

SOUTH KOREANS
— AND —
THEIR NEIGHBORS
2026

ASAN POLL

THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES

South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2026



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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 2026

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” annually since 2014. “South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2026” reveals South Korean views towards neighboring countries, the ROK-U.S. alliance, and U.S. forces in Korea, future relationships with the United States and North Korea, nuclear armament, prospects for U.S.-China competition, and South Korea’s strategic choices between the United States and China.

Since last year’s Asan annual survey in March 2025, South Korea had a transition of government in June with the election of President Lee Jae Myung from the progressive Democratic Party. On South Korea’s relations with the United States, the return of President Donald Trump to the White House led to tough trade and security negotiations. With Japan, regular leader-level shuttle diplomacy by President Lee with Japanese prime ministers Ishiba Shigeru and Takaichi Sanae helped to stabilize the relationship. With China, President Xi Jinping made a state visit to South Korea in October and President Lee reciprocated with a visit to China in January 2026 as the two countries sought to manage bilateral tensions over China’s maritime incursions in the West Sea. With North Korea, inter-Korean dialogue remained frozen while North Korea continued its nuclear and missile build-up as well as military campaign in support of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

As South Koreans look out at a more uncertain and, in many respects, anarchic world, how do they feel about neighboring countries and leaders? How confident are they in the ROK-U.S.

alliance? How concerned are they about the threat from North Korea? And how do they feel about nuclear deterrence?

This year's survey reveals three major shifts in South Korean public opinion.

First, Japan's image improved markedly. Favorability towards Japan reached its highest level, ranking as net positive for the first time. In addition, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi was ranked more favorably than U.S. President Trump. This is the first time a Japanese leader has been viewed more favorably than a U.S. leader in our survey.

Second, South Koreans continued to distinguish between President Trump and the United States as a country. Despite unfavorable sentiment towards President Trump, overall views of the United States (favorability: 5.90 out of 10) remain as strong as ever, including the ROK-U.S. alliance (97.1%), the U.S. military presence in Korea (82.3%), and preference for the United States (71.4%) over China (10.8%).

Third, support for stronger nuclear deterrence rose on multiple fronts. Even as there was a 10%p increase in confidence in the U.S. extended nuclear deterrence commitment to 59%, a record 80% (2025: 76.2%) of South Koreans supported acquiring an indigenous nuclear weapons capability.

We also include new survey results examining South Korean public opinion towards nuclear deterrence measures—indigenous nuclear armament and the re-deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons—under conditional scenarios. This builds on recent research, published as: *Peter K. Lee and Chungku Kang, "Worth the Squeeze: A Conditions-based Analysis of South Korean Public Support for Nuclear Deterrence," Asan Issue Brief (May 2025).*

The most recent survey was conducted from February 7 to 11, 2026. The results are based on a representative, weighted sample of 1,000 respondents across South Korea.

Other findings are as follows:

Country favorability: The United States remained the most favored country (5.90, on the scale of 0 to 10, with 5 being neutral). Japan's favorability rose to 5.11, surpassing the neutral midpoint for the first time and reaching its highest level on record. China (3.28) and North Korea (3.37) remained below neutral, and Russia (2.86) was the least favored country.

Leader favorability: Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi recorded the highest favorability (3.24), the first time a Japanese leader ranked first. U.S. President Trump dropped to 2.91, followed by Xi Jinping (2.29), Vladimir Putin (1.79), and Kim Jong Un (1.45).

Future relations: A majority (55.3%) thought relations with the United States would improve, an 8%p increase from 2025, when a majority of South Koreans thought relations would worsen following President Trump's return to office. The outlook for inter-Korean relations slightly improved, with 39.8% thinking ties would improve, up from 35.4% in 2025.

Partner importance: The United States remained South Korea's most important economic partner (74.7%, unchanged from 2025 at 74.2%) and security partner (64%), a 10%p decrease from 2025 (74.4%). Those who thought China was more economically important fell to 19.7%.

ROK–U.S. alliance: This year recorded the highest support for the ROK–U.S. alliance (97.1%, previous highest was 96.4% in 2022) as well as the U.S. military presence in South Korea (82.3%, previous highest was 82.1% in 2022). There was, however, a 13.8%p decrease to 46.8% in those who thought the U.S. military should continue to be stationed in South Korea following unification, marking its first fall below majority support since 2020.

Nuclear deterrence: Public confidence that the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea rose by 10.2%p to 59.1%, with a similar increase in confidence in the event of U.S. exposure to a potential attack. Support for indigenous nuclear armament reached an all-time high of 80%. Even when presented with potential costs—international sanctions (63%), withdrawal of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) (52.2%), or domestic infrastructure burdens (54.1%)—support remained above majority thresholds.

Support for redeploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stood at 60.4%, with 24.4% opposed and 15.2% selecting “don’t know.” This was a slight change from 2025 when 66.3% expressed support and 33.7% were opposed, with an increase in those unsure. There was a 14.5%p decrease in support (45.9%) when respondents were asked to bear higher defense cost-sharing burdens and a 25%p decrease when asked to host nuclear weapons in their area of residence (35.4%).

U.S.–China competition: When asked whether the United States or China would be stronger in ten years, there was a 7.2%p decline in those who chose the United States, even though it was considered more likely by a 3:1 margin (46% vs 15.1%). There was an even sharper 14.4%p decrease to 71.4% in those who would side with the United States over China, but there was also a decrease in those choosing China from 14.2% in 2025 to only 10.8%.

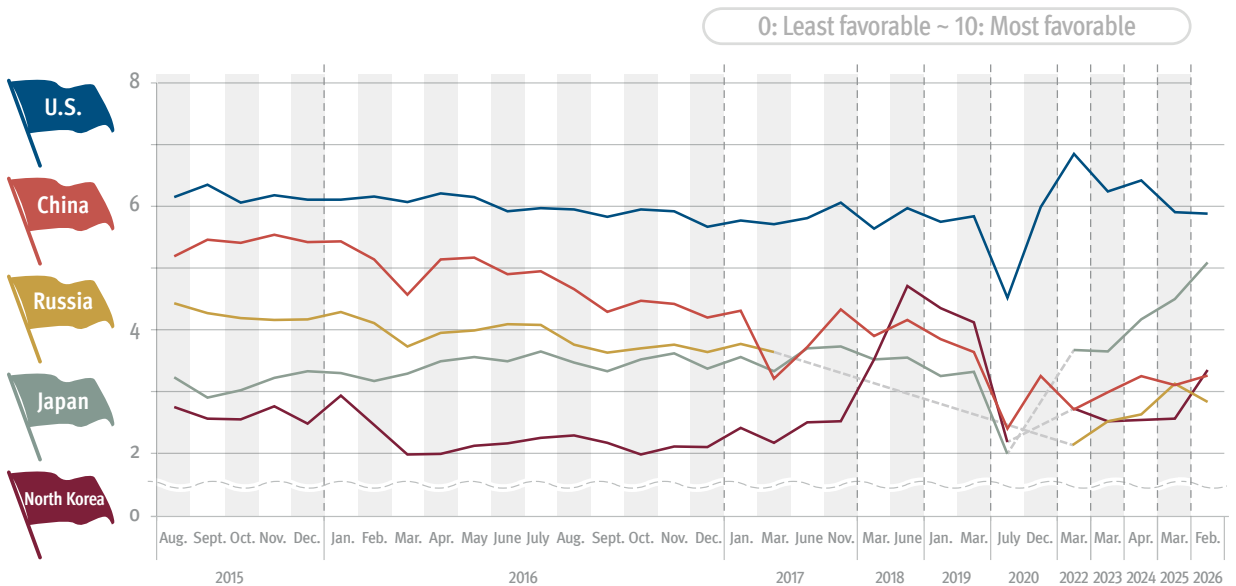
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COUNTRY FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following countries?



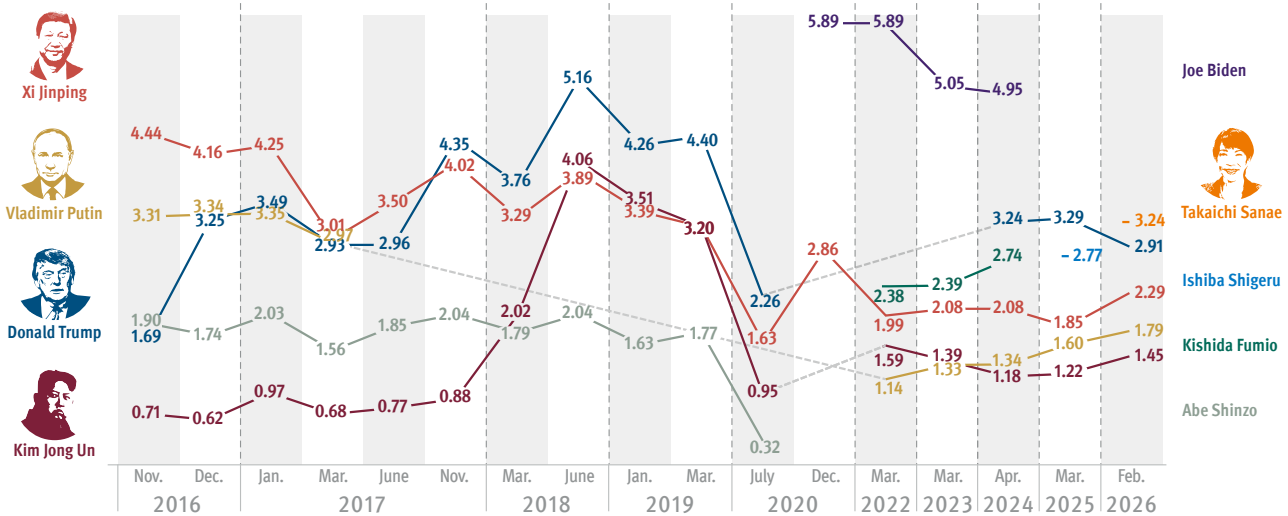
South Koreans were asked to rate their favorability towards neighboring countries on a scale from 0 (“least favorable”) to 10 (“most favorable”), with 5 being a neutral opinion. Favorability towards Japan rose from 4.52 in 2025 to 5.11 in 2026, marking the highest since 2010. This is also the first time Japan’s favorability score has surpassed the neutral midpoint (5.0). The increase likely reflects the recent improvement in bilateral relations, including the summit between the two leaders in January 2026. Despite Japan’s upward trend, the United States nonetheless remains the most favorably viewed country (5.90). By contrast, China, North Korea, and Russia were all viewed unfavorably. North Korea scored 3.37, up from 2.56 in 2025, though well below neutral. China’s score was virtually unchanged at 3.28, while Russia remained the least favored country at 2.86.



LEADER FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following leaders?

0: Least favorable ~ 10: Most favorable

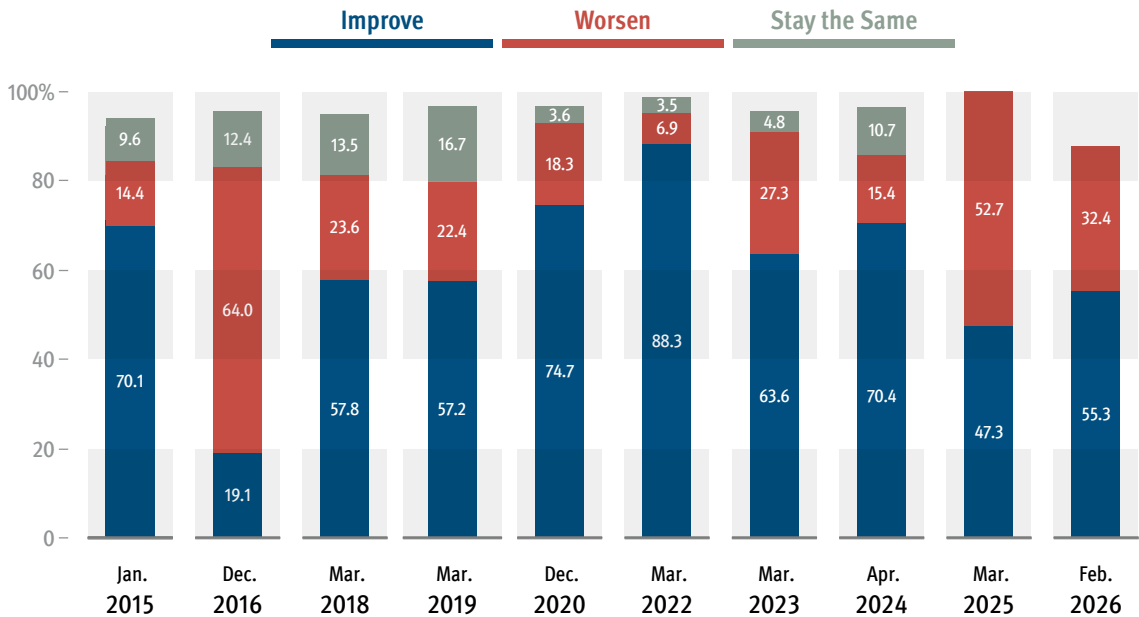


South Koreans were also asked to rate the favorability of leaders from neighboring countries on a scale from 0 (“least favorable”) to 10 (“most favorable”). In February 2026, Japanese Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae received the highest favorability among the leaders surveyed, with a score of 3.24. This marks the first time a Japanese leader has ranked first in the survey. Her score exceeds that of former Prime Minister Ishiba Shigeru, who received 2.77 in 2025. U.S. President Donald Trump followed with a rating of 2.91, down from 3.29 in 2025. Chinese President Xi Jinping was rated 2.29, placing him in the middle of the group but still well below neutral. Among the other authoritarian leaders surveyed, Russian President Vladimir Putin received 1.79 (up slightly from 1.60 in 2025), while North Korean leader Kim Jong Un remained the least favored at 1.45, showing virtually no change over the year.



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE UNITED STATES

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

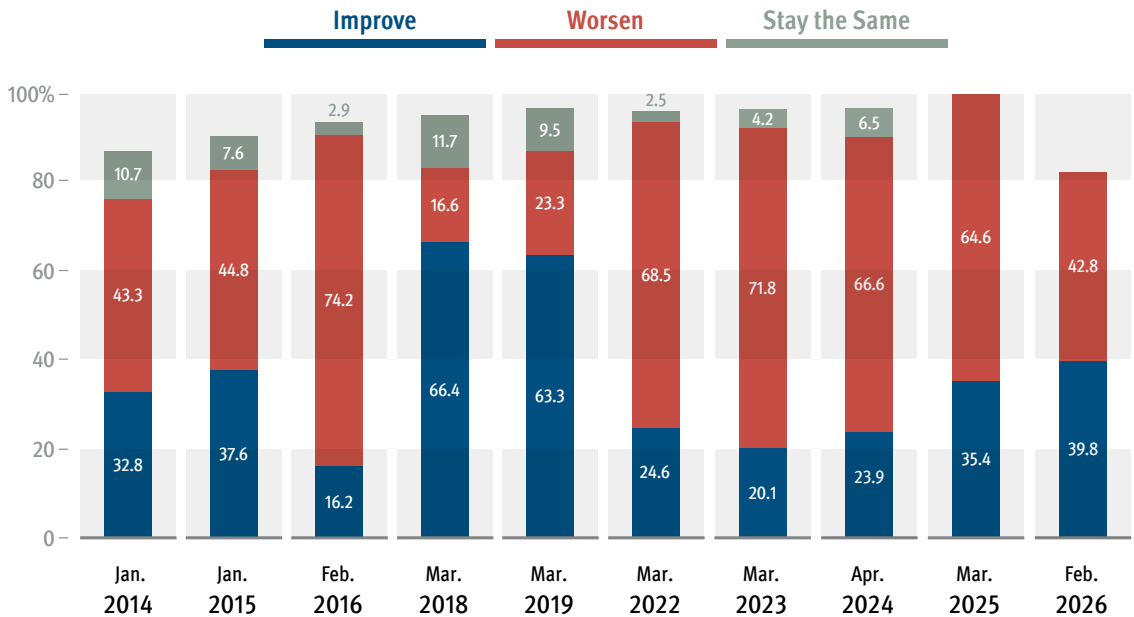


A slight majority (55.3%) expressed optimism about the future of ROK–U.S. relations, while 32.4% reported a pessimistic view. An additional 12.3% said they had no opinion. Despite heightened economic pressures associated with tariff discussions under the Trump administration, public sentiment leaned positive overall. Although optimism recovered over the year, the 2026 level remains below the consistently high optimism recorded in most previous years surveyed. Public confidence in the future of the ROK-U.S. relationship dipped following Donald Trump's electoral victories—first in 2016 and again in 2024—reflecting uncertainty about alliance management under his leadership. However, pessimism appears to have moderated.



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH KOREA

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

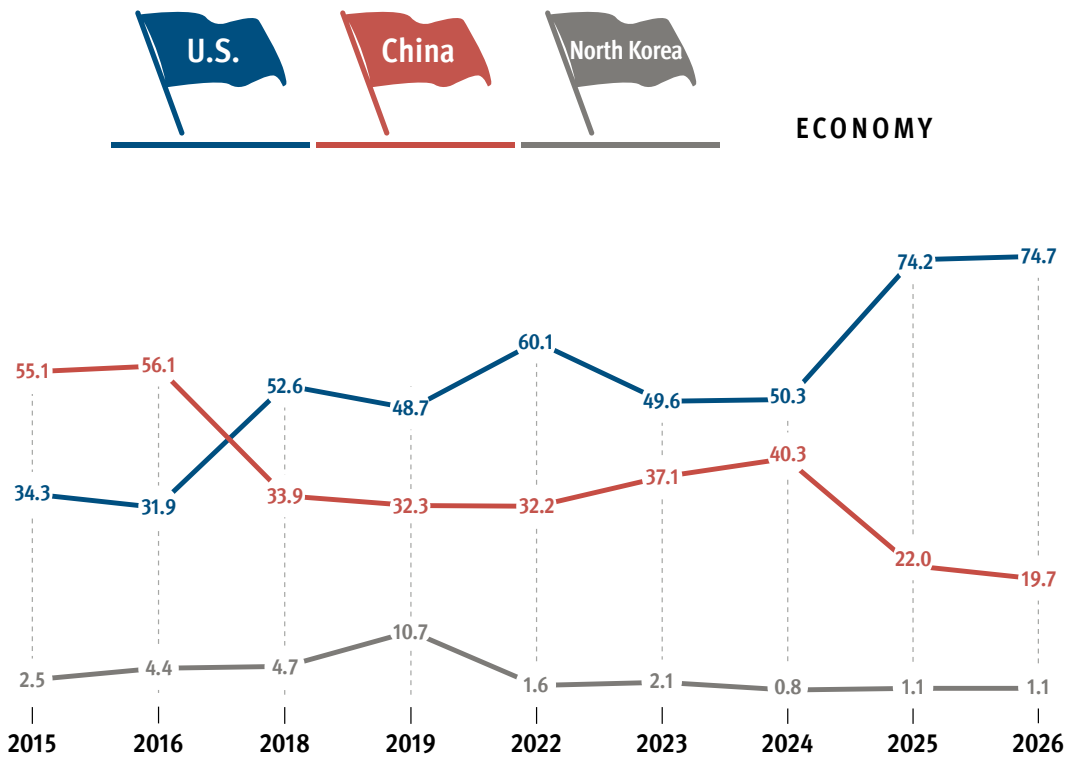


South Korean views on the future of inter-Korean relations were nearly split between expectations that relations would worsen (42.8%) and improve (39.8%). This close division is partially explained by a sizeable no-opinion share (17.4%). Compared to 2025, when 64.6% viewed that inter-Korean relations would deteriorate, the 2026 results indicate a modest improvement in public perceptions. Despite the continued stalemate in inter-Korean relations and ongoing North Korean military provocations, the share expressing negative expectations declined noticeably. This shift is meaningful given that since 2022, roughly two-thirds of respondents had consistently predicted that inter-Korean relations would worsen.



MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY FOR SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY

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

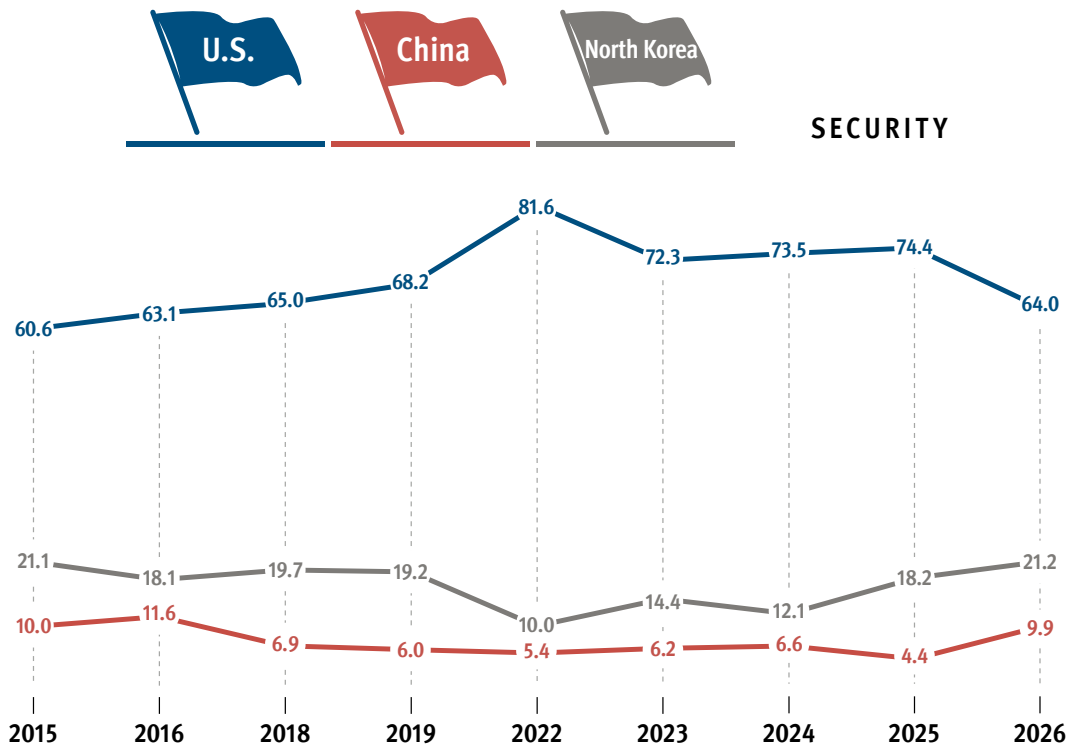


Support for the United States as South Korea's most important economic partner remained at a record high 74.7% in 2026, while perceptions of China fell to a record low (19.7%). The tendency to view the United States as the most important country for South Korea's economy remained at its highest level for the second consecutive year. Notably, this pattern held despite tariff pressures introduced under President Trump: the share of respondents choosing the United States remained consistently strong. By contrast, those who chose China fell below 20%, declining to roughly half of its 2024 level. Overall, these results suggest that public perceptions of economic importance have become more strongly aligned with the United States. Meanwhile, only 1.1% identified North Korea as the most important country for South Korea's economy.



MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY FOR SOUTH KOREA'S SECURITY

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

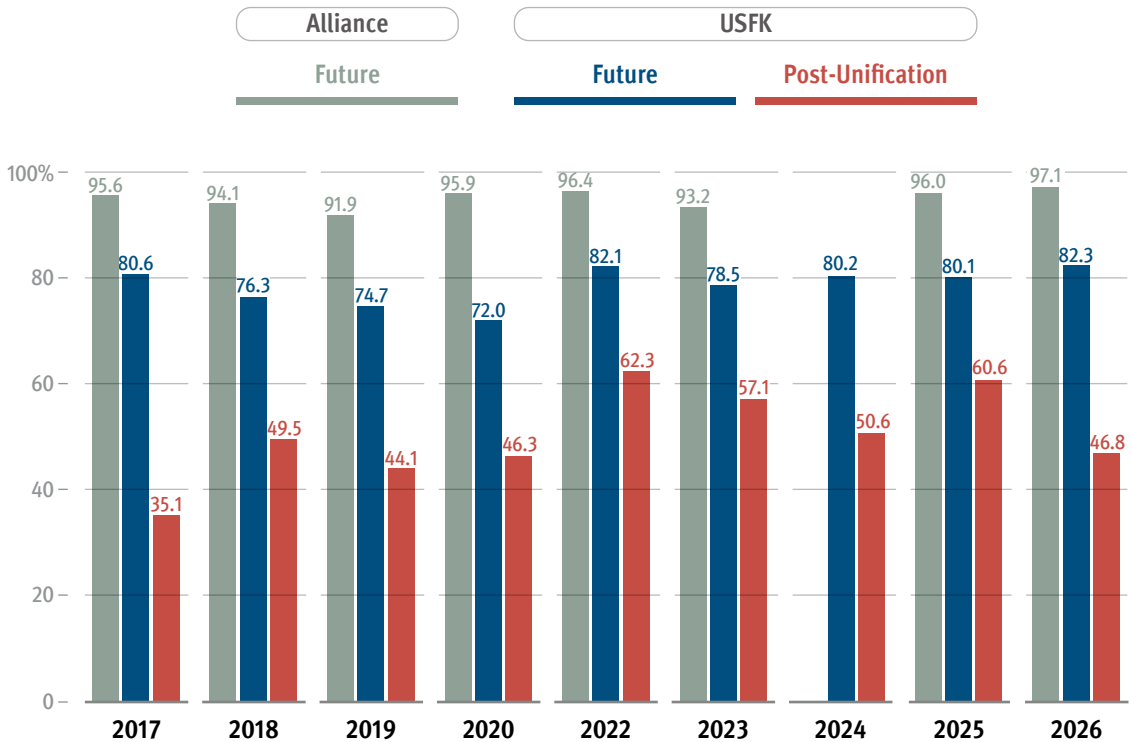


A majority of South Koreans (64%) identified the United States as the most important country for South Korea's security. More than 60% have consistently selected the United States since 2015. However, after peaking in 2022, this figure has gradually declined, falling by 10%p compared to 2025. Over the same period, the proportion identifying North Korea as the most important country for security increased from 18.2% to 21.2%, while the share selecting China rose more sharply from 4.4% to 9.9%. Although the United States remains the clear majority choice, the decline reflects public sensitivity to alliance burden-sharing debates, including renewed U.S. pressure regarding defense spending and cost-sharing contributions.



NECESSITY OF THE ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE AND U.S. FORCES IN KOREA

- Q1. Do you think the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to be necessary in the future?**
- Q2. Should the U.S. military continue to be stationed in South Korea in the future?**
- Q3. Should the U.S. military continue to be stationed in South Korea after unification?**

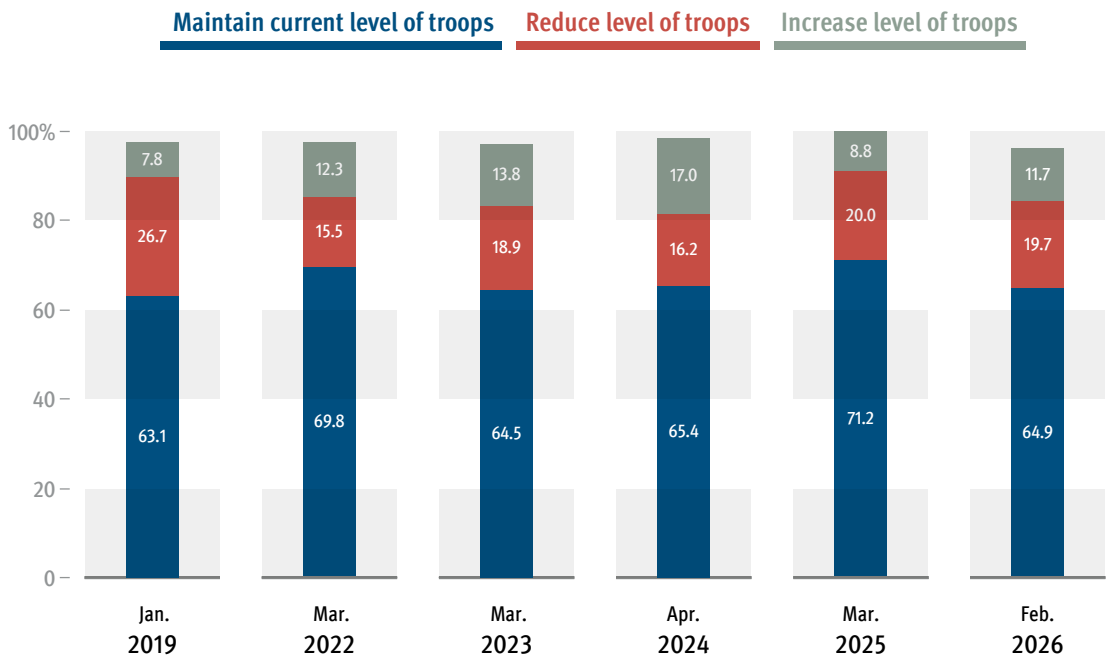


Support for the ROK–U.S. alliance reached 97.1% in 2026, marking the second consecutive year at a record high. Since 2012, more than nine out of ten South Koreans have consistently agreed that the alliance will remain necessary in the future, indicating a consensus on its long-term importance. Regarding the necessity of U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), about 80% continued to state that USFK would remain necessary going forward. In 2026, its support reached 82.3%, the highest level recorded since 2012. However, under the scenario of unification, its support dropped to 46.8%, the lowest level since 2020. After rising steadily from 2014 and peaking in 2022, this figure had already shown a gradual decline before falling more sharply this year.



DESIRABLE SIZE OF U.S. FORCES IN KOREA

What do you think about the size of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea?



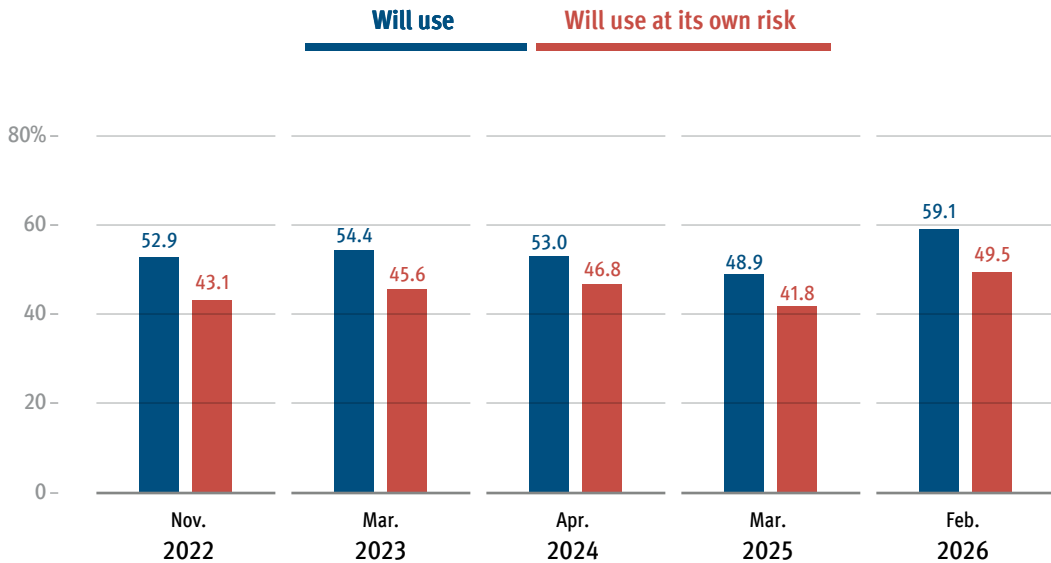
Respondents were asked about the desirable size of U.S. Forces in South Korea. This question was asked only of those who agreed that the USFK presence is necessary ($n=823$). Overall, public opinion landscape regarding the current troop level (28,500) showed little change. A majority continued to state that troops should be maintained at the current level, while 19.7% favored reducing troop levels and 11.7% supported increasing them. Despite heightened alliance burden-sharing pressures under the Trump administration, perceptions of the U.S. troop presence in South Korea remained largely stable. Those who supported maintaining the current level, which had risen to 71.2% in 2025, returned to the mid-60% range in 2026. While the public continues to value the alliance and the presence of U.S. forces, respondents may also be mindful of the financial costs associated with troop deployment, leading them to prefer stability rather than expansion.



PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN U.S. EXTENDED NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

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

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

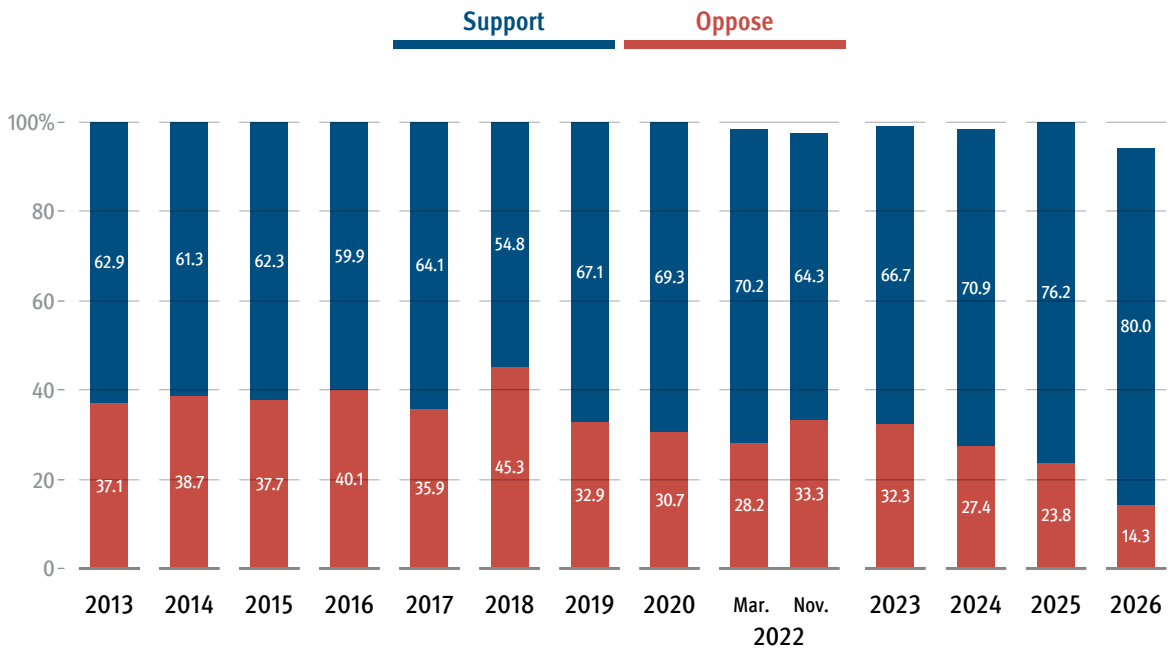


Public confidence that the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea reached 59.1% in 2026, an increase of roughly 10%p compared to 2025. This is the highest level of confidence in U.S. extended nuclear deterrence since 2022. Whereas public trust had generally remained in the 50% range in recent years (min: 48.9%, max: 54.4%), it rose into the upper-50% range in 2026. When asked a more conditional question—whether the United States would fulfill its extended deterrence commitment even at the risk of a potential nuclear attack on its own territory—49.5% expressed confidence in U.S. nuclear assurances. Even under this more demanding scenario, confidence reached its highest recorded level.



ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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



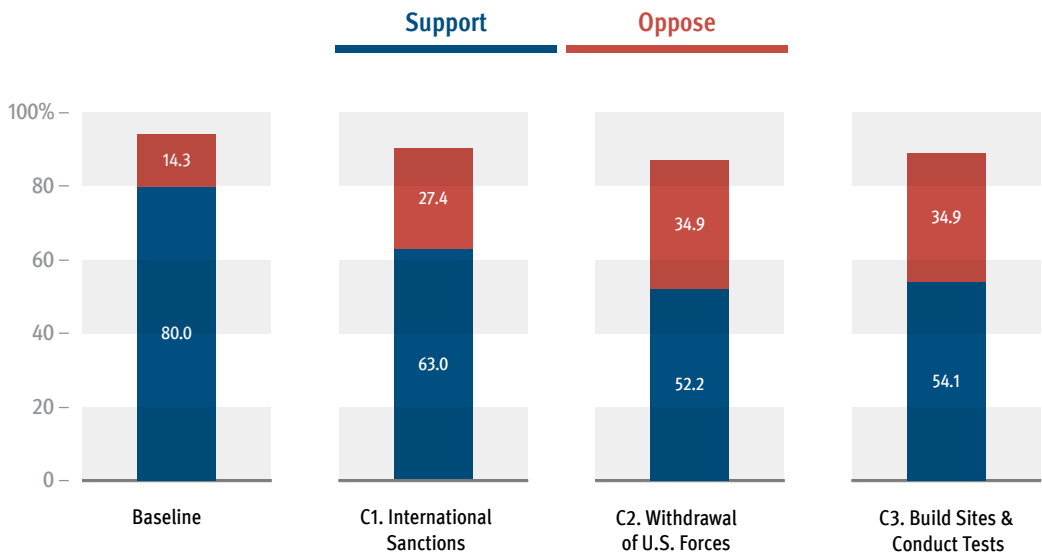
Support for acquiring an indigenous nuclear weapons capability increased by 3.8p, reaching an all-time high of 80% (Oppose: 14.3%). This marks the second consecutive year in which support has reached a record high. Since 2010, when the Asan Institute began tracking this issue, a majority has consistently supported nuclear armament (min: 54.8%, max: 80%). Since 2019, support has steadily risen, remaining in the 70% range for several years before reaching the 80% level in 2026. Notably, although expectations for future inter-Korean relations showed a modest uptick, strong support for nuclear weapons development persisted. This suggests that greater optimism about diplomatic prospects does not necessarily lead to lower support for autonomous deterrence policies.



CONDITIONS-BASED SUPPORT FOR INDIGENOUS NUCLEAR ARMAMENT

Under these conditions, do you think South Korea should develop nuclear weapons?

- Q1. Indigenous nuclear development could lead to international sanctions**
- Q2. Indigenous nuclear development could weaken trust between South Korea and the U.S. and potentially lead to the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea**
- Q3. Indigenous nuclear development could require the construction of nuclear development and waste processing facilities, as well as nuclear testing in South Korea**

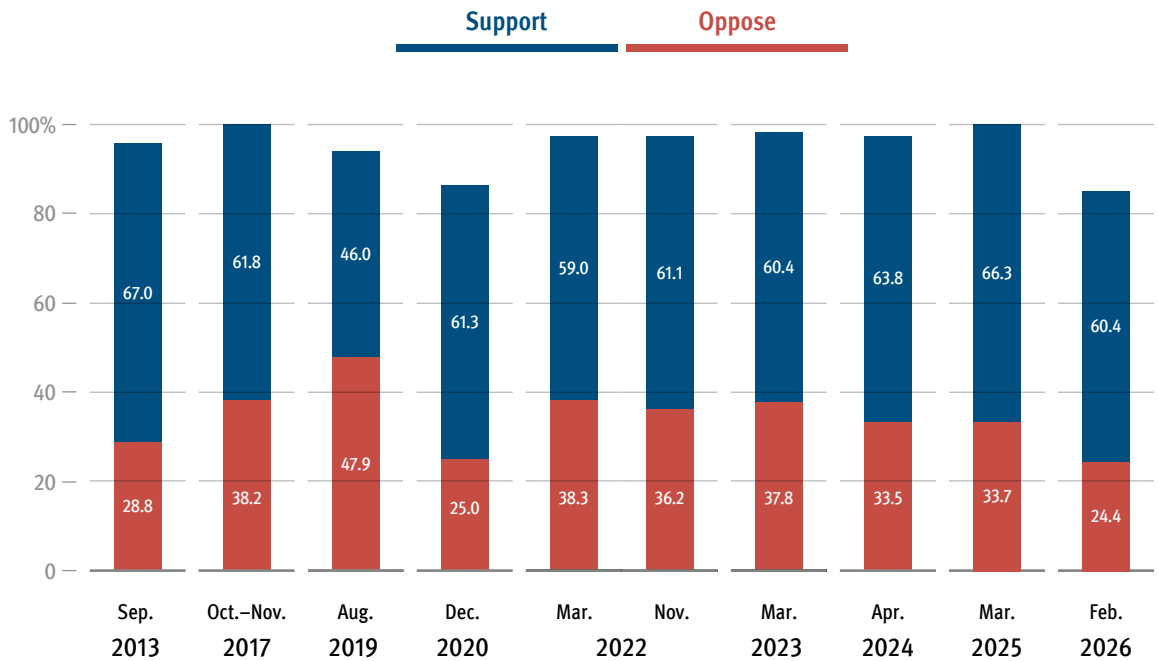


Baseline support for acquiring an indigenous nuclear weapon was exceptionally high at 80%. when respondents were presented with specific cost conditions, support declined—though it remained above a majority threshold. First, when asked if they supported it, even if it led to international sanctions, support fell to 63%, a decline of 17%p from the baseline. Second, when respondents were asked to consider that it could lead to the withdrawal of USFK, support dropped to 52.2% (Oppose: 34.9%). Finally, when told that it would require building nuclear facilities and conducting nuclear testing, support declined to 54.1% (Oppose: 34.9%).



ATTITUDES TOWARDS REDEPLOYING U.S. NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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



Support for the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons stood at 60.4% in February 2026, while opposition remained at 24.4%. However, the share selecting “don’t know” was 15.2%, contributing to a 5–9%p decline in both support and opposition over the year. Opinions on this issue were virtually identical to those in 2020. Despite recent developments in U.S. security assurances, public sentiment towards redeployment has remained largely stable since 2020, fluctuating within a narrow range (min: 59%, max: 66.3%).

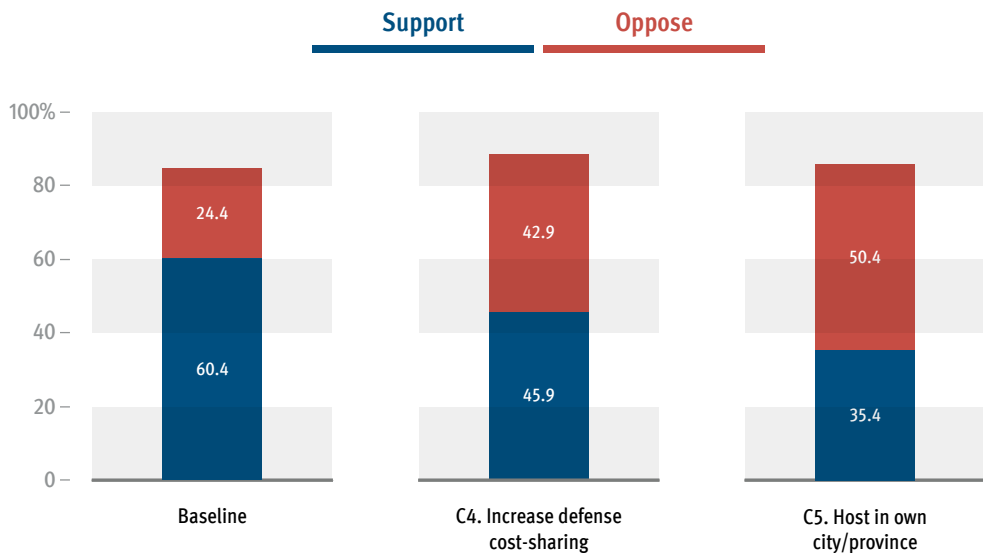


CONDITIONS-BASED SUPPORT FOR REDEPLOYING U.S. NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Under these conditions, do you think U.S. tactical nuclear weapons should be deployed in South Korea?

Q1. Nuclear redeployment could require additional costs beyond the existing defense cost-sharing agreement

Q2. Nuclear redeployment could require nuclear weapons to be placed in your area of residence

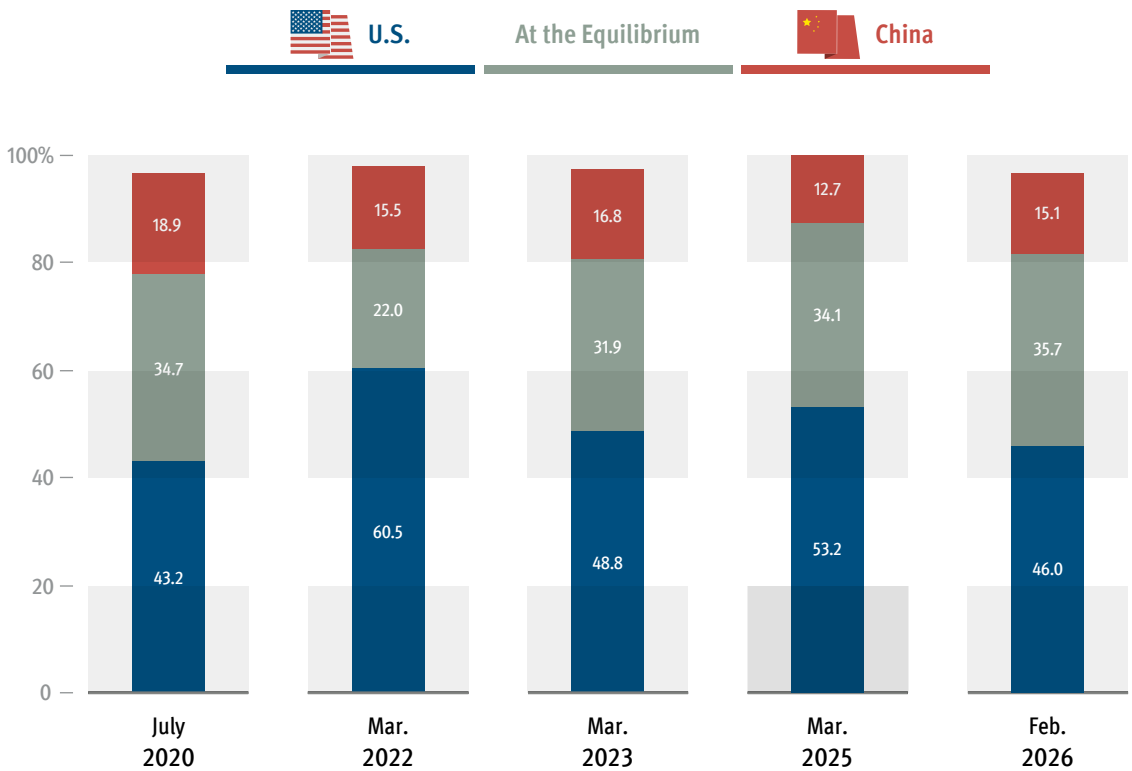


Baseline support for redeployment stood at 60.4% (Oppose: 24.4%, Don't know: 15.2%). When respondents were asked whether they would support redeployment if it required increased defense cost-sharing with the United States, support declined to 45.9%, showing an almost even split (Oppose: 42.9%). This 14–15%p decline indicates that additional financial burdens are politically sensitive. Support eroded more sharply when respondents were asked whether they would support redeployment if nuclear weapons were to be hosted in their own city or province. Under this condition, support dropped to 35.4%, while opposition increased to 50.4%, making it the only scenario in which opposition clearly outweighed support across the two nuclear policy options.



FUTURE SUPERPOWER

In the next ten years, which country will be stronger: The United States or China?

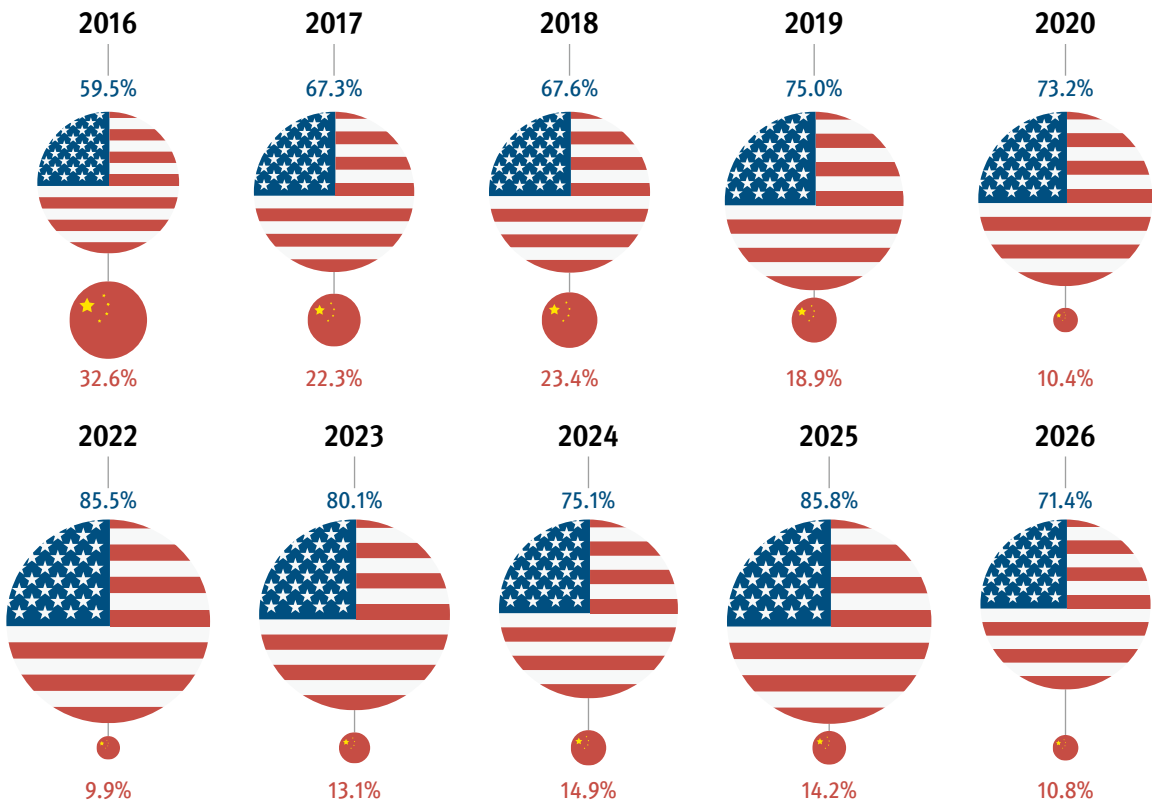


Looking ten years ahead, 46% of South Koreans expected the United States to be stronger than China, though this share declined by about 7%p compared to 2025. At the same time, the proportion expecting the two countries to be equally powerful rose to 35.7%. The share identifying China as the stronger country was only 15.1%, remaining broadly stable around the 15%-range since 2020. Compared to 2022, when only 22% believed the two countries would be equally strong, the 2026 figure represents a 13.7%p increase. This shift coincided with a decline of more than 10%p in the share predicting U.S. dominance. Overall, while South Koreans still lean towards expecting U.S. primacy, perceptions of a more balanced U.S.–China competition have strengthened in recent years.



SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE PARTNER

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



Respondents were asked which country South Korea should cooperate with amid continued U.S.–China strategic competition. In 2026, 71.4% selected the United States, while only 10.8% chose China. Support for strengthening ties with the United States has generally trended upward since 2017, reaching a peak in 2025 before settling in the low-70% range in 2026. Compared to recent years, 17.8% selected “don’t know,”—relatively high—which may indicate reluctance to take a clear position despite an overall tilt towards the United States. Meanwhile, those who chose China—just over 10%—remained near its lowest (e.g., 2022: 9.9%). Overall, the results indicate a strong public preference for aligning more closely with the United States than with China.

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



Compiled by KANG Chungku.



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