

SOUTH KOREANS

— AND —

THEIR NEIGHBORS

2019

ASAN POLL

THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES

South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2019



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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 2019

Since 2010, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies has been tracking South Korean public opinion on international and domestic issues. By collecting major findings from the Asan Institute's surveys in international politics, the Asan Institute has published the "*South Koreans and Their Neighbors*" series since the 2014 Asan Plenum.

As the dynamic shifted on the Korean Peninsula in 2019, the Asan Institute polled South Korean attitudes toward regional security. The report, "*South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2019*" reveals a number of significant findings, including South Korean views about neighboring countries, future relationships with the U.S. and North Korea, the prospects for U.S.-North Korea denuclearization talks, and great power relations.

South Korean views on the U.S. and North Korea has changed following a series of inter-Korean and the U.S.-North Korea dialogues during 2018~19. The perception on China, however, has remained relatively stable given the lack of diplomatic development on this front. This was a marked break from the public perception about China during 2014~15 when ROK-China relations was at an all-time best. Finally, given the recent South Korean Supreme Court ruling on forced labor and continuing tension over history and territory, South Korean public attitudes about Japan has gotten worse. Key results from this study are as follows:

The latest poll conducted in March 2019 indicates that the United States was the most favored country among South Koreans with an average score of 5.84. It was followed by North Korea (4.12), China (3.64), and Japan (3.32).

Similar to 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump (4.4) maintained his position as the most favored foreign leader among South Koreans. President Trump was followed by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Chinese President Xi Jinping (both tied at 3.2). Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's favorability was 1.77, making him the least favored foreign leader for the South Koreans.

A majority of respondents sees South Korea's relationship with the U.S. and North Korea improving in the future. There were notable shifts as the percentage of South Koreans expecting improved ROK-U.S. relations declined from 74.9% in 2016 to 57.8% in 2018 and 57.2% in 2019. Regarding relations with North Korea, 63.3% responded that they expected inter-Korean relations to improve. This is a dramatic change from 2016 when only 16.2% believed that relations with North Korea would improve.

While 48% responded that they are satisfied with the Moon administration's North Korea policy, 46.2% of respondents answered that they are not satisfied. 5.8% answered that they do not know or refused to answer. Support for the country's North Korea policy was 41.7% in 2014 and 60% in 2018.

Regarding the prospects for U.S.-North Korea denuclearization talks,

50% of South Koreans were optimistic. 42.3% were pessimistic and 7.7% responded that they do not know or refused to answer. Breakdown by age group showed that respondents in their 40s were most optimistic (59.8%) followed by individuals in their 30s (53.5%). Pessimism about the talks was relatively high among the older respondents (50s=46.6%, 60 and older=46%).

54.5% predicted that North Korea will never denuclearize. Among those who answered that North Korea will eventually denuclearize, 14.5% answered that they believed North Korea would do so within the next 4 to 5 years. Another 11.1% stated that the denuclearization of North Korea will take place within 6 to 10 years and 5.9% said that it would take more than 11 years. 8.4% speculated that denuclearization is possible within the next 1 to 3 years. The estimated average of the number of years that respondents believed that North Korea would denuclearize was 7.1 years.

When asked which country South Korea should strengthen its ties with if the United States and China continue their rivalry, 75% of South Koreans chose the U.S. over China (18.9%). Since 2014, the respondents have repeatedly chosen the U.S. over China as a future partner. In 2019, the rate for China was the lowest on record. The preference for the U.S. was widespread across most age groups and ideology. When broken down by age, the preference for the U.S. was highest among respondents under 40 (30s=77.9%, 20s=76.3%) and 60 and older (79.7%). The breakdown by ideology reveals that 86.2% of the conservatives preferred the U.S. over China, followed by moderates (72.7%) and progressives (70%).

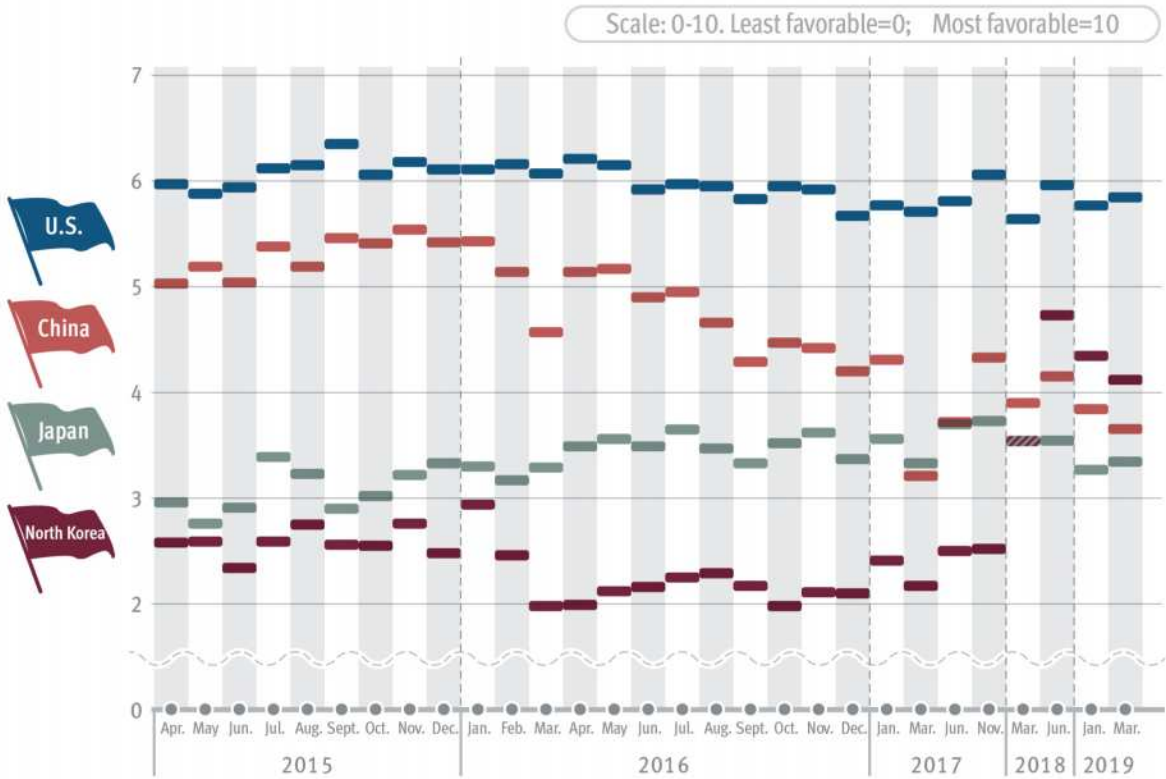
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COUNTRY FAVORABILITY

 How would you rate the favorability of the following countries?

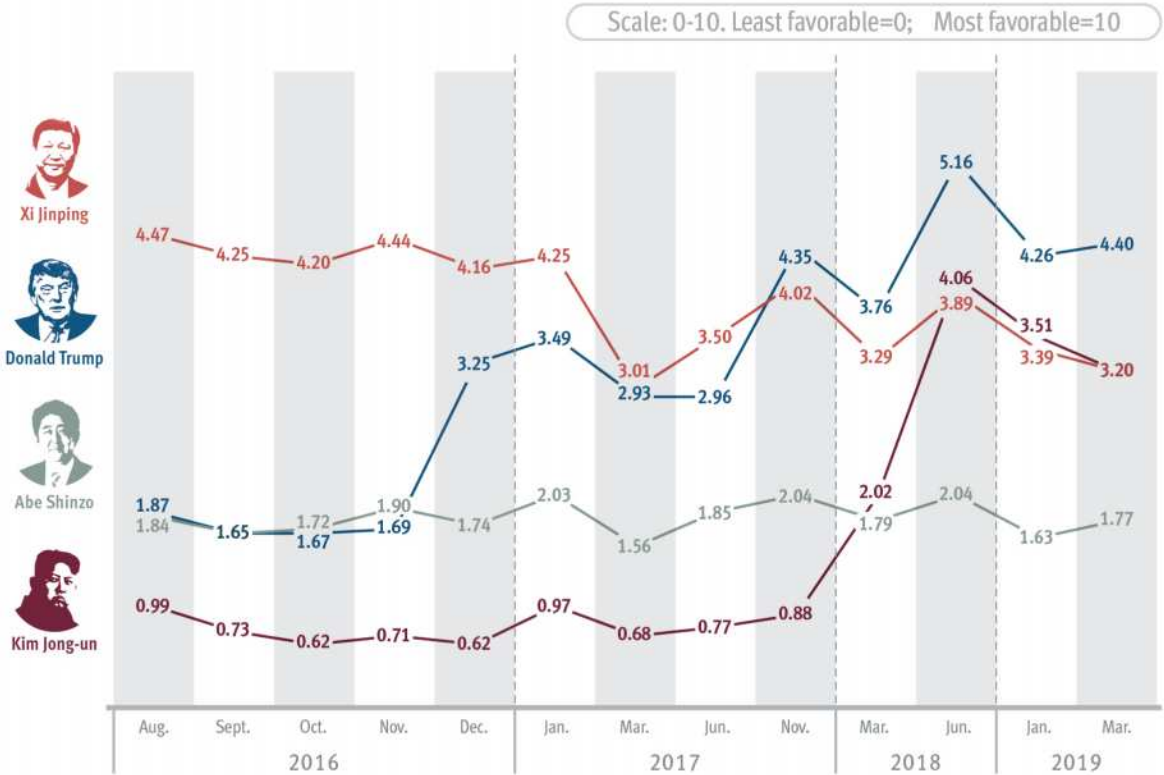


Respondents were asked to rate the favorability of each country (U.S., North Korea, Japan, and China) on a scale of zero to ten, representing “least favorable” to “most favorable.” In March 2019, the favorability of the United States was 5.84. The U.S. remains as South Koreans’ most favored country. North Korea’s favorability (4.12) was second. In fact, North Korea’s favorability was above 4 points ever since June 2018. The favorability ratings for China and Japan remain virtually unchanged. In March 2019, China’s favorability dropped to 3.64 from 4.16 in June 2018. It was lower than that of North Korea. Japan’s rating was 3.32, making it South Koreans’ least favored country. This figure is expected to remain low without a political breakthrough in bilateral relations.



LEADER FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following leaders?

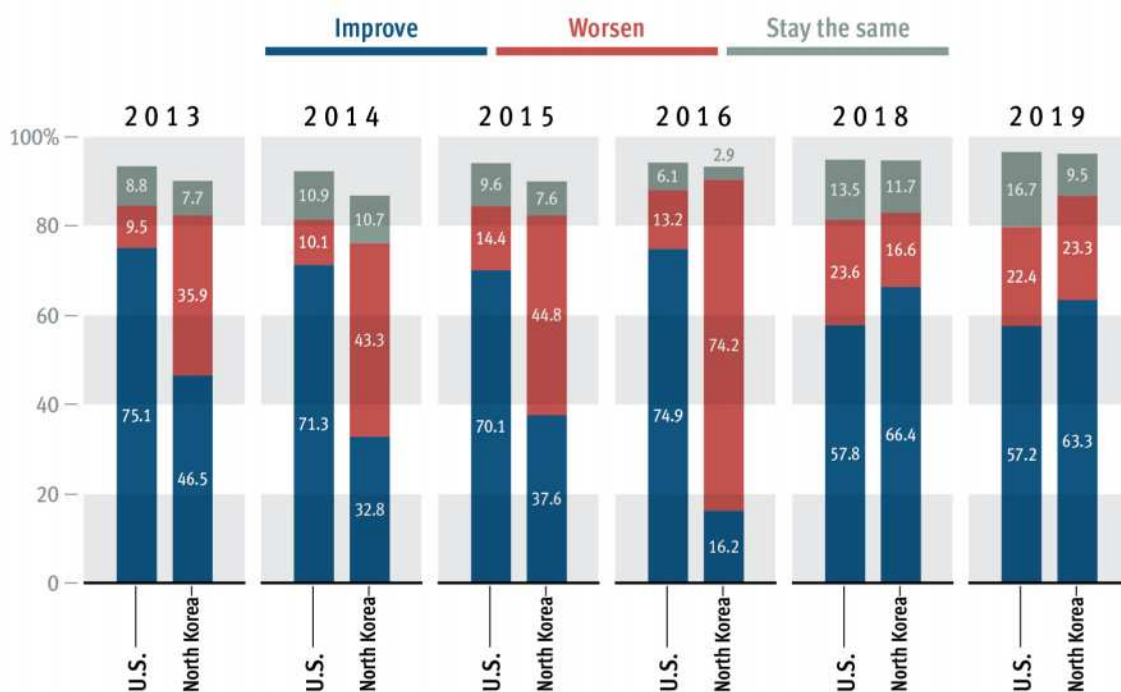


Respondents were asked to rate the favorability of major leaders from the countries above on a scale of zero to ten, with zero representing “least favorable.” U.S. President Donald Trump maintained his position as the most favored foreign leader among South Koreans (4.4). Though President Trump’s favorability dropped from 5.16 in June 2018, it maintained a score above 4. President Trump was followed by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and Chinese President Xi Jinping (both tied at 3.2). South Korean perception of Chairman Kim improved as of early 2018. In contrast, President Xi’s rating is still lower than his average ratings in 2014 and 2015 when ROK-China relation was at its all-time best. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s favorability is 1.77, which means that he is the least favored foreign leader for the South Koreans.

SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE U.S. AND NORTH KOREA

2013. 6/7~9
 2014. 1/4~6
 2015. 1/14~16
 2016. 2/17~19
 2018. 3/21~22
 2019. 3/19~20

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



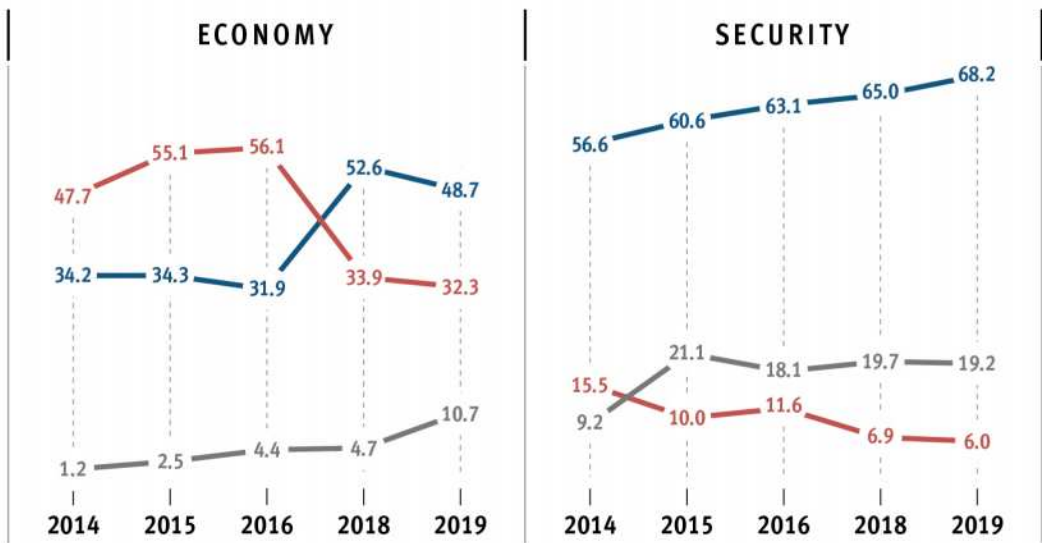
A majority of respondents sees South Korea's relationship with the U.S. and North Korea improving in the future. However, there were some notable shifts as the percentage of South Koreans expecting improved future relations with the U.S. declined from 74.9% in February 2016 to 57.8% in March 2018 and 57.2% in March 2019. Regarding relations with North Korea, 63.3% responded in March 2019 that they expected inter-Korean relations to improve. It is a dramatic increase from 2016 when only 16.2% of South Koreans believed that relations with North Korea would improve. There appears to be a correlation between the expectation for inter-Korean relations and favorability of North Korea and Chairman Kim among South Koreans.



MOST IMPORTANT NEIGHBOR FOR SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY/SECURITY

2014. 3/10~12
 2015. 3/18~20
 2016. 3/22~24
 2018. 3/21~22
 2019. 3/19~20

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



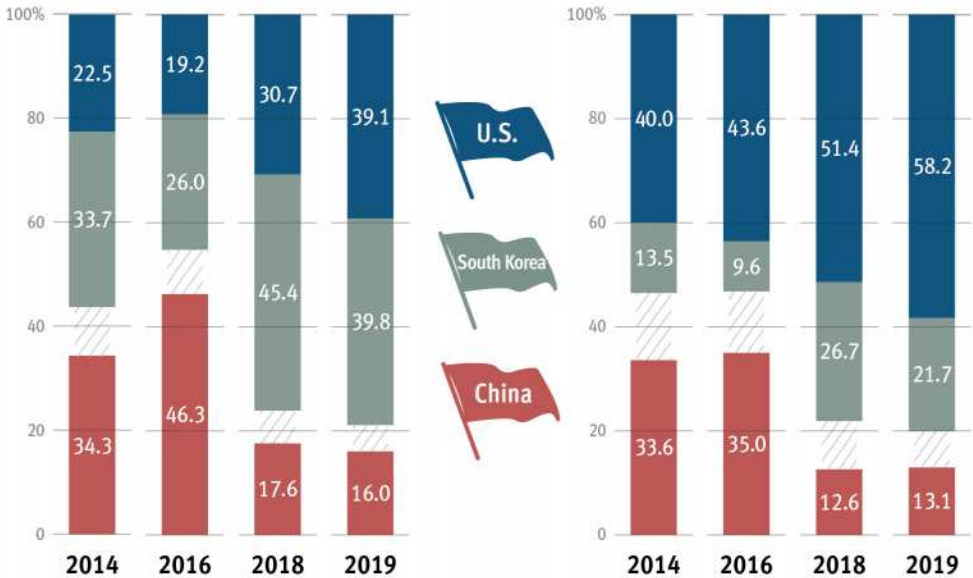
Respondents were asked to identify the most important neighbor for South Korea's economy and security. About half (48.7%) of South Koreans viewed the United States as the most important neighbor economically. China's importance stayed almost the same (32.3%) although this is significantly lower than 56.1% in 2016. Meanwhile, a majority of South Koreans have continually viewed the U.S. as the most important country for South Korea's security ever since the Asan Institute began tracking this issue in 2014. In March 2019, this figure increased to 68.2%.

IMPORTANT NEIGHBOR TO DENUCLEARIZATION OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA

2014. 5/4~6
 2016. 3/22~24
 2018. 3/21~22
 2019. 3/19~20

Q1. Which country *should* take an active role in solving North Korea's nuclear-related problems?

Q2. Which country *will* take an active role in solving North Korea's nuclear-related problems?



Respondents were asked to identify the country that *should* take the most active role in solving North Korea's nuclear-related problems. They ranked South Korea (39.8%) and the U.S. (39.1%) as the countries that should take the lead. Rates for South Korea (2018=45.4%, 2019=39.8%) decreased, while the rates for the U.S. (2018=30.7%, 2019=39.1%) increased. The rates for China (2018=17.6%, 2019=16%) remained unchanged. When asked to identify the neighbor that *will* take an active role in solving North Korea's nuclear-related problems, respondents chose the U.S. (58.2%) followed by South Korea (21.7%) and China (13.1%). The data suggests that the South Koreans understand the importance of the U.S. in solving North Korea's nuclear-related problems.



EVALUATION OF SOUTH KOREA'S CURRENT NORTH KOREA POLICY

2014. 9/7-10
2018. 3/21-22
2019. 3/19-20

Are you satisfied with South Korea's current North Korea policy?



Respondents were split over the Moon administration's North Korea policy. While 48% responded that they are satisfied, 46.2% of respondents answered that they are not satisfied. 5.8% answered they do not know or refused to answer. Analysis of the past trend indicates that the support for the country's North Korea policy increased from 41.7% in 2014 to 60% in 2018, but it is significantly lowered in 2019. The deadlock over the denuclearization of North Korea may have impacted South Korean perception of the current North Korea policy.

REASONS FOR SATISFACTION OF THE CURRENT NORTH KOREA POLICY

2019. 3/19-20

What is the reason that you're satisfied with South Korea's current North Korea policy?

Growing possibility of the resuming inter-Korean exchanges

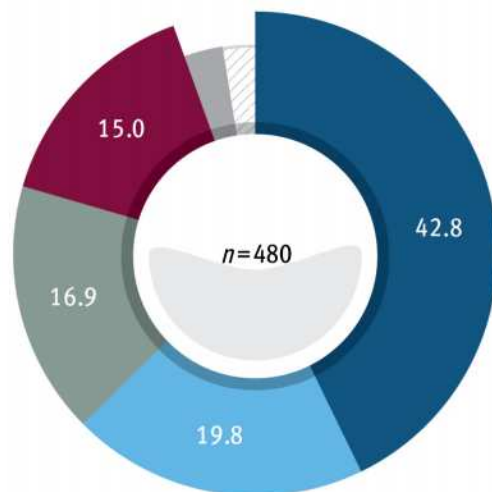
Agree with its overall North Korea policy

Raising expectations for resolving North Korean nuclear issue

Encouraged by inter-Korean and the U.S.-North Korea dialogue

Other

Don't know/Refused



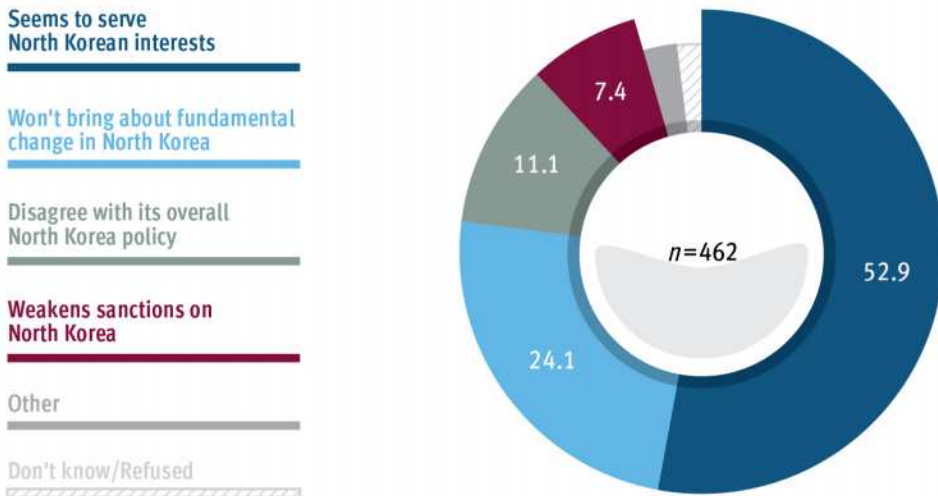
When asked why they are satisfied with South Korea's current North Korea policy, 42.8% of the respondents cited the growing possibility of resuming inter-Korean exchange as the primary reason. Other reasons include support for the government's overall North Korea policy (19.8%), raised expectations for resolving the North Korean nuclear issue (16.9%), and encouraged by inter-Korean and the U.S.-North Korea dialogue (15%). The support for the government's North Korea policy appears to be driven by expectations about normalized inter-Korean relations and a more stable security situation on the Korean Peninsula.



REASONS FOR DISSATISFACTION OF THE CURRENT NORTH KOREA POLICY

2019. 3/19~20

What is the reason that you're not satisfied with South Korea's current North Korea policy?

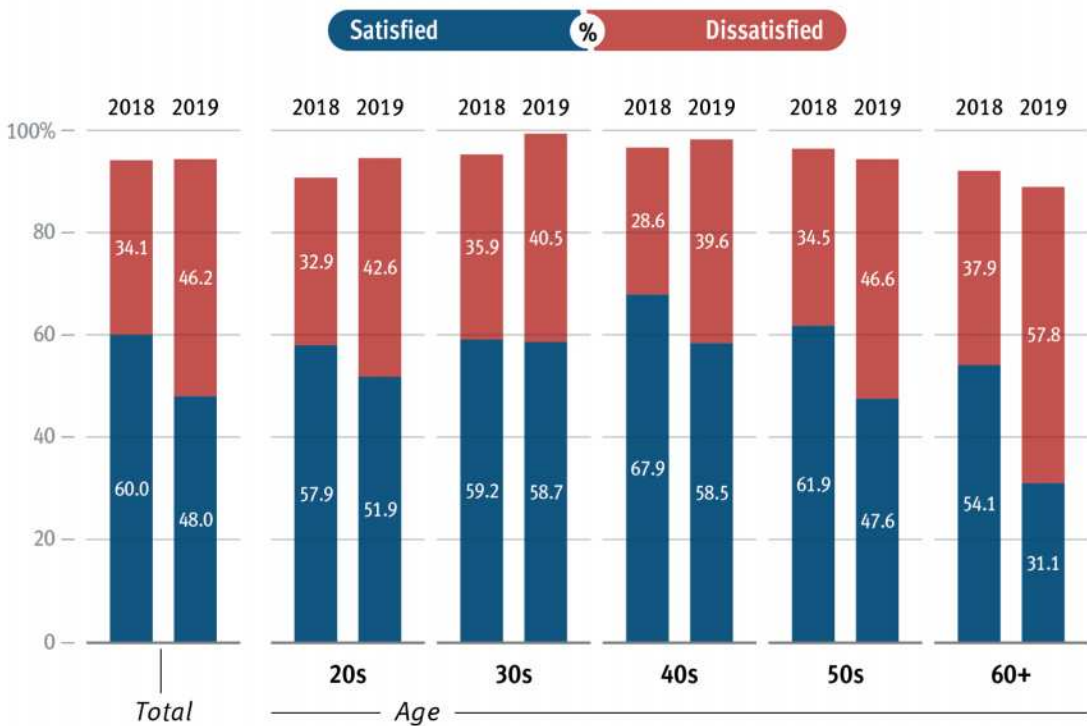


When asked why they are not satisfied with the current North Korea policy, 52.9% of the respondents stated that the policy seems to serve North Korea's interests. Another 24.1% were skeptical whether the policy will bring about a fundamental change in North Korea. One in ten (11.1%) respondents answered that they disagreed with the government's overall North Korea policy. Others were concerned about weakened sanctions (7.4%). In general, public dissatisfaction with the current North Korea policy appears to be driven by concerns about whose interests it serves.

GENERATIONAL GAPS IN EVALUATION OF SOUTH KOREA'S CURRENT NORTH KOREA POLICY

2018. 3/21~22
2019. 3/19~20

Are you satisfied with South Korea's current North Korea policy?



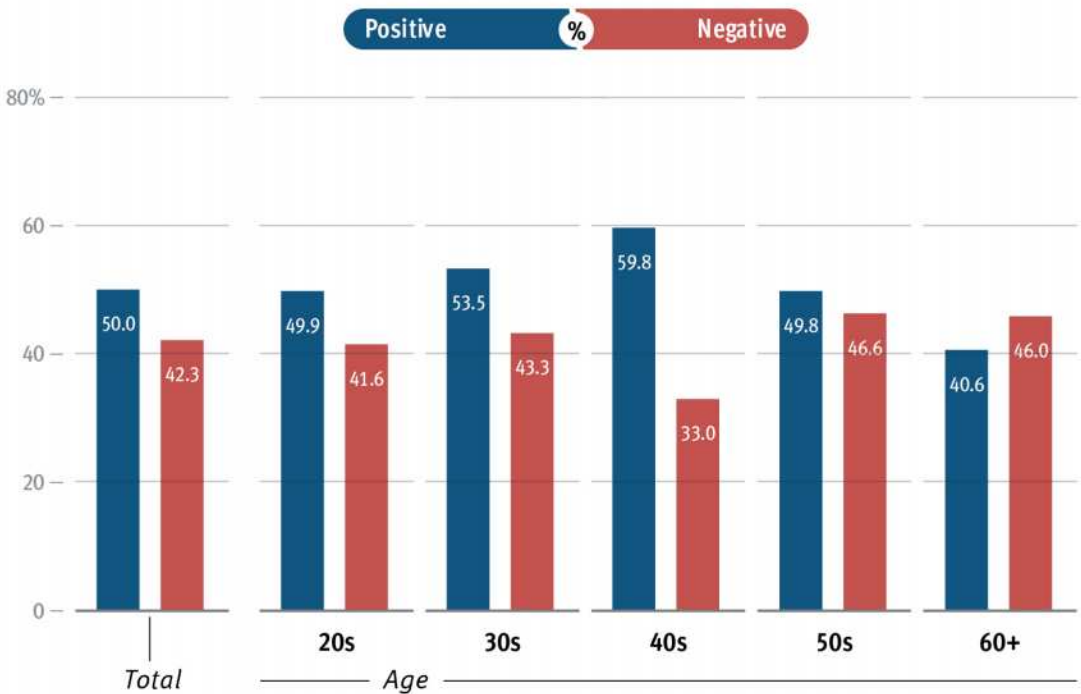
While satisfaction with the government's North Korea policy was widespread across all age groups in 2018, there were some notable differences in 2019. In 2018, over half of all respondents in each age group stated that they are satisfied with the Moon administration's North Korea policy. In 2019, however, satisfaction was lower among individuals in their 50s (47.6%) and 60 and older (31.1%). The number of individuals from that age group who answered that they are satisfied with the current government's policy decreased (50s=14.3% point, 60 and older=23% point) between 2018 and 2019. In March 2019, satisfaction with the government's North Korea policy was highest among respondents in their 30s (58.7%) and 40s (58.5%).



PROSPECTS FOR U.S.-NORTH KOREA DENUCLEARIZATION TALKS

2019. 3/19~20

How do you view the prospects of U.S.-North Korea denuclearization talks?



Respondents were asked how they viewed the prospects for the U.S.-North Korea denuclearization talks. 50% of South Koreans saw the prospects for the U.S.-North Korea talks as positive, while 42.3% saw it as negative. Only 7.7% responded that they do not know or refused to answer. When broken down by age group, respondents in their 40s were most optimistic (59.8%) followed by the 30s (53.5%). The net differences between positive and negative views within each age group were 26.8 percentage points (40s) and 10.2 percentage points (30s), respectively. On the other hand, pessimism about the denuclearization talks was relatively high among the older age groups (50s=46.6%, 60 and older=46%). It is important to point out that negative views exceeded positive ones among respondents that were 60 and older.

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM TOWARD U.S.-NORTH KOREA DENUCLEARIZATION TALKS

2019. 3/19~20

What is the reason that you view the prospects of U.S.-North Korea talks as positive?

North Korea seems determined to make a deal in order to alleviate the sanctions

The mood for U.S.-North Korea talks seems likely to continue

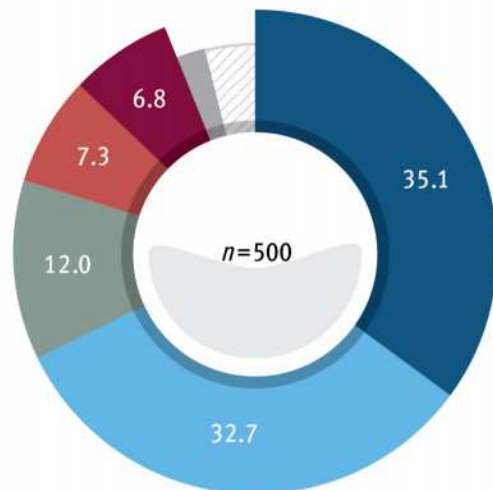
The ROK-U.S. coordination seems to work well

Neighboring countries are supportive of the talks

Can trust North Korea's willingness to denuclearize

Other

Don't know/Refused



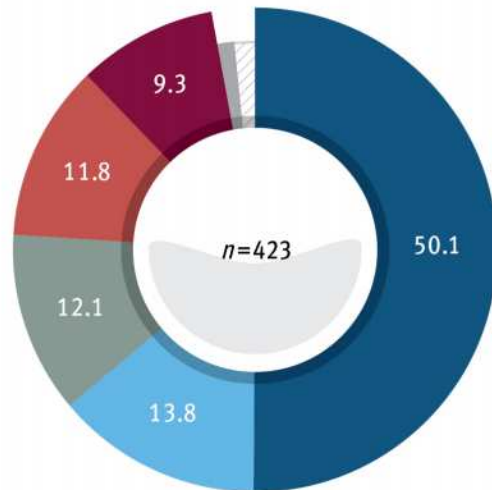
When asked why they viewed the prospects for the U.S.-North Korea denuclearization talks as positive, 35.1% of the respondents stated that North Korea seems determined to make a deal in order to alleviate sanctions imposed on them. Another 32.7% said that the mood for U.S.-North Korea talks seems likely to continue in the future. 12% cited close coordination between South Korea and the U.S. while 7.3% stated that the neighboring countries are supportive of the talks. Only 6.8% stated that they trust North Korea's willingness to denuclearize.



REASONS FOR PESSIMISM TOWARD U.S.-NORTH KOREA DENUCLEARIZATION TALKS

2019. 3/19~20

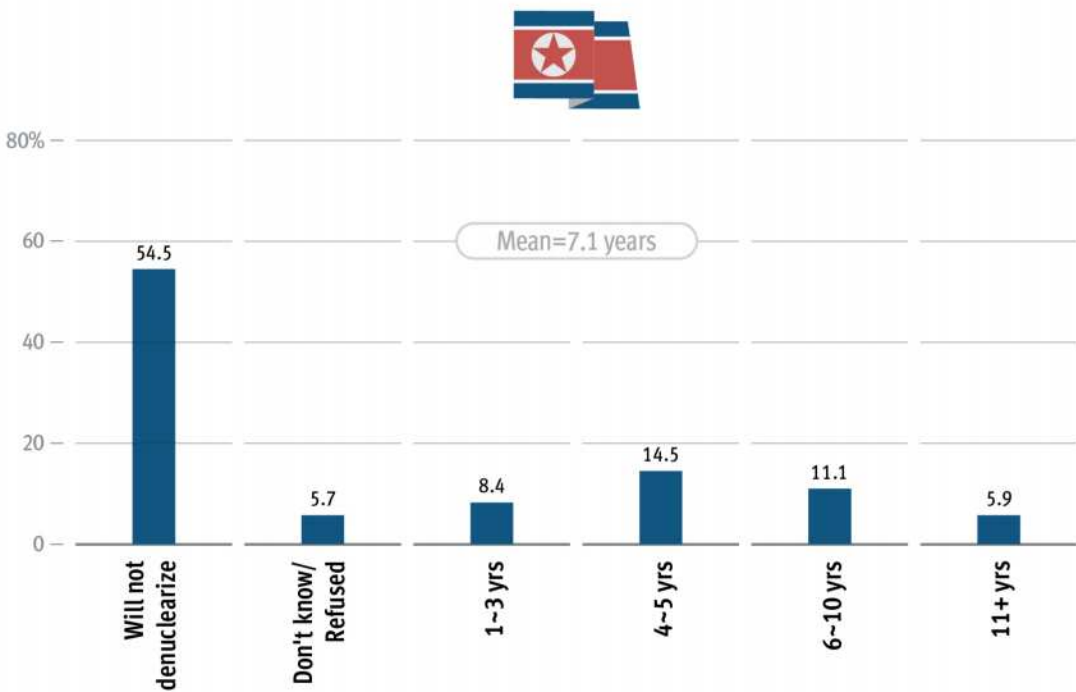
What is the reason that you view the prospects of U.S.-North Korea talks as negative?



Of the respondents that viewed the prospects for the U.S.-North Korea denuclearization talks as negative, 50.1% stated that they could not trust North Korea's commitment to denuclearize. 13.8% said that the previous summits did not produce substantial outcomes while another 12.1% were skeptical whether the two countries could reach an agreement. 11.8% of respondents stated that the clashing strategic interests of neighboring countries will hinder the talks and 9.3% cited challenges in the ROK-U.S. coordination on North Korea.

Q1. Do you think North Korea will eventually denuclearize?

**Q2. (For those answered “North Korea will eventually denuclearize”)
How long will it take for North Korea to denuclearize?**



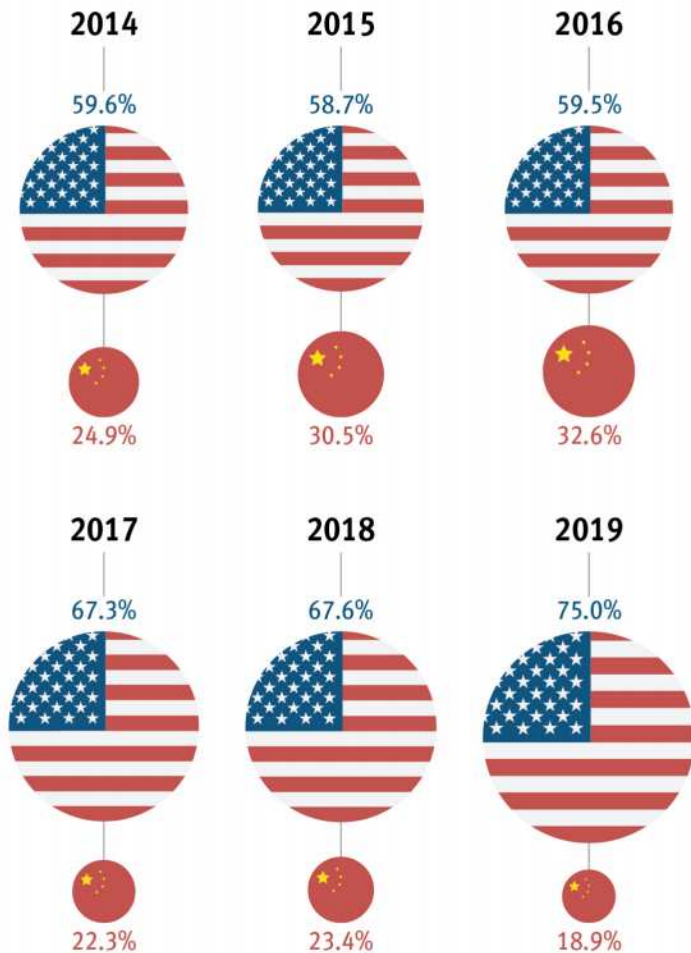
When the respondents were asked whether North Korea will eventually denuclearize, over half of all respondents (54.5%) predicted that North Korea will never denuclearize. This is understandable given that the denuclearization talks have yet to produce any meaningful or substantive outcome. Among those who answered that North Korea will eventually denuclearize, 14.5% answered that they believed North Korea would do so within the next 4 to 5 years. Another 11.1% stated that the denuclearization of North Korea will take place within 6 to 10 years and 5.9% said that it would take more than 11 years. 8.4% speculated that denuclearization is possible within the next 1 to 3 years. The estimated average of the number of years that respondents believed that North Korea would denuclearize was 7.1 years. 5.7% of the respondents answered that they do not know or refused to answer.



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE PARTNER

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

2014. 7/4~6
 2015. 3/11~12
 2016. 3/22~24
 2017. 6/1~3
 2018. 3/21~22
 2019. 3/19~20

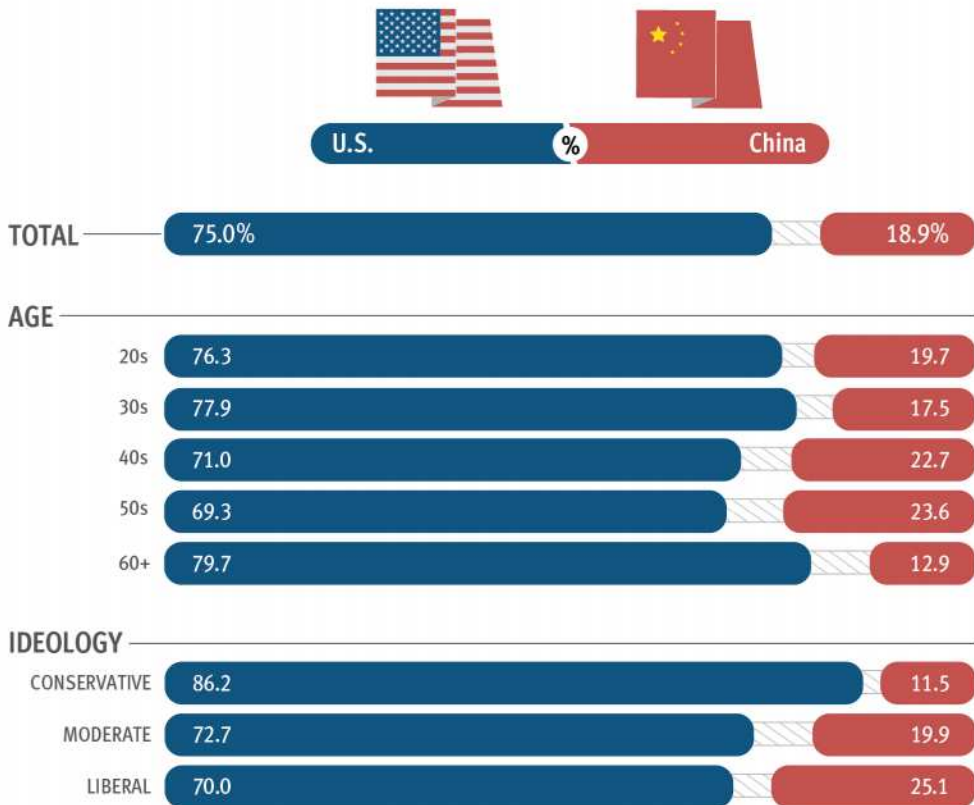


When asked which country South Korea should strengthen ties with if the United States and China continue their rivalry, an overwhelming majority of South Koreans chose the U.S. (75%) over China (18.9%). Since 2014, the respondents have repeatedly chosen the U.S. over China as a future partner. Support for China has fluctuated in the past but the percentage in March 2019 was the lowest on record. This finding is expected given that we have not seen any substantial change in ROK-China relations over the last three years.

SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE PARTNER BY AGE AND IDEOLOGY

2019. 3/19~20

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



The preference for the U.S. was widespread across most age groups and ideology. The breakdown by age shows that the preference for the U.S. was highest among respondents under 40 and 60 and older. Respondents in the 60 and older age group recorded 79.7%, followed by the 30s (77.9%) and the 20s (76.3%). The breakdown by ideology reveals that 86.2% of the conservative respondents preferred the U.S. over China followed by moderates (72.7%) and progressives (70%).

For more details on polling methodology,
please visit [**www.asaninst.org/eng**](http://www.asaninst.org/eng)



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