

ASAN REPORT

South Korean Public Opinion on ROK-U.S. Bilateral Ties

J. JAMES KIM, KANG CHUNGKU, HAM GEON HEE

MAY 2022



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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

About

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, 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 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.

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

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Executive Summary

May 2022 holds a special meaning for ROK-U.S. relations because it marks a critical turning point in the South Korean political landscape as Seoul ushers in a new administration. From a historical standpoint, the month also marks the 140th anniversary of signing the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Korea (also known as Joseon) and the United States. Test of time has shown that the bilateral ties have managed to persevere through thick and thin, if not strengthen. The question for the investigators of this report is how South Koreans view the past, present, and future trajectory of this relationship. Given that President Yoon Suk-yeol has already expressed his commitment to the ROK-U.S. alliance, this report serves as a timely review of the South Korean public view of the ROK-U.S. bilateral relationship.

This report utilizes a combination of data drawn from past studies and the survey conducted during March 10~13 and 17~18, 2022. The data was collected through a random digit dialing method with weighted sampling referenced according to the latest South Korean census.

The following are the key findings from this report.

- When asked what the first thing that comes to mind is when they see “the United States,” 37.3% of respondents chose “strong military.” In 2015, the percentage of answers mentioning “capitalist economy” and “strong military” were similar at 28.6% and 26.7%, respectively.
- When asked about important events in the history of ROK-U.S. relations, more than half answered security-related issues (Korean War 35.8%, formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance 23.3%).
- South Koreans showed high affinity for the United States and President Biden. The favorability of the U.S. remained above 5 (neutral) and reached a maximum of 6.85 in March 2022. President Biden’s favorability remained at 5.89, which was significantly higher than that of President Xi Jinping (1.99).
- 60.2% of South Koreans supported the idea of developing the ROK-U.S. alliance to

include fundamental values, such as democracy and human rights.

- South Korean public's confidence in the U.S. security guarantee was high. When asked if the U.S. would intervene in the event of a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, 88.9% answered affirmatively.
- Support for the ROK-U.S. alliance was high. Since 2012, the response that the ROK-U.S. alliance is necessary never fell below 91.9%. South Korean public felt that the alliance was still necessary after unification (minimum 80%, maximum 86.3%).
- Support for USFK was 82.1%. 62.3% of respondents stated that the USFK was still necessary after unification. The support for USFK seems higher than in the past due to a rise in North Korean provocation.
- 70.2% of South Koreans supported developing indigenous nuclear weapons. This was the highest support for proliferation since 2010. 63.6% favored independent nuclear armament even if South Korea was sanctioned for violating the NPT.
- 59% of South Koreans supported the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. 38.3% opposed.
- South Koreans appeared to place a high premium on the security and economic dimensions of ROK-U.S. relations. When asked about the most important issue South Korea and the U.S. should jointly manage, 37.1% named cooperation in dealing with a nuclear North Korea. 16.1% mentioned economic revitalization through trade, 14.3% picked resumption of dialogues with North Korea, 12.6% mentioned China, and about 10% named OPCON transfer, joint exercises, and other alliance related issues.
- The survey explored what South Koreans thought about the joint military exercises. Even since the Moon administration began active engagement with North Korea, ROK-U.S. joint military exercises have been scaled down to win Pyongyang's trust. However, the survey data indicated that nearly half of all South Koreans (46.4%) wanted the military exercises to be scaled up to the level before the dialogues. 35.8% wanted to maintain the reduced or suspended status.

- 86.1% supported South Korea's participation in the QUAD.
- 83% of respondents supported ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral cooperation.
- 71.7% of South Koreans supported South Korea's participation in the U.S.-led ballistic missile defense (BMD) system (22.8% opposed).
- 57.7% of South Koreans supported the deployment of additional THAAD batteries. 38.9% were opposed to this idea.
- Nearly 9 out of 10 people (88.3%) were optimistic about ROK-U.S. relations. South Koreans believed that the relationship between the two countries would improve based on trust in the alliance.

1. Introduction

May 2022 holds a special meaning for ROK-U.S. relations because it marks a critical turning point in the South Korean political landscape as Seoul ushers in a new administration. From a historical standpoint, the month also marks the 140th anniversary of signing the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between Korea (also known as Joseon at the time) and the United States. Test of time has shown that the bilateral ties have managed to persevere through thick and thin, if not strengthen. The question for the investigators of this report is how South Koreans view the past, present, and future trajectory of this relationship. Given that President Yoon Suk-yeol has already expressed his commitment to the ROK-U.S. alliance, this report serves as a timely review of the South Korean public view of the ROK-U.S. bilateral relationship.

This report utilizes a combination of data drawn from past studies as well as the survey conducted during March 10~13 and 17~18, 2022. The data was collected through a random digit dialing method with weighted sampling referenced according to the latest South Korean census.

2. Image, History, and Favorability of the United States

History suggests that South Korean public sentiment about the United States has had good and bad moments. Periodic flair-ups of anti-American sentiments were often coupled with incidents such as homicides involving U.S. soldiers in the 1990s, formaldehyde dumping in 2000, auto accident involving U.S. armored vehicles and South Korean minors in 2002, and protest against U.S. imported beef in 2008.

However, the overall South Korean public opinion on the United States, at least as far as the data would allow us to see, has generally been quite favorable. In fact, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies has continuously gauged country favorability for the United States, China, Japan, North Korea, and Russia since 2010. This data shows consistent support for the United States and its leader, which far surpassed that of other countries in the region regardless of the domestic political circumstance in the United States or South Korea.

2.1. Image

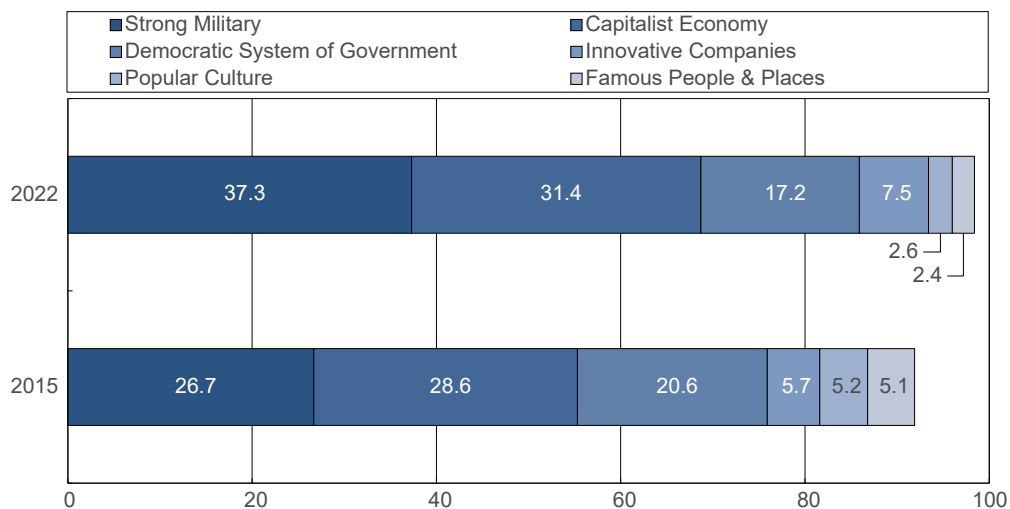
To get a sense of the South Korean public perception of the United States, we asked the survey respondents what image came to mind when they read “the United States.” Of the choices they were given, 68.7% of the answers referred to hard power, such as “strong military” and “capitalist economy.” Determinants of soft power, such as “democratic system of government” (17.2%), “innovative companies” (7.5%), “popular culture” (2.6%), and “famous people and places” (2.4%) accounted for 29.7% of all answers.¹

An interesting trend observed in the longitudinal data is that between “strong military” and “capitalist economy,” there has been relatively little change in the association between the U.S. and capitalist economy since 2015; however, the association with “strong military” increased by a sizable margin from 26.7% in 2015 to 37.3% (+10.6%p)

1. There were no statistically significant demographic differences.

in 2022. This result may be attributed to the recently increased attention given to security matters as U.S.-China competition begins to heat up and the Ukrainian crisis worsens. The fact that the U.S. fancies a large defense budget is also a contributing factor. Global Firepower's military strength ranking suggests, for instance, that the U.S. has continued to maintain the world's strongest military through its defense spending.² In short, the South Korean perception is shaped by structural realities of the U.S. military capability and the emerging security challenges.

Figure 1. Image of the U.S.³ (%)



2.2. History

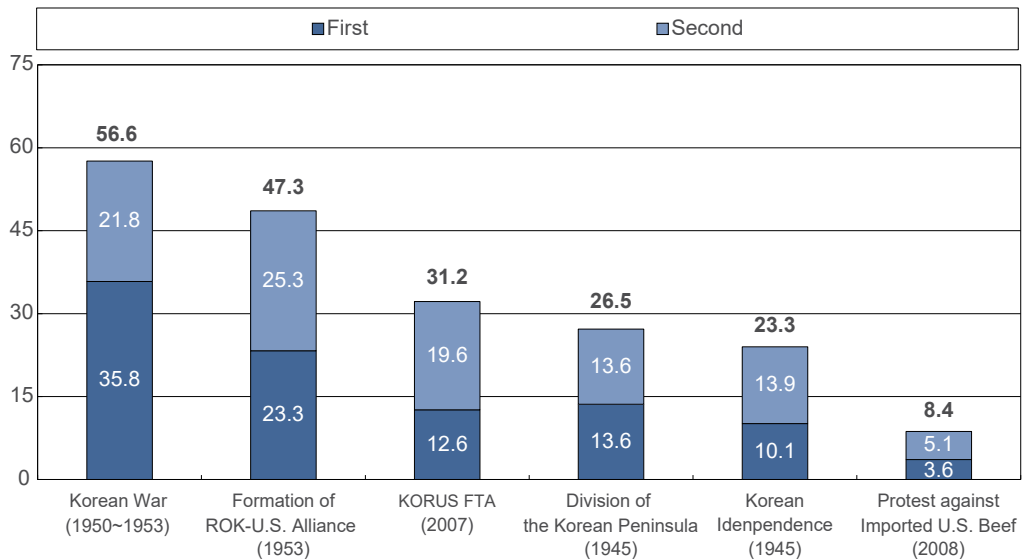
Next, the survey questions explored further what historical event(s) came to mind for the respondent when considering ROK-U.S. relations. The respondents were asked to select the top two choices among the list that included “the Korean independence in 1945,” “the division of the Korean Peninsula,” “the Korean War,” “the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance,” “the signing of the KORUS FTA,” and “the protest against imported U.S. beef in 2008.”

2. Source: Military Strength Ranking 2005~2022, Global Firepower (GFP). <https://www.globalfirepower.com/global-ranks-previous.php>.

3. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)).

The majority of respondents converged on security-related matters, such as the Korean War (35.8%) and the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance (23.3%). Part of the reason may be linked to the fact that security cooperation was the foundation of bilateral relations immediately after the Korean War. The priority on security cooperation scored even higher when we broadened the selection to the top two choices, with 56.6% choosing “the Korean War” and 47.3% opting for “the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance.” “The KORUS FTA” (31.2%) was followed by “the division of the Korean Peninsula” (26.5%) and “the Korean independence” (23.3%). “The protest against imported U.S. beef” recorded the lowest percentage at 8.4%.

Figure 2. Important Events in ROK-U.S. Relations⁴ (%)



Interpretive meaning can be assigned to the results from this data through simple sentiment analysis. For instance, the data suggests that the respondents focused on historical events that can be categorized as more “positive” than “negative.” Looking only at the first choice, for instance, the respondents tended to favor “the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance” (23.3%), “the KORUS FTA” (12.6%), and “the Korean independence” (10.1%) over “the division of the Korean Peninsula” (13.6%) and “the

4. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)). Top line numbers represent the result of multiple response analysis.

protest against imported U.S. beef” (3.6%). This relative ordering remained consistent even when broadened out to the top two choices.

What we mean by “positive” and “negative” events is based on a crude modal subjective assessment about how ordinary Koreans can see these events from a historical perspective and whether the net impact of a given event can be assigned some meaning on a spectrum between positive and negative.⁵ For instance, events such as alliance formation, FTA, and independence can be interpreted as positive outcomes of the bilateral relationship between Korea and the U.S. On the other hand, division of the Korean Peninsula and South Korean protest against imported U.S. beef in 2008 could be interpreted as a negative outcome.

Excluded from this analysis was “the Korean War,” even though it scored highest among all choices. The reason for not assigning any value to this choice was because the U.S. role in the Korean War can have both positive and negative interpretations.⁶ This is supported by the fact that the respondent’s ideological disposition did not appear to correlate with “the Korean War.” Both conservatives (33.3%) and progressives (32.5%), for instance, had an equally high tendency to link “the Korean War” with the United States.

For other historical events, the respondent’s modal choice tended to correlate with their ideological disposition. For instance, conservatives tended to emphasize the importance of “the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance” (28.2%), while progressives tended to emphasize “the division of the Korean Peninsula” (22.7%). When looking at

5. Michael Gref, Nike Matthiesen, Sreenivasa Hikkal Venugopala, Shalaka Satheesh, Aswinkumar Vijayananth, Duc Bac Ha, Sven Behnke, and Joachim Kohler. 2022. “A Study on the Ambiguity in Human Annotation of German Oral History Interviews for Perceived Emotion Recognition and Sentiment Analysis.” arXiv:2201.06868. Retrieved from chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://arxiv.org/pdf/2201.06868.pdf; A.B. Pawar, M.A. Jawale, and D. N. Kyatanavar. 2016. “Fundamentals of Sentiment Analysis: Concepts and Methodology.” *Sentiment Analysis and Ontology Engineering*. pp.25-48.

6. Although the start of the Korean War is attributed to the North Korean invasion, there are competing historical explanations about “the cause” of the war. See Bruce Cummings. 1990. *The Origins of the Korean War Volume II*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ; Youngho Kim. 1999. “The origins of the Korean War: Civil War or Stalin’s Rollback?” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*. 10(1): 186-214.

the top two choices, conservatives focused on “the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance” (57.8%) followed by “the Korean independence” (27.4%) and “the KORUS FTA” (25.4%). Progressives, on the other hand, converged on “the division of the Korean Peninsula” (38%) followed by “the KORUS FTA” (37.3%) and “the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance” (35.1%).⁷

Since past findings suggest a correlation between age and ideological disposition of the South Korean public, we also see some relationship between age and choice of the modal historical event the people often associate with the ROK-U.S. relations. Looking at the top two choices, for instance, 65.3% of those 60-and-over chose the Korean War as the event that comes to mind when thinking of the bilateral relationship. The formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance was most important for those in their 20s (53.5%). While individuals in their 30s and 40s also tended to name the Korean War and the formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance most often, their mentioning of the KORUS FTA (30s: 38%; 40s: 39.5%) was higher than any other age categories. Similarly, the same can be said about the division of the Korean Peninsula, for which individuals in their 40s and 50s were more likely to mention than individuals in other age categories (40s: 29.7%; 50s: 32.9%).

2.3. Favorability⁸

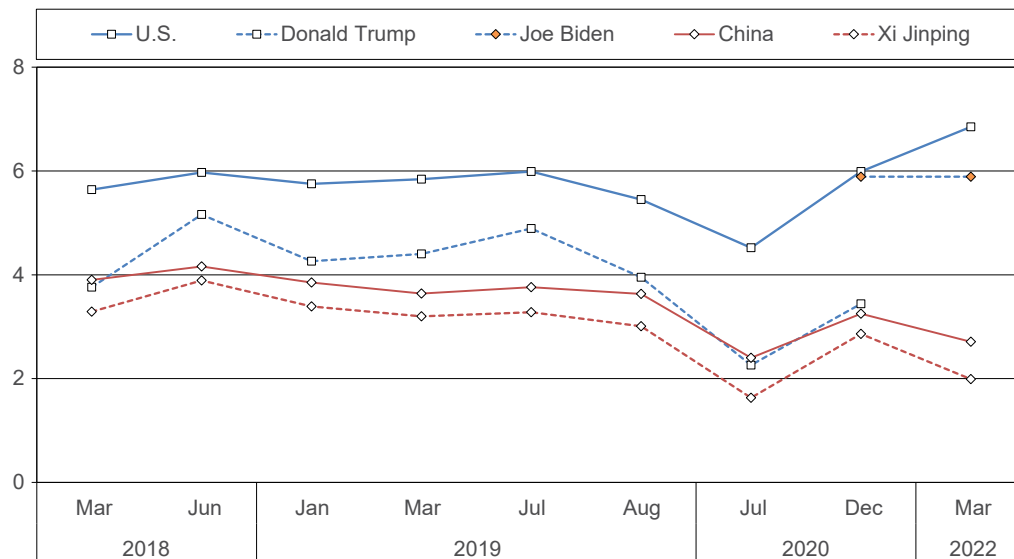
Data indicates that South Koreans appear to favor the presidency of Joe Biden and the United States. For example, the favorability (0=least favorable to 10=most favorable) of the United States was above five (5=neutral) during the Trump years, except for July 2020. If we leave out July 2020, South Koreans’ favorability for the United States was at a minimum of 5.45 in August 2019 and at a maximum of 6.85 in March 2022. Furthermore, the favorability rating for the United States improved significantly after Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election. In December 2020, the favorability of the United States was 5.99, and in March 2022, it increased to 6.85.

7. Relative frequency of the moderates for the top two choices are as follows: Korean War (60%), formation of the ROK-U.S. alliance (47%), KORUS FTA (34.3%), division of the Korean Peninsula (24%), Korean independence (21.7%).

8. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies has continued to measure South Korean favorability for the U.S., China, Japan, North Korea, and Russia. This report excludes data for Japan, North Korea, and Russia, given that it is primarily focused on the U.S. China was included as a reference point for comparison.

We also found a significant gap in the relative favorability of the United States and China. For the period examined above, China's favorability was at a minimum of 2.4 in July 2020 and at a maximum of 4.16 in June 2018. China's favorability increased significantly in December 2020 to 3.25, but it declined to 2.71 by March 2022. This decline can be explained by the ongoing domestic debate over the origins of COVID-19 and "cultural (mis)appropriation."⁹ Leadership favorability was significantly lower than the country favorability, which suggests that the South Koreans blame the Chinese leadership for COVID-19 and cultural (mis)appropriation. Xi Jinping's favorability was at a minimum of 1.63 in July 2020 and at a maximum of 3.89 in June 2018.

Figure 3. Favorability of Country and Leader¹⁰ (0~10 Point)



9. Cultural appropriation refers to incidents when the Chinese government or people incorrectly lay claim to distinctly unique Korean culture as their own. An example was the appearance of an individual wearing a Korean traditional garment called hanbok as a representative of Chinese ethnic group during the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022. President Xi Jinping also claimed during his meeting with Donald Trump in 2017 that Korea was once a part of China.

10. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)). Figures 3 and 4 include data taken from J. James Kim, Chungku Kang. "South Korean Outlook on the United States and ROK-U.S. Relations in the Biden Era." Issue Brief. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. February 2021.

The above findings are hardly surprising given that South Korean favorability of leaders and country are generally correlated. One exception to this rule was Donald J. Trump. While the overall favorability of the United States was within the range of 4 to 5, President Trump's favorability had a wider range spanning 2.26 to 5.16. However, as shown in Figure 3, favorability for Xi Jinping and China was highly correlated ($r=0.99$). A similar observation can be made concerning President Biden after his inauguration.

One interesting result was that the relationship between favorability for President Biden and the United States varied according to the age and ideology of the respondent. For instance, the data indicates that country-leader favorability correlation is higher among older or ideologically more conservative respondents. The variance in favorability was more pronounced across ideology than age, however. Progressives and moderates rated the U.S. and President Biden around points 5~6, while conservatives ranked the U.S. and President Biden to be between points 6~8.

Table 1. Favorability Toward the U.S. and Biden by Demographics¹¹ (0~10 Point)

	U.S. (a)	Joe Biden (b)	Gap (a-b)
Total	6.85	5.89	0.96
Age	20s	5.05	<u>1.30</u>
	30s	5.46	<u>1.27</u>
	40s	5.44	<u>1.19</u>
	50s	<u>6.04</u>	0.76
	60+	<u>6.76</u>	0.58
Test Statistics	$F=5.467, df=4, p<.001$	$F=17.479, df=4, p<.001$	
Ideology	Conservative	<u>6.63</u>	<u>1.20</u>
	Moderate	5.38	<u>0.93</u>
	Progressive	5.26	0.55
Test Statistics	$F=75.032, df=2, p<.001$	$F=34.365, df=2, p<.001$	

11. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)).

Since Joe Biden took office in 2020, South Korean favorability of the U.S. has stayed above 6, and Biden's favorability remained well above 5. These results are meaningful because the South Korean public mood appears set for building a stronger bilateral relationship with the United States, which is also high on the priority list for the Yoon administration in Seoul.

3. ROK-U.S. Alliance

The ROK-U.S. alliance helped keep the peace on the Korean Peninsula after the Korean War and contributed to South Korea's economic development. But there are different interpretations of the alliance. For instance, some observers may say that South Korea was the poster child of democracy and capitalism for much of the Cold War era. These people also claim the alliance was a beacon for the free world in Asia. Through thick and thin, the relationship has continued to grow and blossom in promoting a stable environment in and around the Korean Peninsula and contributed to shaping the regional order. On the other hand, of course, the detractors may question whether the U.S. played any constructive role in the region. Some people argue that the U.S. was at least partly responsible for the division of the Korean Peninsula and the Korean War.¹² In light of these different interpretations, it may be worth exploring the South Korean public's attitudes about the ROK-U.S. alliance and its future outlook.

3.1. Purpose and Functionality

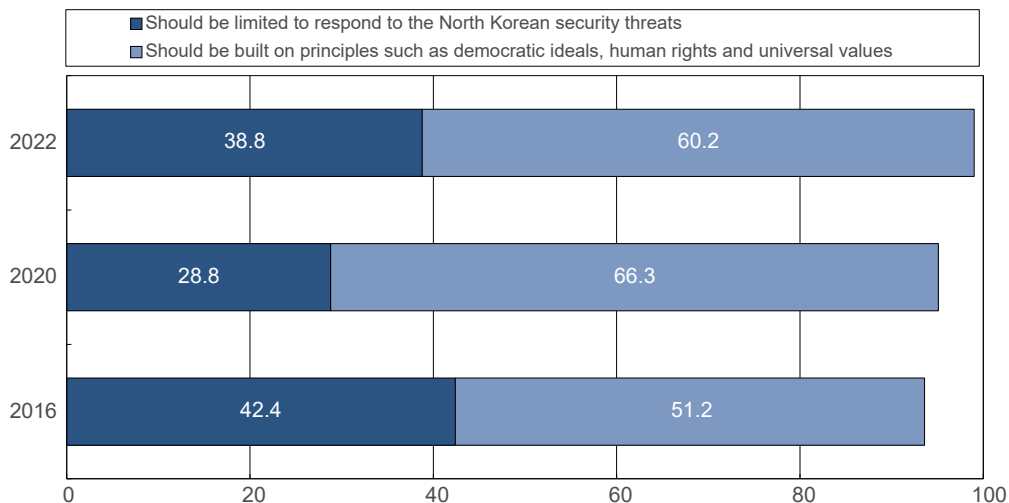
As stated in Article III of the Mutual Defense Treaty, both South Korea and the U.S. acknowledge that “an armed attack in the Pacific area on either [party] ... would be dangerous to [the other's] peace and safety and declare that [they] would act to meet the common danger in accordance with [their] constitutional processes.” While the treaty alludes to the security obligations of each party, subsequent documents and interactions have signaled concern for a broader set of challenges. The Joint Vision Statement of 2009, for instance, states that South Korea and the United States agree to expand the areas of bilateral cooperation to include space, energy, public health, economic inequality, human rights, democracy, and climate change, among others. These ideas were revisited during the ROK-U.S. summit in 2021, where South Korea and the United States agreed more specifically to expand cooperation on global health, supply chain, space, and emerging technology.

How do South Koreans view the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance within the context of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia? First, we explore South Korean attitudes

12. See Cummings (1990).

about the functional role of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Do South Koreans see the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance to be restricted to addressing the North Korean threat as security cooperation or recognize the need to broaden the alliance to include fundamental values such as human rights and democracy?

Figure 4. Role of the ROK-U.S. Alliance¹³ (%)



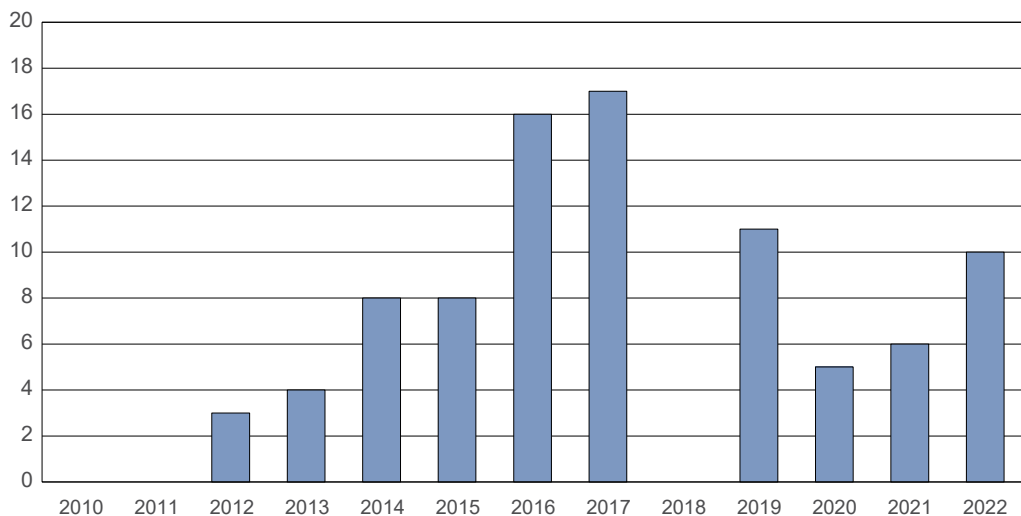
When we considered this very question in the past (2016 and 2020), where more than half of the respondents expressed the desire to broaden the alliance initiative to include fundamental values such as human rights and democracy. This year was no exception, with 60.2% of respondents stating that they would like the ROK-U.S. alliance to develop into a broad value-based one. The notable difference is that the percentage of individuals not having any opinion on this matter declined significantly between 2016 and 2020, which suggests that individuals are increasingly more likely to form a clear view on this issue over time.

Secondly, individuals supporting a broader role for the alliance was peaked in 2020 at 66.3% but pulled back to a little over 60%, yet still significantly higher than 51.2% in 2016. Part of the explanation for this trend is the rising security risk posed by an

13. Source: Asan Poll (November 2016, December 2020, March 2022(a)). “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer” declined from 6.4% in 2016 to 4.9% in 2020.

increased number of North Korean provocations since the failure of nuclear diplomacy in Hanoi. As shown in Figure 5, the number of provocations has continued to grow since 2020. This trend is likely to continue given the series of public statements released by North Korea in recent months. In short, the increasing security risk perception has contributed to the view that the alliance should be valued for its contribution to the defense needs of South Korea. What is notable is the relatively higher percentage of South Koreans seeing the need for a broadened value-based perspective of the alliance despite rising security risks associated with North Korea.

Figure 5. North Korean Military Provocations, 2010~2022¹⁴ (No. of Incidence)



There were some notable differences in opinion across age groups. Except for those aged 60 and over, every age category agreed in 2020 and 2022 that the alliance should be value-based. However, the older respondents favored a more restrictive security-based view of the alliance, perhaps due to their concerns over the security risks associated with North Korea. For instance, individuals in their 50s wanting the alliance to be more value-encompassing declined from 74.7% to 62.2%. For 60-and-over, the percentage fell from 60% to 48.3%. These declines were offset by individuals preferring a more security-focused alliance, which grew from 22.7% to 36.2% for the 50s and 34.4% to

14. Source: CSIS Missile defense project (<https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>). Each unit of analysis is incidence of provocation not the number of missiles or tests conducted. Data in Figure 5 was extracted in March 2022.

50.7% for 60-and-over during the same period. While we see a similar trend among individuals in their 30s, the magnitude of swings for 50-and-over is significantly higher.

Table 2. Role of the ROK-U.S. Alliance by Demographics, 2020~2022¹⁵ (%)

		2020		2022	
		Security	Values	Security	Values
Total		<u>29.0</u>	66.1	<u>38.7</u>	60.1
Age	20s	30.0	64.7	32.3	65.9
	30s	25.5	68.2	36.7	62.7
	40s	29.3	66.0	29.3	69.7
	50s	22.7	74.7	36.2	62.2
	60+	<u>34.4</u>	60.0	<u>50.7</u>	48.3
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=13.611, df=8, p<.10$		$\chi^2=29.942, df=8, p<.001$	
Total		29.3	66.9	38.4	60.5
Ideology	Conservative	<u>33.1</u>	65.1	41.9	57.0
	Moderate	28.8	63.9	38.2	60.4
	Progressive	25.7	<u>71.6</u>	33.8	65.2
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=18.956, df=4, p<.05$		<i>n.s.</i>	

Interestingly, the respondent's ideology also mattered less in 2022 than in 2020. In 2020, for instance, the progressives tended to prefer a value-based alliance more than the conservatives but this difference became statistically non-significant in 2022. This suggests that the ideological disposition has no decisive impact on determining whether an individual will support broadening out the alliance functionality to defend fundamental values such as human rights and democracy today. In short, the supporters of the value-based view of the alliance may not see a trade-off between security and values and that the two can go hand-in-hand.

15. Source: Asan Poll (December 2020, March 2022(a)). Table 2 excludes "Don't Know/Refused to Answer."

Table 3. Expectations about the U.S. Response to a War on the Korean Peninsula¹⁶ (%)

		2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Asan Institute for Policy Studies	Will Intervene	<u>92.6</u>	<u>91.3</u>	<u>91.6</u>	<u>90.0</u>	<u>88.0</u>	<u>84.7</u>	<u>86.6</u>		<u>88.9</u>
	Won't Intervene	7.4	8.7	8.4	10.0	12.0	15.3	13.4		10.7
SNU Institute for Peace and Unification Studies	Help South Korea	<u>74.0</u>	<u>70.5</u>	<u>74.1</u>	<u>67.8</u>	<u>66.1</u>	<u>71.7</u>	<u>64.7</u>	<u>70.7</u>	
	Help North Korea	1.8	4.9	2.4	3.4	2.4	3.2	1.1	2.3	
	Follow Its Interests	22.6	22.6	22.1	<u>26.2</u>	<u>29.7</u>	<u>23.2</u>	<u>32.0</u>	25.4	
	Remain Neutral	1.6	2.0	1.4	2.7	1.7	1.8	2.2	1.6	

Another dimension of the functionality perception is the level of trust that South Koreans may have about the U.S. security guarantees often tied to the ROK-U.S. alliance. If trust is high, South Korean public perception of the overall robustness of the alliance is also high. When the respondents were asked whether they thought the U.S. would intervene in the event of a war on the Korean Peninsula, nearly 90% (88.9%) answered in the affirmative. This percentage had never declined below 84.7% since 2014, when the question was first asked in previous surveys. It shows that the South Koreans maintain a high level of confidence in the U.S. security guarantee. This was true even during the Trump years when Washington was demanding more from South

16. Source: Asan Annual Survey (2014~2020). Asan Poll (March 2022). March 2022(a) poll changed the wording of the question from "If there is a war on the Korean Peninsula..." to "If North Korea attacks South Korea..." Although there is qualitative difference in the wording, the question of interest was what the respondent thought about the likelihood of U.S. intervention on South Korea's behalf in the event of a military conflict.

Source: SNU Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (Attitudes on Unification, 2014~2021). Retrieved from <https://ipus.snu.ac.kr/blog/archives/publishing/4767> {Question: "How do you think the neighboring countries (the U.S., Japan, China, and Russia) would respond in the event of a war on the Korean Peninsula?"}.}

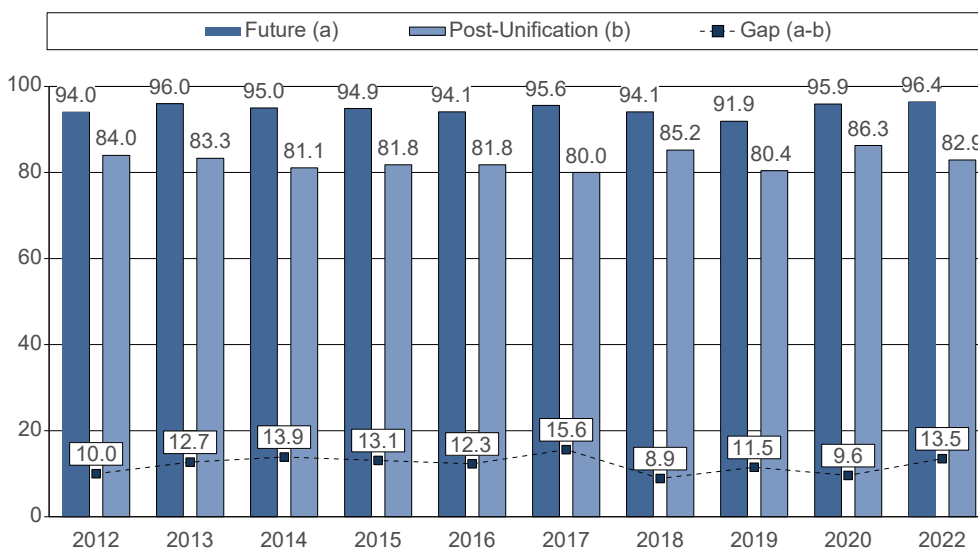
Korea in terms of its ability to shoulder a more significant cost burden on maintaining the alliance.

This finding is consistent with data reported by Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University, which showed that every year since 2010, the majority of South Koreans continued to believe that the U.S. would intervene to help South Korea in the event of a war on the Korean Peninsula. This was true even during the term of the Trump presidency, when 32% of the Korean public believed that the U.S. would pursue its national interest.

3.2. Necessity of the ROK-U.S. Alliance

Trust in U.S. security guarantees can be linked to the perception of the necessity of the alliance. We can explore this idea more directly by checking the survey for what the respondent thinks about the “necessity” of the alliance in the future and perhaps even after unification. This question was asked every year since 2012, and the answer in the affirmative has never been below 91.9% (max: 96.4%). The interesting finding was that there was little to no variation in the general attitude about the necessity of the alliance. In short, the security environment did not matter much for the South Koreans.

Figure 6. Necessity of the ROK-U.S. Alliance: Future vs. Post-Unification¹⁷ (%)



When asked if the alliance was necessary post-unification, the percentage dipped to a minimum of 80% (2017) and a maximum of 86.3% (2020). In short, the difference between pre and post-unification can be seen as North Korea's effect on the general South Korean thinking about the alliance. This difference never broke 16%p since these questions were first posed in 2012. This finding suggests that the South Koreans see the value of the alliance not only for its role in addressing the North Korea challenge but also for a whole host of other functions it serves, as discussed above.

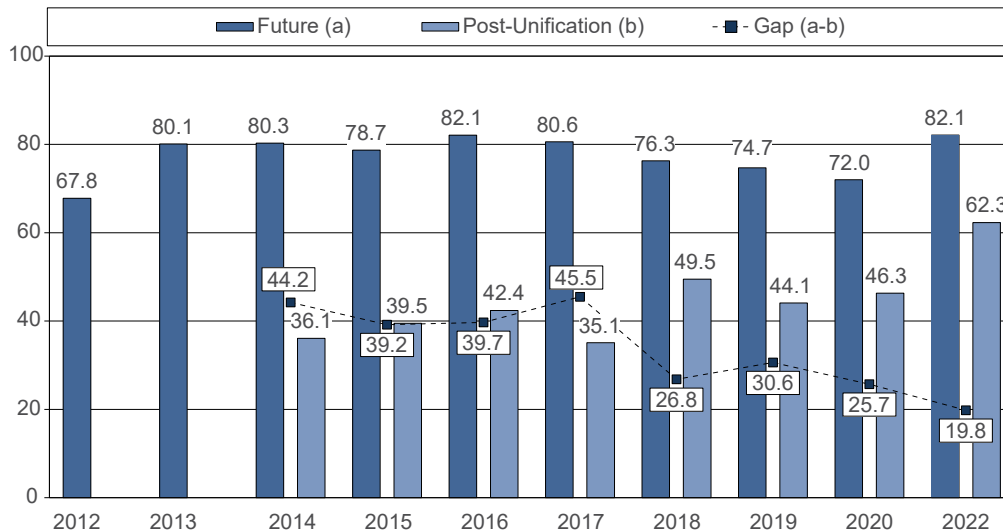
3.3. USFK

The centerpiece of the ROK-U.S. alliance is the 28,500 Americans serving in the USFK. While the USFK can be the center of controversy and criticism as it may have in the past when it comes to negotiations for the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), it can also be the bedrock for a stable security environment in the Korean Peninsula. But exactly how do South Koreans see the USFK? Do they know the presence of USFK as a benefit or hindrance to South Korea's interest?

The survey posed two questions to gauge public attitudes about the USFK. One was whether the respondent thought it was necessary to have the USFK continually present into the foreseeable future. The second question asked whether the respondent thought it was essential to have the USFK after unification. Concerning the former, 82.1% answered that it is necessary to have the USFK in South Korea for the foreseeable future. Since this question was first posed in 2012, the lowest percentage supporting USFK's presence in South Korea was 67.8%. Support for USFK was at a high in 2016 and 2017 when tensions ran high, and North Korea has conducted multiple tests. However, it declined significantly during 2018~2020 when diplomatic engagements between the two Koreas and the United States suggested a possible breakthrough in North Korea's denuclearization. However, this changed when the talks broke down, and North Korea resumed testing missiles.

17. Source: Asan Annual Survey (2012~2020), Asan Poll (March 2022(a)). Figure 6 includes data from Annual Survey between 2012~2020. March 2022 data is from the Asan Poll (March 2022(a)). Data before 2020 was taken from Figure 8 of the Asan Report on "The Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and National Security."

Figure 7. Necessity of USFK: Future vs. Post-Unification¹⁸ (%)



Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the support for USFK's continued presence on the Korean Peninsula declines significantly when North Korea is taken out of the equation. When asked whether the survey respondent would support the continued presence of USFK post-unification, the affirmative answer drops to 62.3%. Before 2022, the percentage ranged from 35.1% to 49.5%. This suggests that the North Korean threat is a significant factor when considering the necessity of the USFK. However, there is also a substantial change in this view starting in 2022. This may be due to the changing regional security environment, which now includes challenges other than North Korea. Increasing great power competition and concern about the potential threat posed by a neighboring great power from having watched the Russo-Ukrainian conflict seems to have contributed to the South Korean public thinking about the strategic value of the USFK for South Korea.

There were statistically significant differences in the need for USFK by age and ideology. For instance, respondents aged 60-and-over were most supportive when it came to the presence of the USFK before and after unification at 90.4% and 70.3%, respectively. For all other age categories above 30, the percentage breakdown was approximately

18. Source: Asan Annual Survey (2012~2020). Asan Poll (March 2022(a)).

Table 4. Necessity of USFK by Demographics: Future vs. Post-Unification¹⁹ (%)

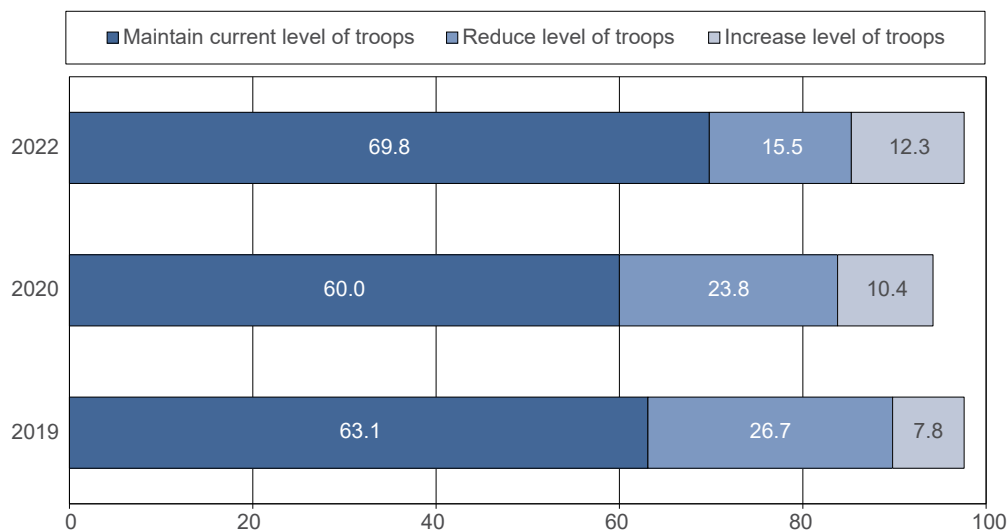
	Future		Post-Unification	
	Necessary	Unnecessary	Necessary	Unnecessary
Total	82.4	17.6	63.1	36.9
Age	20s	<u>84.0</u>	<u>60.5</u>	39.5
	30s	77.3	64.4	35.6
	40s	80.3	61.5	38.5
	50s	74.5	54.6	45.4
	60+	<u>90.4</u>	<u>70.3</u>	29.7
Test Statistics	$\chi^2=25.107, df=4, p<.05$		$\chi^2=13.285, df=4, p<.05$	
Total	82.2	17.8	63.2	36.8
Ideology	Conservative	<u>90.3</u>	75.4	24.6
	Moderate	79.0	60.9	39.1
	Progressive	<u>74.1</u>	<u>49.1</u>	<u>50.9</u>
Test Statistics	$\chi^2=32.086, df=2, p<.05$		$\chi^2=49.624, df=2, p<.05$	

10~20%p lower. However, for those in their 20s, the support for USFK was relatively high at 84%. This suggests that the individuals in their 20s though slightly less supportive had very similar views as respondents aged 60-and-over regarding attitudes about the USFK. Post-unification, however, the respondents in their 20s saw less need for USFK than individuals aged 60-and-over. What this suggests is that the individuals in their 20s tend to restrict their association of the need for USFK with North Korea.

19. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)). The number of “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer” was excluded because it was negligible. To compare the “future” with “post-unification,” “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer” was excluded from the analysis. The sample size for “future” by age was n=998; “future” by ideology was n=958; “post-unification” by age was n=988; “post-unification” by ideology was n=952.

Not surprisingly, ideological conservatives were more supportive of the USFK than the moderates or progressives. This carried over into the post-unification scenario as well. However, the more interesting finding was that as many as 3 in 4 progressives (73.8%) even saw a strong argument for why the USFK should remain in South Korea for the foreseeable future.

Figure 8. Level of USFK Presence in the Future²⁰ (%)



Among those who answered that the USFK should remain for the foreseeable future ($n=821$), the survey asked whether the size of the USFK should stay at the current level or change. 69.8% answered that the USFK should remain at the current level. This is significantly higher than in 2019 and 2020. During 2019 and 2020, when the Trump administration demanded more contribution from South Korea for troop basing, more individuals opted for a reduction in the size of USFK (2019: 26.7%; 2020: 23.8%). On the other hand, individuals wanting to increase the size of the USFK grew from 7.8% in 2019 to 10.4% in 2020 and 12.3% in 2022.

20. Source: Asan Annual Survey (2020), Asan Poll (2019, March 2022(a)).

3.4. Nuclear Options

Northeast Asia is becoming an increasingly dangerous place with the emergence of an assertive and bolder China and a menacing de facto nuclear North Korea. With each passing day, these threats continue to grow, not lessen. How should South Korea address these threats? Recent chatters in Washington and Seoul suggest that there is a growing call for potential indigenous nuclear development or reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons.²¹ Others recommend that South Korea should continue to rely on the tried-and-true U.S. extended deterrence.²² However, signs of shifting winds within the United States indicate the possibility that the future staying power of U.S. security commitment is less reliable than once thought.²³

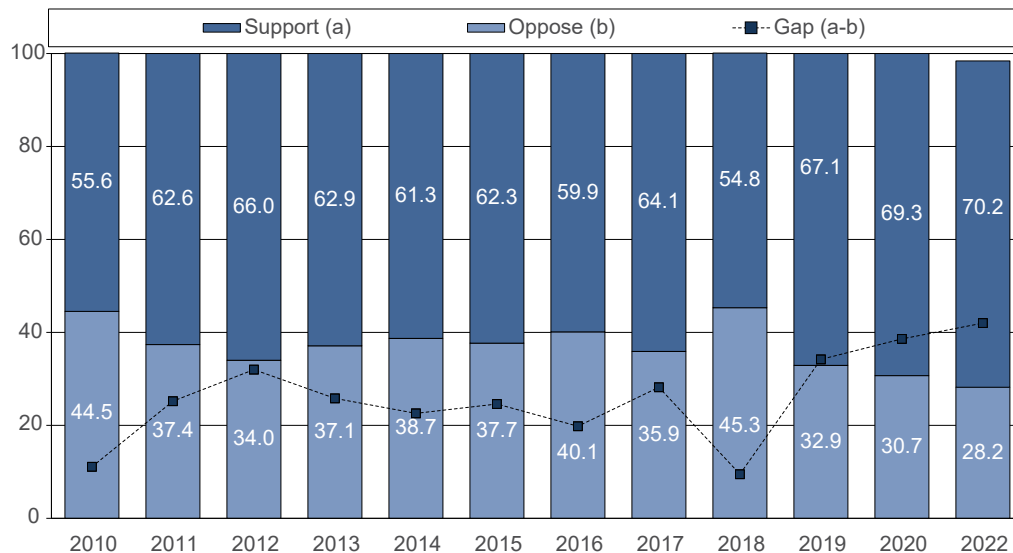
One recent study of the South Korean public suggests that support for nuclear weapons is “robust,” with 71% in favor of indigenous nuclear weapons development and 56% supporting the deployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea.²⁴ This finding is consistent with other research which also shows similar results. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, for instance, has conducted a similar survey every year since 2010 (except for 2021), and the support for indigenous nuclear development ranged from 54.8% (2018) to 70.2% (2022). Trends show growing support for indigenous nuclear program since 2019. There are several factors that may explain this trend: 1) the failure of nuclear negotiations with North Korea as of 2019; 2) the increased incidence of provocation and testing by North Korea; 3) the continued refinement and development of North Korean defense capability, including nuclear ones; 4) the growing concern about the longevity of U.S. security commitment to South Korea.

21. Jennifer Lind and Daryl G. Press. “Should South Korea build its own nuclear bomb?” *The Washington Post*. October 7, 2021; Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim. “Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons.” *The Chicago Council on Global Affairs*. February 2022.

22. Shane Smith. “Renewing U.S. Extended Deterrence Commitments Against North Korea.” *38North*. May 13, 2020; Toby Dalton. “How Washington and Seoul Can Get on the Same Page to Deter North Korea.” *War On the Rocks*. April 4, 2022.

23. Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker. 2022. *I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year*. Penguin Random House.

24. Dalton et. al.

Figure 9. Attitudes on Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Development²⁵ (%)


What these studies fail to show, however, is the South Korean public thoughts about “going nuclear” after accounting for the potential costs of embarking on this path. Indigenous nuclear weapon development would require that South Korea exit the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and risk the possibility of diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions. For an economy heavily dependent on trade, this would likely be an unacceptable outcome. Would the South Korean public still support pursuing an indigenous nuclear capability despite economic sanctions? If reframed in this way, the result may be different.

The survey questionnaire was designed so that the respondents were asked to answer both questions. First, they were presented with a question about their support for indigenous nuclear weapon development. Then they were cued with the information that indigenous nuclear weapon development can lead to international sanctions. The study aims to see if there are any noticeable changes in the respondent’s answers after

25. Source: Asan Annual Survey (2010~2020), Asan Poll (March 2022(a)). The Asan Institute for Policy Studies has followed South Korean public opinion on indigenous nuclear weapons development and reintroduction of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. Figure 9 and 10 are adapted from the “Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and national Security” (2021).

accounting for the costs of proliferation.

If we exclude respondents who did not respond or did not have an opinion, the support for going nuclear declined from 71.3% to 65%, a 6.3%p decline. We can derive two logical conclusions from these results. One is that there was a decline in Korean public support for going nuclear when the cost of doing so was made clear. The decline was also felt very broadly throughout all age categories and ideologies. In general, more conservative and older respondents (50-and-over) supported going nuclear than more

**Table 5. Attitudes on Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Development by Demographics:
With(out) Hypothetical Sanctions²⁶ (%)**

		Without Sanctions		With Sanctions	
		Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose
Total		71.3	28.7	65.0	35.0
Age	20s	59.3	40.7	50.9	49.1
	30s	58.4	41.6	51.7	48.3
	40s	62.0	38.0	55.9	44.1
	50s	<u>77.1</u>	22.9	<u>71.0</u>	29.0
	60+	<u>86.4</u>	13.6	<u>81.2</u>	18.8
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=67.606, df=4, p<.001$		$\chi^2=13.285, df=4, p<.05$	
Total		70.6	29.4	64.5	35.5
Ideology	Conservative	<u>79.4</u>	20.6	<u>72.8</u>	27.2
	Moderate	70.6	29.4	63.8	36.2
	Progressive	<u>58.4</u>	41.6	<u>53.8</u>	46.2
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=34.355, df=2, p<.001$		$\chi^2=25.717, df=2, p<.001$	

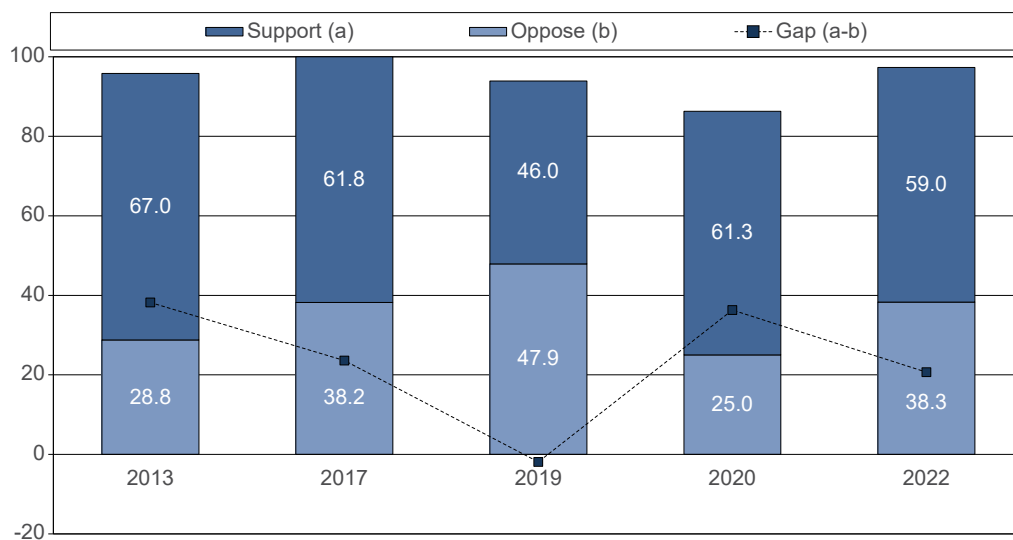
26. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)). Table 5 excludes “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer.” Sample size for without sanctions by age was n=985; without sanctions by ideology was n=946; with sanctions by age was n=980; with sanctions by ideology was n=944.

moderate or progressive and younger respondents. The second finding is that a small percentage of respondents were discouraged from going nuclear when they were informed about the sanctions risk.

Together, these findings suggest that simply mentioning “the possibility of sanctions” is not enough to alter the South Korean public’s views about proliferation. The data does show, however, that the Korean public can change its mind if the cost of proliferation is communicated more clearly. For instance, policymakers can more clearly communicate the seriousness of sanctions and their spillover effects. They can also point out that South Korea will need reprocessing facilities for spent fuel. The public may need to be informed that South Korea will also lack access to fresh nuclear fuel from the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG), which would subsequently impact South Korea’s nuclear security and safety, and energy supply.

Some people have argued that South Korea can better address its security threat and avoid international scrutiny by convincing the United States to redeploy its tactical nuclear weapons onto the Korean Peninsula. The proponents see the value of

Figure 10. Attitudes on Reintroducing Tactical Nuclear Weapons²⁷ (%)



27. Source: Asan Annual Survey (2013, 2017, 2020), Asan Poll (2019, March 2022(a)).

strengthening deterrence posture and its effect in pressuring other countries like China to be stricter with North Korea since an arms race in Northeast Asia can go against China's national interest. The opponents have argued that tactical nuclear weapons would not credibly deter North Korea. On the contrary, it would only encourage proliferation, which would create a more destabilizing regional security environment. What do South Koreans think about this matter?

When asked about the reintroduction of tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea, 59% of respondents supported this idea. This was a marginal decline from 61.3% in 2020 but still consistent with other results obtained in 2013 and 2017. The support for tactical nuclear weapons dropped momentarily in 2019 when nuclear diplomacy suggested a possible denuclearization deal that fell apart in Hanoi earlier that year. If we exclude 2019, approximately 60% of South Koreans appear to support tactical nuclear weapons. This figure is significantly lower than support for the indigenous nuclear weapons development. There may be several reasons for this, but the most convincing one is that tactical nuclear weapons are ultimately American (not South Korean) assets. A previous study on this issue suggests that one of the main reasons South Koreans support going nuclear is the national prestige associated with being a nuclear state. This condition would certainly not hold in the case of tactical nuclear weapons.²⁸

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4. The Future of ROK-U.S. Relations

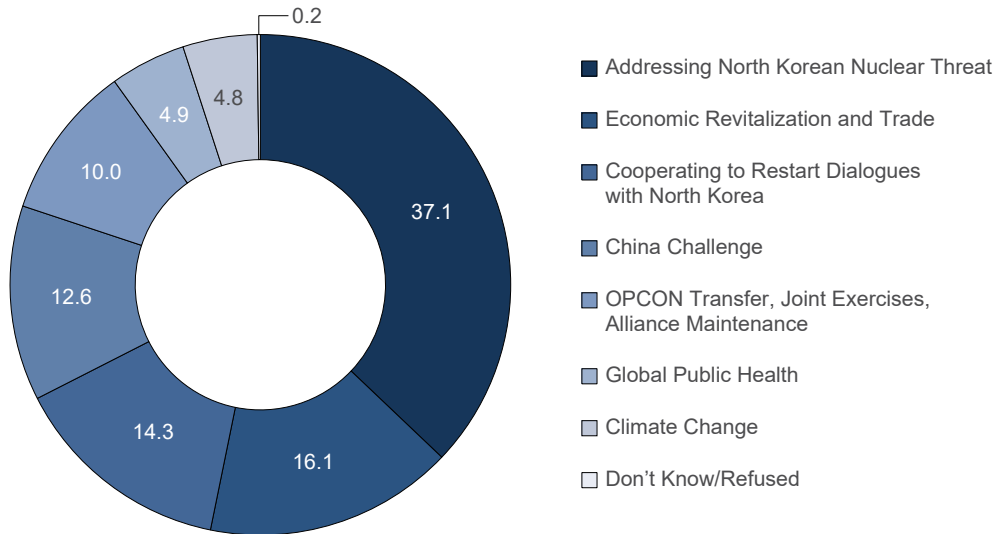
Northeast Asia is undergoing a geopolitical tectonic shift as the United States declared the start of a new era by releasing the National Security Strategy Report in 2017 and the National Defense Strategy Report in 2018. South Korea is among the countries being asked to either take part or opt out of the U.S.-China competition. The rise of different mini-lateral cooperative arrangements, such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) or AUKUS, signals a possible expansion of security cooperation with other countries like South Korea and Japan. What would these changes mean for South Korea's relations with China and North Korea? What are the implications for the ROK-U.S. alliance and USFK?

4.1. Agenda Priorities for ROK-U.S.

To get a pulse on where the South Korean public stands regarding the above changes, the survey asked the respondents to name the most important national security issue that South Korea and the United States must manage together. The choices included addressing the North Korean nuclear threat, economic revitalization and trade, coordination on ROK-DPRK and U.S.-DPRK dialogue, China challenge, alliance maintenance, pandemics and infectious diseases, climate change, and other global issues.

For most South Koreans, the North Korean nuclear issue loomed large as 37.1% named "addressing North Korean nuclear threat" the most important problem South Korea and the United States must jointly manage. When we looked deeper into the respondents who chose this answer, threat perception seemed to be an important determinant. For instance, of the individuals that named the North Korean nuclear threat as the most important issue, 44.5% rated the probability of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula to be high, 30.6% thought the likelihood of military conflict was low, and 40.5% estimated the likelihood of military conflict to be moderate.

In contrast, 16.1% named "economic revitalization and trade," 14.3% stated "cooperating to restart dialogues with North Korea," 12.6% answered "the China challenge," and 10% answered "OPCON transfer, joint exercises, and alliance maintenance." Emerging security issues such as global health and climate change, among other global issues were below 5%.

Figure 11. Important Issues for Current ROK-U.S. Relations²⁹ (%)

There are two important lessons to be drawn from this data. One is that South Koreans seem to take a more immediate and narrow view of the most pressing security challenge. The second is that the priorities for South Korea may not align with those of the United States. According to the 2020 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy, Americans rank the top seven critical threats to U.S. vital interests as 1) COVID-19 pandemic; 2) domestic violent extremism; 3) China; 4) global economic downturn; 5) political polarization; 6) international terrorism; and 7) foreign interference in U.S. elections.³⁰ Bilateral cooperation would be difficult if there is no convergence on agenda priority.

There were some differences across ideologies. Conservatives, for instance, cared more about the North Korean nuclear threat (49.5%) compared to moderates (31.8%) and progressives (24.2%), while progressives (22.8%) tended to prioritize dialogue with North Korea more so than moderates (13%) and conservatives (9.8%). Both moderates (19%) and progressives (20.7%) tended to care more about trade and economy than the

29. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)).

30. Dina Smeltz, Ivo Daalder, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, and Brendan Helm. "Divided We Stand: Democrats and Republicans Diverge on U.S. Foreign Policy." *2020 Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy*. September 2020.

conservatives (11.1%).

4.2. Outstanding Issues in ROK-U.S. Alliance

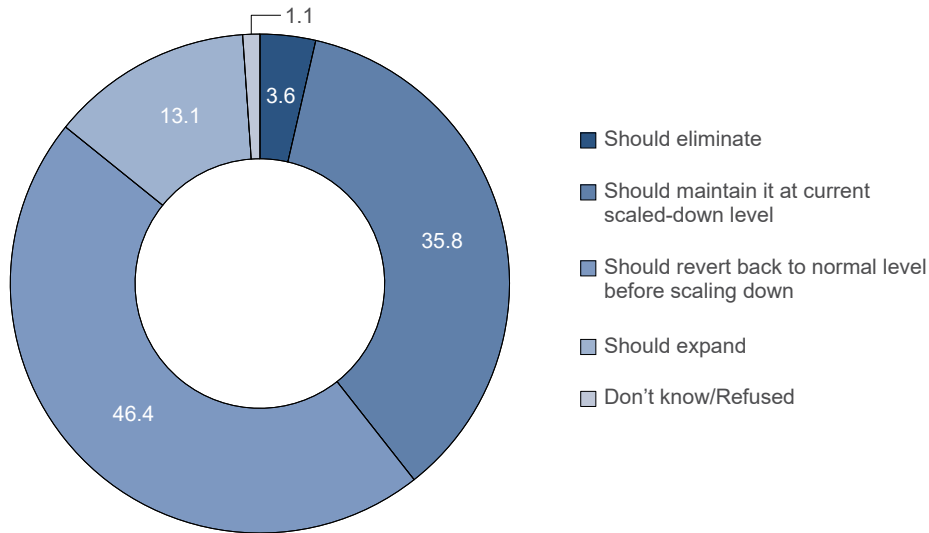
Aside from broad issue areas that both South Korea and the United States can work on, there are several outstanding issues that the two countries must address when it comes to the alliance. These include ROK-U.S. joint exercises, mini-lateral regional cooperation, U.S.-led ballistic missile defense (U.S. BMD) participation, and THAAD.

Joint Exercises

For much of the Moon administration's term, ROK-U.S. joint military exercise has been in a lull. This is mainly due to Seoul's priority on engagement with North Korea and the Trump administration's desire to lower perceived expenses related to these activities. COVID-19 was another contributing factor during much of 2020 and 2021 or 2022. Given the rotational nature of the USFK deployment and North Korea's stated intent to continually develop its capabilities, it would be a gross understatement to suggest that long gaps between exercises have not impacted the readiness of combined forces. In speaking to the Senate Armed Service Committee in September 2018, the commander of USFK General Robert B. Abrams stated that an "atmosphere of détente" on the Korean Peninsula has led to the suspension of the joint exercise and that "there was certainly degradation to the readiness of the force."

What does the South Korean public think about this development? 46.4% of respondents stated that the joint exercises should be conducted at full-scale. 13.1% advocated for an increase in the scale of original joint military exercises. 35.8% supported the continuation of currently reduced or suspended exercises. While a majority favors either return to the original scale or expansion of joint military training, a sizable number of respondents cared to disagree with this position, reflecting a split in South Korean public opinion.

Not surprisingly, there were individual differences across ideologies. 54.9% of conservatives and 48.9% of moderates stated that the joint exercises should return to the original scale, while only 35% of progressives agreed with this view. 51.7% of progressives argued for the continuation of reduced or suspended exercises. Only 22.1% of conservatives and 37% of moderates agreed. 20.2% of conservatives supported expanding the scale of joint exercises, while only 5.7% of progressives supported the same.

Figure 12. Attitudes on ROK-U.S. Military Exercise³¹ (%)

The QUAD

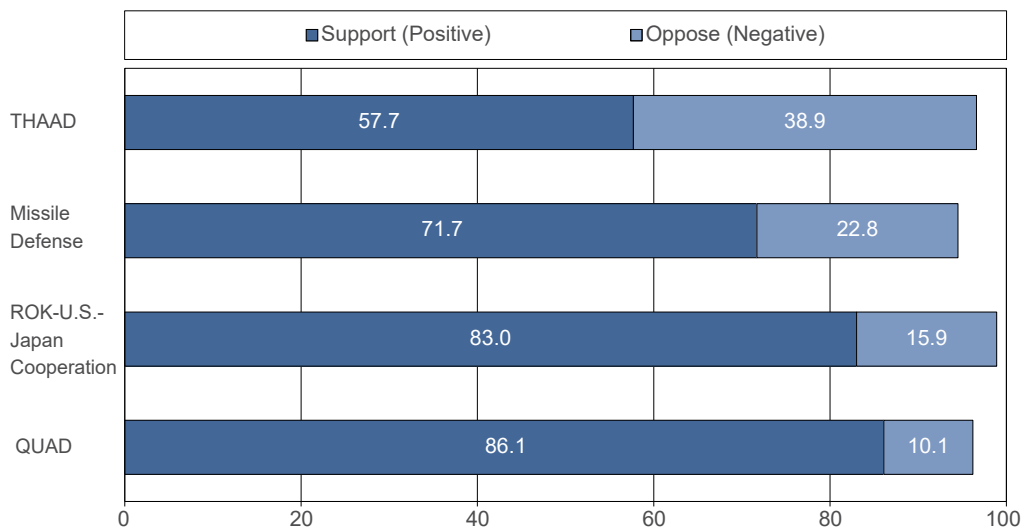
One issue gaining momentum in the Korean media over the past two years has been whether South Korea will take part in the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue as part of the QUAD+ initiative. The Moon administration has been less than forthcoming about taking part in this kind of mini-lateral cooperation framework and instead elected to maintain a policy of strategic ambiguity. There are at least two arguments for why the Moon administration has refrained from participating in the QUAD. One is that participating in the QUAD would lower the strategic value of South Korea. The second is that South Korea is vulnerable to economic retaliation from China if it sides with the U.S. Our survey, however, suggests that most South Koreans beg to differ. As shown in Figure 13, 86.1% of the South Korean public supports South Korea's QUAD participation. Opposition to QUAD participation was a meager 10.1%. While there were some differences across ideology, an overwhelming share of conservatives (93.3%), moderates (87.4%), and progressives (77.1%) support the QUAD.

31. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)).

ROK-U.S.-Japan Trilateral Cooperation

A similar trend can also be observed in the issue of Japan. Looking at the data on basic attitudes about trilateral cooperation between South Korea, the U.S., and Japan, 83% have expressed approval. Only 15.9% disapproved. Support also seemed very broad across age and ideological spectrum. Most support came from individuals in their 20s (88.4%) and 60-and-over (90.7%) as well as conservatives (90.2%).

Figure 13. Attitudes on Issues in ROK-U.S. Relations³² (%)



One explanation for the broad approval is the heightened awareness of the security challenges associated with North Korea and China. However, this issue also gained some attention when President Yoon Suk-yeol also stated that he looked to improve bilateral ties with Japan. Surprisingly, the South Korean public attitudes about Japan have shifted so quickly over the past two years. In 2020, over 70% of South Koreans were reported to have participated in boycotting Japanese products after the two countries engaged in a bitter dispute over the forced labor issue and trade.³³

32. Source: Asan Poll (March 2022(a)).

33. Source: "Over 70 pct of S. Koreans joined boycott of Japanese goods: survey." *Yonhap News*. December 22, 2020. (Retrieved from <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20201222007600315>)

THAAD

Another major national security issue that gained quite a bit of attention in recent months was the debate surrounding the deployment of additional batteries for the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea. On more than one occasion, President Yoon proposed to work with the U.S. to deploy additional THAAD batteries in South Korea to deter North Korea. However, Yoon's idea drew some controversy because detractors questioned its feasibility and practicality. Currently, there is one THAAD battery in South Korea, which is based in Seongju County. But the residents of this town have opposed its basing and clashed with authorities every time the government brought construction equipment and other items onto the base.

Perhaps it is not surprising that the South Korean public appears somewhat split over this matter. According to our survey, 57.7% supported additional THAAD deployment. 38.9% opposed. There were meaningful differences across different demographic and attitudinal categories. For instance, 77.9% of conservatives and 33.8% of progressives were supportive. Those who supported a more security-focused view (65.9%) of the alliance tended to support additional THAAD deployment than those who did not (52.4%). Those who saw the possibility of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula in the next ten years to be moderate (69.5%) to high (66%) were more supportive of THAAD than those who did not (47.3%).

U.S. BMD

Although the South Korean public appears split over the issue of THAAD, the data suggests that the attitude about participating in the U.S.-led ballistic missile defense (U.S. BMD) system was different. When asked what the respondent thought about South Korea's participation in U.S. BMD, 71.7% supported it. 22.8% opposed (5.5% did not know or refused to answer). The response also differed according to ideology. 84.7% of conservatives, 70.1% of moderates, and 56.2% of progressives supported U.S. BMD. 38.5% of progressives, 24% of moderates, and 12% of conservatives opposed.

Attitudinal disposition about national security also seemed to matter. More people who saw the ROK-U.S. alliance as a security alliance supported the U.S. BMD (75.7%) than those who did not (69.6%). Those who thought the likelihood of military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula in the next 10 years is high (78.6%) or moderate (79.6%) were

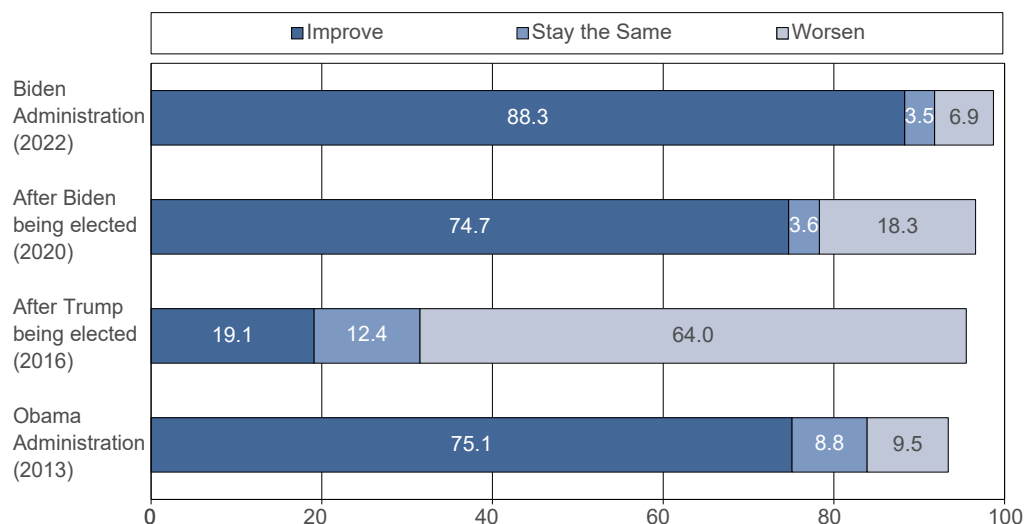
more supportive of U.S. BMD than those who did not (64%).

This finding suggests that the South Korean public associates South Korea's participation in the U.S. BMD is a more effective way of addressing the ballistic missile threats from adversaries in and around the Korean Peninsula. It also suggests that the South Korean public has a view that is different than the Moon administration, which has elected to declare the Three No policy: 1) no additional THAAD battery; 2) no participation in U.S. BMD; and 3) no ROK-U.S.-Japan trilateral security cooperation.

4.3. Outlook on ROK-U.S. Relations

Finally, we sought to explore South Korean attitudes about the future of ROK-U.S. relations by asking whether the survey respondents expected the ROK-U.S. ties to be better, worse, or the same. 88.3% stated that they expected ROK-U.S. relations to be better in the future than in the past. This was a sizable increase from 2020, when 74.7% of respondents thought that ROK-U.S. relations would improve after Joe Biden's presidential election victory. This is comparable, if not better, to when President Obama was beginning his second term in 2013, when 75.1% of respondents thought

Figure 14. Outlook on ROK-U.S. Relations³⁴ (%)



34. Source: Asan Poll (October 2013, December 2016, December 2020, March 2022(b)).

that the bilateral relations would improve. It is most certainly a big turnaround from 2016, when Donald Trump was elected to be the next president. On the other hand, 64% thought that ROK-U.S. relations would worsen.

There were some notable differences according to ideology. That is, conservatives (94.1%) tended to be more optimistic than moderates (86.8%) or progressives (84.6%) about the prospect of ROK-U.S. relations. Interestingly, this difference was not as noticeable in 2020. In 2020, age was more of an important factor where individuals in

Table 6. Outlook on ROK-U.S. Relations by Demographics³⁵ (%)

		2020		2022	
		Improve	Worsen	Improve	Worsen
Total		77.3	19.0	89.5	6.9
Age	20s	72.3	23.5	89.4	8.8
	30s	64.1	32.0	91.8	6.8
	40s	75.4	22.3	85.6	9.0
	50s	<u>82.6</u>	14.9	88.1	6.7
	60+	<u>85.1</u>	9.8	91.9	4.7
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=40.656, df=8, p<.001$		<i>n.s.</i>	
Total		76.9	19.5	89.5	7.0
Ideology	Conservative	75.8	20.9	<u>94.1</u>	4.2
	Moderate	78.0	18.0	86.8	8.4
	Progressive	76.9	19.6	84.6	<u>10.3</u>
Test Statistics		<i>n.s.</i>		$\chi^2=18.999, df=6, p<.05$	

35. Source: Asan Poll (December 2020, March 2022(a)) “Don’t Know/Refused to answer” was excluded from this analysis. Sample sizes were as follows: 2020 by age was n=968; 2020 by ideology was n=942; 2022 by age was n=985; 2022 by ideology was n=987.

their 50s (82.6%) and 60-and-over (85.1%) were more optimistic than others. Age was not shown to be an important factor in 2022. This suggests that even though age and ideological leanings are often correlated on issues related to foreign policy and national security, there are unique differences across sampled groupings that require separate consideration.

5. Conclusion

This year is significant from the standpoint of ROK-U.S. relations. It marks the 140th anniversary of bilateral ties, and we have a new administration in Seoul that prioritizes strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance. Although the relationship has had its ups and downs in the past, the survey presented in this report suggests that the South Korean public feels very strongly about the bond with the United States and believes that the alliance is critical to keeping peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula. Key findings from this report can be described as follows.

First, South Koreans were generally very optimistic about the United States and its leadership. In particular, the South Koreans continue to see the U.S. as a strong military and the history of the alliance relationship as one built on common security challenges and interests. South Koreans also tend to make positive linkages between the U.S. and critical historical events such as the signing of the KORUS FTA and the liberation of South Korea from Japanese occupation. While the Korean War still loomed large for most South Koreans when it comes to relations with the United States, the data suggests that this is colored by different historical interpretations of the role of the United States before, during, and after the Korean War.

Second, the data clearly shows that the South Korean view of the United States since 2010 is very favorable. This was true even during the problematic Trump-Moon era when relations between Washington and Seoul were not always that easy. However, there are promising signs that the bilateral relationship is on an upswing with the inauguration of a new administration in Seoul, ushering in a new Biden-Yoon era.

Third, South Koreans tended to see the role of the ROK-U.S. alliance differently depending on the geopolitical context of Northeast Asia. For instance, while more than half of South Koreans wanted the ROK-U.S. alliance to develop into one based on a broad set of values encompassing democracy and human rights, this view was tempered by the context that favored closer bilateral relations and modest threat perception. When perceived security risk was more significant, individuals tended to emphasize the security dimension of the alliance. For instance, South Koreans were more concerned about U.S. security guarantees when the occurrence of North Korean provocation was high. This suggests that it would be impossible to ignore North Korea when thinking

about pushing the boundaries of alliance function to address new frontier challenges. Therefore, South Koreans will need greater reassurance if policymakers wish to seek their support in expanding the areas of cooperation within the alliance framework.

Fourth, South Koreans continued to maintain a high level of trust in U.S. security guarantees. Although some critics lamented the decline of trust in U.S. extended deterrence during President Trump's term, many South Koreans believed strongly that the U.S. would intervene on their behalf if North Korea invaded South Korea. This view also spilled over into South Korean views about the ROK-U.S. alliance and the USFK. A large cross-section of South Koreans continued to believe that the ROK-U.S. alliance should continue even after unification. A significant share also thought that the USFK should continue to remain on the Korean Peninsula even after unification. While North Korea is still a major security threat to South Koreans, these findings show that South Koreans also see other regional threats related to great power competition between the U.S. and China.

Fifth, South Koreans supported indigenous nuclear development and redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons regardless of the U.S. security guarantees. Rising security risks coupled with potential U.S. withdrawal would necessitate an insurance policy in the form of a nuclear deterrent. However, it was surprising that the support for proliferation was relatively high even when South Koreans were made aware of its potential cost. There was, nonetheless, a marginal decline in the desire to pursue nuclear development when the cost was factored in. This suggests that the view on proliferation largely hinges on the perceived costs and benefits of going nuclear.

Sixth, South Koreans seemed to be driven by practical concerns when considering the ROK-U.S. relations. For them, the overriding security concern was North Korea and denuclearization. South Koreans are more willing to consider the possibility of multilateral security cooperation and cooperation on missile defense with the United States. Although there was less interest in introducing additional THAAD batteries in South Korea, a majority still supported this idea.

Together, the findings suggest that the current and future state of ROK-U.S. relations are on firm grounds concerning the South Korean public. South Koreans believe that there is a solid foundation for strengthening and broadening this relationship to include matters beyond the Korean Peninsula, provided that there is an adequate assurance of

effectively deterring a de facto nuclear North Korea. With the new administration in Seoul favoring a strengthened alliance, South Korea is likely to take a more proactive stance on matters related to China and Japan. Signs of shifting tide look promising for the time being. South Korea and the U.S. should seize this moment to accomplish as much as they can.

Survey Methodology

Asan Poll

2013

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

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

Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with Random Digit Dialing (RDD) for mobile and landline phones

Period: May 23~25, October 10~12, 2013

Organization: Research & Research

2014

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

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

Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with RDD for mobile and landline phones

Period: March 13~15, July 11~13, 2014 (Nuclear Armament)

Organization: Research & Research

2015

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

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

Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with RDD for mobile and landline phones

Period: March 11~13, 2015

Organization: Research & Research

2016

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

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

Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with RDD for mobile and landline phones

Period: October 10~12, November 22~24, 2016

Organization: Research & Research

2019

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

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

Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with RDD for mobile and landline phones

Period: January 7~9 (USFK), August 19~21, 2016

Organization: Research & Research

2020

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

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

Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with RDD for mobile and landline phones

Period: December 28~29, 2020

Organization: Research & Research

2022

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

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

Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with RDD for mobile and landline phones

Period: March 10~12 (a) 17~18 (b), 2022

Organization: Research & Research

Asan Annual Survey**2010**

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

Margin of error: $\pm 2.2\%$ at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: Personal Interview Survey (Face-to-face Method)

Period: August 16~September 17, 2010

Organization: Media Research

2011

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

Margin of error: $\pm 2.2\%$ at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: Mixed-Mode Online Survey employing RDD for mobile and landline telephones

Period: August 26~October 4, 2011

Organization: EmBrain

2012

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

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

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

Period: September 24~November 1, 2014

Organization: Media Research

2013

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

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

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

Period: September 4~27, 2013

Organization: Media Research

2014

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

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

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

Period: September 1~17, 2014

Organization: Media Research

2015

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

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

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

Period: September 2~30, 2015

Organization: Media Research

2016

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

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

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey
Period: September 9~October 14, 2016
Organization: Media Research

2017

Sample size: 1,200 respondents over the age of 19
Margin of error: $\pm 2.8\%$ at the 95% confidence level
Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey
Period: October 19~November 14, 2017
Organization: Kantar Public

2018

Sample size: 1,200 respondents over the age of 19
Margin of error: $\pm 2.8\%$ at the 95% confidence level
Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey
Period: November 8~December 5, 2018
Organization: K-Stat Research

2019

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: December 5~24, 2019
Organization: K-Stat Research

2020

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: December 3~17, 2020
Organization: EmBrain Public

Appendix I: 2022 Asan Poll Questionnaire (March 2022(a))

Q01. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of the U.S.?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strong Military	37.3
Capitalist Economy	31.4
Democratic System of Government	17.2
Innovative Companies	7.5
Popular Culture	2.6
Famous People & Places	2.4
Others/Don't Know/Refused	1.7

Q02. What is the most important event in 140 years of ROK-U.S. relations? Please pick two things in the order of importance. (%)

Response Options	First	Second
Korean War (1950~1953)	35.8	21.8
Formation of ROK-U.S. Alliance (1953)	23.3	25.3
Division of Korean Peninsula (1945)	13.6	13.6
KORUS FTA (2007)	12.6	19.6
Korean Independence (1945)	10.1	13.9
Protest against Imported U.S. Beef (2008)	3.6	5.1
Others/Don't Know/Refused	1.0	0.7

Q03. Which one of the following statements about the ROK-U.S. alliance do you agree with?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Should be built on principles such as democratic ideals, human rights and universal values	60.2
Should be limited to respond to the North Korean security threats	38.8
Don't Know/Refused	1.1

Q04. What is the most important issue for current ROK-U.S. Relations?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Addressing North Korean Nuclear Threat	37.1
Economic Revitalization and Trade	16.1
Cooperating to Restart Dialogues with North Korea	14.3
China Challenge	12.6
OPCON Transfer, Joint Exercises, Alliance Maintenance	10.0
Global Public Health	4.9
Climate Change	4.8
Don't Know/Refused	0.3

Q05. If North Korea attacks South Korea, do you think the U.S. will intervene?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Likely	53.4
Likely on the Whole	35.5
Not Likely	8.6
Not Likely at All	2.0
Don't Know/Refused	0.5

Q06. Do you think the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to be necessary in the future?

Q07. Do you think the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to be necessary after the two Koreas reunify? (%)

Response Options	Future	Post-Unification
Not Necessary at All	1.2	4.5
Not Necessary	2.2	11.7
Necessary	33.9	45.6
Very Necessary	62.5	37.3
Don't Know/Refused	0.1	1.0

Q08. What is your opinion toward the U.S. military stationing in South Korea in the future?

Q09. What is your opinion toward the U.S. military stationing in South Korea after unification? (%)

Response Options	Future	Post-Unification
Very Necessary	42.3	23.2
Necessary	39.9	39.1
Not Necessary	13.4	23.8
Not Necessary at All	4.0	12.7
Don't Know/Refused	0.4	1.3

Q10. Currently, the U.S. has some 28,500 troops in South Korea. Do you think the size of U.S. military should be reduced, maintained, or increased in the future?
(n= 821)

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Should be reduced	15.5
Should be maintained	69.8
Should be increased	12.3
Don't Know/Refused	2.4

Q11. Do you think the ROK-U.S.-Japan security cooperation is necessary for responding to North Korean nuclear threats and the rise of China?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Positive	38.5
Positive on the Whole	44.5
Negative on the Whole	10.5
Very Negative	5.4
Don't Know/Refused	1.0

Q12. Do you think that South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons to counter North Korea's nuclear weapon development?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	32.0
Support	38.2
Oppose	18.4
Strongly Oppose	9.8
Don't Know/Refused	1.5

Q13. If there are international sanctions on a country developing its own nuclear weapon, do you think that South Korea should still develop nuclear weapons?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	21.3
Support	42.3
Oppose	22.1
Strongly Oppose	12.2
Don't Know/Refused	2.1

Q14. Do you think that tactical nuclear weapons should be deployed to South Korea?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	20.5
Support	38.5
Oppose	23.8
Strongly Oppose	14.5
Don't Know/Refused	2.6

Q15. What is your opinion on the ROK-U.S. military exercise?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Should eliminate	3.6
Should maintain it at current reduced level	35.8
Should revert back to normal level before scaling down	46.4
Should expand	13.1
Don't Know/Refused	1.0

Q16. What do you think about South Korea joining the QUAD?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Positive	35.5
Positive on the Whole	50.6
Negative on the Whole	7.0
Very Negative	3.1
Don't Know/Refused	3.8

Q17. What do you think about South Korea deploying additional THAAD system?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	25.6
Support	32.1
Oppose	21.2
Strongly Oppose	17.6
Don't Know/Refused	3.4

Q18. What do you think about South Korea joining the U.S. Missile Defense?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	21.6
Support	50.1
Oppose	16.8
Strongly Oppose	6.0
Don't Know/Refused	5.4

Q19. How do you rate the likelihood of military conflict on Korean Peninsula within next ten years? Please rate your view on a scale of zero to ten, respectively, representing “Not Likely at all” and “Very Likely” with five being “Normal.”

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Not Likely	48.4
Normal	25.7
Likely	23.3
Don't Know/Refused	2.5

Appendix II: 2022 Asan Poll Questionnaire (March 2022(b))

Q1~2. How do you rate the favorability of [the U.S. and China]? Please rate your view on a scale of zero to ten, respectively, representing “Not favorable at all” and “Very favorable” with five being “Neutral.”

Q5~6. How do you rate the favorability of [President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping]? Please rate your view on a scale of zero to ten, respectively, representing “Not favorable at all” and “Very favorable” with five being “Neutral.” (0~10 point)

Response Options	Average
The U.S.	6.85
China	2.71
Joe Biden	5.89
Xi Jinping	1.99

Q13~17. Do you think the relationship between South Korea and [the U.S., Japan, China, North Korea, and Russia] will improve or worsen in the future? (%)

Response Options	U.S.	Japan	China	North Korea	Russia
Improve	88.3	62.2	37.9	24.6	23.4
Stay the Same	3.5	5.1	3.4	4.1	3.8
Worsen	6.9	31.6	56.8	68.5	68.9
Don't Know/Refused	1.3	1.1	1.9	2.8	3.9



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