

# TECHNICAL R E P O R T

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## Ambivalent Allies?

### A Study of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.

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## Summary

An increase in expressions of anti-American sentiment among South Koreans led, in the spring and summer of 2002, to heightened concern among many observers of South Korea (the Republic of Korea, or ROK) that a pillar of the U.S.-South Korean alliance—a strong belief among South Koreans in the continued importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance and an equally strong commitment to its continuation—might be in jeopardy.

This study's focus on favorable and unfavorable sentiment toward the U.S. within the South Korean mass public does not in any way challenge the proposition that most South Korean political and military leaders—as stewards of a now 50-year alliance with the U.S.—remain committed to a healthy and strong bilateral relationship with the U.S. The extent to which ordinary South Koreans may be less committed, however, is of obvious policy interest both to the U.S. and to them as well, because democratic theory—and historical experience—suggest that leadership often is needed to build and sustain support for contentious policies, and that public support is needed to sustain policies over the long run.

The RAND Corporation conducted an empirical study of the matter, addressing three key policy-relevant questions:

- (1) What are the trends in South Koreans' attitudes toward the United States and is the conventional wisdom that they recently have deteriorated correct?
- (2) What are the sources of South Korean attitudes toward the U.S., and what are their trends over time?
- (3) What are the implications of these trends for U.S. policy toward Korea and larger security interests?

To address these questions, we conducted a qualitative analysis of the historical context for South Koreans' attitudes toward the U.S., and quantitative analyses of the available public opinion data on the matter.

## **A Recent Downturn in Favorable Sentiment Toward the U.S.**

Our research demonstrates that there is strong evidence of a recent downturn in favorable sentiment toward the U.S. among South Koreans but also evidence of a more recent recovery. This downturn represented a departure from a generally favorable trend in South Koreans' views toward the U.S. since the early 1990s—on average, support was higher in the 1996–2001 period than in the 1990–1995 period that preceded it.

Favorable sentiment toward the U.S. plummeted in late February 2002 in reaction to an incident in which a South Korean speed skater lost the Olympic gold medal to an American. It then rose in the summer of 2002 but bottomed out again in December 2002, following the acquittal of two U.S. soldiers whose armored vehicle accidentally killed two South Korean schoolgirls.

The candlelight vigils and other public expressions of unfavorable sentiment toward the U.S. that occurred during this period tapered off after South Korean leaders indicated that such expressions were inimical to South Korea's interest in preserving its alliance with the U.S., and that they therefore should cease. Although expressions of unfavorable sentiment flared again at the time of the U.S. war with Iraq, they abated thereafter, and a feared resurgence of anti-American sentiment on the first anniversary of the June 2002 deaths of the school girls failed to materialize.

Moreover, many measures of sentiment toward the U.S.—attitudes toward the alliance, for example, and toward Americans—have remained strongly positive throughout the period.

## **The Sources of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.**

There are many sources of attitudes toward the U.S. among South Koreans.

Our qualitative historical analysis identified a number of key incidents and sources that have shaped South Korean attitudes toward the U.S. over the last decade: historical residue, U.S. and ROK leadership actions taken and not taken, the ROK's security and economic situations, the state of North-South relations, social and generational change, and the media.

Our statistical analyses suggest that overall favorable and unfavorable sentiment derives primarily from perceptions of the U.S.-South Korean bilateral relationship at any given time and the importance of U.S. forces to protecting South Korea's security. Using respondent-level data from past polling, we were

able to explain, with a high degree of accuracy, individuals' favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward the U.S. by means of these two variables. A number of other individual-level characteristics and beliefs—what we called “lenses”—also modestly improved our predictions of favorable and unfavorable sentiment. Of these, the most important were age, educational attainment, and student status, each of which was found to be systematically associated with favorable or unfavorable sentiment. That is, younger and better-educated South Koreans typically tended to have the least favorable views of the U.S.

Both our qualitative historical analyses and our quantitative analyses of the available public opinion data suggest that South Koreans' assessments of the state of U.S.-South Korean relations are greatly influenced by the extent to which new developments appear to impinge on South Korean “sovereignty”; stoke South Koreans' sense of subservience, inequality, or unfairness; or can be successfully exploited by North Korea in its efforts to drive a wedge between the U.S. and South Korea.

## Implications and Recommendations

The key implication of our work is that although we may have weathered the most recent downturn in U.S.-South Korean relations, and there are some reasons for hope that favorable sentiment toward the U.S. will increase, this is no time for complacency about South Koreans' views of the U.S. and the bilateral relationship.

Despite the efforts of U.S. and South Korean policymakers to put bilateral relations back on track, there has as yet been only a partial recovery in favorable sentiment toward the U.S. This seems to be attributable to the continued, widespread belief that the bilateral relationship is in poor shape, which appears to be placing drag on a full recovery. It cannot be known at this point whether a recovery in favorable sentiment has temporarily stalled, whether we are now at some sort of “tipping point,” or whether attitudes have stabilized at a new, lower level. But the issue begs policy attention from both the U.S. and South Korea.

The challenge of dealing with North Korea (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK) will likely continue to test the alliance, as South Korea seeks to balance policies regarding inter-Korean affairs and the nuclear problem in the north, and as Pyongyang continues its efforts to create or exploit divisions between the U.S. and South Korea; there are many opportunities for miscalculation and missteps in the U.S.-ROK-DPRK *pas-de-trois* that could lead to friction in the alliance and to heightened ambivalence within the South Korean public.

Additionally, although many specific U.S. policies appear to be implicated in anti-American sentiment in South Korea, some unfavorable attitudes appear to transcend the current U.S. administration. Moreover—and somewhat ironically, given the U.S. government’s encouragement—South Korean efforts to develop an “independent national defense” could have the undesirable effect of further eroding South Koreans’ beliefs in the importance of U.S. forces to South Korea’s security, a key foundation of overall favorable attitudes; the same line of reasoning would apply if the North Korean threat were to diminish or vanish.

As described in this report, younger cohorts have much less favorable attitudes than their parents, and better-educated South Koreans (and students) generally have less favorable attitudes than less well-educated ones. While the data cannot as yet be used to support an argument of demographic determinism—i.e., that simply through the normal replacement of the older generation of Koreans (who have generally more favorable attitudes) with new generations of better-educated Koreans (who have less favorable attitudes), we can expect further erosion in attitudes toward the U.S.—there are serious reasons for concern that such a shift could be taking place, and policymakers will need to monitor this question closely.

In consultation with our advisory group, we developed six recommendations for U.S. policymakers:

- First, the U.S. should explore opportunities for even more robust intelligence sharing, consultations, and other mechanisms that could help to harmonize U.S.-South Korean views on threats and appropriate responses. Our view is that the more both parties share a common picture of threats, the easier it will be to harmonize public statements and policies and avoid perceived divisions that might be exploited by North Korea.
- Second, the U.S. needs to do more now to persuade South Koreans that its interest in the region goes well beyond the North Korean threat and that it has a long-term interest in a peaceful, stable, and economically vital Northeast Asia. While the outcome of North Korea’s efforts to preserve its regime and forestall a collapse cannot be foreseen with any clarity, it is important that South Koreans begin to consider the role of the U.S. in the region following either the collapse of the regime in Pyongyang or reunification.
- Third, the U.S. government should develop a public diplomacy strategy for South Korea that focuses on the legitimate grievances of those who criticize the U.S. (*pimi*), and does not attempt to change the views of those whose anti-Americanism (*panmi*) is ideological and more deeply rooted. The U.S. can, for example, highlight its support for South Korea’s participation in the

six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear capabilities, which could soften long-standing grievances that the U.S. does not take South Korean interests into account. To the maximum extent possible, the strategy should be a joint U.S.-South Korean one; the No Gun Ri commission, created to investigate an incident involving the deaths of South Koreans during the Korean War, might serve as a possible template.

- Fourth, the U.S. should work to better understand the extent to which (if at all) South Korea's educational system constitutes a structural source of anti-American sentiment. It would be useful for the U.S. and South Korea to jointly sponsor surveys and studies that (1) begin tracking the attitudes of South Korean youths age 13–18 on an annual basis and (2) analyze the contents of teaching curricula—including textbooks, syllabi and course notes, teaching methods used, teachers' incentives, and other factors that might be encouraging anti-American sentiment. Foundations also might sponsor these sorts of studies. The U.S. government also should (3) evaluate the potential contributions of educational exchange programs, including the Fulbright English Teaching Assistants (ETA) program.
- Fifth, the U.S. needs to better understand the role of the South Korean media in shaping attitudes toward the U.S. and should conduct or commission content analyses of South Korean media reporting on the U.S. and possibly of popular culture, such as music, television, and film.
- Our final recommendation is that the U.S. simply should not give up on Korea or Koreans: Their attitudes toward the U.S. are quite complex, and in spite of the recent downturn many measures have remained consistently and strongly positive. It remains very much in the U.S. interest to find ways to strengthen these attitudes while also seeking ways to avoid predictable friction that may arise as a result of perceived slights. And given South Koreans' increasing desire that their preferences and interests be fully considered on bilateral matters—especially dealings with North Korea—the U.S. will need to ensure a much higher level of bilateral coordination on policy matters if further rancor, and crystallization in unfavorable attitudes toward the U.S., are to be avoided.

As described in this report, South Koreans face a changing tableau of positive and negative images and messages about the U.S. and the U.S.-South Korean relationship—including the security alliance; trade, economic, and cultural relations; and other facets of the alliance—all filtered through the legacy of a complicated and at times tumultuous past and hopes for a better future. In the longer term, uncertainties about the prospects for continued economic growth, reunification, the future shape of Northeast Asia, and South Korea's need for U.S.

forces and the alliance introduce notes of both caution and stability in Koreans' attitudes toward the U.S. The result is a kaleidoscopic image or mosaic of the U.S. that harbors both gratitude and a desire to see a future South Korea that is a more independent and equal partner.

This basic ambivalence about the United States, which reflects South Koreans' efforts to balance their appreciation of the benefits that flow from a close relationship with the U.S. against continued aspirations arising from national pride and identity, imbues some South Korean attitudes toward the U.S. with a mercurial quality that can sometimes be breathtaking. But as described in this study, if the magnitude of the changes at times seems out of proportion to their proximate causes, the basic nature of the responses are frequently predictable and even avoidable. The challenge will be to ensure that South Koreans continue to have every reason to believe that the destinies of Koreans and Americans are intertwined and that this is, in the final analysis, a very good thing.