



## Working Paper on the U.S.-ROK Alliance

December 2012

*On October 15, 2012, The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, in partnership with the Asan Institute for Policy Studies and the Korea Economic Institute, hosted a half-day conference on the future of U.S.-Korea relations. This paper summarizes the findings of the conference. A list of conference attendees, the agenda, and a copy of this working paper can be found at [thechicagocouncil.org](http://thechicagocouncil.org). The conference was made possible by a generous grant from the Korea Foundation. The summary was prepared by Craig Kafura, senior program officer at The Chicago Council on Global Affairs.*

### **The Current State of U.S.-Korean Relations**

Under the administrations of Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Barack Obama, the relationship between South Korea and the United States reached a high point. In the past year the two countries have signed two major agreements: the Korea-U.S Free Trade Agreement (KORUS-FTA) and a revision to the bilateral missile pact extending the range of South Korea's ballistic missiles. The two leaders also share a close working relationship. On President Lee's visit to the United States in October 2011, he was treated to an official state dinner, an honor granted by President Obama to only four visiting heads of state so far.

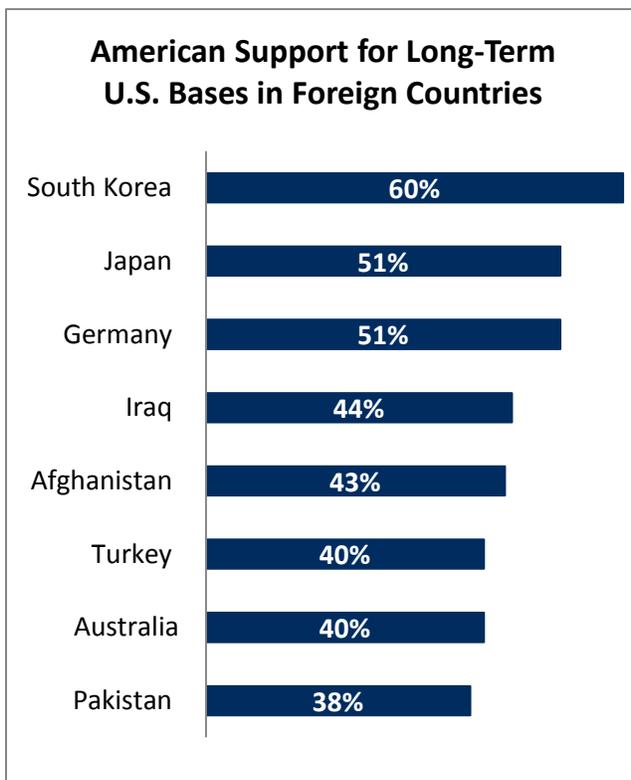
There is no guarantee, however, that the strong relationship will continue in the near future. Although President Obama has won reelection to a second term, the term-limited President Lee will be replaced in February 2013 with the winner of that country's December election. The conference, which came at a pivotal moment just before presidential elections in each nation, considered whether the strong relationship between the two countries would be sustained under new presidents, what challenges the new administrations would face, and how the Korean and American publics view the alliance.

To address these questions, the conference brought together two panels of experts from Korea and the United States as well as fresh data from The Chicago Council's biennial public opinion survey and the Asan Institute's annual survey. Both surveys focused on the bilateral relationship and publics' views on the U.S. role in changing regional politics.

## ***Americans Remain Committed to South Korea***

To set the stage for the day’s discussions, panelists discussed newly released survey data from The Chicago Council and the Asan Institute. In the U.S. survey, four key trends were identified.

First, Americans continue to support taking an active part in world affairs, but generally prefer to do so multilaterally and with more emphasis on diplomatic and economic rather than military measures. Finding themselves in a more multipolar world and aware of domestic economic constraints and the limits of military power, Americans seek a less dominant role when possible. Although majorities see the United States as “the greatest country in the world,” Americans are comfortable allowing other countries to assert leadership. Though Americans continue to view the United States as the most influential country, they expect that China’s influence will continue to rise over the next decade. Americans also see South Korea’s influence increasing, along with other emerging powers such as India and Brazil.



Second, Americans remain committed to South Korea. Despite declining support for sustaining U.S. military budgets and basing overseas, there is strong support for U.S. bases in South Korea, with a majority (60%) in favor of long-term military bases there. This is a substantially higher percentage than support for bases elsewhere, including longtime U.S. allies Germany and Japan (both 51%) and Australia (40%). Nevertheless, majority support for U.S. bases in both South Korea and Japan suggests a continued commitment by the American public to its traditional military partners in Asia. Similarly, a majority (53%) says that the United States should prioritize building up America’s strong relations with its traditional allies of South Korea and Japan, versus 40 percent who say the United States should prioritize building a new partnership with China.

Americans are also willing to commit troops to the defense of South Korea, with 64 percent in favor of contributing U.S. military forces to a United Nations-sponsored effort to reverse the aggression if North Korea attacked South Korea. Americans make a strong distinction between unilateral and multilateral use of those troops, however, and a majority (56%) opposes going it alone if North Korea were to invade. As Scott Snyder, senior fellow for Korea Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations concluded, “The disparity suggests that

Americans appreciate the deterrence value of a U.S. presence and see the primary role of U.S. basing in ROK as deterrence.”

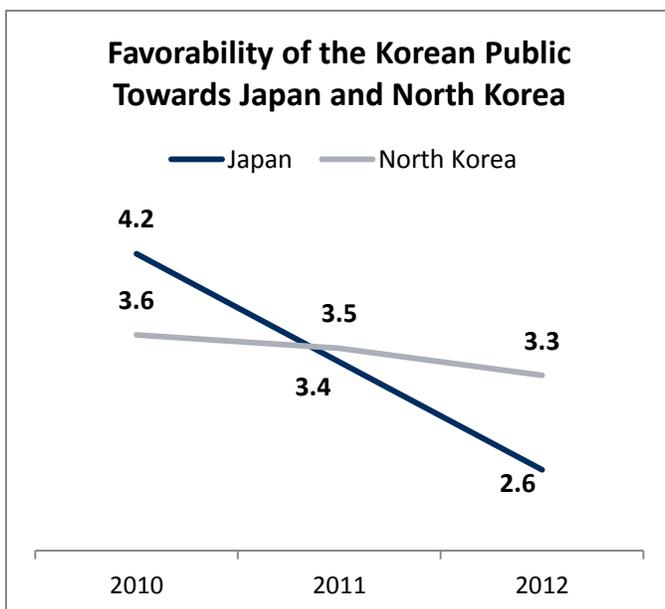
Third, Americans do not view relations with China in confrontational terms. Americans appear to interpret the Chinese challenge as political and economic rather than military. Most favor pursuing friendly cooperation and engagement (69%) over actively working to limit the growth of China’s power (28%). In addition, limiting the rise of China’s power is not considered among the highest priorities in the U.S. relationship with South Korea, with only 17 percent of Americans saying it should be a “very high” priority.

Fourth, while concerned about the Middle East, Americans are increasingly turning their focus to Asia. For the first time in Chicago Council Surveys going back to 1994, when asked which continent is more important to the United States—Asia or Europe—slightly more Americans (52%) say that Asia is more important than say Europe is more important (47%). While support for the “Pacific pivot” is somewhat tepid, the specific objectives of the United States in East Asia are supported by large majorities of Americans, and Americans see the U.S. military presence in Asia as increasing regional stability.

Finally, and in what Snyder described as “the punch line of the report,” a majority (65%) of Americans see South Korea as “mostly partners” rather than “mostly rivals,” and half (49%) see Koreans as sharing similar values or way of life with the United States to some or a great extent, up from 35 percent in 2008.

### ***South Koreans Prioritize ROK-DRPK Relations***

The Asan Institute’s recent poll of Korean public opinion on foreign policy focused on three areas: unification, the ROK-U.S. alliance, and the rise of China. The poll was conducted before the DRPK’s December 12, 2012 rocket launch.



The data show that the South Korean public has become slightly less favorable towards North Korea recently, yet is more favorable towards North Korea than Japan. Esteem for Japan has sharply declined in recent years among South Koreans: as measured on a ten-point scale, favorability towards Japan declined from 4.2 in 2010 to 2.7 in 2012. Meanwhile, favorability toward the DPRK has moved from 3.6 in 2010 to 3.3 in 2012. This suggests that the United States will have its work cut out for it as it seeks to cultivate the trilateral relationship with South Korea and Japan, two countries whose bilateral relationship is deteriorating.

Compared to previous years of Asan survey findings, South Koreans are more likely to see North Koreans as “one of us” or a “neighbor,” rather than the “enemy” or a “stranger.” It will be important to track what affect recent events have had on these views. While South Koreans are not pressing for reunification, they are less likely to see it as “unnecessary” or say that there is “no rush,” and more likely to say that the speed of reunification is “dependent on circumstance.”

Koreans overwhelmingly continue to see the ROK-U.S. alliance as necessary in the future (95%), even after a potential reunification with the North (84%). They also continue to support the U.S. military presence (67%), possibly because large majorities of South Koreans do not think they alone are capable of deterring (24%), or winning a war against (26%) the DPRK. Their priorities reflect this overarching concern with North Korea. More South Koreans say dealing with the North’s nuclear program (89%) is a top priority for the ROK-U.S. alliance than any other option asked about, such as containing the rise of China (76%) or effecting regime change in North Korea (74%).

Though China is a lower priority than the DPRK for the South Korean public, its rise is very much on the public’s mind. A majority (61%) of South Koreans prioritize pursuing a new cooperative partnership with China rather than maintaining a good relationship with traditional allies such as the United States (38%). This may be based on the perception that China will become more influential than the United States in the future. Nonetheless, South Koreans are not enthusiastic about the rise of China. A large majority believes that China will be the most threatening country to a unified Korea (61%).

### **Alliance Issues: Policy and Politics**

The second Obama administration and an incoming Korean administration face a region in flux. In the past year nearly all of the major powers in East Asia have had or will have a leadership transition. North Korea saw the ascension of Kim-Jong Un in December 2011. China underwent its own transition with the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress in November 2012, the same month as U.S. voters headed to the polls to determine which party would control the House, Senate, and White House. Finally, elections in Japan and South Korea in December 2012 will round out this year of change. Conference attendees identified several areas in which leadership transitions in both the United States and South Korea could affect alliance policies. These included relations with North Korea, the ongoing negotiations over South Korea’s nuclear program, and South Korea’s role on the global stage.

On all issues, coordination between the American and Korean administrations will be key during this winter and spring. Though the Korean election is a month after the American one, the Korean presidential transition is expected to move much more quickly. Consequently, Seoul will likely be announcing new policies before the U.S. inauguration, and before a new U.S. policy team is in place. Conference participants predicted that Korean policymakers will have substantial influence on U.S. policy, as U.S. policymakers are likely to prioritize the stability of the alliance.

### ***Potential Electoral Effects on Relations with North Korea***

In the second term of the Obama administration, policy towards North Korea is expected to remain relatively cautious, as it has been for some time. In fact, U.S. policy toward the DPRK has displayed significant continuity since the George W. Bush administration. Conference participants predicted that a new South Korean administration will likely emphasize greater engagement with the DPRK, a shift from the current administration's more hawkish policy. However, given Pyongyang's rocket launch, this new approach may not materialize.

Before the launch, panelists had raised concerns that should North Korea extend an olive branch to South Korea, a new administration in Seoul would be inclined to pursue that offer, while Washington would be more reluctant to do so, given the futility of past efforts. December's rocket launch makes it less likely that any olive branch will be proffered in the near future. Conference participants predicted that any future negotiations would be predicated on robust performance standards, but that a new DPRK offer would elicit different responses from Seoul and Washington and could serve as a new point of contention.

### ***The 1-2-3 Agreement: Nuclear Nonproliferation or Sovereignty?***

Of all the issues in the U.S.-ROK alliance, the issue of South Korea's nuclear program is the most likely to cause serious friction in the coming year. This potential derives from the very different assumptions that the U.S. and South Korean administrations bring to the ongoing 1-2-3 negotiations. The United States sees negotiations primarily through the lens of nuclear proliferation and is concerned about South Korea's program in the context of broader nonproliferation goals and the viability of the nonproliferation regime as a whole. On the other hand, South Koreans define their program primarily as a sovereignty issue, arguing that they have the right to process spent fuel for peaceful energy production and waste management. Notably, this is not a partisan issue in South Korea; conservatives and progressives cast their nuclear program similarly. Additionally, while 66 percent of South Koreans say they would prefer to have their own nuclear weapons rather than rely on the U.S. nuclear umbrella, this is contrary to current ROK policy.

As both sides are firmly entrenched in their respective positions, there is little expectation of progress before the South Korean elections. Given the realities of the election cycles, the timeline to resolve this issue is very short, as nuclear negotiations must be wrapped up by next summer. This leaves very little time following the elections for negotiation. The lengthier post-election transition period for the U.S. side exacerbates the issue. As one conference participant described it, it is "a train wreck in slow motion."

### ***Balancing with China***

China has long loomed large in the minds of Korean policymakers seeking to balance their foreign policy between this rising power and the global superpower of the United States. Both of the Korean presidential candidates acknowledge the importance of China as an

economic power, while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of the United States as a military/security power.

The U.S. administration welcomes a rising China that plays by the international “rules of the game.” Officials argue that the international liberal order has been highly beneficial to China over the past decades in helping it grow as an economic power and that as long as China abides by those norms, it will both thrive in the international community and pose no threat to South Korea. As U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton said in March 2012, “there is no contradiction between a rising China and the interests of the U.S. A rising China is good for America, and a thriving America is good for China.”

Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers are concerned about the framing of South Korea’s foreign policy choices, believing that when Korea casts its policies as either pro-U.S. or pro-China (i.e., in zero-sum terms), it causes unnecessary tension. Conference participants pointed out that the last thing the U.S. administration wants is for South Korean policymakers to start framing issues such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), or any other effort, as a pro-U.S., anti-China policy. From the American perspective, the best way for Korea to have a close relationship with China is to pursue a balancing strategy and maintain a close relationship with both the United States and China. As one participant noted, “China won’t treat Korea well if Korea has a poor relationship with the United States—they’ll treat it as a small province.”

For their part, Koreans are somewhat divided. A slight majority (53.5%) sees China as a partner rather than a rival (46.5%), and a majority says that South Korea should put a higher priority on building a new cooperative relationship with China (61%) over maintaining its strong relationship with traditional allies such as the United States (38%). At the same time, however, 68 percent of Koreans support the long-term military presence of the United States and express overwhelming support for the ROK-U.S. alliance (94%).

### ***South Korea on the Global Stage***

One of the topics of discussion between the Lee and Obama administrations had been turning the U.S.-Korea relationship from a regional alliance into a global partnership. Since the 1950s Korea has ascended rapidly to a position of global prominence by virtue of its astounding economic trajectory. Korea has already made a name for itself in development assistance and global health, and the United States will continue to push for Korea to play a major international role, both in Asia and globally. Together, the two nations can supply public goods that are in high demand such as security, trade, and development assistance. As one conference participant commented, “Both the U.S. and Korea are capable nations—something in short supply.”

There is a potential danger in this increased global role: joint partnership efforts related to China or to Asian regional politics may raise regional tensions. However, as U.S. policymakers are careful to point out, this is not a case of the United States demanding that Korea play a global role. Rather, it is a case of Korea coming out onto the global stage, a move that the United States fully supports.

## ***Japan and the Trilateral Relationship***

The conference concluded with a discussion of the recent tensions between Korea and Japan. Participants all agreed that consolidating the trilateral relationship will be a priority for the next U.S. administration, but that the question of how to forge increased cooperation was not an easy one to answer. As previously mentioned, the South Korean public's views of Japan have dropped sharply over the last two years, driven in large part by the territorial dispute over the Liancourt Rocks (Dokdo/Takeshima). Consequently, increasing ROK-Japan cooperation will take time and effort, and the forces in Korea and Japan driving these tensions are not going away anytime soon. As one participant noted, there is no solution to the historical issues that divide Korea and Japan, and politicians who have something to gain from exploiting them will continue to exacerbate the tensions.

Political transitions in both Seoul and Tokyo could help reduce tensions, as fresh administrations may provide the chance to improve conditions. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that ameliorating these tensions will be a priority for either administration. A common external threat may also push the two nations closer together. In the short term, a renewed threat from the DPRK—such as December's rocket launch—may serve this role. On a longer timeline, both Korea and Japan see a real or potential threat from a rising China; the question is how each will respond.