

SOUTH KOREANS
— AND —
THEIR NEIGHBORS
2024

ASAN POLL

THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES

South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2024



ASAN POLL



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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 2024

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies has been tracking South Korean public opinion on international affairs since 2010. The Institute has released a report called “*South Koreans and Their Neighbors*” since 2014. “*South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2024*” showcases the current views of South Koreans towards neighboring countries, the ROK-U.S. alliance, outlook on relationships with the United States and North Korea, nuclear armament, strategic choices between the United States and China, and U.S. global leadership.

The most recent survey was conducted in April 2024.

The key findings are as follows:

Country favorability: In April 2024, the favorability of the United States was 6.42 on a scale of 0 to 10. Japan was ranked second, with its rating recording the highest (4.17) in 2024. China’s favorability was 3.25, increasing from 3.00 in March 2023. North Korea was rated as the least favored country (2.54) and the favorability of Russia was 2.63, which was slightly higher than that of North Korea.

Leader favorability: U.S. President Joe Biden was the most favored leader, though his rating dropped again. It decreased from 5.89 in 2022 to 5.05 in 2023, and finally to 4.95 in April 2024. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida ranked second with a favorability score of 2.74, while President Xi Jinping followed with 2.08. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s favorability was 1.34. Finally, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s rating dropped once again to 1.18 from 1.39 in March 2023, making him the least favored leader.

ROK-U.S. alliance: Regarding the most important policy issue facing the ROK-U.S. alliance, 47.9% chose strengthening security cooperation to respond to North Korean nuclear threats. This was followed by increasing trade to revitalize the economy (30.9%), cooperating to balance the rise of China (8.8%), and responding to global agendas including climate change (8.3%).

When asked about the necessity of U.S. Forces in South Korea, 80.2% saw it as necessary for the foreseeable future. Since 2013, at least 72% of South Koreans have supported the USFK presence. When asked if the U.S. military should continue to be stationed in Korea after unification, support declined to 50.6%.

Nuclear deterrence and assurance: Public confidence that the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea remained unchanged at 53% (2022: 52.9%, 2023: 54.4%). This is despite significant developments in U.S. extended deterrence as part of the Washington Declaration over the past year. Public confidence further decreased when respondents were asked whether the United States would fulfill its pledge to use nuclear weapons even at the risk of potential nuclear attacks against itself, with less than half of South Koreans (2024: 46.8%) expressing confidence.

South Korean support for acquiring an independent nuclear weapons capability reached the highest point at 70.9% (Oppose: 27.4%). This is the highest figure since the Asan Institute first began surveying this question in 2010 (min: 54.8%, max: 70.9%). In addition, a majority of respondents (63.8%) also supported reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula (Oppose: 33.5%).

U.S.-China competition: When asked which country South Korea should strengthen ties with if the United States and China continue their rivalry, a strong majority (75.1%) chose the United States over China (14.9%). Since 2014, over half have chosen the United

States over China as a future partner (min: 58.7%, max: 85.5%). Since 2019, more than 70% have preferred the United States as a future partner. Respondents viewing China as a preferred future partner have ranged from 9.9% to 14.9% since 2020.

U.S. global leadership: In April 2024, 54.5% approved of the role of U.S. leadership in global affairs. Since 2013, a majority have viewed the U.S. role as positive (min: 54.5%, max: 73.9%). Whereas only 37% approved of U.S. global leadership under President Donald Trump in 2020, under President Joe Biden it has stayed above 50%.

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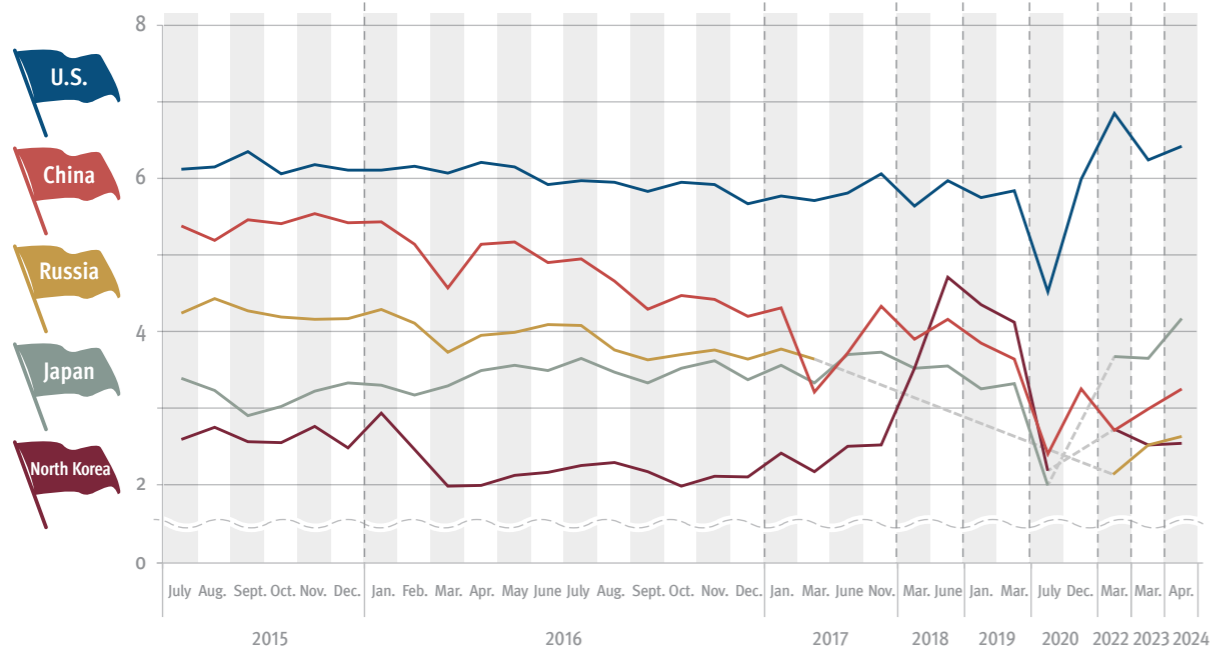
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COUNTRY FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following countries?

0: Not favorable at all ~ 10: Very favorable



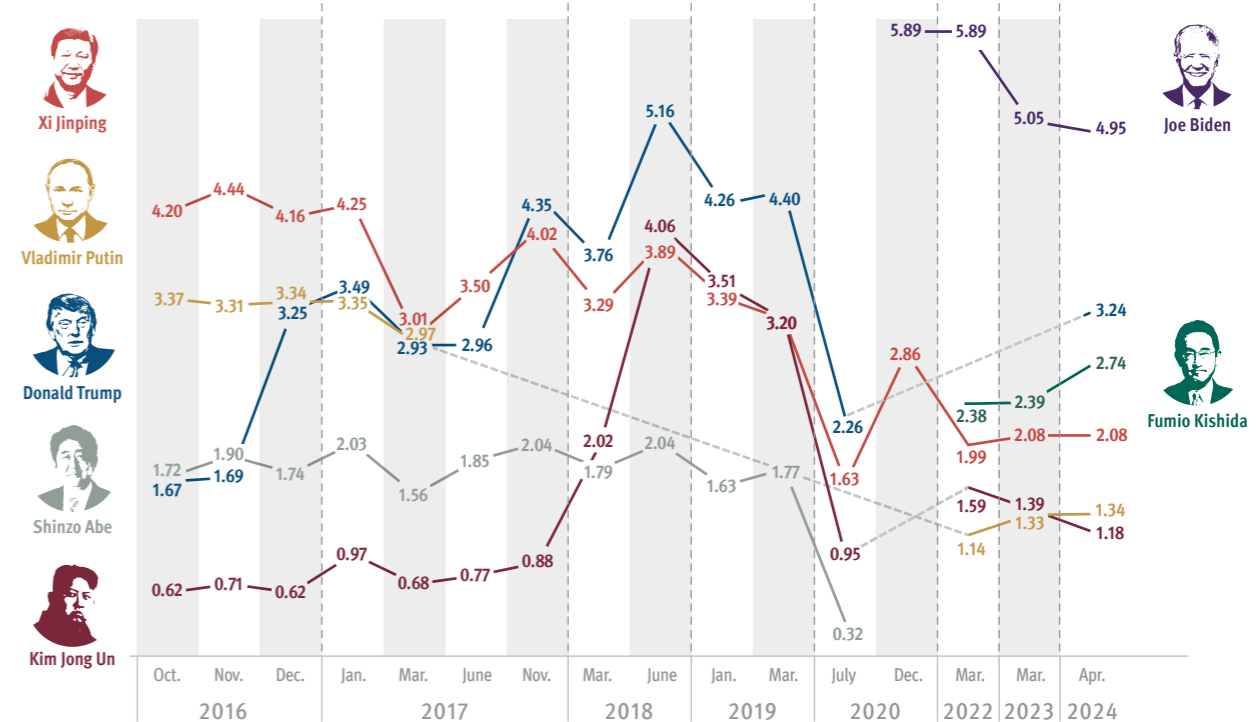
South Koreans were asked to rate the favorability of the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and North Korea on a scale of 0 (“not favorable at all”) to 10 (“very favorable”). In April 2024, the favorability of the United States was 6.42. The United States was the only country whose rating consistently stayed above 5, meaning neutral, since 2015. Japan was ranked second, with its rating reaching its highest point of 4.17 in 2024. Japan’s favorability increased from 3.66 in March 2023 due to an improved bilateral relationship in 2023. This shows a contrast to the lowest rating of 1.99 in July 2020, when anti-Japan sentiment ran high among South Koreans. China’s favorability was 3.25, increasing from 3.00 in March 2023. In April 2024, North Korea was rated as the least favored country (2.54), and the favorability of Russia was 2.63, which was slightly higher than that of North Korea. It appears that North Korean military provocations and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have had a negative impact.



LEADER FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following leaders?

0: Not favorable at all ~ 10: Very favorable

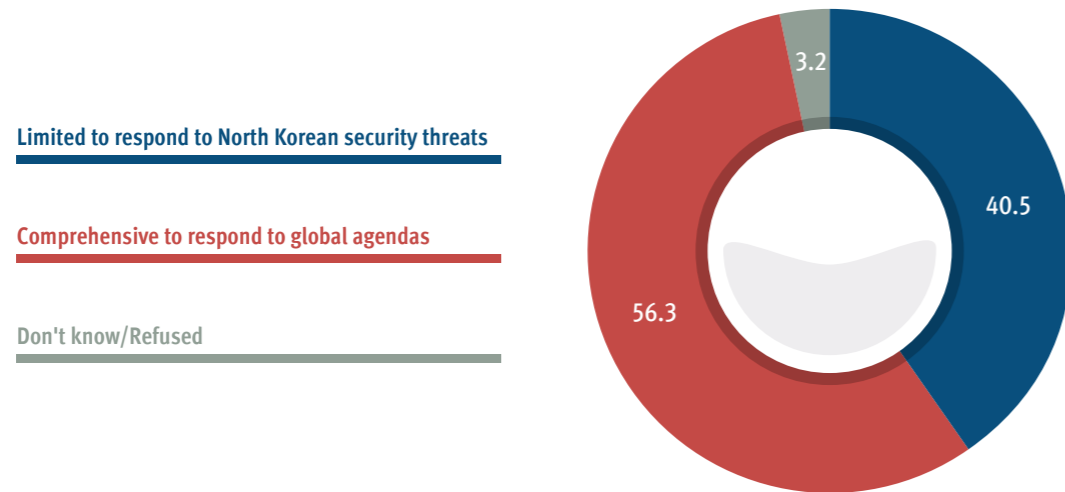


South Koreans were asked to rate the favorability of leaders from neighboring countries on a scale of 0 (“not favorable at all”) to 10 (“very favorable”). U.S. President Joe Biden was the most favored leader, though his rating dropped again. It decreased from 5.89 in 2022 to 5.05 in 2023, and finally to 4.95 in April 2024. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida ranked second (2.74). Despite an improved relationship with Japan, his rating stayed below 3. President Xi’s favorability followed with a score of 2.08, which was much lower than his ratings in 2018 and 2019. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s favorability was 1.34 in April 2024. The Russian invasion of Ukraine appears to be a factor. Finally, North Korean leader Kim’s rating dropped once again to 1.18 from 1.39 in March 2023, making him the least favored leader.



ROLE OF THE ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE

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

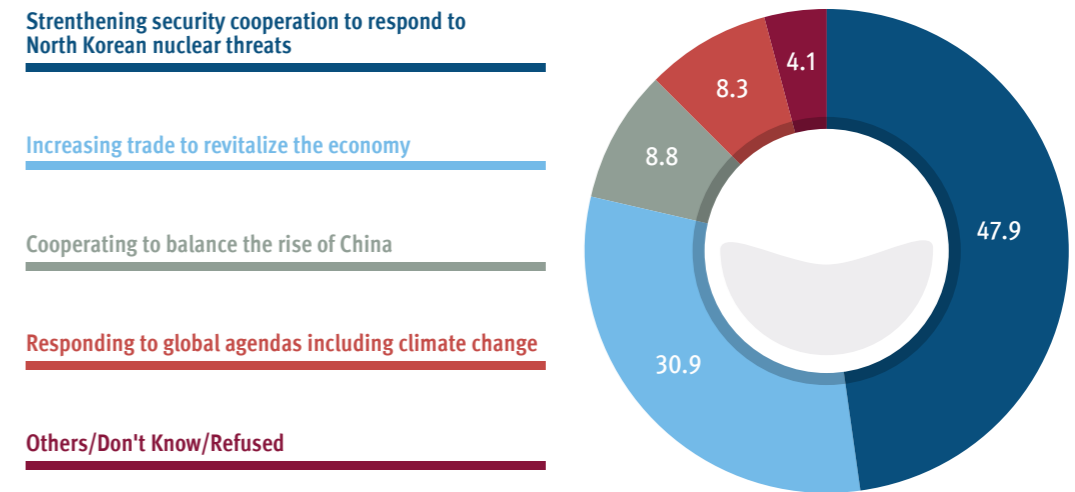


The survey asked respondents to identify the current role of the ROK-U.S. alliance. In April 2024, over half (56.3%) agreed that the alliance is comprehensive enough to respond to global agendas. Meanwhile, those who said that the alliance takes a limited role to respond to North Korean security threats made up 40.5%. Though tension from North Korean provocations recently increased, a majority agreed that the ROK-U.S. alliance takes a more comprehensive role to properly respond to global agendas. This might be due to its improved relationship with the United States. It appears that South Koreans have come to believe that the scope of cooperation has been expanded by strengthening ties with the United States through trilateral cooperation, which had primarily focused on security.



MOST IMPORTANT POLICY ISSUE IN THE ROK-U.S. RELATIONSHIP

What is the most important policy issue in the ROK-U.S. relationship?

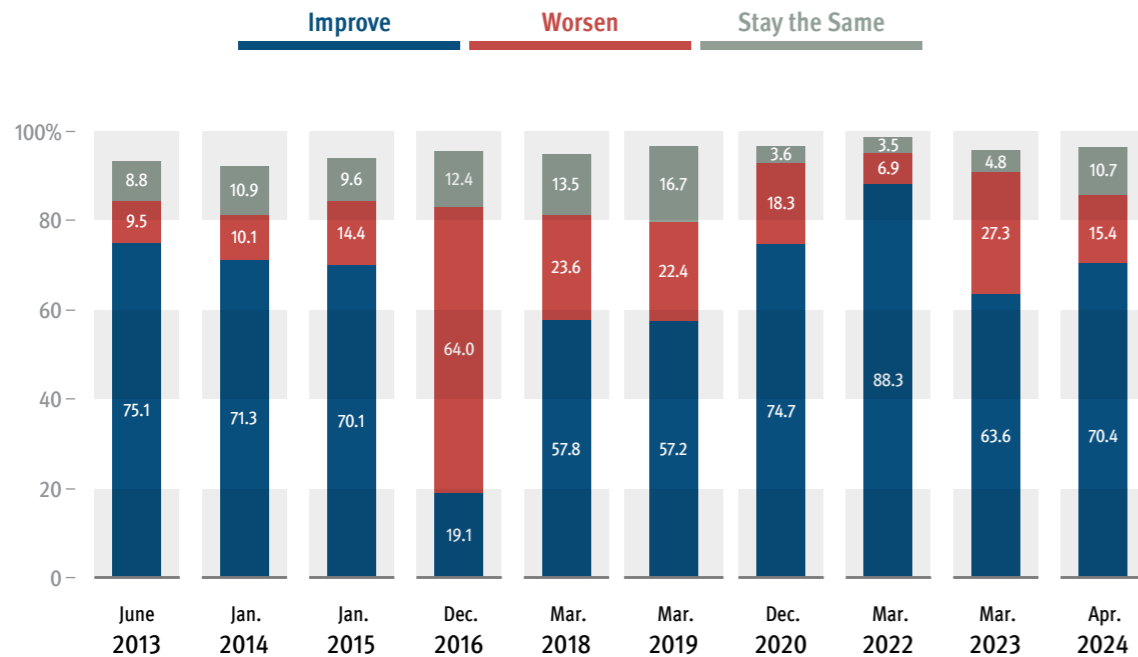


When asked to identify the most important policy issue in the ROK-U.S. relationship in April 2024, 47.9% of respondents chose strengthening security cooperation to respond to North Korean nuclear threats. Increasing trade to revitalize the economy (30.9%) was seen as the second most important issue, followed by cooperating to balance the rise of China (8.8%) and responding to global agendas including climate change (8.3%). Even though South Korea and the United States recently showed an intention to expand their bilateral relationship into a comprehensive framework that includes cooperation in advanced technology and supply chains, many South Koreans viewed responding to North Korean nuclear threats as the primary issue in the ROK-U.S. relationship.



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

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

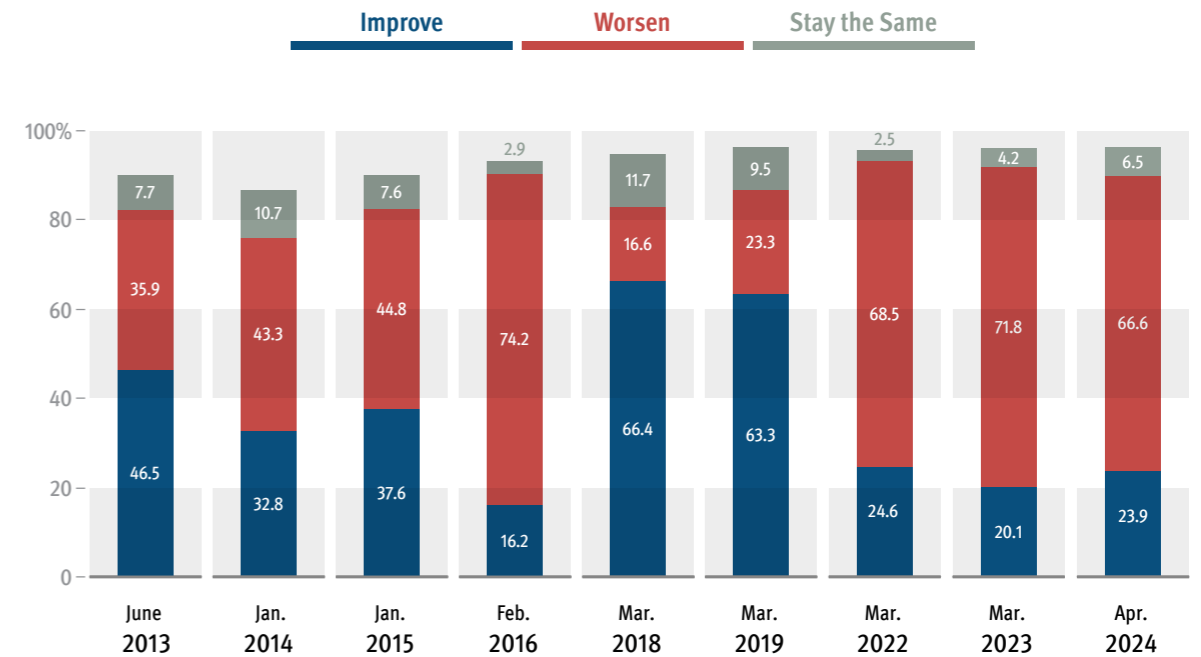


Respondents were asked about South Korea's future relationship with the United States. In April 2024, a majority (70.4%) expressed optimism about it. Since 2013 when the Asan Institute first surveyed the topic, South Koreans have consistently shown a positive view towards South Korea's future relationship with the United States, except in December 2016 when Donald Trump was elected as the U.S. president. After Joe Biden won the 2020 U.S. presidential election, South Koreans became more optimistic (2020: 74.7%, 2022: 88.3%). In 2024, in contrast to a significant drop between 2022 and 2023, those who hold a positive view of the future relationship with the United States have increased compared to last year (2023: 63.6%).



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH KOREA

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

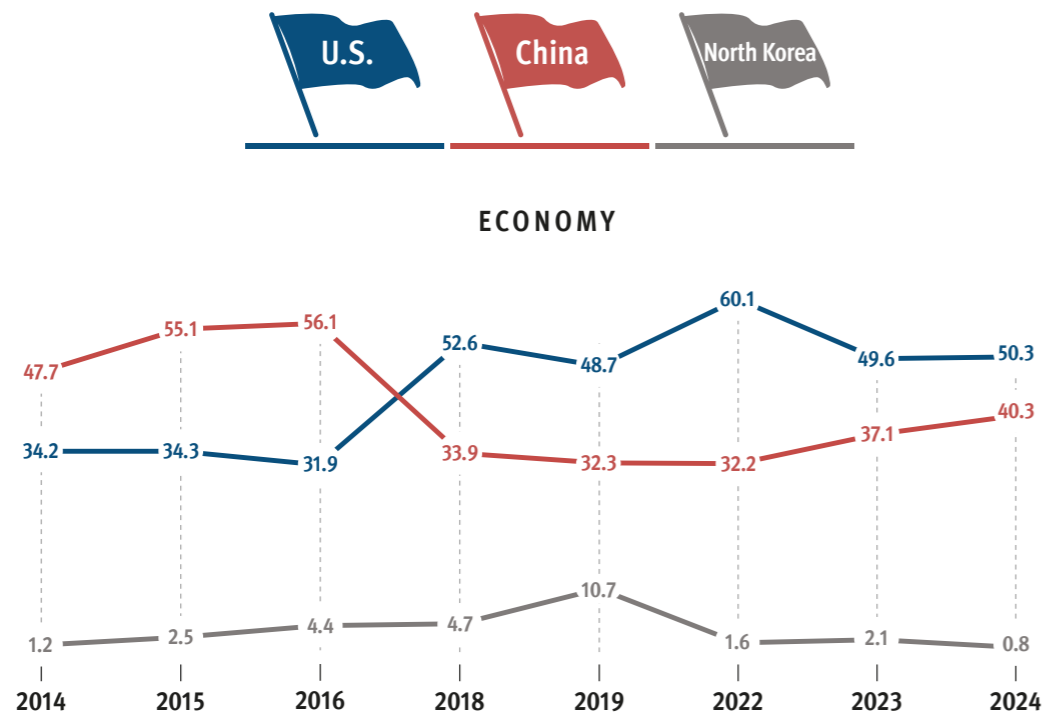


When asked about the future of inter-Korean relations in April 2024, a majority (66.6%) expressed pessimism due to increased tension with North Korea. Only 23.9% expected inter-Korean relations to improve. As North Korean nuclear threats escalate, it appears that South Koreans' view of inter-Korean relations remains negative. Since March 2022, when a majority began to see the future of inter-Korean relations negatively, those who hold a pessimistic view have remained virtually unchanged (2022: 68.5%, 2023: 71.8%). This was a contrast to the period between 2018 and 2019 when South Korean optimism ran high due to heightened expectations for North Korean denuclearization following several high-level talks involving the two Koreas and the United States.



MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY FOR SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY

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

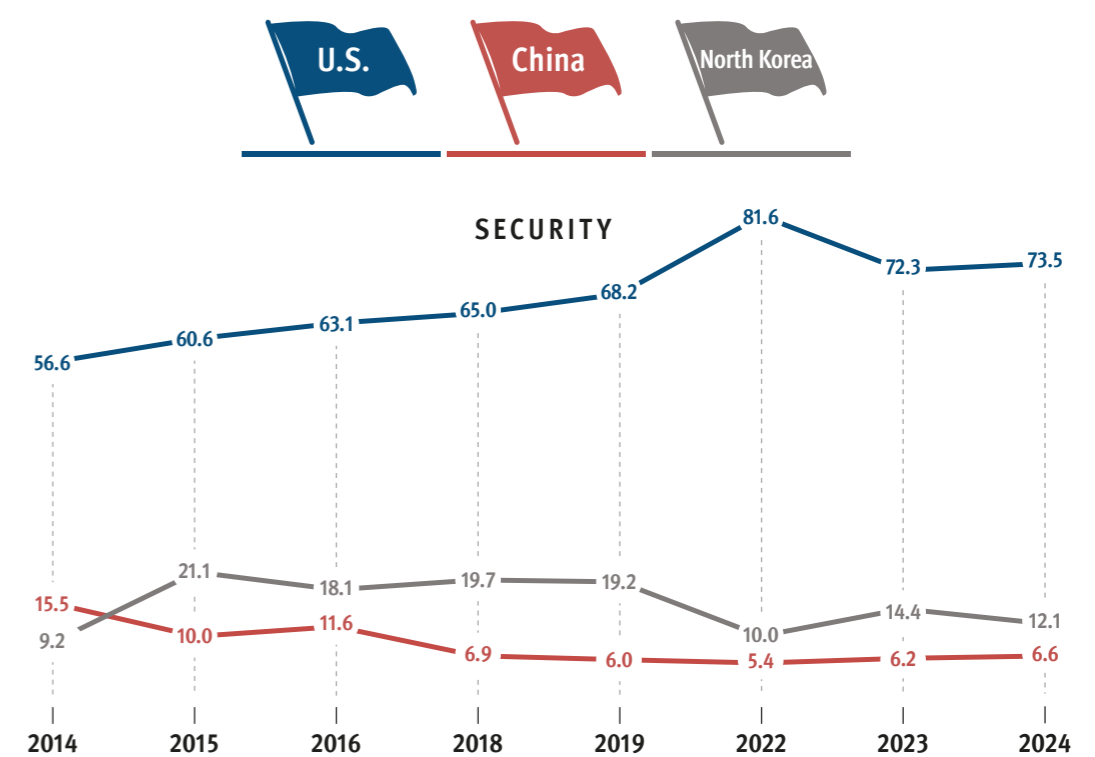


South Koreans were asked to identify the most important country for South Korea's economy. In 2024, about half (50.3%) answered the United States while 40.3% chose China. Since March 2018, a majority repeatedly said the United States is the most important country for South Korea's economy (min: 48.7%, max: 60.1%). By contrast, from 2014 to 2016, a majority viewed China as the most important country for South Korea's economy (min: 47.7%, max: 56.1%). In April 2024, those who saw China as important reached over 40% (40.3%) for the first time since 2016. Finally, those who viewed North Korea as economically important were less than 1% (0.8%), much lower than 10.7% in 2019 when it was at its highest.



MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY FOR SOUTH KOREA'S SECURITY

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



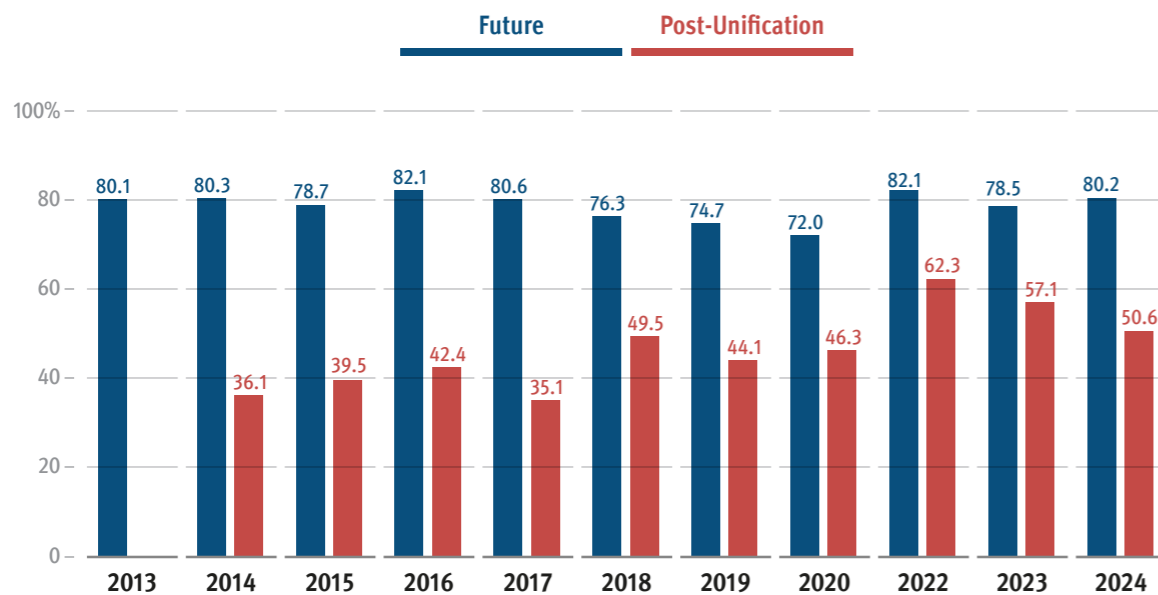
Respondents were asked to identify the most important country for South Korea's security. Since the Asan Institute began tracking this data in 2014, a majority have consistently chosen the United States as the most important country. In 2024, 73.5% viewed the United States as the most important country. Those who saw the United States as most important remained steady in the recent two years, even though the framework for security cooperation has developed since the Washington Declaration in 2023. Interestingly, public sentiment regarding the importance of the United States for security has not significantly improved. Additionally, those who viewed North Korea as the most important country for South Korean security were 12.1%. This was about half the level from 2015 to 2019 when it ranged around 20%. Lastly, only 6.6% named China.



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

Q1. Should the U.S. military continue to be stationed in South Korea in the future?

Q2. Should the U.S. military continue to be stationed in South Korea after unification?



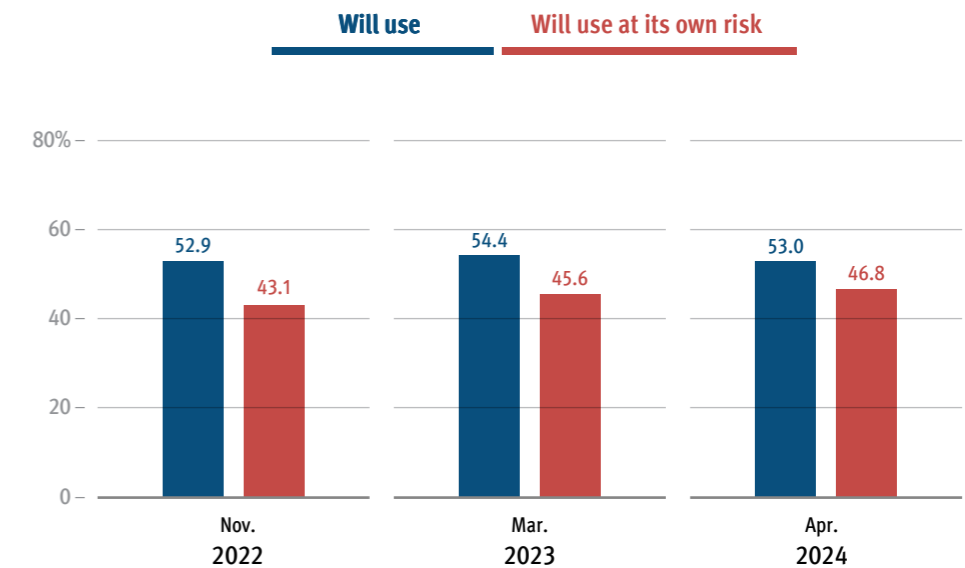
When asked about the necessity of U.S. Forces in South Korea, 80.2% viewed it as necessary for the foreseeable future. Since 2013, at least 72% of South Koreans support the USFK presence. Public support reached its highest point (82.1%) in 2016 due to increased tensions from North Korean provocations, and in 2022, it reached that level again due to lowered expectations for North Korean denuclearization. Even during the diplomatic engagements for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula from 2018 to 2020, over 70% supported the USFK presence. When asked if the U.S. military should continue to be stationed in South Korea after unification, 50.6% viewed it as necessary in 2024. Since 2014, when the Asan Institute first inquired about this issue, support for the USFK presence has gradually increased, despite a decline of more than 10%p in the last two years. The only exception was in 2017 when then U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump demanded an increase in South Korea’s share of the cost for stationing USFK during his 2016 election campaign; support for USFK reached its lowest point (35.1%).



PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN U.S. EXTENDED DETERRENCE

Q1. Do you think the United States would use nuclear weapons in a North Korean nuclear attack against South Korea?

Q2. Do you think the United States would use nuclear weapons in a North Korean nuclear attack against South Korea even if it means risking its own security?

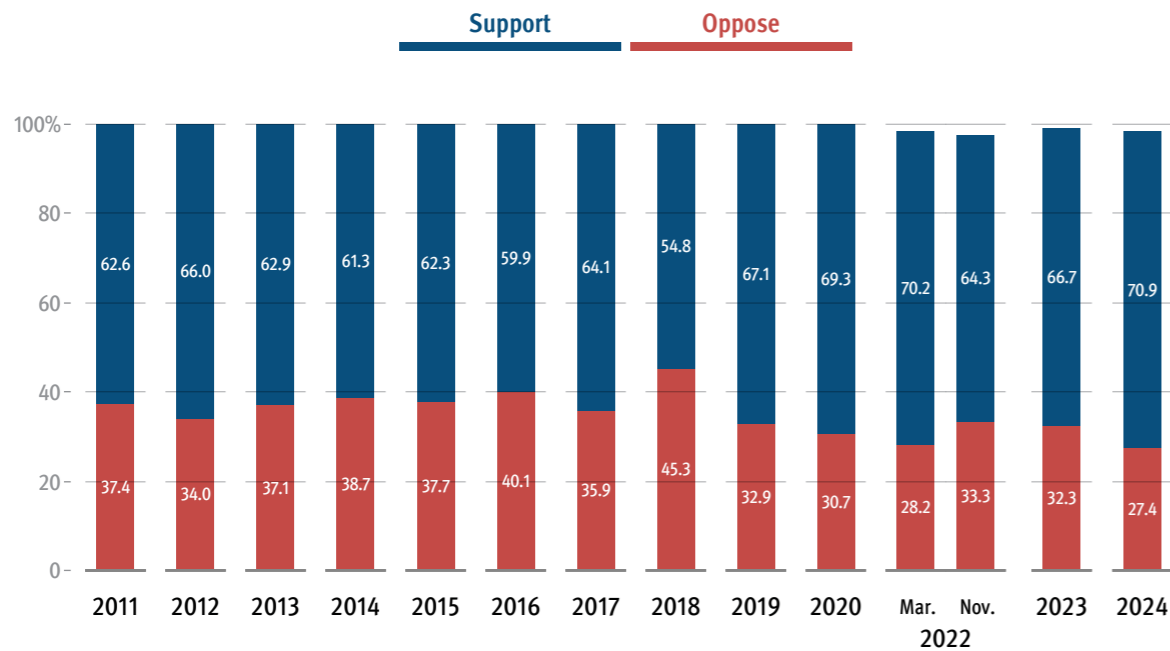


Respondents were asked whether the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea in response to a nuclear attack against South Korea. In November 2022, when the Asan Institute first inquired about this issue, 52.9% said that the United States would use nuclear weapons. In April 2024, 53% said the same, which was statistically within the margin of error. The survey further questioned whether the United States would fulfill its pledge even at the risk of potential nuclear attacks against itself. Interestingly, less than half of South Koreans agreed since November 2022 (2022: 43.1%, 2023: 45.6%). In April 2024, 46.8% agreed, which was virtually unchanged since November 2022. Though South Korea and the United States have strengthened extended nuclear deterrence, public confidence has not changed.



ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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

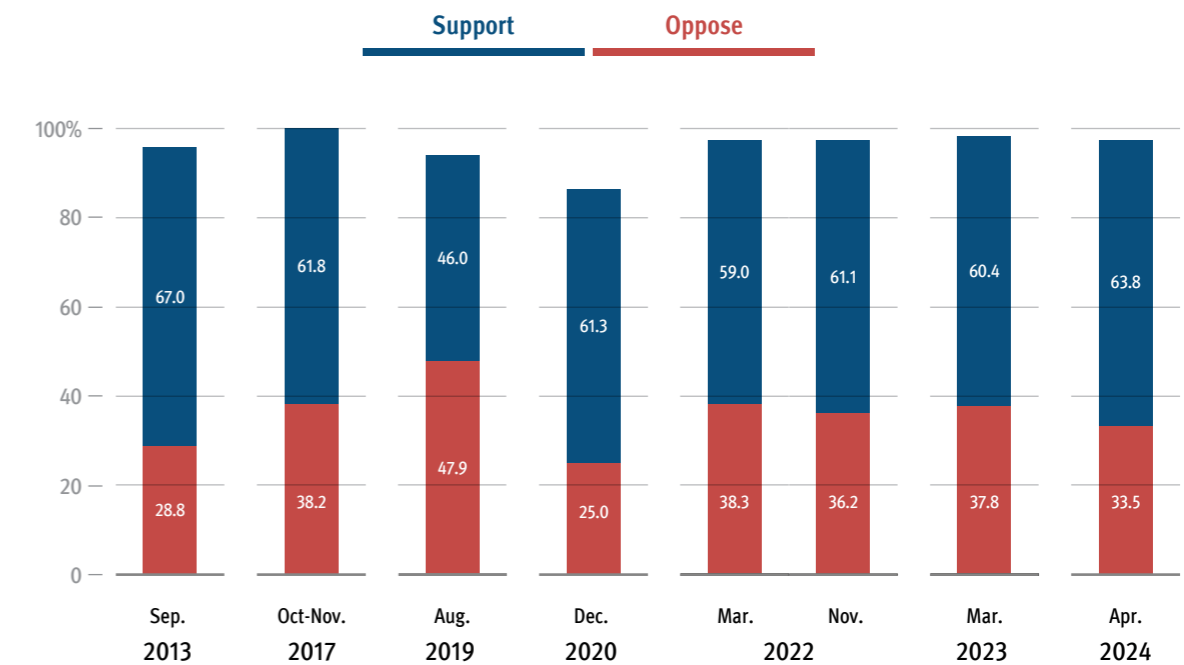


A debate on nuclear armament in South Korea is ongoing as North Korean nuclear threats have recently increased. Many surveys in South Korea reported that respondents were in favor of gaining access to nuclear weapons. Specifically, they have shown consistent support for developing independent nuclear weapons. Since 2011, over half of respondents have consistently expressed support (min: 54.8%, max: 70.9%). In April 2024, 70.9% supported (Oppose: 27.4%), which recorded the highest figure. It is noteworthy that South Korean attitudes toward developing independent nuclear weapons have not changed since March 2019 (min: 64.3%, max: 70.9%).



ATTITUDES TOWARDS REINTRODUCING TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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

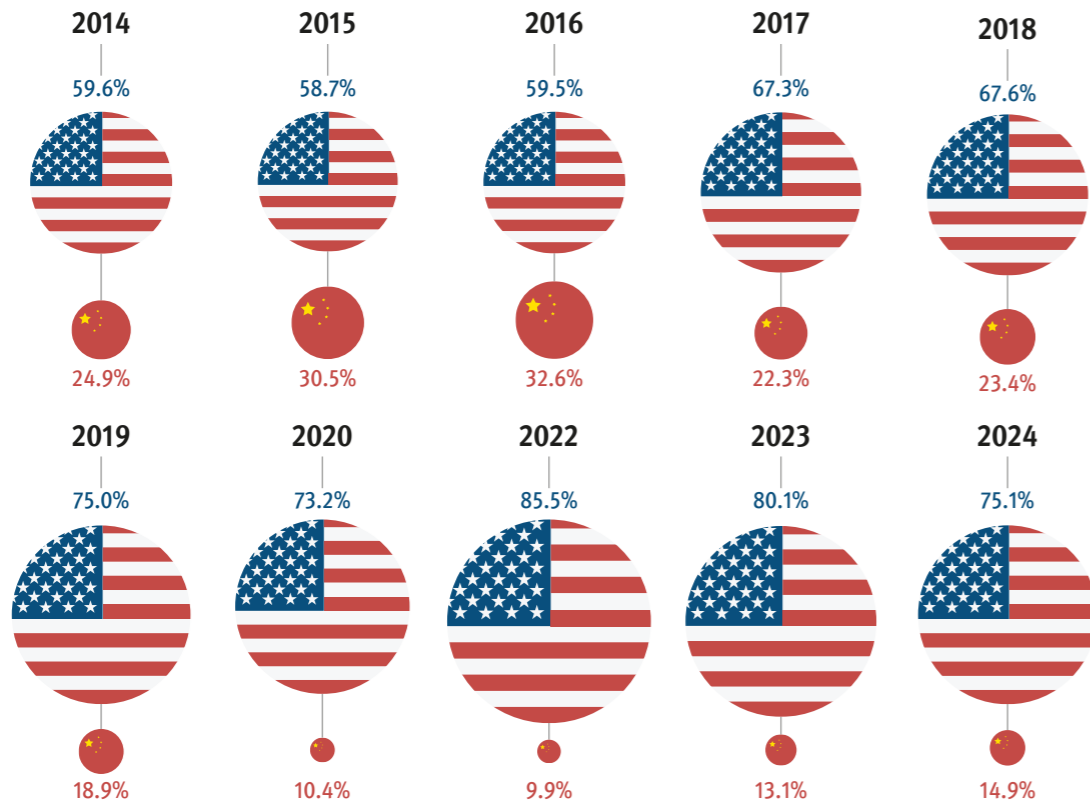


When asked about reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula, 33.5% opposed, while 63.8% of respondents supported the statement in April 2024. A majority has consistently supported reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea since 2013 when the Asan Institute first began to gauge public opinion towards it. Only in March 2019 was the public evenly split over the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (Support: 46%, Oppose: 47.9%). Since 2020, it appears that public sentiment has not changed significantly (min: 59%, max: 63.8%). Despite developments in the relationship with the United States in terms of security, South Korean attitudes have stayed the same.



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE PARTNER

🔄 If the United States and China continue their rivalry, which country should South Korea strengthen ties with?

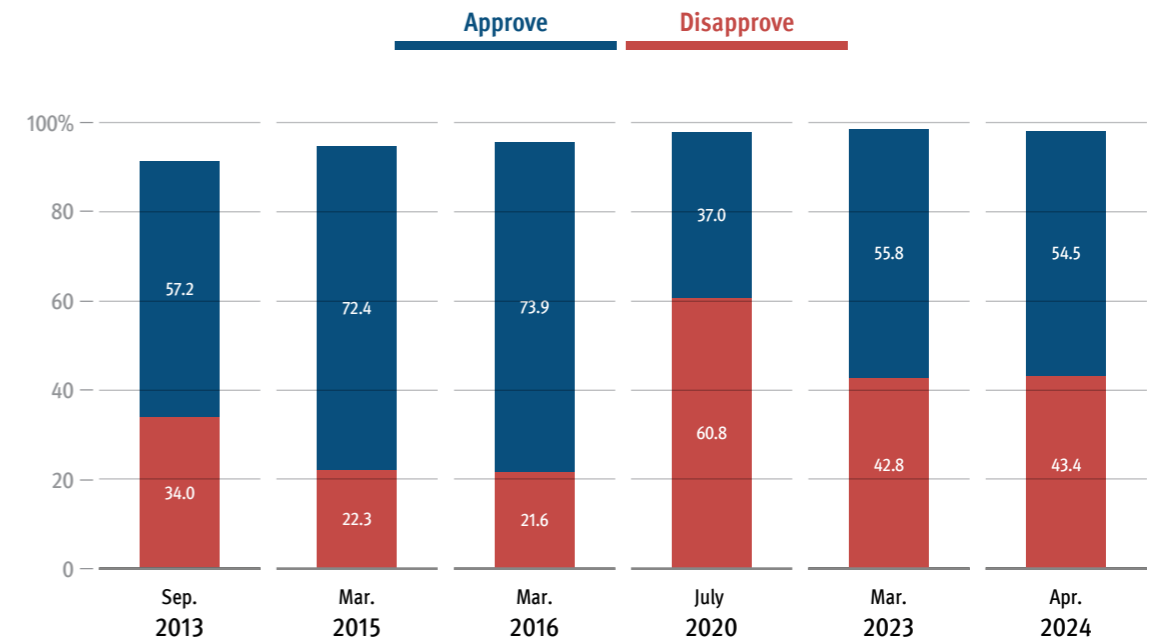


When asked which country South Korea should strengthen ties with if the United States and China continue their rivalry, in April 2024, a strong majority (75.1%) chose the United States over China (14.9%). Since the Asan Institute began tracking this data in 2014, over half of the respondents have chosen the United States over China as a future partner (min: 58.7%, max: 85.5%). Since 2019, more than 70% of South Koreans have preferred the United States as a future partner. Meanwhile, those who chose China over the United States remained relatively low. Specifically, the respondents viewing China as a preferred future partner ranged from 9.9% to 14.9% since 2020. As public preference for the United States has increased and stayed over 70% since 2019, those who prefer China dropped.



U.S. GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

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



When South Korean respondents were asked to assess the role of U.S. leadership in global affairs, in April 2024, 54.5% approved. Since the Asan Institute first asked about it in 2013, a majority viewed the U.S. role as positive (min: 54.5%, max: 73.9%). The only exception was in July 2020 under former U.S. President Donald Trump when a majority (60.8%) disapproved of U.S. global leadership (Approve: 37%). After Joe Biden took office in December 2020, approval of U.S. leadership in global affairs bounced back to over 50%. However, this was not even close to South Korean approval for U.S. global leadership during the Obama administration. In April 2024, disapproval for U.S. leadership was 43.4%, remaining over 40% for two years in a row.

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



Compiled by KANG Chungku.



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