



SESSION SKETCHES

Asan Washington Forum 2013

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Day 2 Session II: Public Opinion: Alliance, Security, Nukes.

Moderator: J. James Kim, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Speakers: Charlie Cook, The Cook Political Report
Kim Jiyeon, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
Bruce Klingner, The Heritage Foundation
William Tobey, Harvard University

The first speaker for the Session II Panel was Charlie Cook. He is the founder and operator of the Cook Political Report, an independent and non-partisan newsletter that has analyzed US elections since 1984. Cook began his presentation by expressing his admiration of the transformation experienced by the Republic of Korea (ROK) into an economic powerhouse and 20th Century success story. To demonstrate, Cook used the quote “Not your grandfather’s Korea” to highlight the scale of change that the ROK has experienced in the last 60 years. Cook believes that the ROK is important to the United States at both the foreign and domestic policy level. At a bilateral level, Cook believes that deepened economic ties over the last 60 years has allowed US-ROK relations to become a more comprehensive partnership that has expanded beyond its previously military-centric nature. At a domestic level, Korean Americans now constituted an increasingly influential minority that not only stands at approximately 1.7 million but also constitutes an important part of the ‘Tapestry of America’.

It is for this reason that Cook believes that the US-ROK relationship can weather key realities of the US domestic environment. Particularly, in the context of public opinion in the US, the ROK must understand that the United States has been through the longest continuous period of war in its history. To demonstrate, Cook highlighted that the length of US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan is longer than the civil war, WWI and WWII combined. As such, Cook emphasised that there is a contradiction in current polling in regard to Korea and the idea of conflict. Despite support for Korea in the event of war, there is a correlative decrease in the enthusiasm for such an engagement. Cook added that again, continuous war has fatigued the US psyche on conflict, a fact compounded by the considerable waste to treasure and blood.

The second speaker for the Session II Panel was Jiyeon Kim, a Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Kim is the lead researcher of the Public Opinion Studies Center at the Asan Institute. Among the various projects undertaken by Kim and her team, a major one is a comprehensive annual poll. The most recent 2012 poll included a segment on the ROK alliance with the United States. Kim believes that the recent poll is indicative of the highest approval rating for the United States in recent memory, standing at approximately 92 percent. This data continues to be reinforced by answers to questions that highlighted continued support for the U.S. alliance after unification (which stands at 70%) and the perception that the US is currently the most influential state with an average score of 8.7 (out of 10). This is in contrast to the score of China in the same section which stands at an average score of 6.6 (out of 10).

However, Kim warned that not all is as it seems. Dr. Kim looked to average scores on similar questions based on hypothetical future scenarios. In terms of most influence, polls suggest that China will be the most influential country in 10 years with a score of 8.2 (out of 10). In turn, US influence sees a drop to 7.9 (out of 10). Perhaps more striking are polling numbers that suggest older age segments desire closer relations with China as a default diplomatic model. Standing at 60 percent, the support by this age segment for this stance stands in obvious contrast to expressed support for the alternative diplomatic model of continuing and strengthening ties with traditional allies.

This leads to perhaps the most interesting finding by Kim and her team concerning the demographic distribution of political preferences. Among the greatest concerns raised by policymakers both in the United States and the ROK is the perception of lacklustre youth support for the US-ROK alliance. If anything, Kim demonstrates that these perceptions are misplaced given that polling in fact suggests the opposite. Individuals in the 20-30 age group are among the strongest supporters for the US alliance, standing at approximately 95 percent. In turn, 80 percent support the continuance of the alliance after unification. As for the question posed over the stance to China, polling suggests that the 20-30 age group is in fact more likely to stand with traditional allies (i.e. the US) in contrast to the 50-60 age segment. To continue, based on a Stanford experiment utilising a hypothetical soccer match, 80 percent of the 20-30 age segment voted for the US against China.

Overall, polling suggests a more complex political landscape than what would initially be expected. Kim believed that the data suggests an electorate which holds a much more complex and nuanced set of beliefs. Particularly in the case of the younger population, a picture is being painted of an increasingly hawkish and security conscious segment that is contrastingly more socially liberal and equally more open to creating a more multifaceted platform for US-Korea relations.

The third speaker for the Session II Panel was Bruce Klingner. Klingner is a Senior Research Fellow for Northeast Asia at the Heritage Foundation. Firstly, Klingner warned about the caveats of polling. Though Klingner noted the usefulness of these instruments to assess situational moods, polls do not provide analysis of long-term strategic prospects. In fact, Klingner warned that polling is often proof of how fickle the electorate is and thus capable of skewing the reality of a situation. To demonstrate, Klingner noted several key examples in recent memory. First was perception of the Sunshine Policy. Klingner noted that support for the policy stood at only 17 percent following the end of the Kim Dae-Jung presidency. However, he noted that support for the policy surged following the death of two teenage girls during US exercises in 2002. Second was polling data in the aftermath of the *Cheonan* sinking. Despite 70 percent of people believing the DPRK was complicit in the sinking, it was matched by an equal 70 percent who did not believe the results of the investigative report.

Klingner concluded that polling was important. However, he believed that facts often so easily extrapolated from polling is underscored by concurrently contradictory perceptions or driven by external shocks. He concluded with the line that “Consensus is the absence of leadership”, surmising that leadership should be the primary driver of policy acceptability not public opinion.

The fourth and final speaker was William Tobey. William Tobey is a Senior Fellow of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Tobey sought to address some of the caveats of polling highlighted by Klingner. He asserted that the disadvantages of polling can be balanced by principles displayed by leadership, something which was alluded to by Klingner. To support this point, Tobey cited his work with President Reagan, who decided against listening to some of the loudest voices of public opinion on issues critical to nuclear security. He also noted that if anything, public opinion in light of how the North Korean issue should be treated or is perceived should be heeded. That would help to steer public perception rather than be driven by it.

Tobey recommended some practical policy recommendations. Rather than, considering following polling that supports the reintroduction of tactical nuclear weaponry, Tobey argued that domestic effort should be made to reemphasise the ROK inclusion under US extended deterrence. In turn, Tobey highlighted that public perception would be further swayed if the ROK made more tangible efforts particularly in the realm of defence technology such as missile defense systems and pushing the US government to lift further restrictions on its missile program. Given the increasing pessimism following 20 years of failure, Tobey argued that these suggestions are just suggestions but nevertheless something that the ROK and United States can consider when devising alternative strategies that not only strengthens the alliance but also sustain public perception.

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