

SOUTH KOREANS
— AND —
THEIR NEIGHBORS
2023

ASAN POLL

THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES

South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2023

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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, as well as Korean reunification.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 2023

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies has been tracking South Korean public opinion on international affairs since 2010. Among the reports and papers released by the Institute is a series called “*South Koreans and Their Neighbors*.” The Institute released the first print of this series in 2014 but fell short of publishing it in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19. We are happy to pick up where we left off with this year’s report, which carries data collected in March 2023.

The report “*South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2023*” reveals the current state of South Korean views on neighboring countries, foreign policy priorities, outlook on relations with the U.S. and North Korea, nuclear armament, prospects for U.S.-China competition, and U.S. global leadership.

Our key findings are as follows:

The U.S. was rated the most favored country among South Koreans (6.27). Japan (3.66) was ranked second. Japan’s favorability has been virtually unchanged since March 2022 (3.67). China’s favorability was 3.00, increasing from 2.71 in March 2022. Finally, North Korea and Russia (tied at 2.52) were rated as the least favored countries.

U.S. President Joe Biden was named the most favored leader (5.05), though his rating dropped from 5.89 in March 2022. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida ranked second (2.39). President Xi’s rating followed him by scoring 2.08 in March 2023. Chairman

Kim's rating dropped to 1.39 from 1.59 in March 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin's favorability was 1.33, making him the least favored foreign leader.

A majority saw South Korea's relationship with the U.S. as improving in the future since June 2013. The exception was in December 2016. As Donald Trump openly questioned the value of the ROK-U.S. alliance, 64% viewed the future of ROK-U.S. relations as unfavorable. However, South Koreans turned more optimistic (2020: 74.7%, 2022: 88.3%) after Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election. In March 2023, 63.6% expected the ROK-U.S. bilateral relationship to improve.

The data suggests a correlation between threat perception and prospects for inter-Korean relations. In March 2023, only 20.1% saw inter-Korean relations improve in the future. 71.8% were pessimistic in March 2023, which appears reasonable given the increased number of provocations by North Korea over the past year. 68.5% held a negative outlook on inter-Korean relations in March 2022.

Ever since the Asan Institute surveyed South Koreans about the necessity of ROK-U.S. alliance in 2012, more than nine out of ten South Koreans have stated that the alliance is necessary for the foreseeable future. March 2023 was not an exception – 93.2% said the ROK-U.S. alliance would continue to be necessary. However, when asked if the alliance would be necessary *after* unification, the percentage dropped to 80.8%. This result is consistent with the past: the share of respondents never dipped below 80% since 2012 (min: 80%, max: 86.3%) when the Institute first collected this data.

When asked about the necessity of U.S. Forces in South Korea for the foreseeable future, 78.5% answered in the affirmative. The support for USFK has been at least 67.8% since 2012 (min: 67.8%, max: 82.1%). When asked if the USFK would be necessary *after* unification, those who answered in the affirmative were 57.1%. Past data shows a range

from 35.1% to 62.3% between 2014 and 2023.

Debate on nuclear armament is gaining more attention as tension escalates in South Korea. In March 2023, 66.7% of respondents supported developing nuclear weapons in South Korea (Oppose: 32.3%). The cumulative data since 2010 suggests South Koreans generally favor indigenous nuclear weapons development (min: 54.8%, max: 70.2%).

When asked about reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons onto the Korean Peninsula, 60.4% supported it in March 2023. 37.8% opposed. Public sentiment has remained relatively unchanged since March 2022 (Support: 59%, Oppose: 38.3%). The data suggests a majority consistently supported the U.S. tactical nuclear weapons except in 2019 when the public was split (Support: 46%, Oppose: 47.9%).

When the respondents were asked to choose the stronger country between the U.S. and China, a majority (48.8%) chose the former over the latter in March 2023. This was much lower than 60.5% in 2022. And those who named China as the stronger country was only 16.8%. The respondents viewing China as a future superpower remained almost unchanged (2022: 15.5%). And those who projected the strength of the U.S. and China will be at the equilibrium reached 31.9% in March 2023, which increased from 22% in 2022.

When asked which country South Korea should strengthen ties with if the U.S. and China continue their rivalry, an overwhelming majority chose the U.S. (80.1%) over China (13.1%). However, the respondents viewing China as a preferred future partner ranged from 9.9% to 32.6% since 2014.

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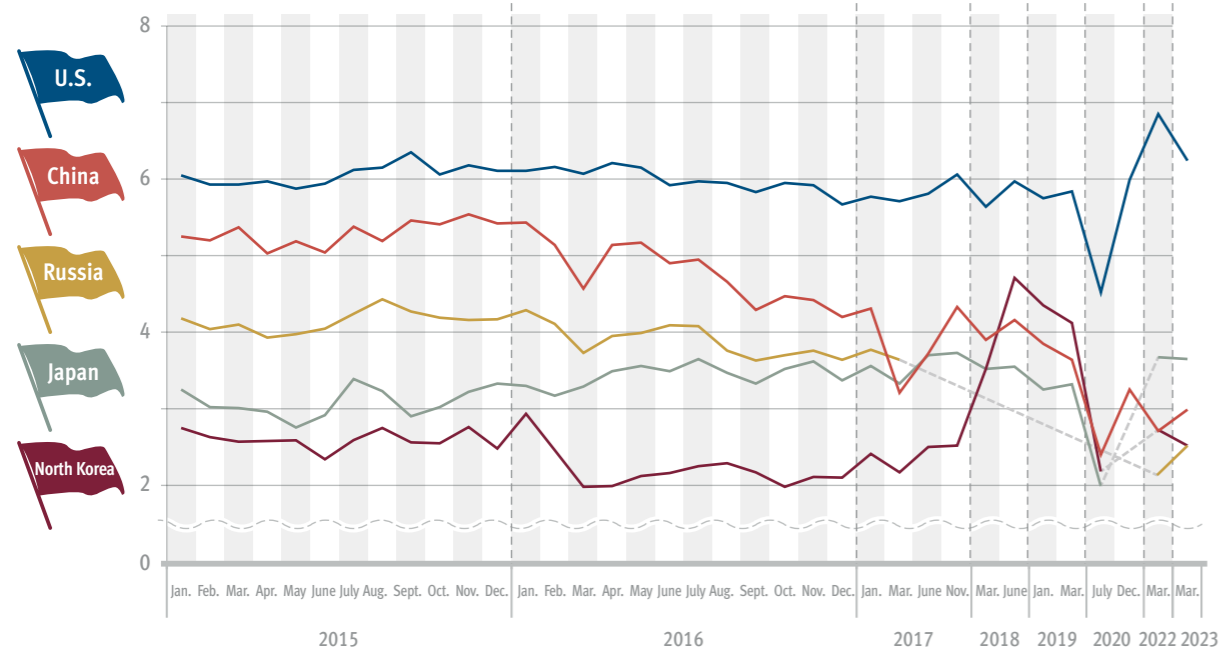
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COUNTRY FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following countries?

0: Least favorable ~ 10: Most favorable

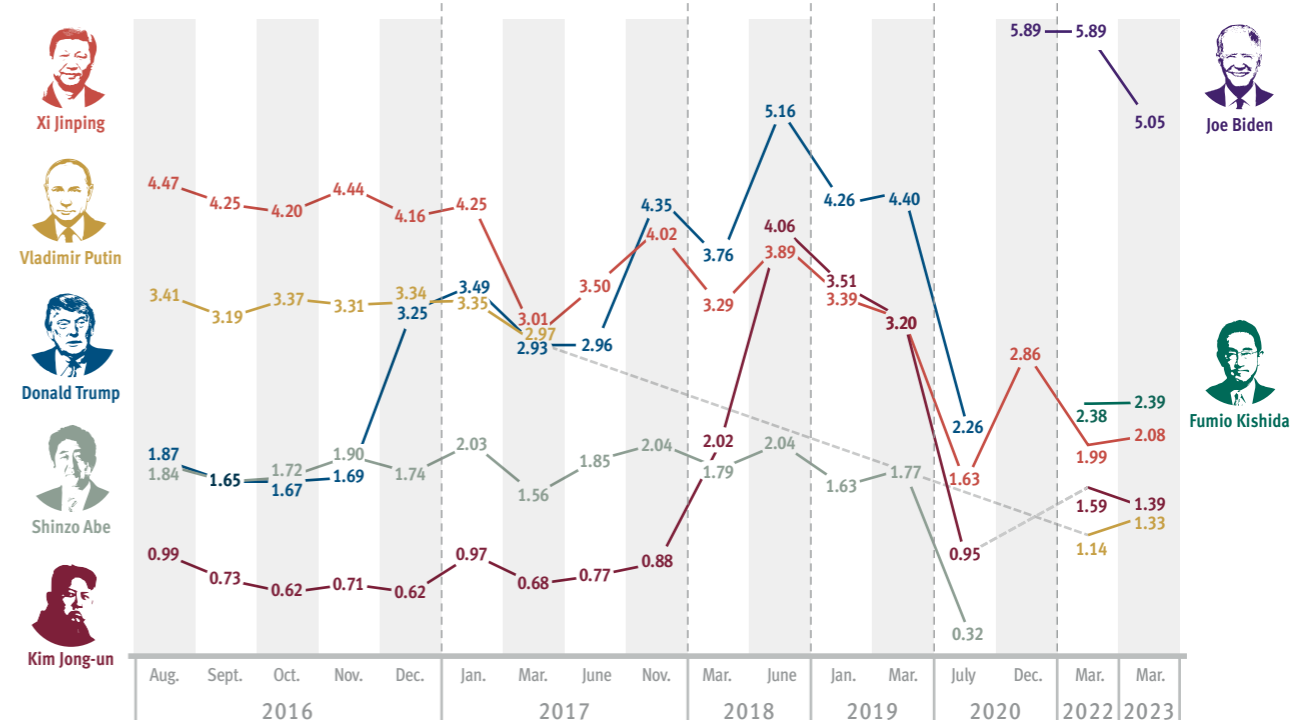


South Koreans rated the favorability of the U.S., China, Russia, Japan, and North Korea on a scale of zero (“least favorable”) to ten (“most favorable”). In March 2023, the favorability of the U.S. was 6.27. It remained above five since January 2015, recording the highest (6.85) in March 2022. Japan (3.66) was ranked second. Japan’s favorability has been virtually unchanged since March 2022 (3.67), and it stayed above three after October 2015, except in July 2020, when it recorded the lowest (1.99). China’s favorability was 3.00, increasing from 2.71 in March 2022. And finally, North Korea and Russia (tied at 2.52) were rated as the least favored countries. North Korea’s military provocations and Russia’s Ukraine invasion appear to be contributing factors.

LEADER FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following leaders?

0: Least favorable ~ 10: Most favorable

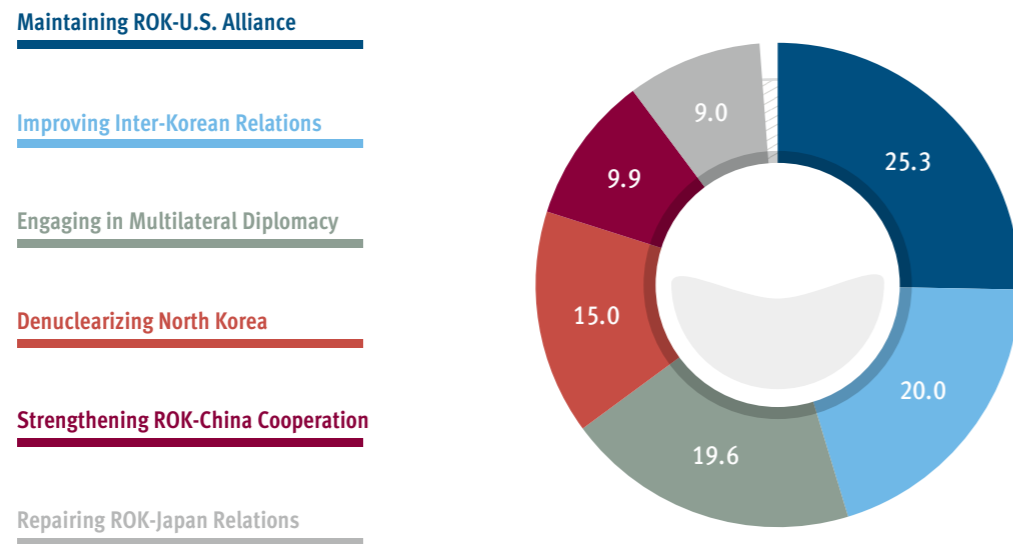


Survey respondents were asked to rate the favorability of leaders from neighboring countries on a scale of zero (“least favorable”) to ten (“most favorable”). U.S. President Joe Biden was named the most favored leader (5.05), though his rating dropped from 5.89 in March 2022. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida ranked second (2.39). President Xi was third, with an average score of 2.08. This is much lower than his ratings in 2018 and 2019. Chairman Kim’s rating dropped to 1.39 from 1.59 in March 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s favorability was 1.33, making him the least favored foreign leader. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine appears to be a key factor.



MOST IMPORTANT FOREIGN POLICY ISSUE

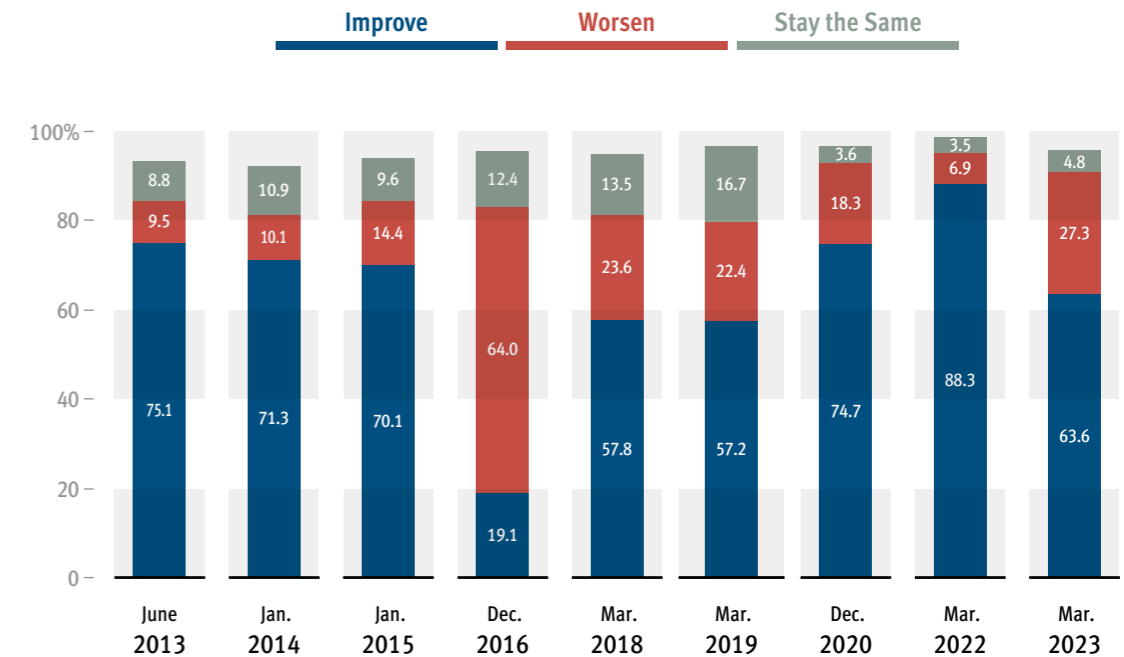
What is the most important foreign policy issue for South Korea?



Respondents were asked to identify the most important foreign policy issue for South Korea. In March 2023, 25.3% named maintaining the ROK-U.S. alliance the most important issue. Improving inter-Korean relations (20%), engaging in multilateral diplomacy (19.6%), and denuclearizing North Korea (15%) were also seen as critical issues for South Korea. Meanwhile, those who view South Korea's relationships with China and Japan as important were 9.9% and 9%, respectively. Though the South Korean government is trying to restore its ties with Japan, it appears the public does not see it as important at this time.

SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S.

How do you see South Korea's relationship with the U.S. changing in the future?

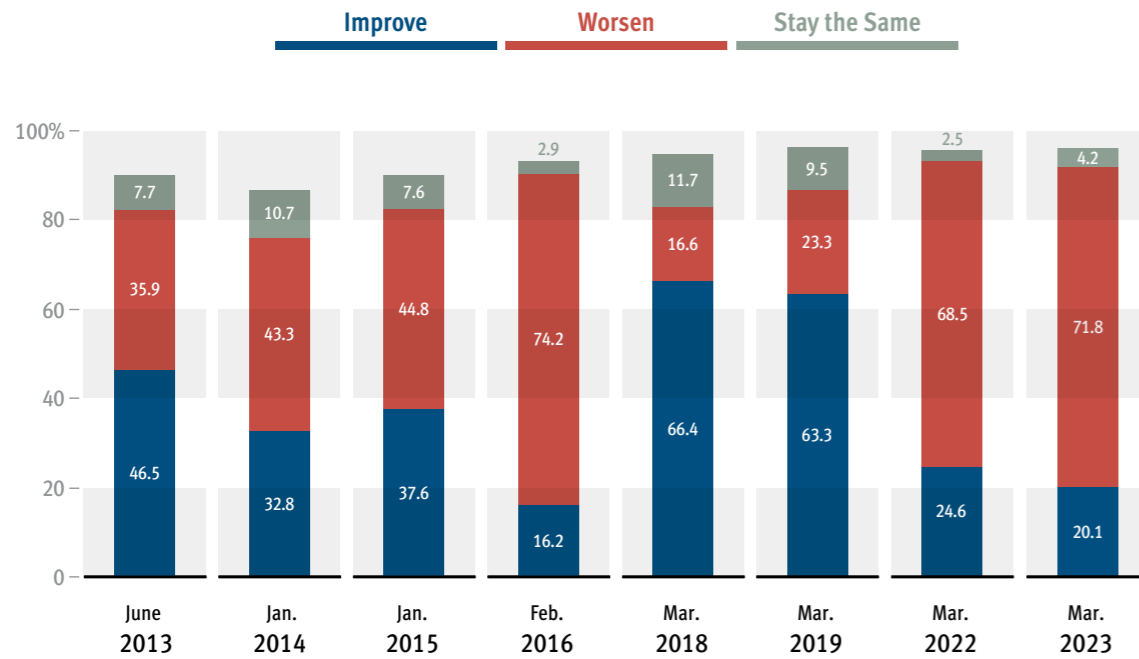


A majority expressed optimism about South Korea's future relationship with the U.S. The exception to this rule was in December 2016, when Donald Trump was elected as the U.S. President. As Donald Trump openly questioned the value of the ROK-U.S. alliance, 64% viewed the future of the ROK-U.S. relationship as negative. However, South Koreans became more optimistic after Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election (2020: 74.7%, 2022: 88.3%). In March 2023, 63.6% expected the ROK-U.S. bilateral relations to improve. Though a majority hold a positive view on the future of bilateral ties, the number dropped from 88.3% in March 2022. There appears to be some reservation about the future of the ROK-U.S. relationship under the Biden administration.



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH KOREA

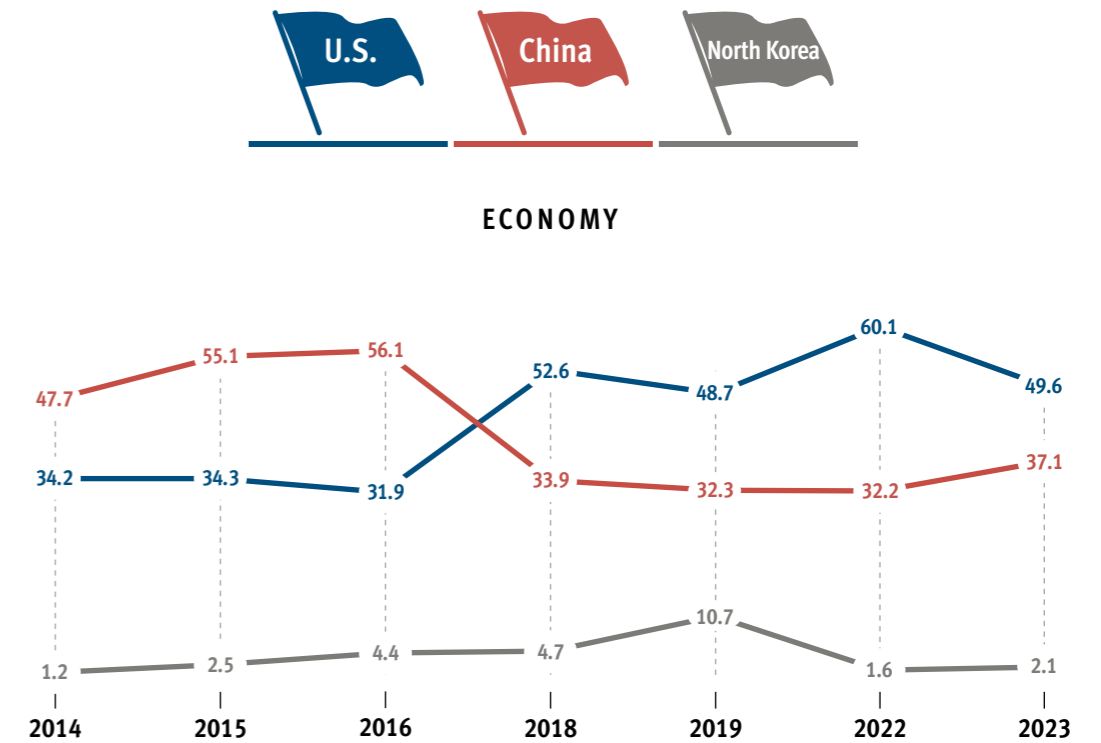
How do you see South Korea's relationship with North Korea changing in the future?



Respondents were asked about the future of inter-Korean relations. In March 2023, 20.1% expected inter-Korean relations to improve. Pessimism reached 71.8% in March 2023 with increased North Korean provocations. This is a slight increase from 68.5% in March 2022. A majority was optimistic about inter-Korean relations throughout 2018 and 2019 when there were several high-level talks involving two Koreas and the U.S. for North Korean denuclearization. There appears to be some correlation between the threat perception and the prospects for inter-Korean relations.

MOST IMPORTANT NEIGHBOR FOR SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY

Which country is most important for South Korea's economy?

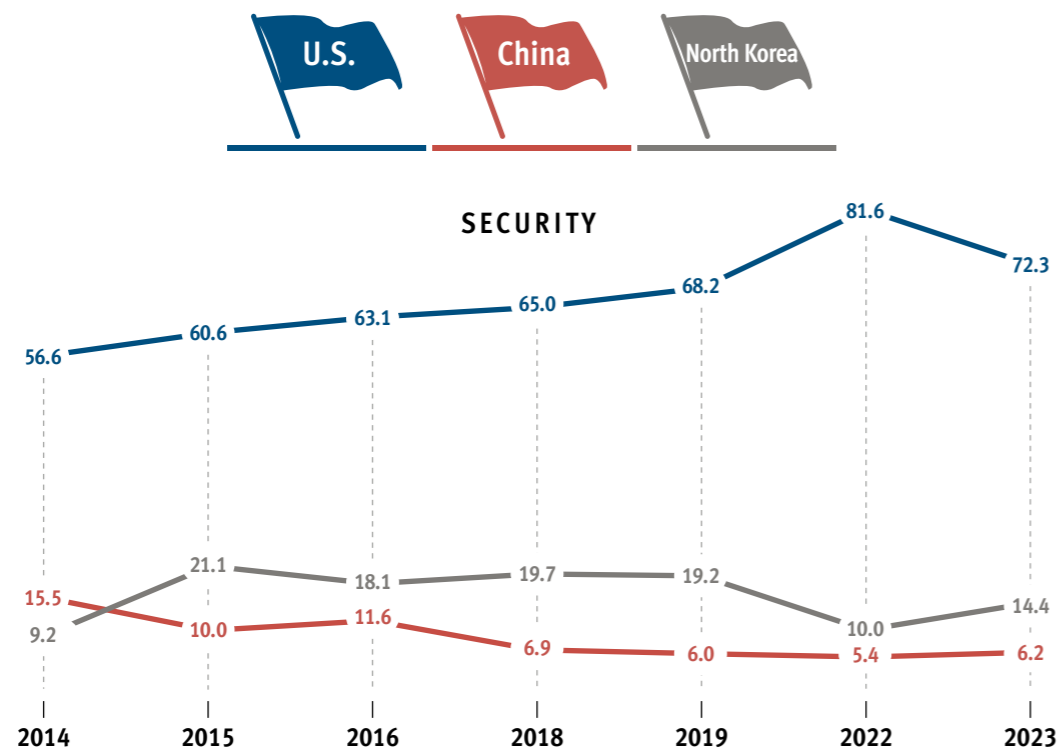


When asked to identify the most important country for South Korea's economy, almost half (49.6%) of South Koreans named the U.S. A majority saw China as the most important country for the South Korean economy from 2014 to 2016 (min: 47.7%, max: 56.1%), while about three out of ten viewed the U.S. as important during that period. Since 2018, around half began to see the U.S. as important for South Korea's economy (min: 48.7%, max: 60.1%). Those who viewed China as important were within the margin of error after its relative importance dropped significantly in 2018. Finally, those who viewed North Korea as economically important were only 2.1%, which is much lower than 10.7% in 2019.



MOST IMPORTANT NEIGHBOR FOR SOUTH KOREA'S SECURITY

Which country is most important for South Korea's security?

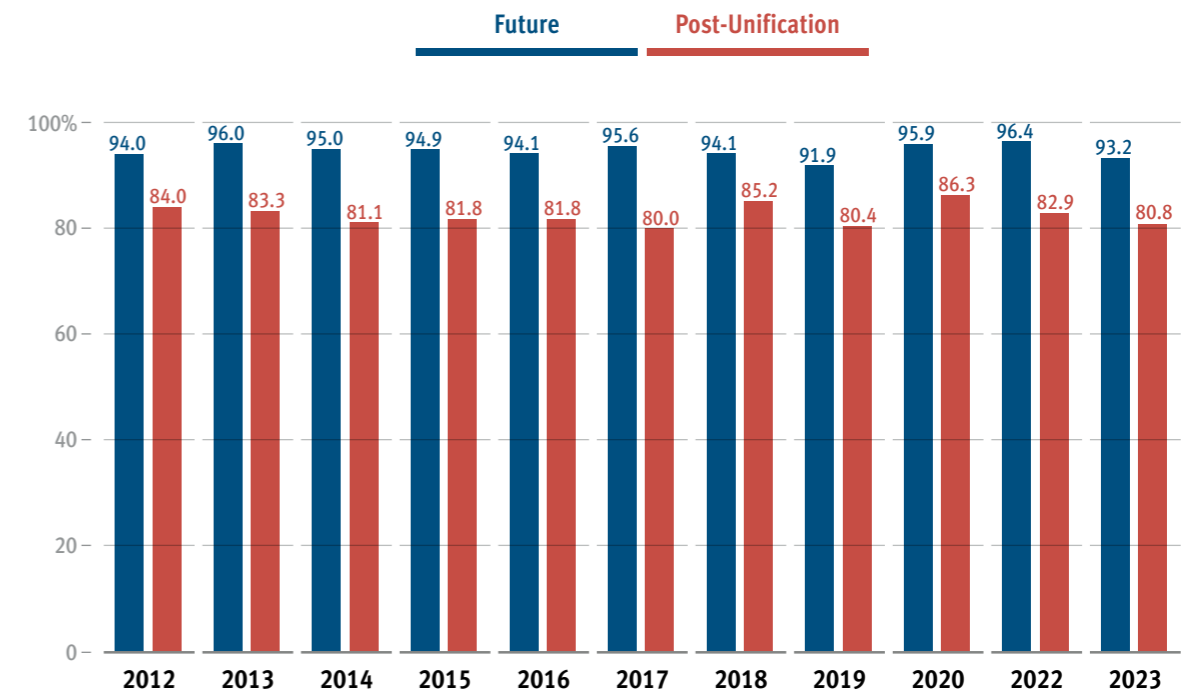


Respondents were asked to identify the most important neighbor for South Korea's security. Since the Institute began tracking this data in 2014, over half of South Koreans have consistently chosen the U.S. as the most important country. In 2023, 72.3% viewed the U.S. as the most important neighbor. 6.2% named China as the most important country. And lastly, those who believed North Korea was the most important country for South Korean security was 14.4%, which is a slight increase from 10% in 2022. But this figure is much lower than 21.1% in 2015, which was an all-time high.

NECESSITY OF ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE: FUTURE VS. POST-UNIFICATION

Q1. Do you think the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to be necessary in the future?

Q2. Do you think the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to be necessary after unification?



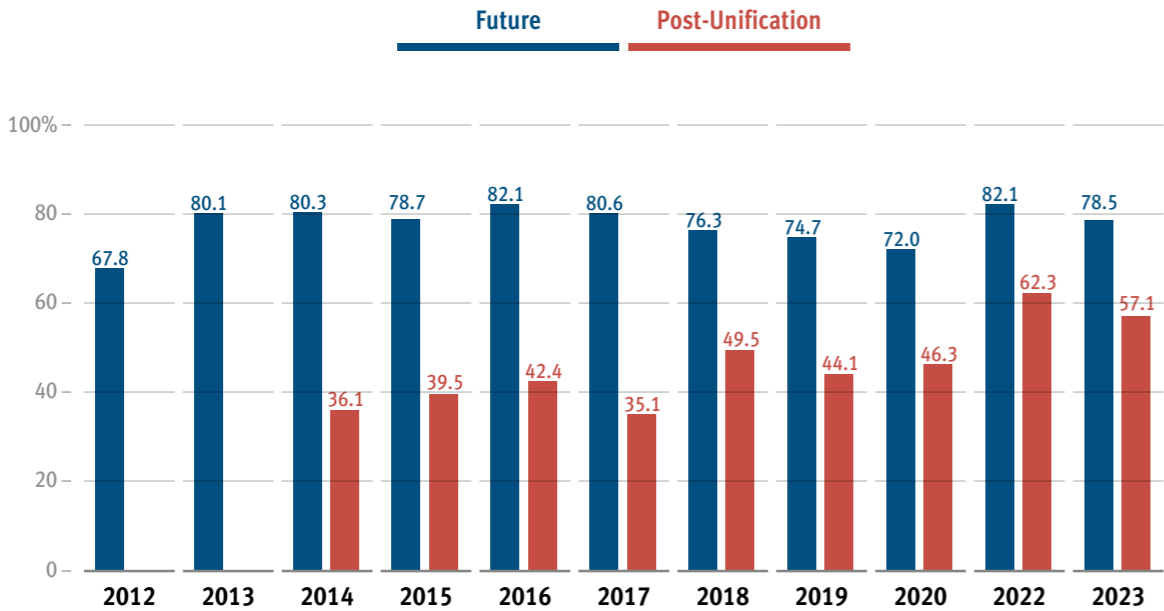
Respondents were asked to show their views about the necessity of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Since 2012, over nine out of ten South Koreans have said the ROK-U.S. alliance is necessary for the foreseeable future. In 2023, those who answered the ROK-U.S. alliance would continue to be necessary was 93.2%, showing a slight drop from 96.4% in 2022. And when asked if the alliance would be necessary even after unification, the percentage dropped to 80.8%. However, those who saw the alliance would be necessary after unification was no less than 80% since 2012 (min: 80%, max: 86.3%). In 2023, the difference was 12.4%p, which has never exceeded 15.6%p since 2012.



NECESSITY OF U.S. FORCES IN SOUTH KOREA: FUTURE VS. POST-UNIFICATION

Q1. What is your opinion about continued U.S. military stationing in South Korea in the future?

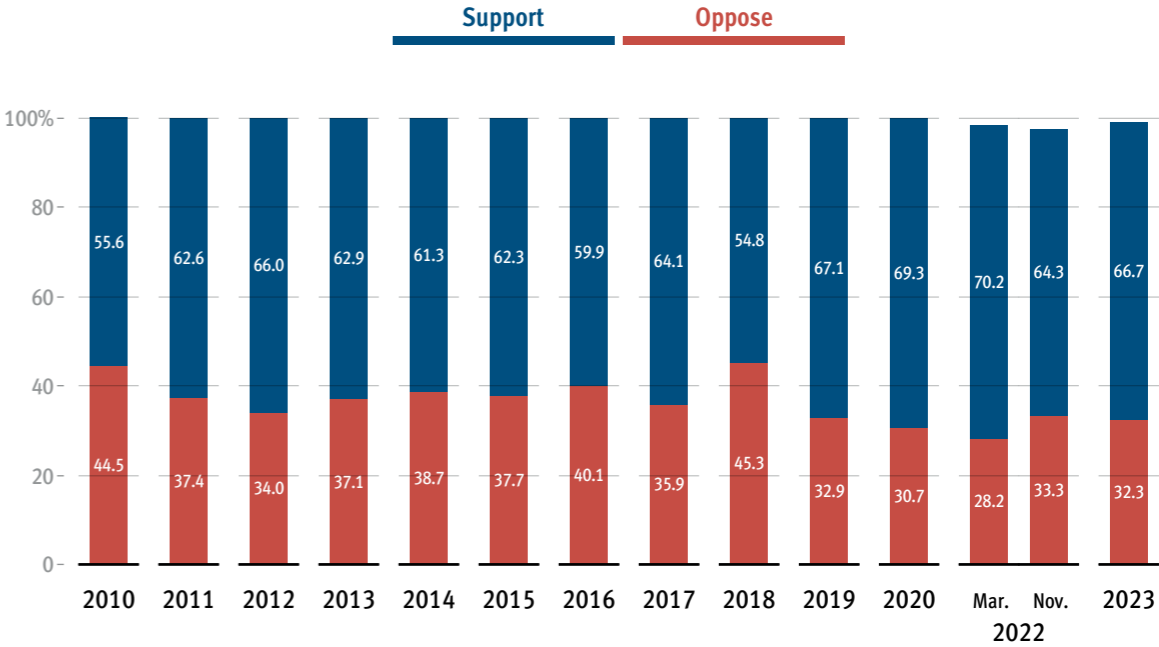
Q2. What is your opinion about U.S. military stationing in South Korea after unification?



When asked about the necessity of U.S. Forces in South Korea, 78.5% answered it is necessary for the foreseeable future. The support for USFK presence has been at least 67.8% since 2012 (min: 67.8%, max: 82.1%). Public support was high in 2016 and 2017 when tensions increased due to multiple missile tests conducted by North Korea. However, there was a significant decline from 2018 to 2020 when the diplomatic engagements between North Korea and the U.S. hinted at a possible breakthrough in denuclearization. When asked if the USFK would be necessary after unification, those who answered in the affirmative ranged from 35.1% to 62.3% since 2014. The affirmative answer in 2023 was 57.1%. The difference in future versus post-unification stationing of the USFK was 21.4%p in 2023, much lower than the highest gap in 2017 (45.5%p).

ATTITUDES ON DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS NUCLEAR WEAPONS

What is your opinion about the statement that South Korea should develop nuclear weapons?

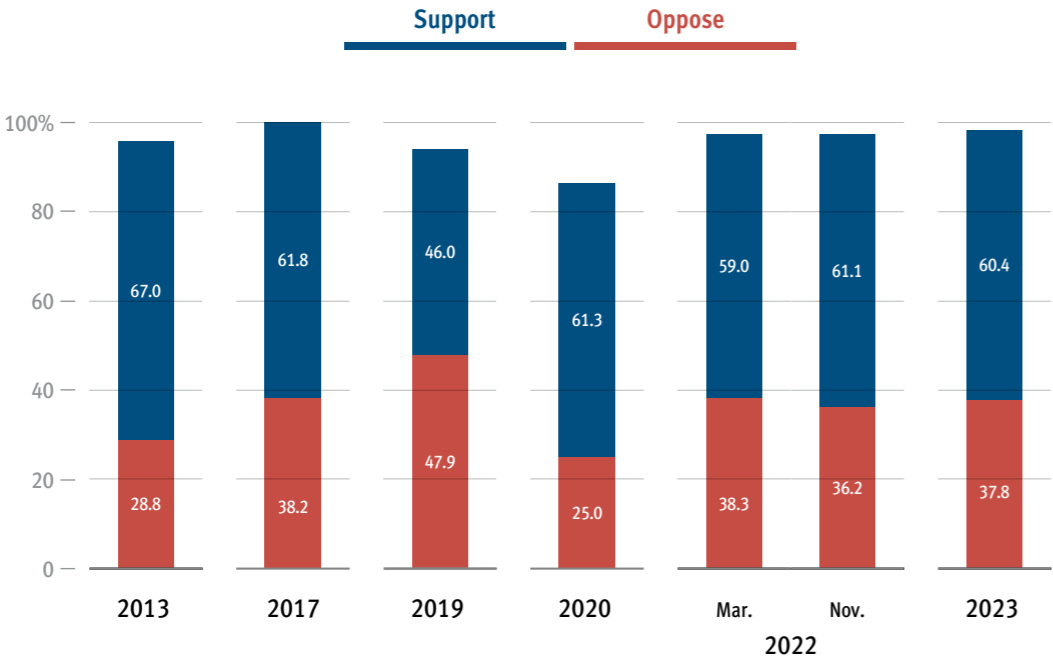


Debate on nuclear armament in South Korea is gaining more attention as the North Korean threat escalates. While indigenous nuclear weapons are one of the potential countermeasures against North Korean nuclear weapons, they could reshape the geopolitical landscape. The Institute has repeatedly gauged South Korean attitudes about indigenous nuclear weapons since 2010. In 2023, 66.7% of respondents supported developing nuclear weapons (Oppose: 32.3%). The cumulative data shows South Koreans favor indigenous nuclear weapons development (min: 54.8%, max: 70.2%).



ATTITUDES ON REINTRODUCING TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS

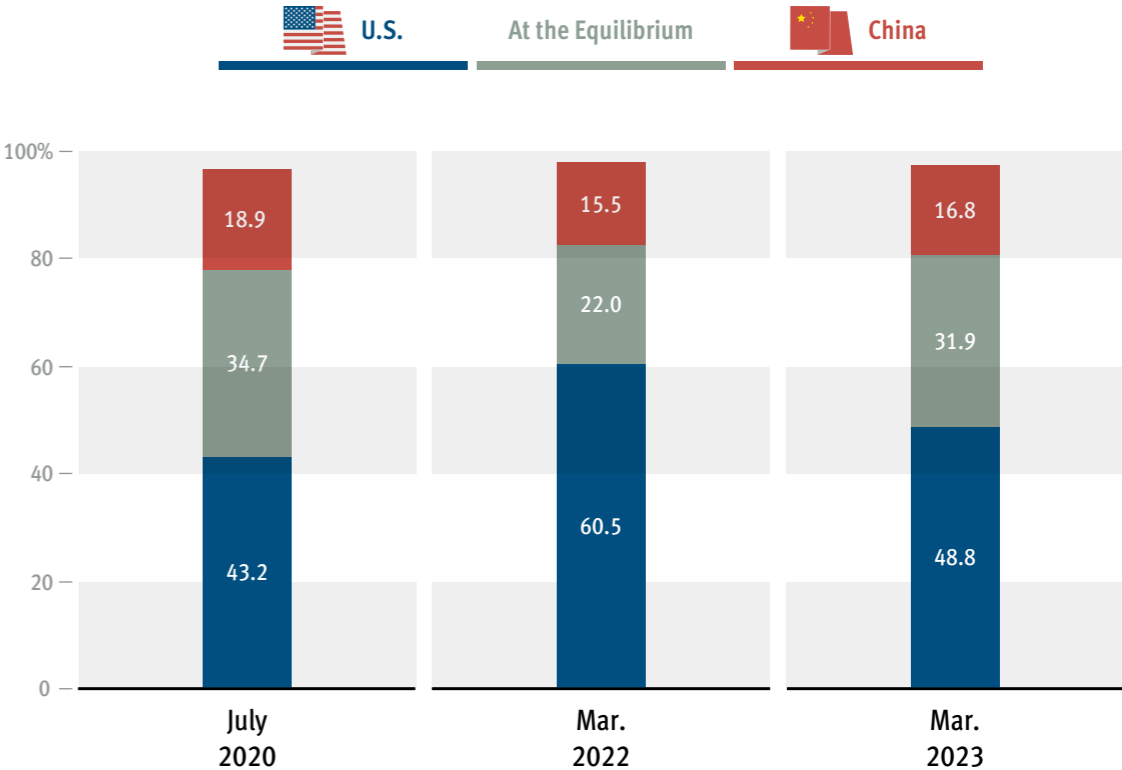
What is your opinion about the statement that U.S. tactical nuclear weapons should be deployed in South Korea?



Reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula has also been discussed as a potential countermeasure against North Korea. When asked about reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons onto the Korean Peninsula, 60.4% supported it in 2023. 37.8% opposed. Public sentiment appears unchanged since March 2022 (Support: 59%, Oppose: 38.3%). The data suggests that a majority consistently supported reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons since 2013, except in 2019, when the public was evenly split (Support: 46%, Oppose: 47.9%).

FUTURE SUPERPOWER

In the next ten years, which country will be stronger? The U.S. or China?

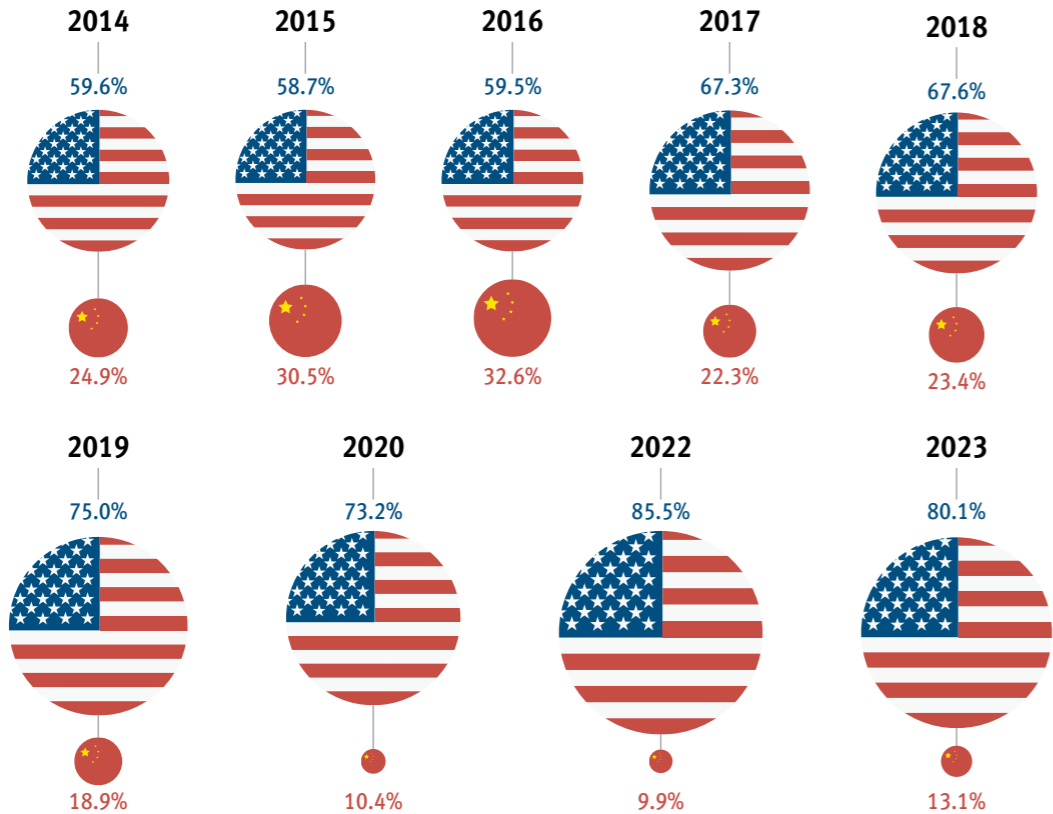


When the respondents were asked to identify which country would be stronger between the U.S. and China, a majority (48.8%) chose the former over the latter in March 2023. The support for the U.S. in March 2022 was much higher at 60.5%. Those who named China as the stronger country was only 16.8%. The respondents viewing China as a future superpower remained almost unchanged (2022: 15.5%). This figure has been within the margin of error since July 2020 (min: 15.5%, max: 18.9%). Meanwhile, 31.9% thought the U.S. and China would be at parity. This figure is significantly higher than 22% in 2022 but similar to 34.7% in 2020. This result suggests that the public assessment of the relative strength of two major powers can change over time.



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE PARTNER

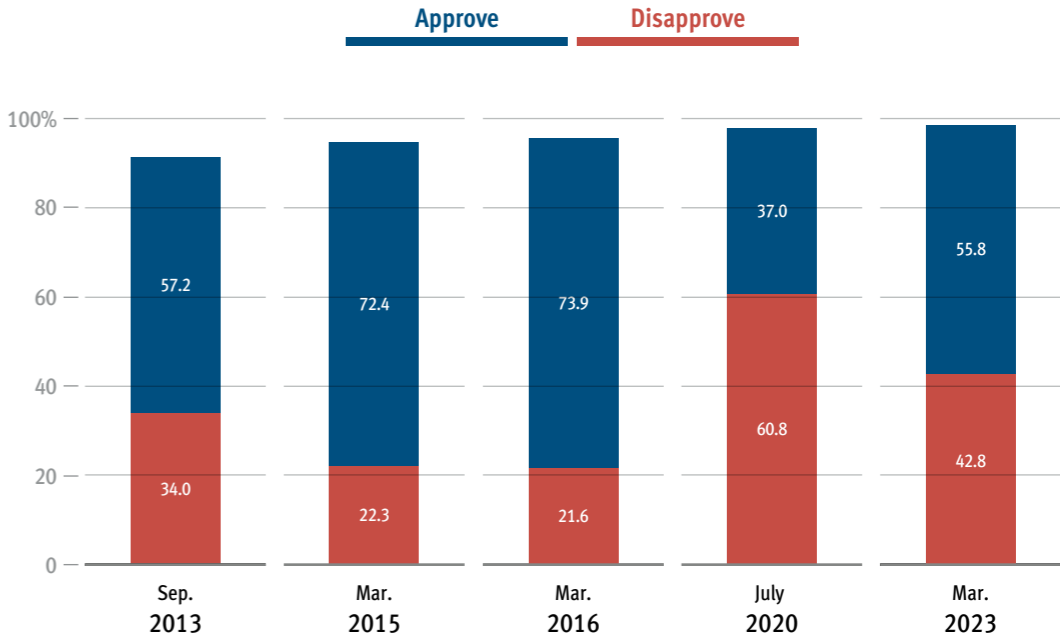
🔄 If the U.S. and China continue their rivalry, which country should South Korea strengthen ties with?



When asked which country South Korea should lean towards if the U.S. and China continue their rivalry, an overwhelming majority chose the U.S. (80.1%) over China (13.1%). Over half of South Koreans have repeatedly chosen the U.S. over China as a future partner since the Institute began tracking this data in 2014 (min: 58.7%, max: 85.5%). South Koreans prefer the U.S. as a prospective partner by at least 80% since 2022. On the other hand, the respondents viewing China as a preferred future partner ranged from 9.9% to 32.6% since 2014. South Korean public preference for China has fluctuated widely. Those who prefer China dropped to 13.1% in 2023 from 32.6% in 2016, when it hit an all-time high.

U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

🔄 Do you approve or disapprove of U.S. leadership in global affairs?



When respondents were asked to assess the role of U.S. leadership in global affairs, 55.8% approved. Since the Institute first collected this data in 2013, a majority saw the U.S. role as positive (min: 55.8%, max: 73.9%). The only exception was in July 2020 when Donald Trump declared the “America First” policy. Although Joe Biden was elected president in December 2020, the approval for American leadership did not reach the pre-Trump level. The overall disapproval for American leadership in March 2023 was 42.8%. This is still much higher than 21.6% in March 2016.

For more details on polling methodology,
please visit www.asaninst.org/eng



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