

Asan Institute Releases the Issue Brief “The U.S.-China Competition in South Korean Public Eyes”

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SEOUL, August 25, 2020– The Asan Institute for Policy Studies (<http://en.asaninst.org/>) presents the issue brief “The U.S.-China Competition in South Korean Public Eyes.”

The issue brief reveals a number of significant findings about public opinion on U.S.-China relations. Among the topics covered include South Korean public attitudes about the U.S. and China, U.S.-China relations, global leadership, and regional balance of power. Some interesting results include the following:

- There is a decline in the overall favorability of the United States (5.45→4.52) and China (3.63→2.40) as well as their respective leaders (Trump: 3.95→2.26, Xi Jinping: 3.01→1.63).
- When presented with a binary choice, the South Korean public clearly favors the U.S. (73.2%) over China (15.7%). South Koreans have steadfastly favored the U.S. over China since 2014. The authors explain that this is likely due to three reasons:
 - Bilateral relationship that South Korea has had with China since the fourth nuclear test in January 2016 and the announced decision to deploy the THAAD missile defense system to the Korean Peninsula in July 2016.
 - Robustness of the U.S.-ROK alliance
 - Perceived (present and future) leadership of the U.S. and China on the world stage
- The South Korean public is quite disappointed in the lack of leadership that these two countries have shown on the global stage (U.S.: positive 45.2%, negative 48.2%; China: positive 18.1%, negative 79.6%). But the South Korean public has a more optimistic outlook on the U.S. performance as a global leader ten years from now (45.2%) compared to China (33.5%).
- The findings also show that the South Korean public thinks that the balance of power is tilted in favor of the U.S. (economy 71.1%, military 80.4%) but the future outlook is more divided with 43.2% of South Koreans seeing the U.S. maintaining the advantage. 34.7% think that China will be able to achieve parity with the U.S. in the next decade. 18.9% see China overtaking the U.S.

- When asked how they would characterize the competition between the U.S. and China, a large majority said that they see it as a hegemonic competition (62.7%).
- When asked whether they thought that the U.S.-Sino rivalry will get better or worse, more than half (56.8%) of the respondents answered that they expect it to get worse. 31.4% said that relations will improve and only 8.2% state that the relationship will not change.

The authors state that “while the political implication of this choice may be less meaningful in a non-election year...any decision to move against the long-standing alliance with the United States would not have popular support.” Furthermore, Kim and Kang also recommend that South Korea should use the current situation between the U.S. and China to chart out “a more sustainable and forward-looking policy based on norms, principles, and values which the Korean public seems to support as the data suggests.”

The sample size of the South Korean survey was 1,000 people, over the age of 19. The margin of error is $\pm 3.1\%$ at 95% confidence level. The survey was conducted by Research & Research using Random Digit Dialing for mobile and landlines during July 15~16, 2020.

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