

Asan Institute Releases the Asan Report “Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and National Security”

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SEOUL, September 13, 2021– The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (<http://en.asaninst.org/>) presents the Asan Report “Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and National Security.”

This report aims to identify and explain fundamental trends in South Korean public attitudes about foreign policy and national security. The analysis includes South Korean public opinion about the issues related to the Korean Peninsula, such as unification, North Korea, ROK-US alliance, and relations with other neighboring countries like the US, China, and Japan. Some key findings from the report shows that:

- Nearly 77% of surveyed South Korean respondents expressed interest in unification. 53.5% stated that the speed with which to move forward on unification should be adjusted and more than 1 in 4 (25.5%) stated that there is no need to rush unification.
- Views about unification were tempered by expectations about its cost as 63% of those surveyed stated that they anticipated South Korea’s post-unification economy to be worse off. The respondents stating that they are not willing to pay for unification increased from 20.6% in 2011 to 45.5% in 2020.
- When asked how the respondents perceived North Korea, 27.9% said “neighbor,” 25.7% stated “enemy,” 11.5% said “stranger,” and 21.1% said “one of us.”
- Nearly 79% (78.7%) of those surveyed stated that South Korea should provide economic aid to North Korea if Pyongyang changes its behavior. 21% stated that aid should continue unconditionally.
- 94.9% of those surveyed agreed that the human rights situation in North Korea was serious and 78.3% stated that this issue should be addressed immediately.
- Over 57% of the respondents stated that they assessed the likelihood of war with North Korea to be low. Over 72% of those surveyed stated that South Korean military cannot deter North Korea in the event of a contingency on the Korean Peninsula.
- Nearly 95% of South Koreans believe that North Korea possesses a working nuclear capability and over 93% believes that North Korea will not abandon this capability.
- Nearly 70% (69.3%) of the respondents supported developing indigenous nuclear capability and over 61% (61.3%) supported reintroducing tactical nuclear weapons.

- With respect to the ROK-US alliance, over 78% supported either maintaining or strengthening the bilateral relationship. Over 86% supported keeping the alliance even after unification.
- With regards to US Forces Korea, over 70% supported either maintaining or increasing the troop level.
- On burden sharing, over 41% supported maintaining the current level of South Korean contribution to the Special Measures Agreement.
- On wartime operational control (OPCON) transfer, 42.5% favored condition-based transfer while 27.2% favored schedule-based transfer.
- 25.9% of the respondents saw China as a significant security threat after North Korea (55.8%). 66.7% named China as the greatest threat to South Korea after unification.
- 71.5% of survey respondents assessed Japan’s influence in the region to be negative.
- Only 11.3% of the respondents stated that Japan is a national security threat. 23.1% saw Japan as a potential security threat after unification.

The report states that “data from the *Asan Annual Survey 2010~2020* reveals ... aspects of South Korean public opinion, which seem quite stable and predictable” over time. They also point out that the South Korean attitudes on the US, China and Japan have not changed much except when the security environment dramatically changed in 2018 due to heightened expectations about North Korean denuclearization.

The sample size of the *Asan Annual Survey 2020* was 1,500 people, over the age of 19. The margin of error is $\pm 2.5\%$ at the 95% confidence level. The survey was conducted by *EmBrain Public* using Random Digit Dialing for mobile and landlines and online survey during December 3~17, 2020.

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