

**ASAN**  
REPORT

---

**South Korean Attitudes  
on the Korea-US Alliance  
and Northeast Asia**

CHOI KANG, KIM JIYOON  
KARL FRIEDHOFF, KANG CHUNGKU, LEE EUICHEOL



Asan Report

**South Korean Attitudes  
on the Korea-US Alliance  
and Northeast Asia**

CHOI KANG, KIM JIYOUN,  
KARL FRIEDHOFF, KANG CHUNGKU, LEE EUICHEOL

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies



## About

**The Asan Institute for Policy Studies** is an independent, non-partisan think tank that undertakes policy-relevant research to foster domestic, regional, and international environments that promote peace and prosperity 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.

## Authors

### **CHOI Kang**

Choi Kang is the vice president for Research and the director of the Center for Foreign Policy and National Security at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Previously, he was the dean of Planning and Assessment at the Korean National Diplomatic Academy, professor and director general for American Studies at the Institute for Foreign Affairs and National Security, research fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, and senior director for Policy Planning and Coordination on the National Security Council Secretariat. He holds several advisory board memberships including: the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Unification of the National Assembly; the Ministry of National Defense; the Ministry of Unification; the Air Force De-



velopment Committee; and the National Unification Advisory Council. Dr. Choi was also a South Korean delegate to the Four-Party Talks. Dr. Choi writes extensively on the ROK-US alliance, North Korean military affairs, inter-Korean relations, crisis management, and multilateral security cooperation. He received his B.A. from Kyunghee University, M.A. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and his Ph.D. in Political Science from the Ohio State University.

### **KIM Jiyoon**

Kim Jiyoon is a research fellow and the director of the Center for Public Opinion and Quantitative Research at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Kim received her B.A. in Political Science and Diplomacy from Yonsei University, M.P.P. in Public Policy from the University of California, Berkeley, and Ph.D. in Political Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Prior to joining the Asan Institute, she was a postdoctoral research fellow at Université de Montréal. Her research interests include elections and voting behavior, American politics and political methodology. Recent publications include “Political judgment, perceptions of facts, and partisan effects” (*Electoral Studies*, 2010), and “Public spending, public deficits, and government coalition” (*Political Studies*, 2010).

### **Karl FRIEDHOFF**

Karl Friedhoff is a program officer in the Public Opinion Studies Program at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies and a Korea Foundation-Mansfield Foundation U.S.-Korea Nexus Scholar. His writing has appeared in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and his analysis has appeared in leading international and domestic media. Mr. Friedhoff earned his B.A. in Political Science at Wittenberg University and an M.A. in International Commerce at Seoul National University.

**KANG Chungku**

Kang Chungku is a program officer in the Public Opinion Studies Program at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Prior to joining the Asan Institute, he was a research assistant at the Korea Dialogue Academy in Seoul. He earned both an M.A. in Sociology and a B.A. in English at Korea University. His research interests include quantitative research methods, survey design, and statistical data analysis.

**LEE Euicheol**

Lee Euicheol is a program officer in the Public Opinion Studies Program at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. His main responsibilities are practicing and analyzing 'Asan Daily Poll' and 'Asan Annual Survey.' His research interests include opinion polls, Korean politics, and elections. He received his B.A. in Business Administration from Yonsei University.

**Disclaimer**

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

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	8
<b>Introduction</b>	10
<b>The United States to Korea: As Good as It Gets</b>	11
Attitudes on the United States and President Obama	11
<b>Perceptions of the Korea-US Relationship</b>	14
Attitudes on the Korea-US Alliance	15
Outstanding Issues in the Korea-US Alliance	17
The 123 Agreement	19
Equality of the Relationship	21
<b>Northeast Asia and the Role of the United States</b>	24
Another Big layer in the Region: China	24
China in the Future	28
The Trilateral Alliance and Japan	30
<b>Conclusion</b>	35
<b>Appendix A</b>	38
<b>Appendix B</b>	40



## List of Tables

<b>Table 1:</b>	Views of the Korea-US Alliance	22
<b>Table 2:</b>	Perceptions of the Korea-US Relationship and the KORUS FTA	23
<b>Table 3:</b>	Korean Opinion on Security Cooperation	25
<b>Table 4:</b>	Future Influence of the US and China and Cooperative Partners	30
<b>Table 5:</b>	US Response to Korea-Japan Tensions	32
<b>Table 6:</b>	US Response to Korea-Japan Conflict and Perceived US Country Preference	33
<b>Table 7:</b>	US Response to Korea-Japan Conflict and Preferred Security Relationship	33
<b>Table 8:</b>	Perceived US Country Preference and Preferred Security Relationship	34

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1:</b>	Country Favorability	12
<b>Figure 2:</b>	Leader Favorability	13
<b>Figure 3:</b>	Views of the Korea-US Relationship	14
<b>Figure 4:</b>	Participation of Troops in Foreign Operations	16
<b>Figure 5:</b>	Important Issues for the Korea-US Alliance	17
<b>Figure 6:</b>	Views of the Korea-China Relationship	26
<b>Figure 7:</b>	Most Important Cooperative Relationship: By Age	27
<b>Figure 8:</b>	Influence of the US vs. China	29

## Executive Summary

In a series of surveys conducted in March 2014, support for the Korea-US alliance remains near its all-time high—93.3 percent stated that the alliance was a necessity. However, the alliance is not only viewed as dealing with the threat of North Korea. Even when a hypothetical reunification was posited, 66.0 percent remained in favor of maintaining the alliance. This suggests that the Korean public has both broader perceptions of threats in the region as well as an expanded view of the scope of the alliance.

In terms of favorability, the United States continues to be the most favored nation. It was the only nation to score above a 5.0 on the zero to ten scale, and there was very little variation in those views across age cohorts or the political spectrum. These positive views are bolstered by favorable views on President Barack Obama. Mr. Obama was the most favored leader of any nation active in the region, and the only leader with a favorability score above 6.0 on the zero to ten scale.

But the surveys also revealed underlying problems for the alliance. One area of significant concern is that a majority (64.9%) view the Korea-US relationship as one that is fundamentally unequal. But a more serious problem may be that the Korean public views the United States as a country that is losing influence. While majorities currently see the United States as the most influential country in the world in terms of economics (64.7%) and politics (81.8%), in the future that influence is expected to decline. A majority (66.7%) cited China as being the most economically influential country in the world in the future. In terms of future political influence, 44.8 percent cited the United States and 39.3 percent cited China.

Korea-Japan relations are also a concern for the United States. A strong majority (78.9%) of the Korean public stated that the United States should play an active role in improving Korea-Japan relations. However, a slim majority (53.8%) disapproved of the US response thus far. This issue is complicated by the fact that 53.0 percent thought the United States favored Japan in the trilateral alliance.

Taken together, the data presented in this report reflects the complexities of the region itself. While there are issues internal to the Korea-US alliance, the expansion of the alliance to deal with regional and global issues will highlight a growing list of challenges. However, the Korean public strongly supports the Korea-US alliance, providing a solid foundation on which to address these challenges.

# South Korean Attitudes on the Korea-US Alliance and Northeast Asia

## Introduction

At the outset of 2014, the Korea-US alliance is stronger than at any point in its 60 year history. What was once solely a security alliance aimed at deterring North Korean aggression grew into a relationship with regional implications across a range of issues. It now turns to take on challenges of a global scope, but does so at a time of increasing regional uncertainty. No longer is North Korea the sole security concern in the region. Disputes over territory and history continue to complicate regional relations and prevent the establishment of an overarching security architecture. How the Korea-US alliance addresses these complications will be of prime importance in the years to come.

While the Korea-US alliance has not always been domestically popular, strident anti-Americanism—most recently seen in 2002—has faded. Approval of the alliance is now at record highs, illustrating a growing realization of the role that the United States plays in the security of South Korea, but also the strides both sides have made in managing the alliance. The handling of unforeseen events with the potential to damage the prevailing positive attitudes of the Korean public has improved, leading the alliance into a relatively tranquil period.

However, as in any relationship, challenges remain. Some of these challenges are built into the alliance itself as the countries negotiate how responsibilities—both fiscal and operational—are to be split. But there are also more fundamental challenges about how the alliance partners deal with regional

security challenges. While policy has largely been in-step on North Korea, there is significant daylight between South Korea and the United States in relations with Japan and China. Because these issues all inform one another, a comprehensive view of the region is a necessity.

While public opinion in Korea does not dictate foreign policy, it does play an increasingly important role in informing foreign policy decisions. This report will offer a broad perspective of public opinion on issues of core importance to the Korea-US alliance. It will cover both the immediate challenges specific to the alliance itself as well as the challenges it will face in the coming years.

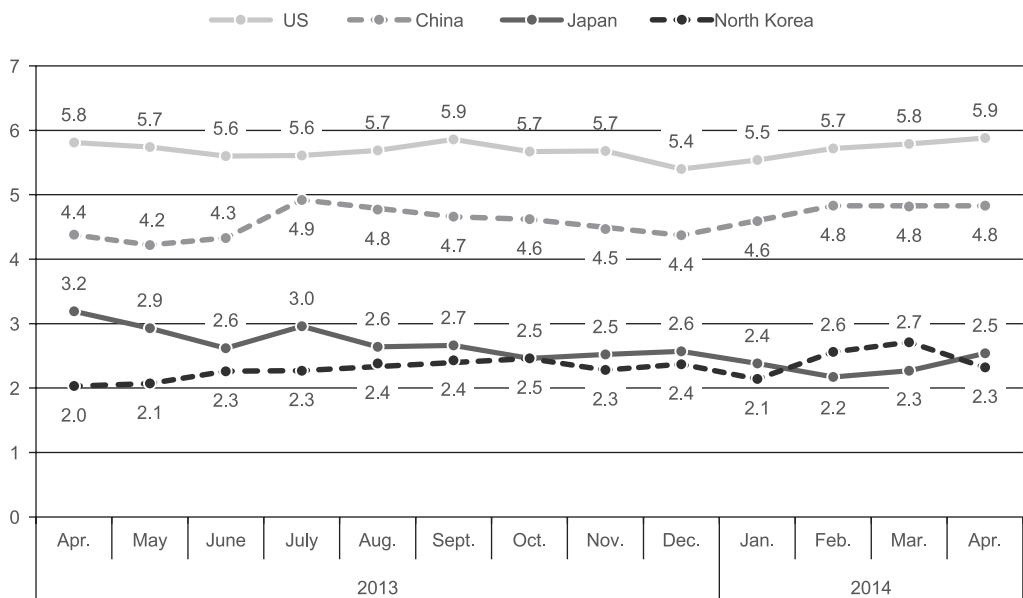
## **The United States to Korea: As Good As It Gets**

### *Attitudes on the United States and President Obama*

Through the beginning of 2014—and since Asan began tracking the number in 2010—the United States was consistently viewed as the most favorable country by the South Korean public. Among the countries included in the survey it was the only country to receive a mean score above 5.0 on the zero to ten scale, and there was very little variation in that assessment. Given this stability and the largely positive attitudes towards the alliance, this may represent the ceiling for favorability of the United States. Any large variation from this will likely be negative in nature, catalyzed by an unforeseen event. However, a short-term decline could be partially mitigated by active public outreach. Both sides have drawn lessons from the events of 2002—when anti-Americanism reached its most recent peak—and those working on alliance management issues are now much more actively engaged in dealing with the Korean public's perceptions of the alliance.

There was a slight decline from November to December 2013. This may have emanated from disappointment with Secretary of State John Kerry's statement of support for Japan's right to collective self defense in late November. However, favorability quickly returned to normal levels. One important point to note is that there was no noticeable generational gap on favorability of the United States. Although those who are 50 and older exhibited higher favorability ratings (50s, 5.73; 60s and older, 6.53) than those of 30s and 40s (30s, 5.18; and 40s, 5.25), all age cohorts viewed the United States favorably. However, in the cases of China and Japan, there was a distinct generational gap.

Figure 1: Country Favorability<sup>1</sup>

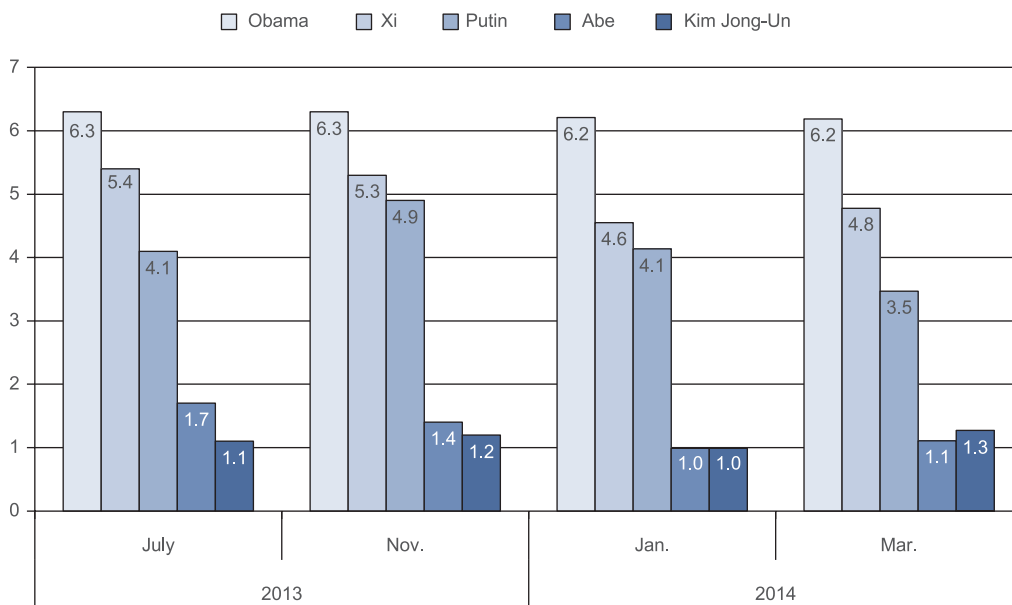


1. Each country's favorability score is its mean score on a scale from zero to ten, with zero representing "zero favorability."



Favorable attitudes toward the United States are bolstered by favorable views of its leader, President Barack Obama. Mr. Obama has consistently been the most favorably viewed leader of nations active in the region, as illustrated in Figure 2. He is the only leader to receive a mean score above 6.0 on a zero to ten scale, and there is no expectation of variation on these views. While the favorability of Mr. Obama and Mr. Xi are both generally higher than the favorability of their respective countries, the marks of Prime Minister Abe and Kim Jong-Un are lower than those their countries received.

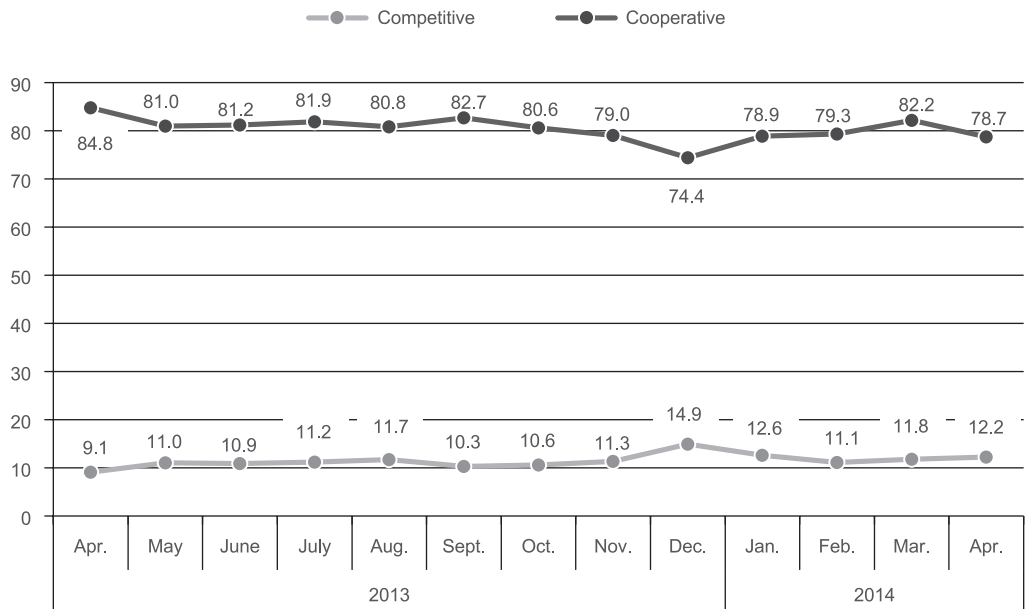
Figure 2: Leader Favorability



Given the favorable views of the United States and President Obama, it is not a surprise that the Korea-US relationship is overwhelmingly seen as cooperative. Since the beginning of 2013—when tracking began on this issue—approximately 80 percent have consistently cited the relationship with the United States as cooperative in nature. This finding has experienced almost no variation,

further illustrating the stability of the relationship.

**Figure 3: Views of the Korea-US Relationship**



Of greater concern is the potential for a longer-term decline in the favorability of the United States. Such a decline could signal the beginning of a serious debate among the Korean public about the need for the Korea-US alliance and lead to a recalibration of Korea's regional relationships. There are myriad factors which could contribute to this. Issues related to China, North Korea, the Korea-US alliance, and the perceived decline in US influence around the world could all contribute to a structural decline. The subsequent sections of this report will address these issues.

### **Perceptions of the Korea-US Relationship**

### *Attitudes on the Korea-US Alliance*

Public support for the Korea-US alliance remains near record-highs. Since 2010, more than 85 percent have cited the alliance as a necessity, and since 2011, that number has been greater than 90 percent. In the most recent survey, conducted in March 2014, that number was 93.3 percent. While these numbers demonstrate the current strength of the Korea-US alliance, the alliance is not perceived to only address the threat of North Korea. While that may have been true in the past, the alliance has moved far beyond that narrow—but still important—role. The Korean public understands this.

If the US alliance was only thought to address security *vis-à-vis* North Korea, the reunification of the Korean Peninsula should theoretically remove views of the alliance as a necessity. However, that was not the case. When asked to consider a unified Korean Peninsula—whether by collapse or by choice was omitted from the question—a clear majority (66.0%) stated that the Korea-US alliance would remain necessary.<sup>2</sup> While this was a 27.3 percentage point reduction from simple support for the alliance, it is still a sizable number.

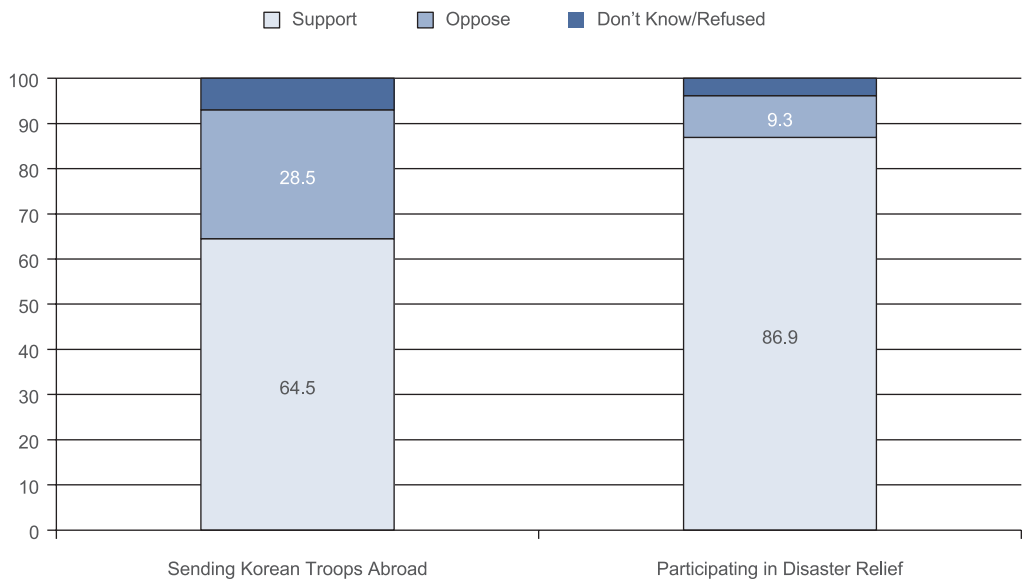
An expected increase in the financial burden to be borne by Korea for maintaining the alliance also did little to deter support. This increase in financial burden is much more concrete than a hypothetical reunification of the two Koreas. In early 2014, the two sides renegotiated the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), and the negotiations attracted significant media attention. However, 82.6% stated support for the Korea-US alliance even if the burden on the Korean economy increased. This finding was consistent among age cohorts and across the political spectrum.

---

2. Survey conducted March 16-18, 2014.

The data also provides two perspectives on the role and scope of the alliance. First, 48.8 percent of all respondents viewed the alliance as one that is primarily military in nature and thus aimed at increasing regional security. In fact, two-thirds of those (61.0%) that stated the alliance was unnecessary following reunification cited the removal of the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula as the reason. On the other hand, 43.1 percent viewed the alliance as one that is comprehensive—including political, social, and economic elements. For now, the Korea-US alliance is primarily viewed as a security alliance to deter North Korea, but views of it appear to be developing toward a more expansive interpretation.

**Figure 4: Participation of Troops in Foreign Operations**



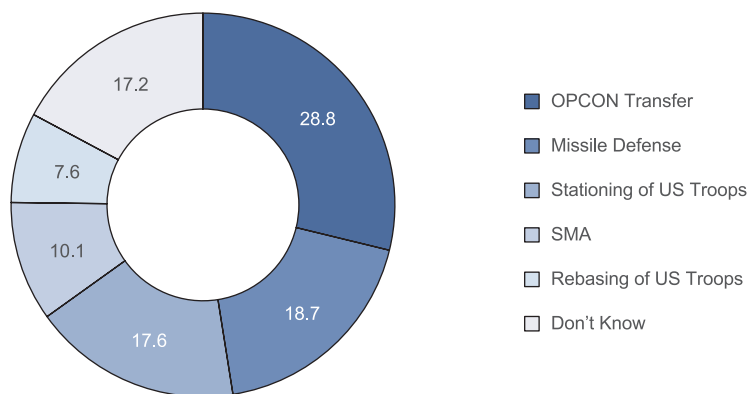
One example of this more expansive interpretation of the alliance—and in line with Korea's growing confidence and influence—the Korean public widely supports (64.5%) sending Korean troops abroad to aid in operations at the

request of the United States, and 86.9 percent support participating in natural disaster relief efforts at the request of the United States.

### *Outstanding Issues in the Korea-US Alliance*

For the Korean public, there are multiple issues that are cited as deserving the attention of the Korea-US alliance, as illustrated in Figure 5.

**Figure 5: Important Issues for the Korea-US Alliance**



Chief among these issues is the transfer of wartime operational control (OPCON) of Korean troops to Korean commanders. This was scheduled to take place in 2015, but Korea requested a delay in that transfer in 2013. The United States has stated that any delay should be conditions-based, and that in 2013 it was too early to officially delay the transfer. By all accounts, OPCON negotiations are a formality. It is highly unlikely that the United States would force such a transfer when Korea has openly stated it is not yet ready to assume command. Thus, this issue is resolved for all intents and purposes.

Missile defense (MD) is more complicated. While 18.7 percent cite it as the most important issue for the alliance to address, it does not resolve the core issue of which system Korea should adopt. The United States would like Korea to join the US-led system for obvious reasons. First, this would ensure system interoperability, allowing Korea to share information on missile launches and trajectory with the United States and Japan. Second, Korea participation in the US-led system would mean sales of hardware from US defense companies.

However, Korea has thus far resisted joining the US-led system. The primary concern is that doing so will be seen as a provocation by China. Thus, Korea has opted to attempt to develop its own MD systems. On this, public opinion is of little help. While 75.4 percent were in favor of joining the US-led system, 83.1 percent were in favor of Korea having its own MD. Essentially, the public does not care which system Korea pursues, it simply wants to feel adequately defended. It also likely reflects a lack of understanding of sophisticated policy by the public, creating contradictory responses.

The third most cited item is the stationing of US troops (17.6%). When combined with the relocation of US forces on the Korean Peninsula (7.6%), as high as 25.2 percent of Koreans are concerned with issues related to US forces. This reading makes it as important as OPCON transfer, as far as the survey is concerned, but in reality it is likely more important in terms of alliance management at the public relations level. While OPCON transfer is an issue that receives press coverage, its intricacies are not well understood by the public. But incidents involving US troops and Korean civilians can act as a flash point, drawing strong reactions from the Korean public.

One issue not included as a response option, but perhaps the most impor-



tant outstanding issue for the Korea-US alliance to address, is the agreement on civil nuclear cooperation—the 123 Agreement. These negotiations contain many of the elements that could prove problematic for alliance management.

### *The 123 Agreement*

#### *Why It Could Be a Problem*

The unwillingness of the United States to grant advanced consent to Korea for enriching uranium and reprocessing plutonium could be problematic in terms of alliance management. First and foremost, sovereignty is a particularly sensitive issue in Korea, and this could be interpreted as the United States dictating policy to South Korea. As the *Chosun Ilbo* stated in an unsigned editorial, “It is an encroachment on its sovereignty for an atomic energy powerhouse like South Korea to face limitations in its peaceful usage of nuclear energy.”<sup>3</sup>

The disparity between Japan and Korea presents a second problem. Japan is already capable of enriching and reprocessing, leaving Korea to wonder why it is still seen as the junior partner in the trilateral alliance. Such sentiment will be exacerbated during times of Korea-Japan tensions.

Third is the public health and safety dimension. With one-third of Korea’s electricity supplied by its 23 nuclear power plants—and a plan to have 40 reactors providing nearly 60% of the country’s electricity by 2030<sup>4</sup>—spent fuel is an issue. While reprocessing will not fully resolve Korea’s spent fuel prob-

---

3. “Nuclear Reprocessing Should Be an Economic Question”. *Chosun Ilbo*. July 1, 2009.

4. World Nuclear Association. “Nuclear Power in South Korea”.

lem, this argument will not resonate with the public. Instead, it will be portrayed as US policy adversely affecting Koreans' health and environment.

Combined, these aspects could offer a compelling narrative to the Korean public about why the 123 Agreement is important and should be negotiated in Korea's favor.

### *Why It Won't Be a Problem*

Public opinion data casts doubt on the 123 Agreement negotiations as becoming a lightning rod for the Korea-US alliance. The media has already reported widely on it, and yet the public remains largely unaware of the agreement.<sup>5</sup> In a survey conducted in August 2013, 79.5 percent stated they were not well-informed on the matter.<sup>6</sup> While 45.7 percent stated they had merely heard of the 123 Agreement, 33.8 percent said that they had not even heard of it. With such a high degree of the public being uninformed, there is serious doubt about the ability for the issue to overcome substantial inertia based on its sheer complexity.

Scandals involving Korea's domestic nuclear energy industry also reduce the likelihood of negative public reaction on the 123 Agreement. Despite Korea's excellent nuclear safety record, a plurality (44.8%) cited Korea's nuclear power plants as being unsafe.<sup>7</sup> Nuclear experts will correctly argue that the ability to enrich and reprocess are far different matters than the scandals

---

5. Between March 1 and July 1, 2013 the 123 Agreement and its negotiations were mentioned more than 800 times in Korea's four major daily newspapers.

6. Survey conducted August 15-17, 2013.

7. Survey conducted February 10-12, 2014

surrounding the domestic nuclear energy industry. But it is unlikely that the general public is able to separate these issues. With a plurality (41.4%) stating it does not trust the Korean nuclear industry, the public will be all the more unsympathetic to the Korean government calling for greater rights regarding treatment of its nuclear fuel.

### *Equality of the Relationship*

Despite the largely positive attitudes toward the United States, and fairly broad agreement that the Korea-US alliance should remain intact if reunification takes place, the relationship is still widely viewed as one that is fundamentally unequal, with 64.9 percent stating as such (Table 1).<sup>8</sup> Sovereignty and historical issues play a key role in this sentiment, and it is a perception that could become more serious with the passage of time. Among those in their 50s and older, views of the alliance as unfair were much weaker. However, roughly three-quarters of those aged 40 and younger saw the alliance as fundamentally unequal. Furthermore, self-identified progressives and progressive party supporters were more likely to perceive the relationship as being unequal than were self-identified conservatives and supporters of the conservative Saenuri Party.

---

8. Survey conducted March 16-18, 2014.

Table 1: Views of the Korea-US Alliance

		Unfair	Fair	Don't Know/ Refused
Total		<b>64.9</b>	30.1	5.0
Age	20s	<b>72.0</b>	26.1	1.9
	30s	<b>85.9</b>	14.1	0.0
	40s	<b>76.3</b>	21.7	2.0
	50s	58.1	<b>37.9</b>	4.0
	60+	30.4	<b>52.6</b>	17.0
Self-identified Ideology	Progressive	<b>77.4</b>	21.2	1.5
	Moderate	68.5	27.7	3.7
	Conservative	58.2	<b>37.8</b>	4.0
Party Support	Saenuri	44.2	<b>49.4</b>	6.3
	New Politics Alliance for Democracy	<b>78.6</b>	19.9	1.5
	Independent	<b>79.5</b>	13.5	7.0

These perceptions of inequality also informed views of the KORUS FTA. Depending on views of the equality of the relationship, respondents held differing views of who benefitted most from the FTA (Table 2). While a plurality (42.9%) of Koreans stated that both countries accrued benefits equally from the FTA, 35.4 percent saw benefits accruing unequally to the United States. However, those who viewed the Korea-US relationship as unequal on the whole were more likely to think that the FTA favored the United States with 52.3 percent of this group stating as such (39.6% of this group thought it bene-

fitted both countries). This is strikingly different from the 67.8 percent who saw the FTA as equally beneficial and the relationship on the whole as equal.

In sum, most Koreans understand and recognize the importance of Korea-US alliance. Support is even strong for maintaining the alliance even after a hypothetical Korean reunification. In addition, more people began to see the alliance in a broader perspective, encompassing security, politics, economics, and culture. Nonetheless, a still disproportionate number of Koreans perceive the relationship to be unequal. Though this perception may not put Korea-US relations in jeopardy in the near future, both countries should remain mindful of this perception.

**Table 2: Perceptions of the Korea-US Relationship and the KORUS FTA**

Evaluation of the FTA	Perceptions of the Korea-US Relationship	
	Equal	Unequal
Favoring Korea	11.6	3.4
Favoring the United States	16.9	<b>52.3</b>
Beneficial to Both	<b>67.8</b>	<b>39.6</b>
Beneficial to Neither	3.7	4.6

On that note, the Korean public wants the alliance to be seen as a two way street. Input from the Korean government should not only be heard, but should also be seen to directly impact the direction of the relationship. Any suggestion that the United States is dictating policy to the Korean government will be met with strong resistance, as it will be seen as a step back into time when South Korea was much weaker and much poorer—a past the Korean public has largely shed if not forgotten.

## Northeast Asia and the Role of the United States

A China on the rise, a surging South Korea, a nuclear-armed and recalcitrant North Korea, a Japan attempting economic reform to shake itself from the doldrums, and a newly attentive United States, all play a role in painting the security picture in Northeast Asia. To complicate that picture even further is a complex web of relations, diplomacy, and ongoing negotiations. Making sense of it all is a difficult task, but public opinion in Korea captures a surprisingly nuanced view of the region and Korea's place in it.

### *Another Big Player in the Region: China*

A primary driver of the US effort to strengthen trilateral relations with Korea and Japan is the rise of China in the region. A clear majority of the Korean public thought this was an important goal for Korea as well, with 70.4 percent stating that Korea should strengthen the alliance with the United States to check China (Table 3). In addition, a majority (57.1%) chose strengthening the Korea-US alliance over Korea-China security cooperation when presented as a binary choice. Only 29.8 percent of the Korean public chose China over the United States as a cooperative partner on security. Moreover, 53.4% agreed that Korea should strengthen the alliance with the United States even at the risk of making China uncomfortable. Roughly one-third thought that Korea should strengthen the relationship with China despite the fact that United States would not welcome it. Last but not least, when it comes to choosing between the United States and China, a majority (56.9%) states that strengthening cooperative relations with the United States will be more important than doing so with China (29.4%) in the future.<sup>9</sup>

---

9. Survey conducted March 13-15, 2014



**Table 3: Korean Opinion on Security Cooperation**

Strengthen Korea-US security cooperation to check China	Support	<b>70.4</b>
	Oppose	19.4
Which security cooperation is more important?	Korea-US-Japan trilateral cooperation	<b>57.1</b>
	Korea-China security cooperation	29.8
Which relationship is more important?	Strengthen Korea-US alliance	<b>53.4</b>
	Strengthen Korea-China relationship	31.7
Country to choose?	The United States	<b>56.9</b>
	China	29.4

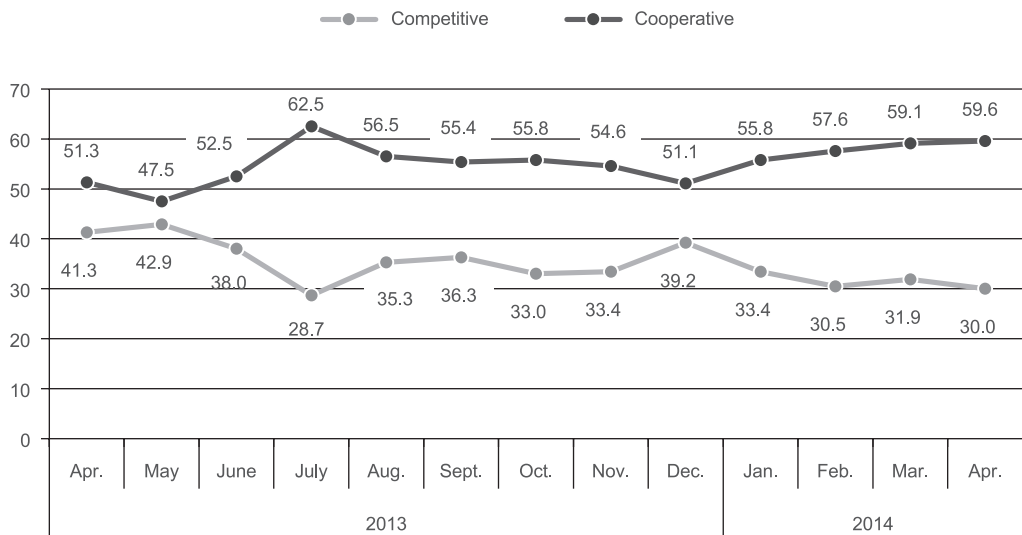
All in all, Koreans generally trust and value the relationship with the United States more than that with China. This is partly due to the fact that China is still an ally of North Korea. Also, the Korean public hasn't forgotten about China's reaction to the sinking of the *Cheonan* and the military attack on *Yeonpyong* Island. China may be an important country to Korea, but it is not yet viewed as a dependable security partner.

This is also displayed in views on Korea's relationship with China which—while seen as cooperative—are relatively more volatile (Figure 6), prone to variation based on prevailing conditions.

In May 2013, views that found the relationship to be cooperative reached their lowest point. However, the June 2013 summit between Park Geun-hye and Xi Jinping created a spike in cooperative views from June to July, and a corresponding sharp decline in competitive views of the relationship. This effect was relatively long-lasting, as cooperative views remained elevated for

several months.

**Figure 6: Views of the Korea-China Relationship**



While cooperative views remained strong for much of the year, China's expansion of its air defense identification zone—otherwise known as ADIZ—caused a clear bump in competitive views in the relationship from November to December. However, this bump was likely muted due to the media response to the expansion. In the days immediately following China's announcement, the media largely downplayed the expansion and espoused caution both from the public and the government. By January 2014, views had returned to the November levels, and then increased through the remainder of the first quarter of the year.

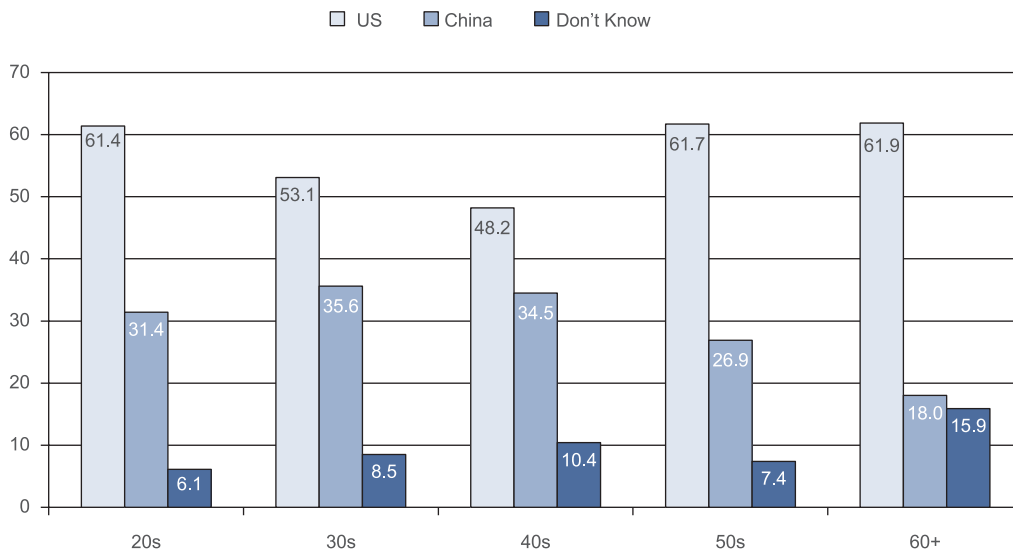
One major theme in recent analysis of Korea often places Korea in the position of eventually being forced to choose between its main security partner—the United States—and its main economic partner—China. This line of analysis has grown stronger due to the diplomatic efforts of President Park,

and the rumors that she personally feels much closer to China than she does to the United States. But the conclusion that South Korea is already moving into the China camp is premature.

The data presented in Figure 1 suggests that the Korean public does not innately perceive the relationships with the United States and China as trade-offs, and it is not clear that this will ever become the case. From June to July 2013, when the favorability of China underwent a significant spike in favorability following the Park-Xi summit, there was no decline in the favorability of the United States. Moreover, from December 2013 to March 2014 the favorability of both countries increased at roughly the same rate.

There is a clear sentiment among those in their 20s, 50s, and 60 and older that the Korea-US relationship is the most important for Korea to pursue in the future (Figure 7). However, that mandate is less clear among those in their 30s and 40s. But this likely reveals more about the attitudes of these

**Figure 7: Most Important Cooperative Relationship: By Age**



cohorts toward the United States than it does about their attitudes toward China. As Figure 3 illustrates, a lower emphasis on the relationship with the United States among those in their 30s and 40s does not lead them to prefer pursuing stronger relations with China any more so than those in their 20s. Those in their 40s were likely at the forefront of Korea's democratization movement—a time when anti-Americanism was high—and that sentiment has proven to be persistent.

### *China in the Future*

Complicating views on China and the United States is that the Korean public clearly perceives the influence of the United States to be in decline. While some of this is certainly attributable to fiscal uncertainty in the United States, the rise of China is also contributing.

That the economic influence of China is perceived by the Korean public to overtake that of the United States in the future—there was no hard timeline attached to “the future” in the original question—is not a surprise (Figure 8).<sup>10</sup> All real world data predicts that China will surpass the United States in most meaningful economic indicators in the not too distant future.

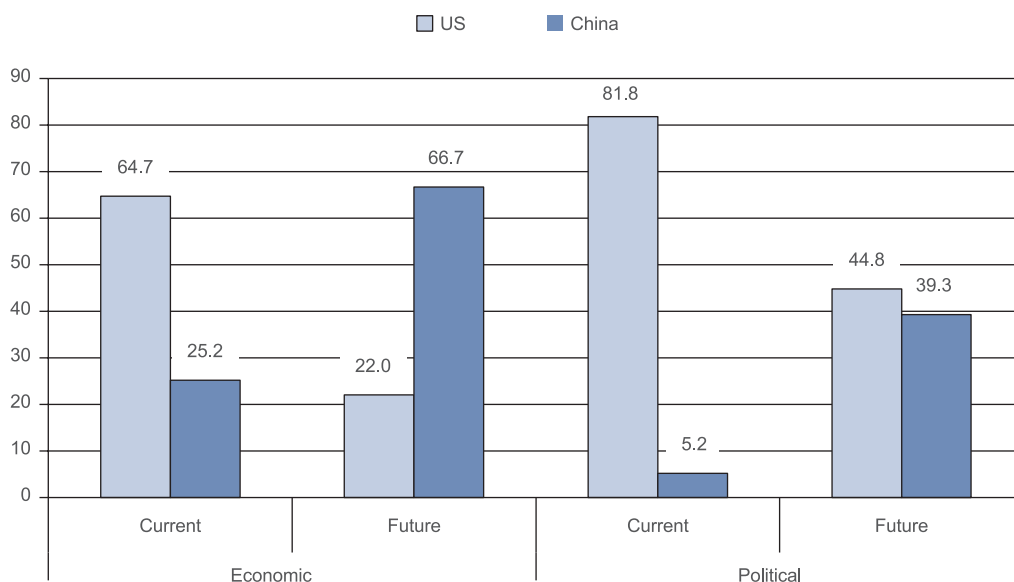
Although the political influence wielded by countries is harder to quantify than economic influence, the Korean public sees US influence to be in significant decline on this as well. In terms of current political influence on global affairs, there is a staggering gap perceived by the Korean public. While 81.8 per-

---

10. Survey conducted March 13-15, 2014. It should be noted that the US and China were not the only response options for this set of questions. The EU, Japan, Russia, and South Korea were also included.

cent identified the United States as the most influential actor in the world, only 5.2 percent cited China. However, in terms of future political influence, the numbers are 44.8 percent versus 39.3 percent, respectively.

Figure 8: Influence of the US vs. China



As aforementioned, Koreans preferred the United States to China in almost every respect. However, there exists a clear difference on preferred cooperative partner depending on a respondent’s evaluation of the future outlook for the United States and China (Table 4).

Among those that saw the United States as more politically influential in the future, 72.3 percent preferred trilateral security cooperation versus 27.7 percent that preferred security cooperation with China—a 44.6 percentage point spread. While a majority (57.1%) of those that viewed China as more politically influential in the future still preferred trilateral security cooper-

ation, the spread was cut to 14.2 percentage points and 42.9% preferred-security cooperation with China. That change was even more dramatic for preferred cooperative partner. Among those that believed China would be more politically influential than the United States in the future, 49.3 percent selected China as the preferred cooperative partner versus 50.7 percent that identified the United States.

**Table 4: Future Influence of the US and China and Cooperative Partners**

		Future Political Influence		Future Economic Influence	
		United States	China	United States	China
Security Cooperation	Trilateral	<b>72.3</b>	57.1	<b>78.7</b>	60.8
	Korea-China	27.7	<b>42.9</b>	21.3	<b>39.2</b>
Preferred Cooperative Partner	United States	<b>77.1</b>	50.7	<b>88.7</b>	57.2
	China	22.9	<b>49.3</b>	11.3	<b>42.8</b>

While this is not trended data, a China perceived as increasingly influential in both world politics and economics will increase Korean preferences for China, first as a preferred cooperative partner and then later as a security partner. This will be an important indicator to watch as it may signal a longer-term structural change in Korean attitudes towards the Korea-US alliance.

### *The Trilateral Alliance and Japan*

Much has been written about the ongoing tensions between Korea and Japan and how these tensions undermine the interests of all parties involved, including the United States. A previous Asan Report clearly outlined risks for

the United States should it continue to be seen as unwilling to reprimand Japan for its recent historical provocations.<sup>11</sup> This ongoing issue bears watching because it contains the potential to influence Korean perceptions of the relationship with the United States.

The United States has stated that it will not act as a mediator between Korea and Japan. But there is strong sentiment among the Korean public that the United States should play an active role in improving Korea-Japan relations, with 78.9 percent stating as such. Unsurprisingly, a majority (53.8%) were not satisfied with the US response to ongoing Korea-Japan tensions. (34.8% approved).

Among those that disapproved of the US response, a plurality (42.1%) disapproved because the United States has avoided the situation altogether, with 38.1 percent stating that the US was too supportive of Japan. Just 6.9 percent stated disapproval because they felt that the United States was opposing Korea's position in the dispute.

Bivariate analysis reinforces frustration among the Korean public about how the United States has addressed Korea-Japan tensions. Taken together, the data suggests that should these frustrations increase, it would lead to increased public sentiment that China is the most important security partner.

Among those that agreed that the United States had an important role to play in improving Korea-Japan relations, 57.6 percent disapproved of the US approach to date, as shown in Table 5. What is interesting in the table is the

---

11. See *Challenges and Opportunities for Korea-Japan Relations in 2014* published by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in March 2014.

76.6 percent who disagreed that the United States should play a role in improving Korea-Japan relations also disapproved of the US response to the conflict. The rationale behind this response is largely influenced by their opinion that the United States is not doing a good job. More than 70 percent of those respondents that negatively viewed the US role in the Korea-Japan conflict thought that the US was either neglecting the whole issue or taking sides with Japan. It appears that these people would prefer that the United States stay out of this debate since they do not believe the United States will help Korea on this matter.

**Table 5: US Response to Korea-Japan Tensions**

US response to Korea-Japan Conflict	US has role in improving Korea-Japan relations		
	Total	Agree	Disagree
		<b>78.9</b>	16.3
Approve	34.8	42.4	23.4
Disapprove	<b>53.8</b>	<b>57.6</b>	<b>76.6</b>

In Korea, there is a pervasive belief that the United States favors Japan over Korea despite being allies with both countries. This comes through in the public opinion data, where 53.0 percent stated that the United States favored Japan over Korea. A majority of every age cohort—except those in their 60s and older—stated as such. One-third (32.4%) stated that Korea was the favored ally. This perception informed how respondents evaluated the US response to Korea-Japan relations. Among those who disapproved of the US response, 76.7 percent held the view that Japan was the favored country of the United States (Table 6).



**Table 6: US Response to Korea-Japan Conflict and Perceived US Country Preference**

Country US thinks is more important	US response to Korea-Japan Conflict		
	Total	Approve	Disapprove
		34.8	<b>53.8</b>
Korea	32.4	<b>53.1</b>	23.3
Japan	<b>53.0</b>	46.9	<b>76.7</b>

One piece of good news for the United States is that the evaluations of the US response to Korea-Japan relations have not yet seriously eroded preferred countries for security cooperation. Even among those that disapproved of the US response, 60.8 percent continued to identify trilateral security cooperation as more important than Korea-China security cooperation (Table 7). However, this deserves to be watched closely. Should the proportion that views the US response negatively rise, it will likely increase the number that identifies Korea-China security cooperation as more important. The data also

**Table 7: US Response to Korea-Japan Conflict and Preferred Security Relationship**

		US response to Korea-Japan Conflict	
		Approve	Disapprove
Which security cooperation?	Korea-US-Japan	<b>71.7</b>	60.8
	Korea-China	28.3	<b>39.2</b>
Which country as a security partner?	US	<b>76.1</b>	58.8
	China	23.9	<b>41.2</b>

suggests that the same could happen for which country the Korean public identifies as the more important security partner. Both would be indicators of a long-term structural change in attitudes towards the Korea-US alliance.

The perception that the US favors Japan over Korea also serves to erode perceptions about security cooperation with the United States and the United States as Korea's most important security partner. Among those that feel that the United States views Korea as a more important partner, as shown in Table 8, there is strong consensus that the United States is Korea's most important security partner (78.7%) and that trilateral security cooperation is more important (71.9%). But for those that thought the US viewed Japan as more important, there were significant increases in the numbers who stated that China was the more important security partner (42.2%) and that preferred Korea-China security cooperation (37.6%).

**Table 8: Perceived US Country Preference and Preferred Security Relationship**

		Country US thinks is more important	
		Korea	Japan
Which security cooperation?	Korea-US-Japan	<b>71.9</b>	62.4
	Korea-China	28.1	<b>37.6</b>
Which country as a security partner?	US	<b>78.7</b>	57.8
	China	21.3	<b>42.2</b>

Also of concern for the United States is that if sentiment grows that Japan is the favored partner in the trilateral alliance, it could lead to views that the United States is complicit in Japanese actions that Koreans find offensive. While the United States is, of course, not complicit in those actions, the Ko-

rean public could peg US inaction as tacit consent. The building of such an opinion could increase anti-US sentiment during times of tense Korea-Japan relations.

## **Conclusion**

Korea-US relations are stronger than at any point in their long history, and there is no reason to suspect that this will change in the near future. Strictly bilateral issues—in as much as any issue in Northeast Asia can be considered strictly bilateral—have been resolved in a remarkably smooth manner. OPCON transfer has largely remained off the public radar, the new SMA agreement was relatively uncontroversial, and the renegotiation of the 123 Agreement has also attracted little attention thus far. Support for the Korea-US alliance is nearly universal, and this stability within the relationship has allowed those that manage the alliance to begin to seriously address how to expand the alliance to one that is truly global in nature. Therein lay its challenges.

Any expansion of the Korea-US alliance will need to be mindful of the perception that the alliance is perceived to be fundamentally unequal. This creates the risk that as the allies address both internal and external challenges, anti-American sentiment could be enflamed and serve to erode favorable attitudes towards the United States. The handling of the issues mentioned above, as well as the relocation of US troops and the environmental treatment of the base in central Seoul will be critical in addressing this perceived inequality.

The external challenges facing the Korea-US alliance stem from the regional

context within which the alliance exists. The growing influence of China, Korea's place within the perceived competitive US-China relationship, and the US position on Korea-Japan tensions could spark longer-term structural changes on how the Korean public views the Korea-US relationship. The latter deserves the most immediate attention. With little optimism that Korea-Japan relations will improve in the near future, the US response will be closely watched. A lack of repercussions for Japan over perceived historical provocations, will further strengthen perceptions that the United States favors Japan in the trilateral alliance. This could eventually begin to erode positive perceptions of the United States in Korea.

In the long-term, however, it is the US-China relationship, and Korea's position in it, that will have the biggest impact on the Korea-US alliance. This position will be complicated by the US rebalance to Asia. While attitudes currently remain in favor of strengthening the relationship with the United States, the prevalent views of an ascendant China and a US in decline may begin to alter country preferences of the Korean public. This will remain an important indicator to watch in the coming years for signs of a structural change in attitudes toward the United States, and thus toward the Korea-US alliance.

North Korea policy, of course, will remain the single most important issue facing the Korea-US alliance. While the South Korean public approves of President's Park approach thus far, it has yet to create a thaw in inter-Korean relations. The focus of the alliance will continue to be on how to deter and denuclearize North Korea.

The April 2014 summit between President Park and President Obama should address many of the issues outlined here. However, there is an expectation

in policy analyst circles that the summit will focus heavily on Korea-Japan relations. After all, Korea was a last minute addition to President Obama's trip through Asia, added primarily to combat perceptions that Japan was being rewarded after Prime Minister Abe's December 2013 visit to the Yasukuni Shrine. This is one case where public opinion and elite opinion may be out of step.

The Korean public expected the summit to address more practical issues for the Korea-US alliance. While 26.5 percent wanted President Park to address the North Korean nuclear problem with Mr. Obama, 19.8 percent wanted Ms. Park to discuss ways to get the most from the KORUS FTA. Just 13.2 percent wanted the two leaders to discuss the Korea-Japan conflict.

This report makes clear that many of the challenges for the Korea-US alliance are not internal in nature. This summit will serve as an opportunity for both leaders to address how the alliance moves forward to address regional and global concerns.

While domestic attitudes can shift quickly, both sides have learned from past experiences and have vastly improved alliance management. Both Korea and the United States must now transition to a new kind of alliance management, one that is commensurate with the expectations of the alliance itself. As both partners seek to expand the role of the Korea-US alliance, this means managing the alliance in relation to other regional relationships. This could cause turbulence in the short-term as both learn to navigate new waters. But the Korean public should remain largely supportive of the Korea-US alliance into the foreseeable future, allowing both sides room to maneuver to secure the best path forward.

## Appendix A

### Major Issues in ROK-US Relations

#### 2013

- March 18 Deputy Defense Secretary Ashton Carter visits South Korea, discussing a measured approach to North Korea's nuclear program
- March 25 President Park meets Former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, saying nuclear North Korea 'unacceptable'
- March 29 President Park meets US Senator Bob Corker, discussing renegotiation of the 123 Agreement
- April 1 Foreign Minister Yun Byung-se visits US, discusses growing tensions with Japan and North Korea
- Ministry of National Defense proposes postponement of OPCON transfer to December 2015
- April 12 President Park meets US Secretary of State John Kerry, discusses growing tensions with Japan and North Korea
- April 18 Korea and the US hold the 37th Military Committee Meeting, discuss OPCON transfer and North Korea nuclear issues

- May 5-10 President Park visits the US
- May 7 ROK-US Summit Meeting
- June 1 ROK-US Defense Minister Meeting, discuss postponement of OPCON transfer
- June 28 US House of Representatives approves extension of the 123 Agreement
- July 30 South Korea and US Integrated Defense Dialogue, discuss postponement of OPCON transfer
- August 19 President Park meets US Senator Robert Menendez, discusses North Korean nuclear issues and Korea-Japanese security cooperation
- September 17 The House Committee on Foreign Affairs approves a bill (H.R. 2449) extending the existing US-ROK 123 Agreement
- September 30 President Park meets US Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, discusses OPCON transfer and North Korea nuclear issues
- October 2 45th ROK-US Security Consultative Meeting to inaugurate joint command and discuss conditions and period of OPCON transfer
- November 25 Lieutenant General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, Commander of US-ROK Military, reviews plan to keep some

frontline troops in areas north of the Han River and to create a combined division including both American and South Korean troops

- December 6 US Vice President Joe Biden visits South Korea, discussing KADIZ extension issues
- December 11 ROK-US meeting of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) Joint Committee in Seoul, revises guidelines on USFK's patrol activities

## 2014

- January 12 Compromise agreement of the 9th Special Measure Agreement (SMA)
- January 27 US Congress passes extension of the 123 Agreement
- February 2 The Signing of the 9th Special Measures Agreement (SMA) between ROK and US
- February 13 President Park meets US Secretary of State John Kerry, discusses improvement of Korea-Japanese relations
- March 6 'East Sea' bill passes Virginia House of Delegates



## ROK-US Major Agreements and Plans

---

- OPCON, the Wartime Operational Control OPCON Certification Plan
- SMA, Special Measures Agreement
- The 123 Agreement
- TPP, Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership

## The 9th Special Measure Agreement (SMA) Summits

---

2013 July 2	1st Summit Meeting in Washington, D.C.
2013 July 24-25	2nd Summit Meeting in Seoul
2013 August 22-23	3rd Summit Meeting in Seoul
2013 September 25-26	4th Summit Meeting in Washington, D.C.
2013 October 5	5th Summit Meeting in Incheon
2013 October 30-31	6th Summit Meeting in Seoul
2013 November 18-19	7th Summit Meeting in Washington, D.C.
2013 December 4	8th Summit Meeting in Washington, D.C.
2013 December 10-17	9th Summit Meeting in Seoul
2014 January 9	10th Summit Meeting in Seoul

## 2014 January 12      9th Special Measures Agreement Finalized

- South Korea to pay 920 billion won (\$866 million) for the upkeep of USFK
- The agreement lasts for five years until 2018. For the last four years of the agreement, the increase of Korea's contribution will be decided by inflation but will not exceed 4 percent.
- Seoul and Washington agree to improve the transparency of the use of the USFK funds and to have prior consultation in the process of base relocation.
- The allies agree to notify the National Assembly on the use of defense funds, including unused money, in a way that does not divulge classified military information. The US will provide Korea with a report twice a year detailing how much money remains unused.
- The agreement clarifies that 90 percent of Korea's share of expenses will flow into the Korean economy as USFK Korean workers' labor costs, and payments made to Korean defense and construction companies

### **The 123 Agreement**

---

- |                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| 2010 October 25 | 1st Negotiation Meeting in Washington, D.C. |
| 2011 March 3-4  | 2nd Negotiation Meeting in Seoul            |
| 2011 July 14-15 | 3rd Negotiation Meeting in Washington, D.C. |

2011 December 6-8	4th Negotiation Meeting in Seoul
2012 February 6	5th Negotiation Meeting in Washington, D.C.
2013 April 16-18	6th Negotiation Meeting in Washington, D.C.
2013 June 3-4	7th Negotiation Meeting in Seoul
2013 September 30-October 1	8th Negotiation Meeting in Washington, D.C.
2014 January 7-8	9th Negotiation Meeting in Washington, D.C.

- Produces a separate document dealing with cooperation in key nuclear energy issues, including exporting nuclear plants and the management of spent fuel

2014 January 27	US Congress passes extension of the 123 Agreement
-----------------	---

### **Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership (TPP)**

---

2013 May	The 17th TPP Agreement
2013 June	Japan decides to join TPP
2013 September	18th TPP Agreement for 12 countries including Japan
2013 October	Basic agreement discussion at APEC Meeting

2014 January 10	President Park publicly proposes South Korea's participation in TPP
2014 February 25	Failure of TPP Final Agreement
2014 March 4	Initial talks on Korea-Japan Bilateral Negotiation
2014 March 10	1st TPP Korea-Japan Bilateral Negotiation Meeting
2014 May	Renegotiation of TPP

# Appendix B

## Survey Methodology

### Asan Annual Surveys

---

#### 2011

Sample size: 2,000 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error:  $\pm 2.19\%$  at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile phones and online survey

Period: August 26-October 4, 2011

Organization: M Brain

#### 2012

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error:  $\pm 2.5\%$  at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: September 24-November 1, 2014

Organization: Millward Brown Media Research

#### 2013

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error:  $\pm 2.5\%$  at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: September 4-27, 2013

Organization: Millward Brown Media Research

## **Asan Daily Poll**

---

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

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

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones

Period: See report for specific dates of surveys cited.

Organization: Research & Research



**A S A N**  
R E P O R T

## **South Korean Attitudes on the Korea-US Alliance and Northeast Asia**

by **Choi Kang, Kim Jiyeon, Karl Friedhoff, Kang Chungku, Lee Euicheol**

**First edition** April 21, 2014

**Published by** The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

**Registration number** 300-2010-122

**Registration date** September 27, 2010

**Address** 11, Gyeonghuigung 1ga-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 110-062, Korea

**Telephone** No. +82-2-730-5842

**Fax** +82-2-730-5876

**Website** [www.asaninst.org](http://www.asaninst.org)

**E-mail** [info@asaninst.org](mailto:info@asaninst.org)

**Book Design** EGISHOLDINGS

**Photo** Credit [pictures.reuters.com](http://pictures.reuters.com)

**ISBN** 979-11-5570-049-5 93300

Copyright © 2014 by The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

All Rights reserved, including the rights of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Printed in the Republic of Korea







ISBN 979-11-5570-049-5