becoming an imminent threat.

Conclusion

This report seeks to provide a background to highlight the realities for South Korean diplomats emanating from public opinion as they deal with North Korea. Elections are in the offing, tensions with Japan are high, and China is seen as a potential threat. The relationship with the United States is thought to be both necessary, strong, and a fixture for the future. North Korea has become diminished in importance for the time being as South Koreans focus on pressing domestic issues. Even so, public opinion remains split on how to deal with North Korea—whether to retain a hardline or to further engage. Until the dust from the upcoming elections settles the status quo is to be expected.