

**SOUTH KOREANS**  
— AND —  
**THEIR NEIGHBORS**  
2022

**ASAN POLL**

THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES



# South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2022



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## THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES

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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 2022

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The Asan Institute for Policy Studies has been tracking South Korean perception of international affairs every year since 2010. The selected data has been published since 2014 as an annual series called the “*South Koreans and Their Neighbors*.” The series was halted in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19, but the institute is continuing this tradition again through the survey conducted in March 2022.

The report “*South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2022*” reveals several interesting findings, including South Korean views about neighboring countries, future relationships with the U.S. and North Korea, nuclear armament, prospects for U.S.-China competition, and the future of superpowers.

Key findings from the most recent survey are as follows:

The latest poll conducted in March 2022 indicates that the U.S. was the most favored country among South Koreans, with an average score of 6.85. Japan (3.67) was ranked second. North Korea scored 2.72. China’s favorability dropped to 2.71 from 3.25 in December 2020. Russia’s favorability was 2.13, making it the least favored country.

U.S. President Joe Biden was singled out as the most favored foreign leader (5.89). He was followed by Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida (2.38).

President Xi Jinping (1.99) scored much lower than his average ratings in 2016 and 2017. Chairman Kim's rating dropped to 1.59 from 4.06 in June 2018. Russian President Vladimir Putin's favorability was 1.14.

When Trump began to question the value of security commitments around the world, South Korean view of the ROK-U.S. bilateral relationship turned decidedly negative, with 64% expressing pessimism. When Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, the mood turned positive, with the outlook on improved relations increasing from 57.2% in March 2019 to 74.7% in December 2020. Finally, in March 2022, 88.3% of South Koreans expected enhanced future relations with the U.S., which was a record-high since 2013.

In March 2022, only 24.6% expected inter-Korean relations to improve. It was a sizable decline from 2019 when over half of South Koreans (63.3%) believed that the relationship with North Korea would improve. In March 2018, South Koreans expecting improved future relations with North Korea peaked at 66.4%.

Since 2012, no less than 91.9% of South Koreans answered that the ROK-U.S. alliance is necessary for the foreseeable future. In March 2022, those who said the ROK-U.S. alliance would continue to be necessary reached 96.4%, hitting a new record high. When asked if the alliance would be necessary after unification, the percentage dropped to 82.9% in 2022 (min 80%, max 86.3%).

In March 2022, 70.2% of South Koreans said they are in favor of

nuclear weapons development in South Korea (28.2% opposed). The data shows that a majority continue to support (min 55.6%, max 70.2%) indigenous nuclear development since 2010.

When asked about reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons onto the Korean Peninsula, 59% of the respondents supported it in March 2022. 38.3% opposed. The data suggests that there is continued broad support for tactical nuclear weapons since 2013.

When survey respondents were asked to identify which country is stronger, an overwhelming majority (83.1%) chose the U.S. over China. Only 3.4% named China as the stronger country. And when asked which of the two countries *will be* stronger in the future, most South Koreans (60.5%) chose the U.S. over China. The percentage of South Koreans viewing China as a future superpower was only 15.5%.





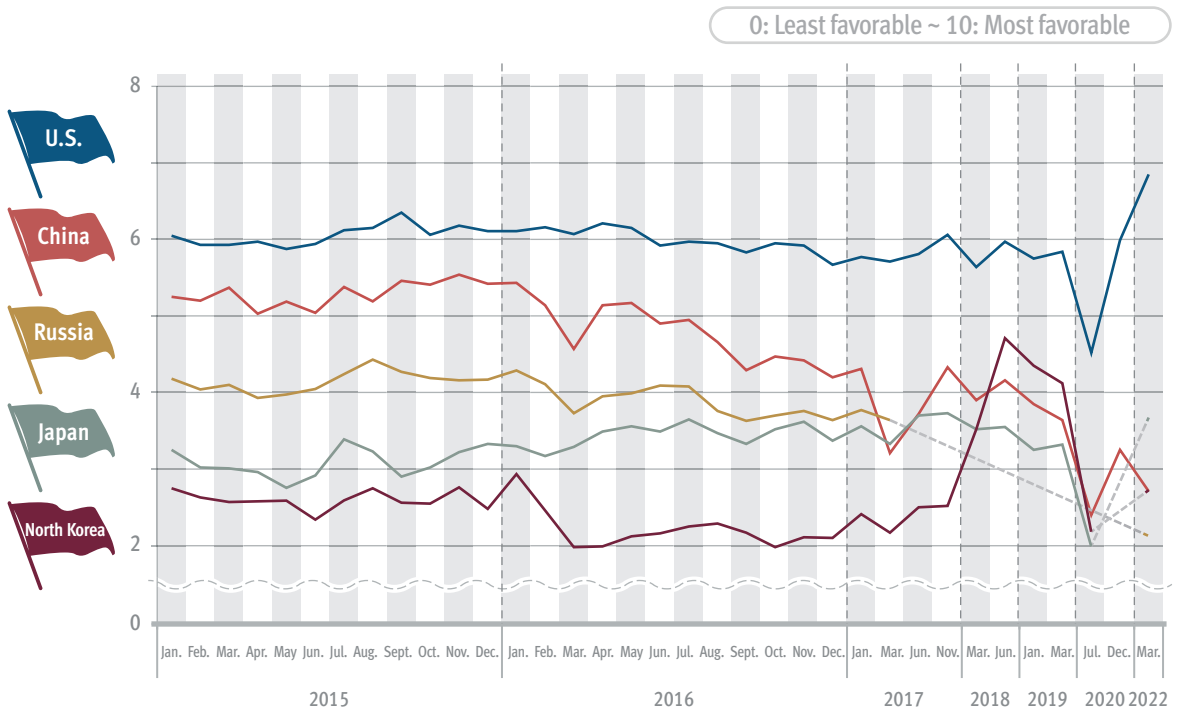
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## COUNTRY FAVORABILITY

 How would you rate the favorability of the following countries?

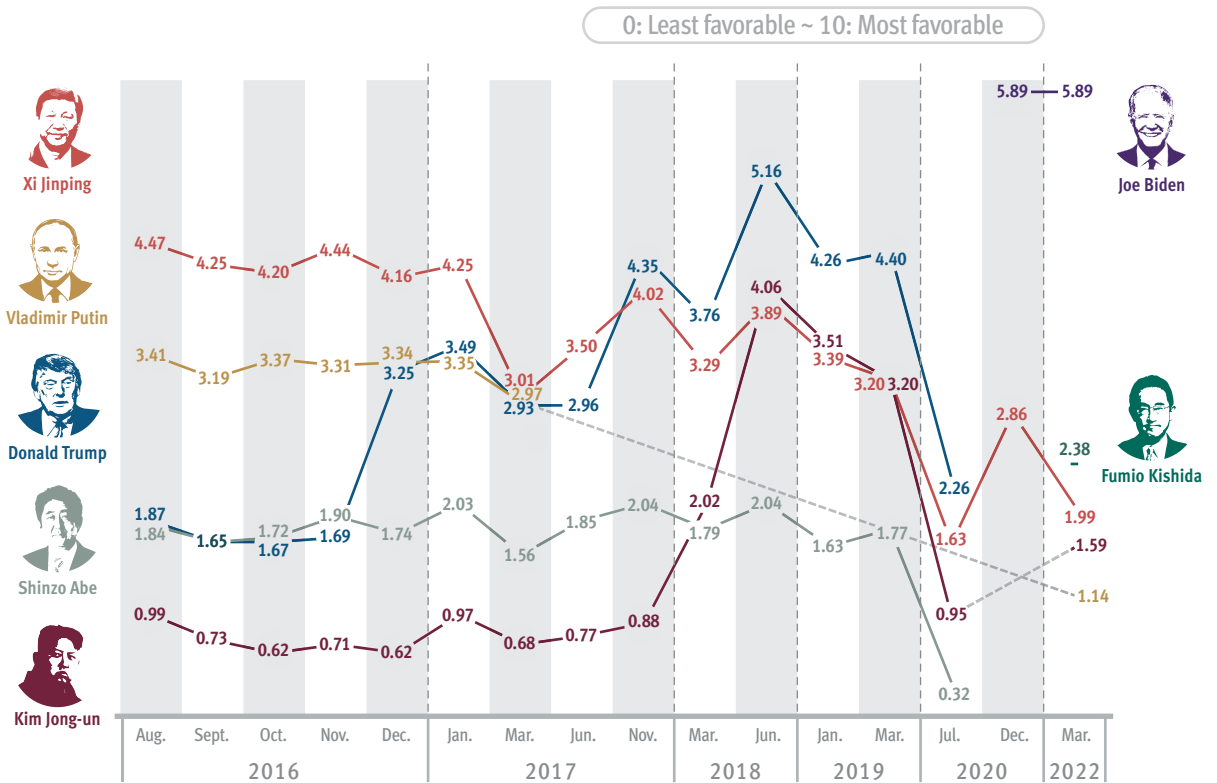


Respondents were asked to rate the favorability of the U.S., China, Japan, North Korea, and Russia on a scale of zero (“least favorable”) to ten (“most favorable”). In March 2022, the favorability of the U.S. was 6.85. Japan (3.67) was ranked second. Japan’s favorability surged back above three after July 2020, when it recorded the lowest (1.99). North Korea’s favorability was 2.72. In March 2022, China’s favorability dropped to 2.71 from 3.25 in December 2020. Russia’s favorability was 2.13, making it the least favored country. Russia’s Ukraine invasion appears to be a contributing factor.



## LEADER FAVORABILITY

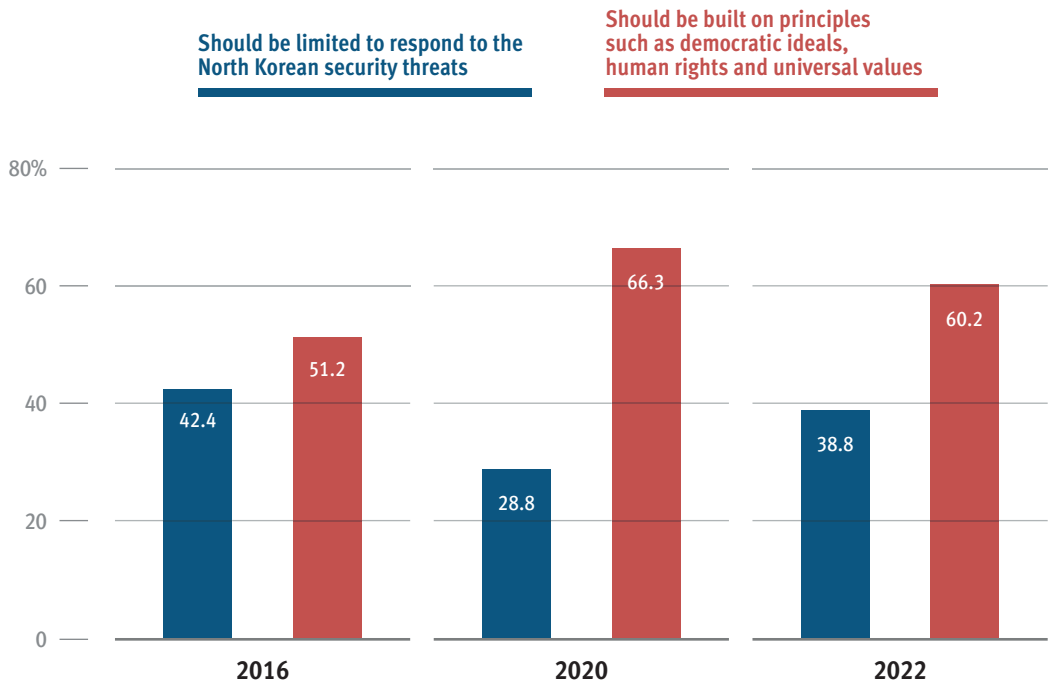
How would you rate the favorability of the following leaders?



When asked to rate the favorability of major leaders from neighboring countries on a scale of zero (“least favorable”) to ten (“most favorable”), U.S. President Joe Biden was named as the most favored leader (5.89). President Biden’s favorability remained unchanged between December 2020 and March 2022. Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida scored 2.38. President Xi’s rating (1.99) was much lower than his average ratings in 2016 and 2017. Chairman Kim’s rating dropped to 1.59 from 4.06 in June 2018. Russian President Vladimir Putin’s favorability was 1.14, making him the least favored leader for South Koreans. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 appears to have been a contributing factor.

# ROLE OF THE ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE

**Which one of the following statements about the ROK-U.S. alliance do you agree with?**

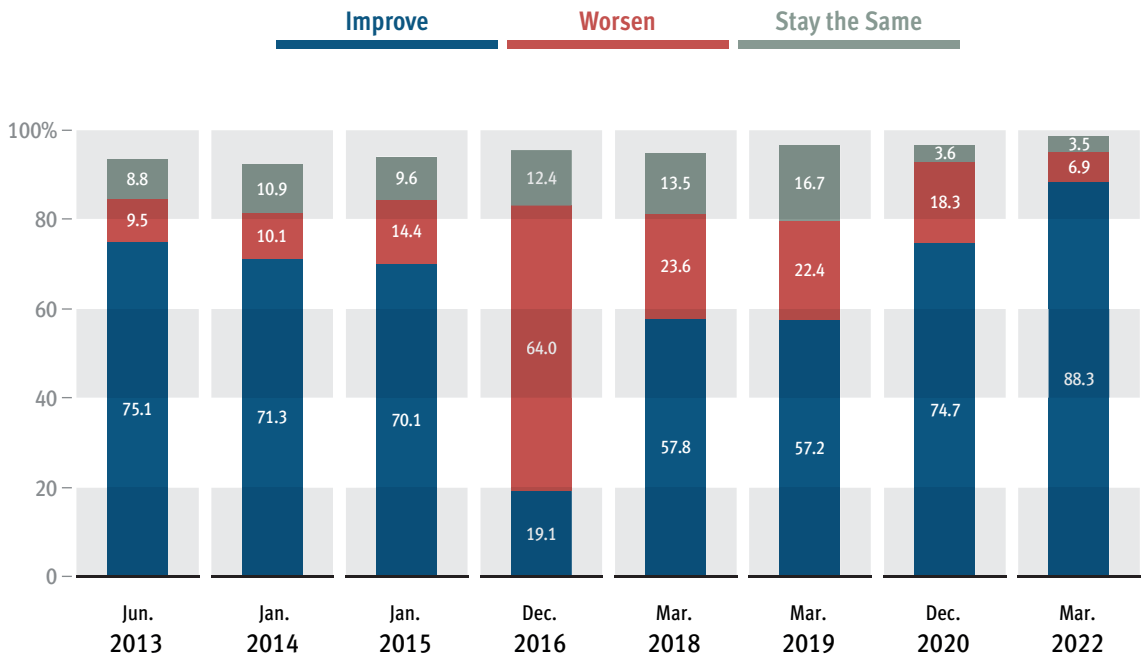


Respondents were asked how they view the future role of the ROK-U.S. alliance. In March 2022, a majority of South Koreans (60.2%) said the ROK-U.S. alliance should be based on universal values. 38.8% of respondents answered that the bilateral relationship should be limited to focus only on the North Korean security threat. From 2016 to 2022, there was a sizable increase (+9%p) in support for a forward-looking vision of the bilateral relationship (51.2% → 60.2%).



## SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE U.S.

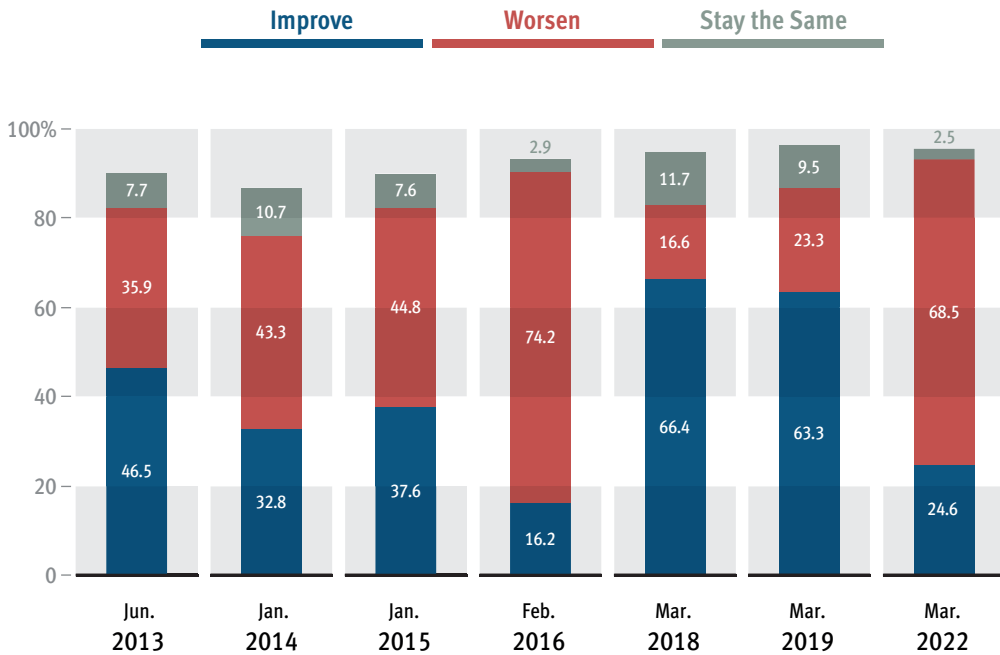
### How do you see South Korea's relationship with the U.S. changing in the future?



A majority of respondents saw South Korea's relationship with the U.S. improving in the future. However, the mood changed in December 2016 when Donald Trump was elected as the U.S. President. When Trump began to question the value of security commitments around the world, South Korean view of the ROK-U.S. bilateral relationship turned decidedly negative, with 64% expressing pessimism. When Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential election, the mood turned positive, with the outlook on improved relations increasing from 57.2% in March 2019 to 74.7% in December 2020. Finally, in March 2022, 88.3% of South Koreans expected enhanced future relations with the U.S., which was a record-high since 2013. There appears to be a correlation between expectations about the ROK-U.S. relationship and the favorability of the U.S. and its leader.

# SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH KOREA

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

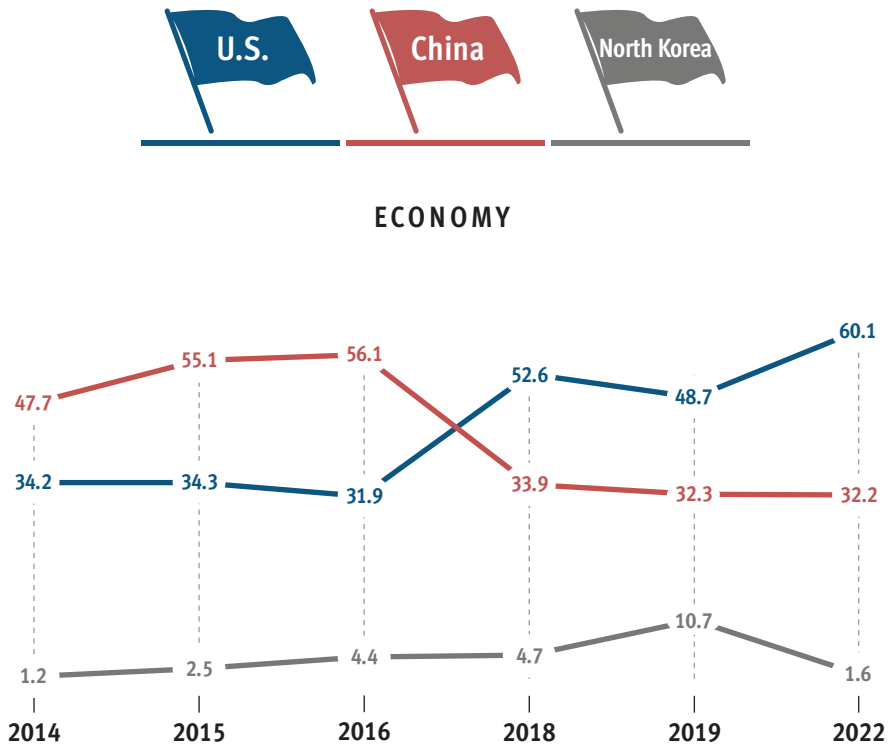


Respondents were asked how they view the future of the inter-Korean relationship. In March 2022, only 24.6% expected inter-Korean relations to improve. It was a sizable decline from 2019 when over half of South Koreans (63.3%) believed that the relationship with North Korea would improve. In March 2018, South Koreans expecting improved future relations with North Korea peaked at 66.4%. Several high-level meetings involving the U.S., North Korea, and South Korea throughout 2018 and 2019 seem to have influenced public perception. In 2016, a positive outlook on the future of inter-Korean relations was 16.2%, and the percentage of South Koreans with a negative outlook was 74.2%. There appears to be a correlation between perception of the North Korean threat and expectations about inter-Korean relations.



## MOST IMPORTANT NEIGHBOR FOR SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY

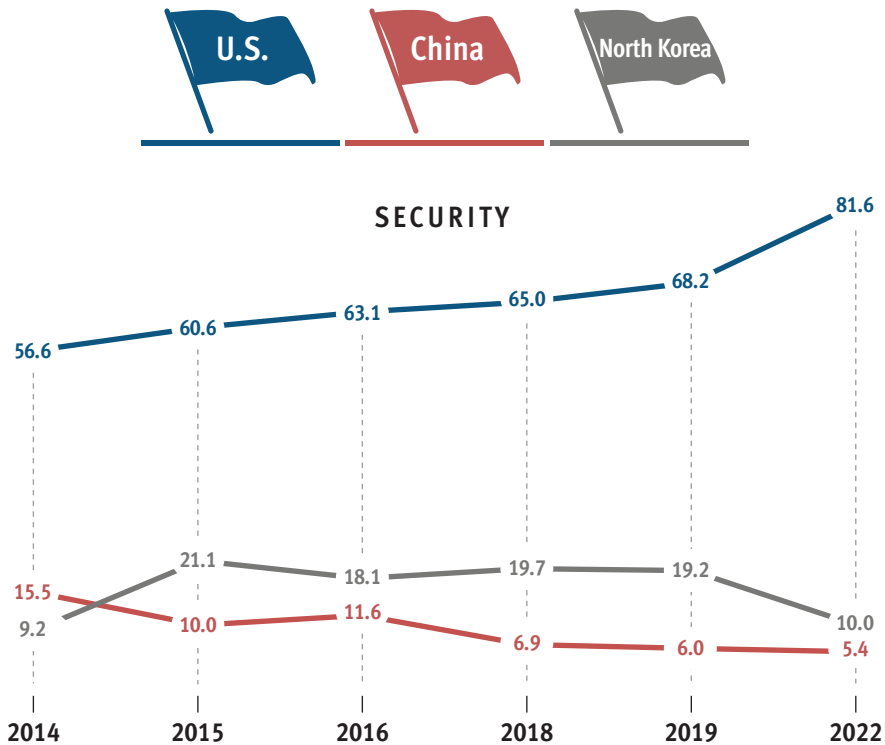
Which country is most important for South Korea's economy?



When asked to identify the most important neighbor for South Korea's economy in 2022, a majority (60.1%) of South Koreans named the U.S. Around half of respondents continued to see the U.S. as an important factor in the South Korean economy since 2018. However, during 2014~2016, the majority saw China as the most important country for South Korea's economy. Only about three out of ten respondents viewed the U.S. as an important country for South Korea's economy during that period. China's relative importance has stayed unchanged (min 32.2%, max 33.9%) since 2018, although this was significantly lower than 56.1% in 2016. And in 2022, it recorded the lowest level (32.2%) since the Asan Institute began tracking it in 2014. Finally, only 1.6% viewed North Korea as economically important, lower than 10.7% in 2019.

# MOST IMPORTANT NEIGHBOR FOR SOUTH KOREA'S SECURITY

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



Respondents were asked to identify the most important neighbor for South Korea's security. Since 2014, over half of South Koreans have repeatedly picked the U.S. as the most important country for South Korea's security. In March 2022, 81.6% of respondents viewed the U.S. as the most important neighbor for South Korea's security. Only 5.4% thought China was important for South Korea's security. This figure was significantly lower than 15.5% in 2014. Lastly, only 10% believed North Korea was the most important country for South Korea's security in 2022. This is a significant downgrade from 19.2% in 2019.

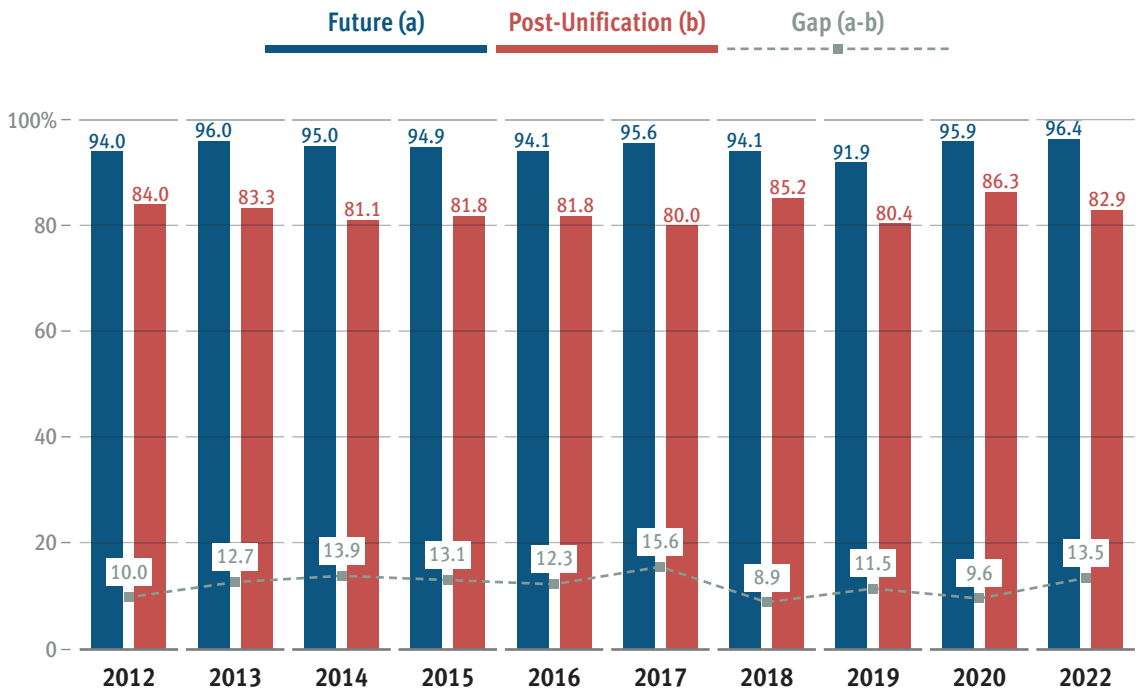




## NECESSITY OF THE ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE: FUTURE VS. POST-UNIFICATION

**Q1. Do you think the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to be necessary in the future?**

**Q2. Do you think the ROK-U.S. alliance will continue to be necessary after Korea becomes unified?**

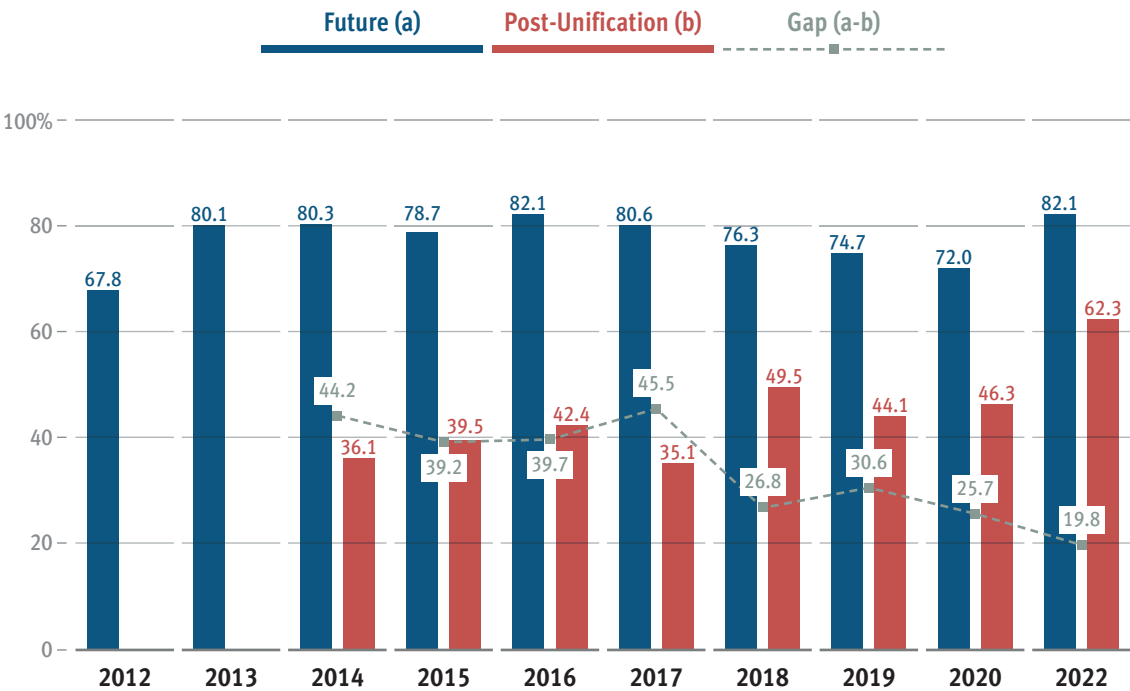


Respondents were asked to share their views about the necessity of the ROK-U.S. alliance. Since 2012, no less than 91.9% of South Koreans answered that the ROK-U.S. alliance is necessary for the foreseeable future. In March 2022, those who said the ROK-U.S. alliance would continue to be necessary reached 96.4%, hitting a new record high. When asked if the alliance would be necessary after unification, the percentage dropped to 82.9% in 2022 (min 80%, max 86.3%). However, this difference never exceeded 16%p since 2012.

## NECESSITY OF THE USFK: FUTURE VS. POST-UNIFICATION

**Q1. What is your opinion toward the U.S. military stationing in South Korea in the future?**

**Q2. What is your opinion toward the U.S. military stationing in South Korea after unification?**

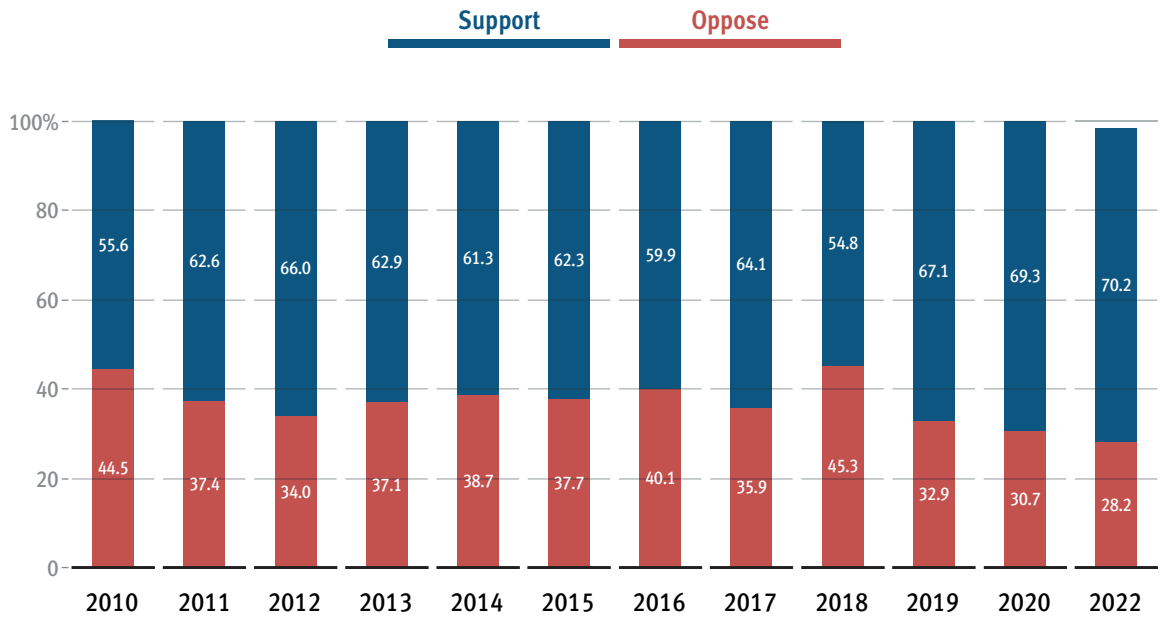


When asked about the necessity of U.S. Forces in South Korea in March 2022, 82.1% answered that it is necessary to have the USFK for the foreseeable future. The weakest support for USFK presence was 67.8% in 2012. Support for USFK was at a high in 2016 and 2017 when tensions ran high, and North Korea conducted multiple missile tests. However, it declined significantly during 2018~2020 when diplomatic engagements between two Koreas and the U.S. suggested a possible breakthrough in denuclearization talks. When asked whether the respondent would support the continued presence of USFK after unification, the affirmative answer dropped to 62.3% in 2022.



## ATTITUDES ON DEVELOPING NUCLEAR WEAPONS

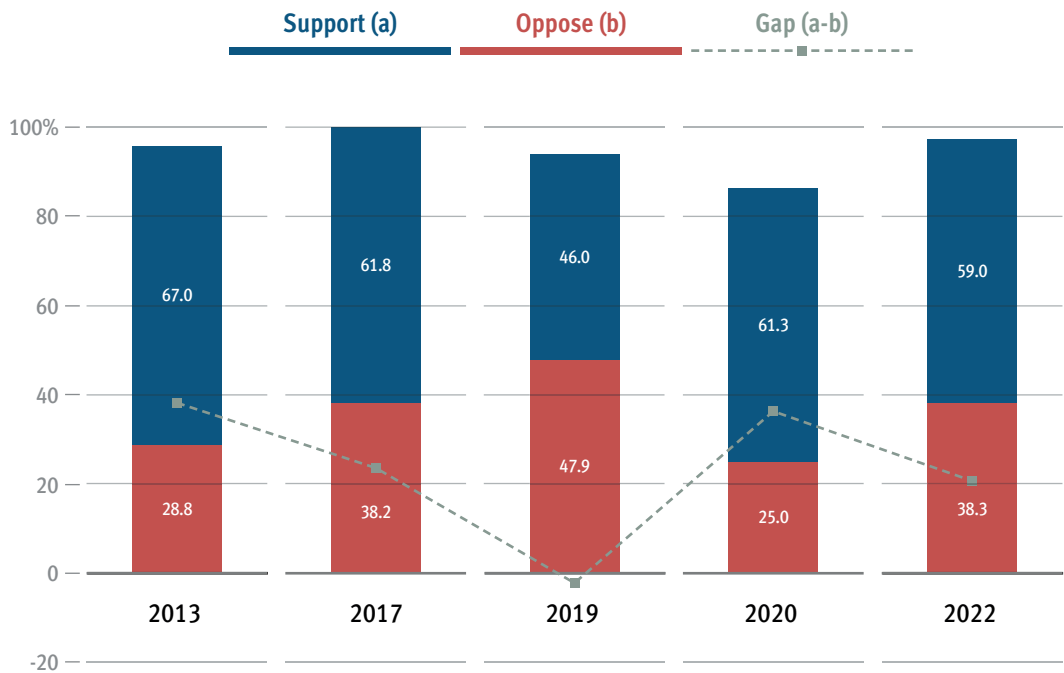
**Do you think South Korea should develop nuclear weapons to counter North Korea’s nuclear weapon development?**



The Asan Institute has repeatedly gauged South Korean attitudes on developing indigenous nuclear weapons. In March 2022, 70.2% of South Koreans said they are in favor of nuclear weapons development in South Korea (28.2% opposed). Meanwhile, in 2018, the percentage of South Koreans supporting development of nuclear weapons was at 54.8%, the lowest ever since 2010. Since then, over 60% of respondents have consistently supported development of indigenous nuclear weapons (2019 67.1%, 2020 69.3%). The data shows that a majority of South Koreans continue to support (min 54.8%, max 70.2%) indigenous nuclear development since 2010.

## ATTITUDES ON REINTRODUCING TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS

### Do you think that tactical nuclear weapons should be deployed in South Korea?



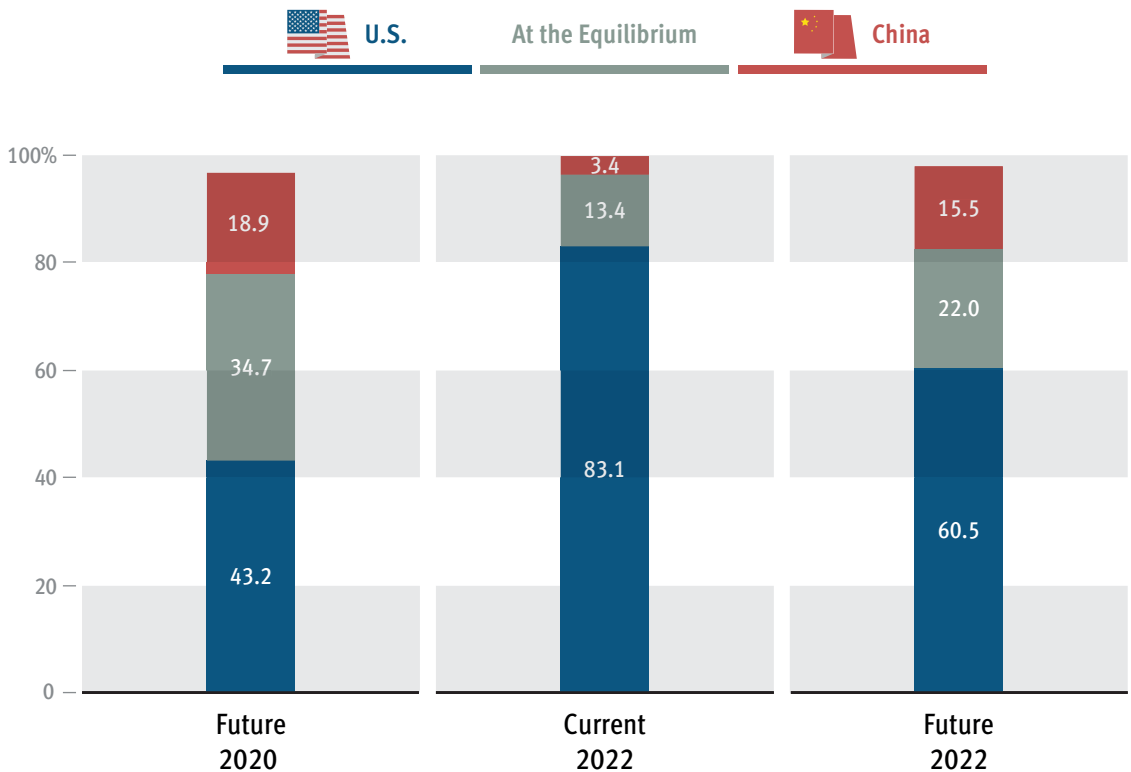
When asked about reintroducing U.S. tactical nuclear weapons onto the Korean Peninsula, 59% of the respondents supported it in March 2022. 38.3% opposed. The data suggests that there is continued broad support for tactical nuclear weapons. One exception is 2019, when South Koreans were split over this idea (support 46%, oppose 47.9%). The rising North Korean threat appears to be a contributing factor in South Korean views about tactical nuclear weapons.



## FUTURE SUPERPOWER

**Q1. Which country is stronger? The U.S. or China?**

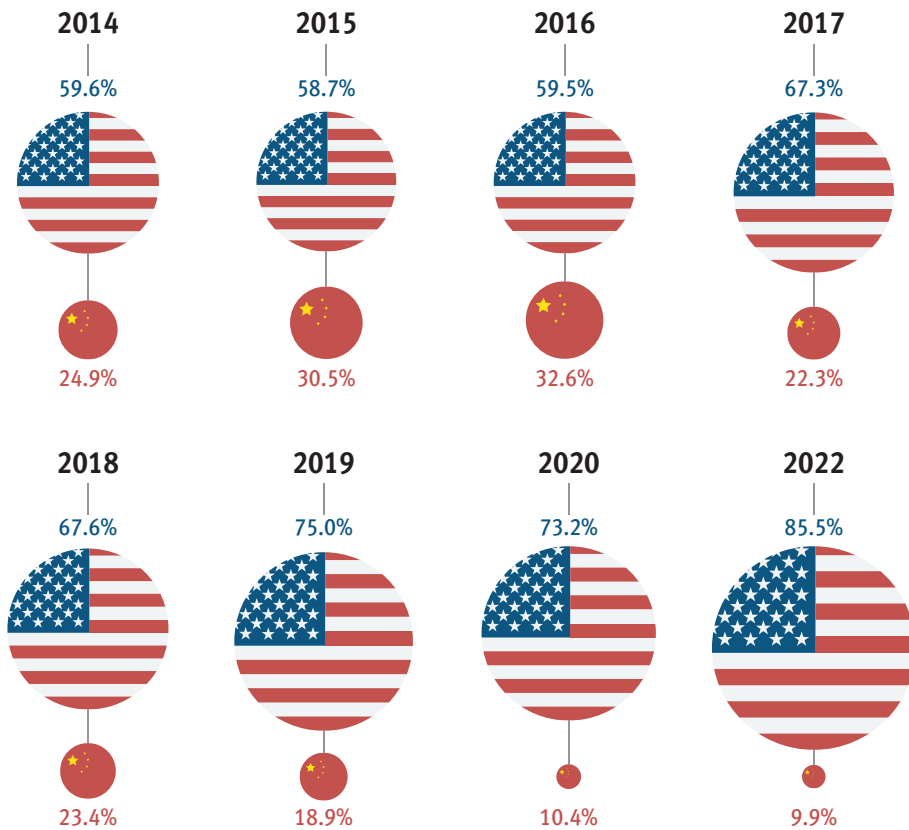
**Q2. In the next ten years, which country will be stronger? The U.S. or China?**



When survey respondents were asked to identify which country is stronger, an overwhelming majority (83.1%) chose the U.S. over China. Only 3.4% named China as the stronger country. 13.4% of respondents said neither country is stronger than the other. When asked which of the two countries *will be* stronger in the future, most South Koreans (60.5%) chose the U.S. over China. This was much higher than 43.2% in 2020. The percentage of South Koreans viewing China as a future superpower was only 15.5%. This view has not changed since 2020 (18.9%). South Koreans who projected future parity in relative power dropped from 34.7% in 2020 to 22% in 2022.

## SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE PARTNER

**🔄** If the U.S. and China continue their rivalry, which country should South Korea strengthen ties with?



When asked which country South Korea should strengthen ties with if the U.S. and China continue their rivalry, a supermajority of South Koreans chose the U.S. (85.5%) over China (9.9%) in 2022. Since the Asan Institute began tracking this data in 2014, respondents have repeatedly chosen the U.S. over China as a more preferred future partner. South Koreans preferring the U.S. as a future partner increased by 25.9p from 59.6% in 2014. But those siding with China dropped to 9.9% in 2022 from 32.6% in 2016. The relative preference for China has fluctuated in the past, but it recorded a new low in 2022.









For more details on polling methodology,  
please visit [www.asaninst.org/eng](http://www.asaninst.org/eng)





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