Many have observed that South Koreans have tended to be somewhat insular in their view of the world, with the exception of their aggressiveness in exporting goods and services as a means to accumulate national wealth quickly. This tendency has inclined South Koreans to focus their national policies on rapid economic growth while depending heavily on the United States for their security. Having achieved rapid economic growth, however, South Koreans have made efforts to be more self-reliant in their foreign and security policy. Increasing prospects for the reunification of the entire Korean Peninsula with the end of the Cold War have reinforced the trend toward greater self-reliance. In this light, understanding properly how South Koreans would define and resolve their security and foreign policy problems given Korea’s important geostrategic location has become critical for South Koreans themselves as well as for concerned countries.

As I understand it, this is why the RAND Center for Asia-Pacific Policy, together with the Joong-Ang Ilbo, conducted public opinion polls in September 1996 and in February 1999 on South Koreans’ perceptions and attitudes toward South Korea’s foreign, security, and unification policy. The two polls taken together help to identify how Koreans perceive themselves and other powers in the world and how those perceptions are changing over time. The polls provide a way to understand how South Koreans define the challenges and opportunities in the next ten years and how they confront the problems associated with North Korea, unification, nuclear weapons, the U.S.-Korea alliance, and relations with Japan, China, and Russia.
As this report points out, the 1999 poll results indicate that South Koreans’ attitudes toward the major powers and the world in general have both broadened and become more realistic. South Koreans value the importance of keeping peaceful and cooperative relationships with neighboring countries as well as maintaining a more generous attitude toward North Koreans in order to contribute to peaceful unification.

This report also discusses how South Koreans are endeavoring to resolve their economic crisis after the historic transfer of political power from the ruling party to the opposition party. In their responses, South Koreans displayed a desire to tackle the economic crisis first before resolving their aspirations for unification. Respondents in the 1999 poll valued the relationship with the United States more than before, particularly with regard to the United States’ facilitative role in helping Korea get out of the economic crisis. In a similar vein, respondents increasingly value foreign direct investment in Korea. Interestingly enough, South Koreans have become more generous toward fellow North Koreans in spite of their own economic difficulties.

From a South Korean perspective, two other findings in the report are also significant. First, South Koreans began to more realistically acknowledge Japan’s increasing role in both regional security and international organizations such as the United Nations. Compared with the first poll, South Koreans in 1999 are more willing to recognize Japan as a legitimate neighbor rather than simply denounce it for its historical actions against Korea and other Asian countries. As detailed in the report, this latter point is a striking development. Taking a similar poll in Japan could further improve relations between South Korea and Japan.

Secondly, Koreans in 1999 more realistically assessed the value and roles of the U.S.-Republic of Korea (ROK) alliance. Whereas they placed more value on the alliance’s role in maintaining regional stability in 1996, in 1999 Koreans evaluated the alliance more favorably in terms of specific national interests, for instance, deterring a crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Not surprisingly, South Koreans think they would be more likely to need nuclear weapons if the alliance disintegrates than if North Korea succeeds in obtaining nuclear weapons. Despite continuing to value the alliance, however,
Koreans in 1999 think the United States still dominates South Korea in the alliance relationship. The latter point is particularly interesting in light of South Korea’s deepening economic dependence on the United States due to the financial crisis. This suggests it will take South Korea some time to establish the equal partnership with the United States to which it has long aspired.

This report provides ample sources for policy deliberation to the policymakers and the general public of South Korea as well as concerned countries. Policymakers in these regions may attempt to build upon South Koreans’ positive attitudes while they try to avoid the potential problems that South Koreans envision. In turn, perhaps the South Korean public will reflect on these polls and adjust their attitudes toward neighboring countries to create a more peaceful and mutually prosperous environment.

In conclusion, I wish to extend my special thanks to the Korea Foundation, which sponsored this project, the Joong-Ang Ilbo, and RAND. Without their concerted efforts, the 1999 poll could not have taken place because of the serious economic problems that struck Korea. I hope this poll will continue to be conducted at least once every two or three years to establish a database on the long-term trends of South Koreans’ attitudes toward foreign and security policy matters. Along these lines, I believe South Koreans’ inward-looking behavior will become more and more outward-looking so that they can play a role tantamount to their economic status in enhancing peace and security in the Asia-Pacific region and the world.

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