

Asan Institute Releases the Issue Brief “South Korean Outlook on the United States and ROK-U.S. Relations in the Biden Era”

Media Contact: Communications Department
(82-2-3701-7338, communications@asaninst.org)

SEOUL, February 10, 2021– The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (<http://en.asaninst.org/>) presents the issue brief “South Korean Outlook on the United States and ROK-U.S. Relations in the Biden Era.”

The issue brief reveals a number of significant findings about public opinion on the U.S. and ROK-U.S. relations. Among the topics covered include South Korean public attitudes about the Biden administration and its policies as well as their expectations about the U.S. policy in the region. The issue brief presents some interesting results:

- According to our average favorability measure, which is evaluated on a scale of 0 to 10 (0= *not favorable at all*, 10= *very favorable*), Donald Trump was rated as 3.44, whereas Joe Biden was at 5.89.
- 68.7% of the respondents rated Trump’s performance over the last four years as being less than satisfactory. When asked for their reasons, 33.9% stated that they did not support Trump’s policy of marginalizing multilateralism and international order; 23.2% blamed Trump for the rise in social tensions and troubled race relations within the United States; and 15.6% stated that Trump did not respond well to the COVID-19 pandemic; 9.9% blamed Trump for his failure to make progress on U.S.-North Korea relations; and 9.5% mentioned rising tensions between the U.S. and China as their reason for giving Trump less than satisfactory rating.
- When respondents were asked about their views on the overall situation in and around the Korean Peninsula under Trump’s watch, 54.5% were negative and 34.2% were positive.
- Country favorability shows that the U.S. is at 5.99 and China is at 3.5.
- When the respondents were asked whether they had a positive or negative outlook on the Korean Peninsula under a Biden presidency, 63% expressed that they were positive; only 25.9% were negative.
- 72.5% of South Koreans also thought that U.S. influence will grow under a Biden leadership. 19.5% thought that this would *not* be the case.
- The outlook on the ROK-U.S. bilateral relationship was overwhelmingly positive with 74.7% of the respondents expressing optimism. When asked about the reasons, 42.6% thought that the bilateral relationship will improve due to improved cooperation among allied nations under a Biden watch; 18.4% cited a positive outlook on the Special Measure Agreement negotiations; 18.1% stated that the value of ROK-U.S. alliance would grow due to growing U.S.-China competition; Finally,

only 10% of those who expressed optimism about ROK-U.S. relations stated that their reason for doing so was due to the likelihood that the Biden administration would engage in a nuclear dialogue with North Korea.

- When asked to name the most important issue on the agenda for the ROK-U.S. alliance, 25.3% cited North Korea (and related issues), 16.7% rated the SMA negotiations as the next most important issue followed by the U.S.-China trade war (13.5%), wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer (11.6%), military-to-military cooperation (i.e. joint exercises) (11.4%), cooperation on infectious diseases (10.6%), and climate change (3.6%).
- When asked to choose what they thought about the future of ROK-U.S. alliance, 66.3% of the respondents stated that the alliance should be built on principles such as “democratic ideals, human rights, and universal values.”
- On the issue of Korea-China relations, 44% stated that they thought the relationship between Seoul and Beijing would improve while 41.3% stated that they thought the relationship would worsen.
- When asked about individual preferences between the U.S. and China, 44% stated that they thought the relationship between Seoul and Beijing would improve while 41.3% stated that they thought the relationship would worsen.
- The survey respondents also believed very strongly that cooperation between South Korea, the U.S. and Japan needed to be strengthened (69.4%) in order to deal with the security challenges arising from growing threats posed by North Korea and China.

The authors state that “the Moon administration... must come to terms with the reality of South Korean public perception about the United States and the new leadership in Washington. This is especially true as the current government enters the lame duck period in which ROK-U.S. bilateral relations can weigh on the minds of South Korean voters in the coming presidential election. While North Korea is an important priority for the Moon administration, there are a number of unresolved issues with respect to the ROK-U.S. alliance....” Kim and Kang also point out that the South Korean public maintains a clear position on matters related to U.S.-China competition and ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation. They argue that “if U.S.-China relations do not improve within the next year, Seoul may need to make a decision on this issue.”

The sample size of the South Korean survey was 1,000 people, over the age of 19. The margin of error is $\pm 3.1\%$ at 95% confidence level. The survey was conducted by Research & Research using Random Digit Dialing for mobile and landlines during December 28~29, 2020.

Research Team from the Asan Institute for Policy Study includes:

Dr. J. James KIM, Senior Research Fellow (jjkim@asaninst.org)

Mr. KANG Chungku, Principal Associate (ckkang@asaninst.org)

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