

**SOUTH KOREANS**  
— AND —  
**THEIR NEIGHBORS**  
2025

**ASAN POLL**

THE ASAN INSTITUTE for POLICY STUDIES

# South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025



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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 2025

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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 2025” 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.

Overall, the 2025 Asan survey reveals that the South Korean public is increasingly united when it comes to dealing with its neighbors. The public has unambiguously turned against China, Russia, and North Korea while attitudes towards Japan are steadily improving, even if it was still lower than neutral sentiment. But the biggest shifts in 2025 were found in South Korean views of the United States. This was demonstrated by the four new records set this year, including the South Korean public viewing the United States as the most important country for South Korea’s economy (74.2%), support for the United States as the preferred future partner (85.8%), support for maintaining current U.S. troop levels (71.2%), and support for indigenous nuclear armament (76.2%). The figures reaffirm the bipartisan consensus about the centrality of the United States to South Korea’s security and prosperity but also highlight rising concerns about the future of President Trump’s foreign policy towards the Korean Peninsula.

The most recent survey was conducted in March 2025. The survey results below are based on a representative sample of 1,000 respondents (*weighted*) across South Korea.

The key findings are as follows:

**Country favorability:** Public favorability towards Japan rose to 4.52 out of 10, representing the highest rating in the Asan Institute's polling, as the two countries mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2025. On a scale from 0 to 10, the United States continued to remain the most favored country of South Koreans at 5.92, albeit this marked a decline from 6.42 in 2024. China's favorability stood at 3.13, showing little change from 3.25 in April 2024. North Korea was the least favored country at 2.56, while Russia's favorability reached 3.15, marking a slight increase from 2.63 in 2024.

**Leader favorability:** U.S. President Donald Trump was the most favored leader of South Korea's neighbors at 3.29 out of 10, slightly higher than the 2.26 rating he scored in 2020 in his final year in office, but representing a sharp drop compared to U.S. President Joe Biden who was rated 4.95 in 2024. Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba came second at 2.77, almost the same as former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida who was ranked 2.74 last year. Among the authoritarian leaders, Chinese President Xi Jinping was rated 1.85 (2.08 in 2024), Russian President Vladimir Putin received a score of 1.60 (1.34 in 2024), and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was the least favored leader at 1.22 (1.18 in 2024).

**Economic cooperation:** This year's survey revealed record levels of public support for the United States as South Korea's economic partner, alongside a record low for China. A historic high of 74.2% chose the United States, while only 22% identified China as economically important for South Korea. This marks a significant shift from 2014 to 2016 when around half or more of respondents viewed China as South Korea's most important economic partner.

**ROK-U.S. alliance:** Public support for the ROK-U.S. alliance remains as strong and bipartisan as ever, with 96% of respondents agreeing that the alliance will be necessary for

the foreseeable future, a figure that has never fallen below 90% over the past decade. Even after national unification, 82.3% of respondents think that the alliance will continue to be necessary, a figure that has never fallen below 80%.

There was a 5.8%p increase in support (71.2%) for maintaining the current 28,500 personnel U.S. Forces Korea (USFK). This likely reflects concerns about potential U.S. troop withdrawals during a second Trump administration. Support for the U.S. military presence remains steady at 80.1% (80.2% in 2024). Within a year, there was a 10%p increase to 60.6% in respondents who think USFK will be needed even after unification, continuing an incremental rise over the past decade from 36.1% in 2014.

**Nuclear deterrence and assurance:** This year's survey found record levels of public support for both indigenous nuclear armament (76.2%) and the re-deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea (66.3%). Public support for acquiring an indigenous nuclear weapons capability increased by 5.3%p in 2025 to reach an all-time high of 76.2% (Oppose: 23.8%). This is the highest figure since the Asan Institute began surveying the issue since 2010 (min: 54.8%, max: 76.2%). In addition, public support for the re-deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula also increased to 66.3% (Oppose: 33.7%).

Meanwhile, public confidence that the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea was virtually unchanged at 48.9% despite ROK-U.S. efforts to implement the Washington Declaration in the Biden administration's final year to demonstrate more visible deterrence measures. When asked whether the United States would fulfill its pledge even at the risk of potential nuclear attacks against itself, fewer than one in ten South Koreans changed their view, with 41.8% agreeing.

**U.S.-China competition:** On taking a side in the U.S.-China competition, the South Korean public continues to overwhelmingly back the United States (85.8%) over China (14.2%) as a future partner. The gap continues to widen ever since the 2016-17 Chinese campaign of coercion against South Korea, when the public preferred the United States 59.5% to 32.6% for China.

A majority of South Koreans also continue to believe that the United States will be stronger than China a decade from now (53.2% vs. 12.7%), while roughly a third of respondents think they will be equal in power. The percentage predicting that China will be stronger than the United States in the future declined by 4.1% from 16.8% last year and is the lowest figure since this question was asked.

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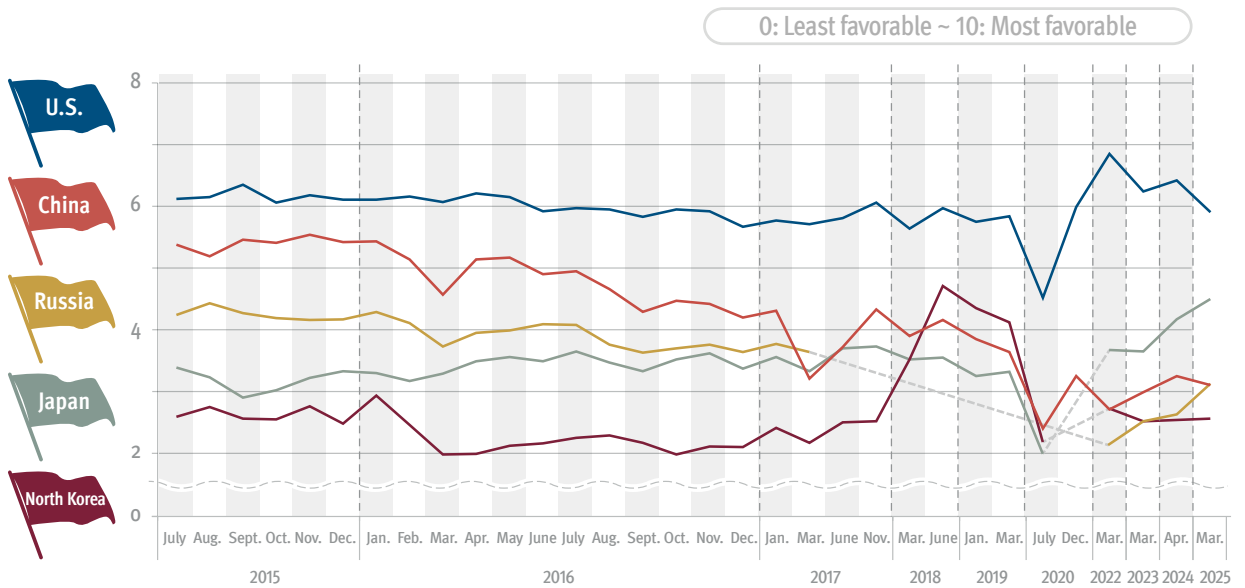
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## COUNTRY FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following countries?



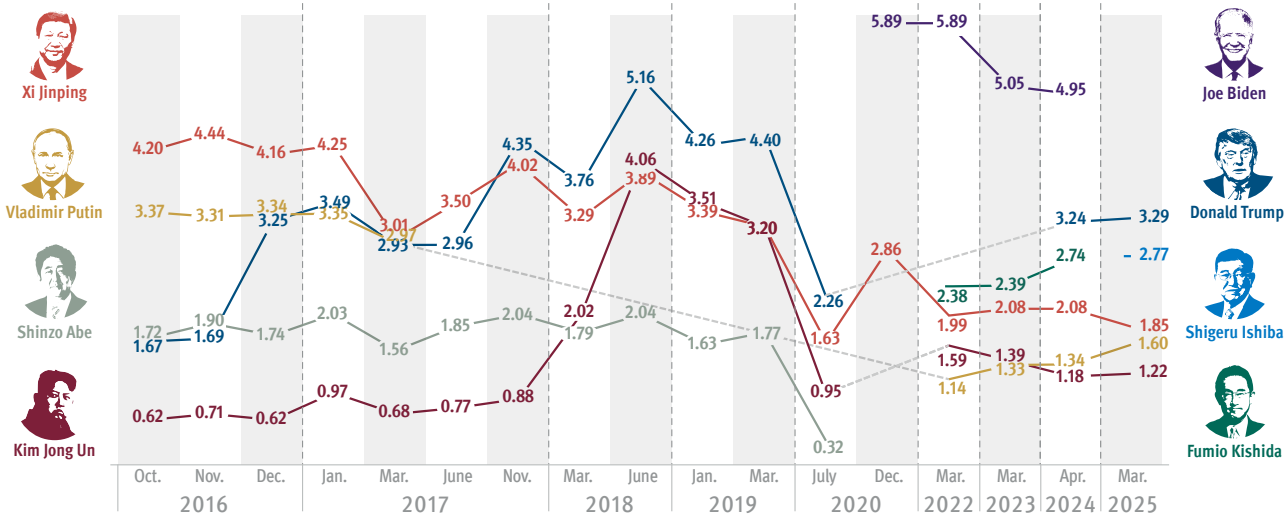
South Koreans were asked to rate the favorability of the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and North Korea on a scale from 0 (“least favorable”) to 10 (“most favorable”). Public favorability towards Japan rose to 4.52 out of 10, representing the highest rating in the Asan Institute’s polling, as the two countries mark the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2025. Thanks to improved bilateral relations, Japan’s favorability rating has remained above 4 points since April 2024. This contrasts sharply with July 2020, when anti-Japan sentiment ran high among South Koreans and the rating fell to 1.99, the lowest ever recorded. The favorability rating of the United States was 5.92, which dropped from 6.42 in 2024. Despite its drop, the United States remains South Koreans’ most favored country; since 2015, the United States has recorded its rating consistently above 5, meaning neutral. China’s favorability remains virtually unchanged. Its rating was at 3.13, slightly down from 3.25 in April 2024. This figure is expected to remain the same without a significant political breakthrough in future bilateral relations. North Korea was rated as the least favored country in 2025 (2.56). It appears that North Korean military provocations have had a negative impact. Meanwhile, Russia’s rating rose slightly to 3.15, up from 2.63 in 2024 despite its ongoing war in Ukraine.



## LEADER FAVORABILITY

How would you rate the favorability of the following leaders?

0: Least favorable ~ 10: Most favorable

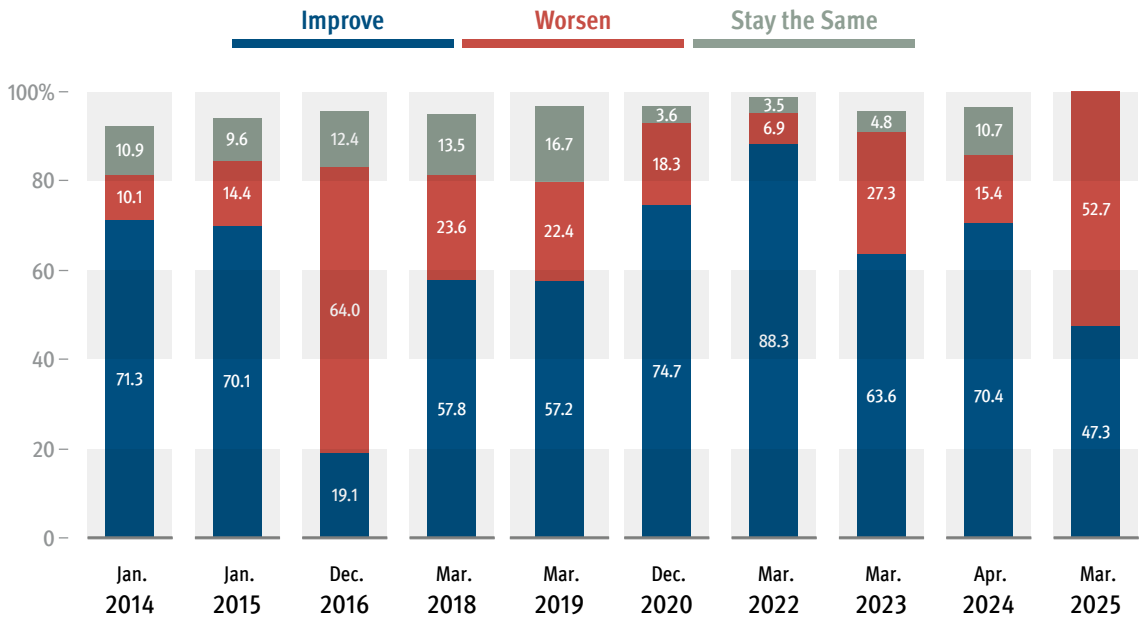


South Koreans were asked to rate the favorability of leaders from neighboring countries on a scale from 0 (“least favorable”) to 10 (“most favorable”). U.S. President Donald Trump was the most favored leader of South Korea’s neighbors at 3.29 out of 10, slightly higher than the 2.26 rating he scored in 2020 in his final year in office, but representing a sharp drop compared to U.S. President Joe Biden who was rated 4.95 in 2024. Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba came second at 2.77, almost the same as former Prime Minister Fumio Kishida who was ranked 2.74 last year. Despite improved relations with Japan under the current South Korean administration, the Japanese leader’s favorability has remained below 3. Among the authoritarian leaders, Chinese President Xi Jinping was rated 1.85 (2.08 in 2024). His ratings once consistently hovered between 4.0 and 4.5, but have sharply dropped in recent years, falling below since 2020. The 2025 figure reflects one of his lowest ratings to date. Russian President Vladimir Putin received a score of 1.60, slightly higher than his rating of 1.34 in 2024. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was the least favored leader at 1.22. Due to ongoing military provocations, his ratings have remained well below 2, ranging between 1.18 and 1.59 since 2022.



## 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?

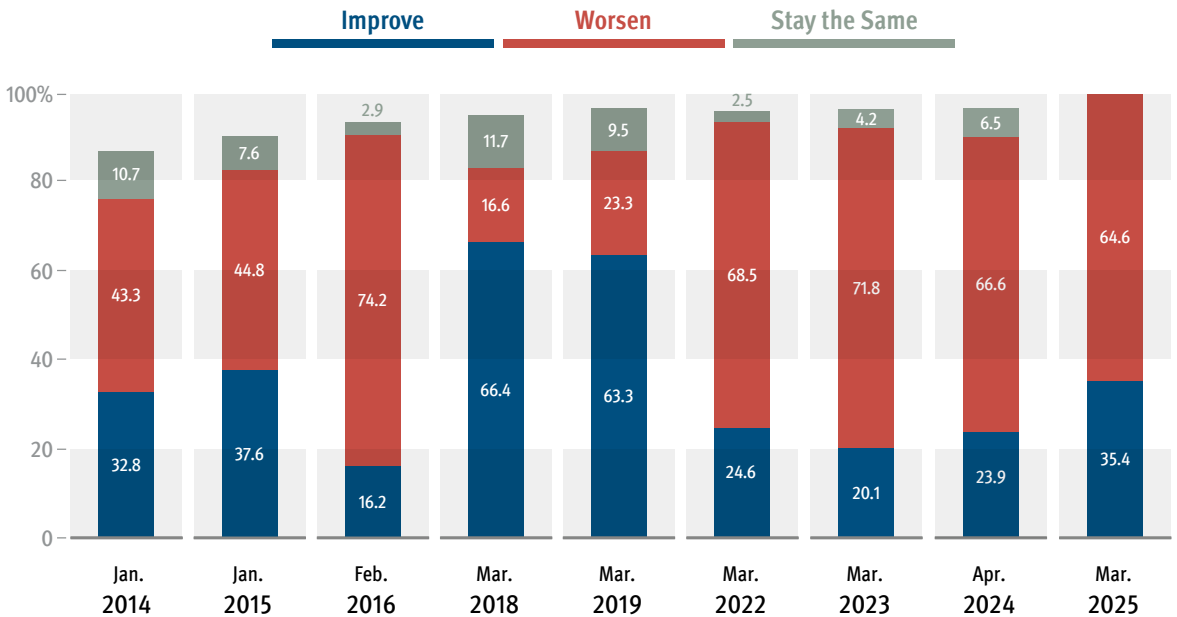


In March 2025, 52.7% expressed pessimism about the future of ROK-U.S. relations, while 47.3% remained optimistic. Although negative sentiment didn't reach the peak recorded in December 2016 when Donald Trump was first elected U.S. president, public opinion was nearly split. South Koreans have consistently shown a positive view toward their country's future relationship with the United States since 2013 when the Asan Institute began its survey on this topic. Despite optimism hitting its lowest point in 2016, a majority has expressed confidence in the bilateral relationship ever since. Optimism surged after Joe Biden won the 2020 U.S. presidential election (2020: 74.7%, 2022: 88.3%). However, an unexpected scenario for South Koreans unfolded after Trump won the 2024 U.S. presidential election. This might be due to President Donald Trump's intensified pressure on South Korea, including issues such as U.S. troop presence, increased trade tariffs, energy development, and semiconductor subsidies, all of which have direct implications for South Korea's economy and national security.



## SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE RELATIONSHIP WITH NORTH KOREA

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

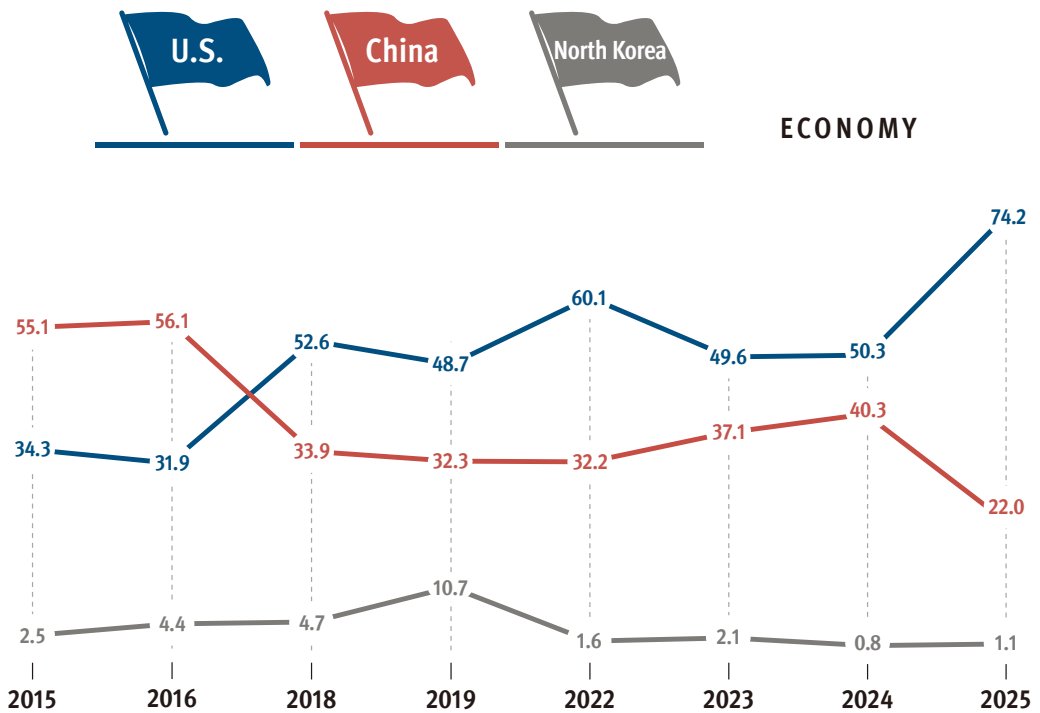


When asked about the future of inter-Korean relations in March 2025, pessimism remained high at 64.6%. A majority consistently expressed pessimism due to increased tension with North Korea. Only 35.4% expected the relationship to improve, despite this figure representing a more than 10%p increase over the past year. As North Korean nuclear threats continue, South Koreans' views on inter-Korean relations remain largely negative. Since 2022, when a majority began to hold a negative view of the future inter-Korean relationship, those who were pessimistic have remained virtually unchanged. This view ranged between 64.6% and 71.8% (2022: 68.5%, 2023: 71.8%, 2024: 66.6%). From a long-term perspective, the only exception was observed between 2018 and 2019 when South Korean optimism reached its highest level due to heightened expectations for North Korean denuclearization.



## MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY FOR SOUTH KOREA'S ECONOMY

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

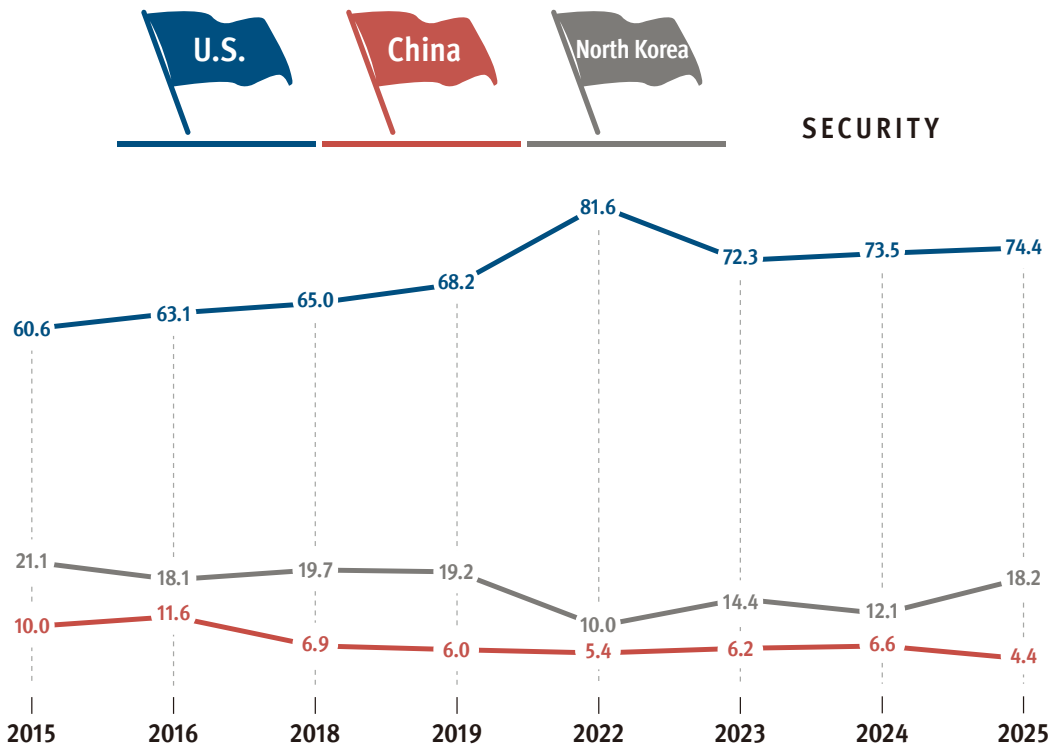


This year's survey revealed record levels of public support for the United States as South Korea's economic partner, alongside a record low for China. A historic high of 74.2% chose the United States, while only 22% identified China as economically important for South Korea. This marks a significant shift from 2015 to 2016 when around half or more of respondents viewed China as South Korea's most important economic partner. Meanwhile, only 1.1% identified North Korea as economically important, a steep decline from the peak of 10.7% recorded in 2019.



## MOST IMPORTANT COUNTRY FOR SOUTH KOREA'S SECURITY

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



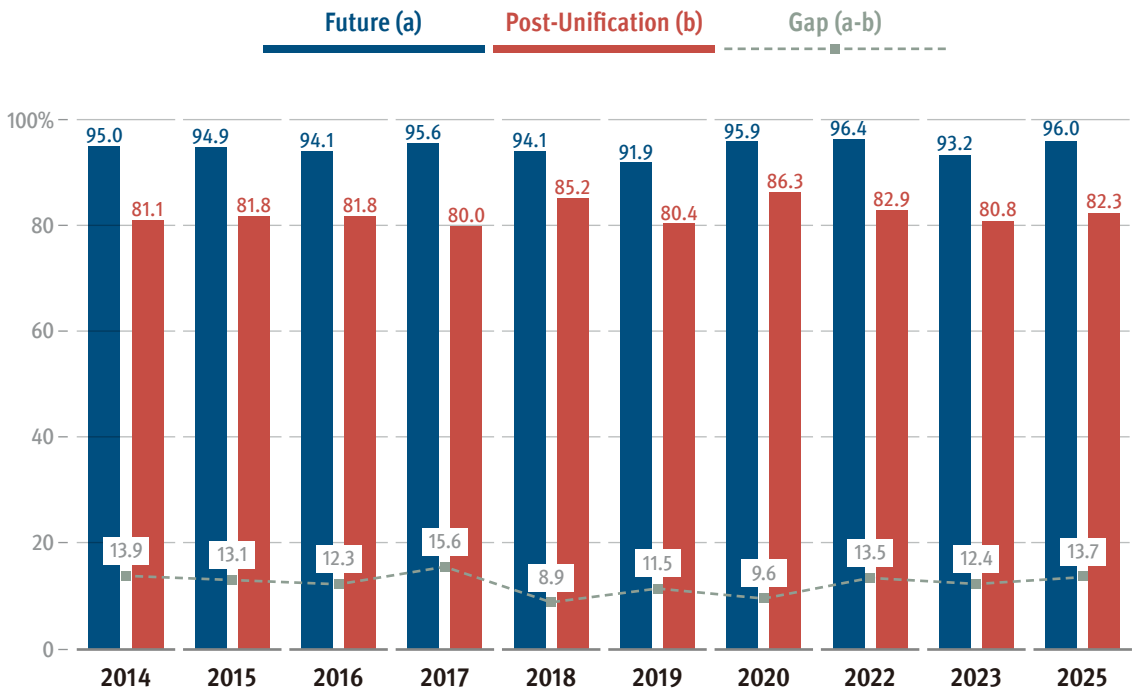
This year's survey also revealed record levels of public support for the United States as South Korea's security partner, alongside a record low for China. In March 2025, 74.4% viewed the United States as the most important security partner. Clearly, the United States has maintained this position, with favorability ranging between 72.3% and 81.6% over the recent few years. This is likely due to deepening security cooperation between the two countries. However, public perception of the United States' importance for South Korea's security has not significantly improved, which suggests it may have reached its ceiling. Meanwhile, only 4.4% identified China as the most important security partner, which was the lowest level recorded to date. Those who viewed North Korea as the most important country for South Korea's security increased to 18.2%, up from 12.1% in 2024. This level is comparable to figures recorded between 2015 and 2019 when it hovered around 20%.



## NECESSITY OF ROK-U.S. ALLIANCE

**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 unification?**



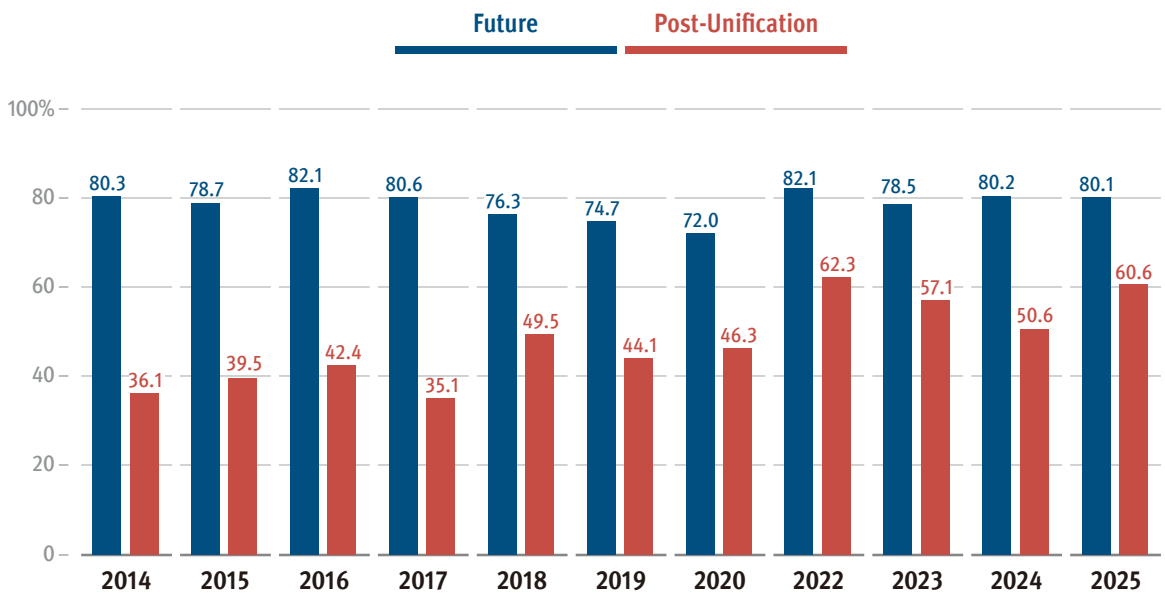
Public support for the ROK-U.S. alliance remains as strong and bipartisan as ever, with 96% of respondents agreeing that the alliance will be necessary for the foreseeable future, a figure that has never fallen below 90% over the past decade. Even after national unification, 82.3% of respondents think that the alliance will continue to be necessary, a figure that has never fallen below 80%. Since 2014, support for maintaining the alliance post-unification has ranged between 80% and 86.3%. The gap between the two figures—future necessity versus post-unification necessity—was 13.7%p, which remained below the largest recorded gap of 15.6%p in 2017.



## NECESSITY OF U.S. FORCES IN SOUTH KOREA

**Q1. Should U.S. military continue to be stationed in South Korea in the future?**

**Q2. Should U.S. military continue to be stationed in South Korea after unification?**



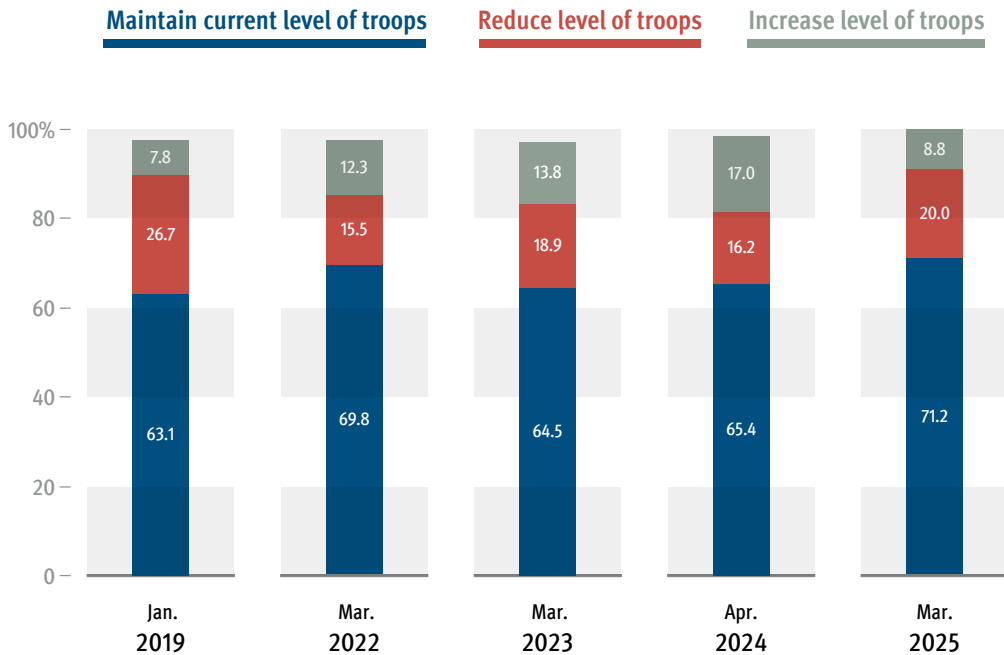
Respondents were asked about the necessity of U.S. Forces in South Korea (USFK). Support for the U.S. military presence remains steady at 80.1%. Since 2014, support for the USFK has ranged between 72% and 82.1%. In 2022, support for the presence of USFK peaked at 82.1%, largely due to lowered expectations for North Korean denuclearization. This level is comparable to 2016 when support also surged in response to a series of North Korea provocations. It is notable that over 70% have consistently supported the USFK presence even during the peace mood period from 2018 to 2020, likely indicating that South Koreans have become more aware of the alliance’s evolving role in regional security. Within a year, there was also a 10%p increase to 60.6% in respondents who think USFK will be needed even after unification, continuing an incremental rise over the past decade from 36.1% in 2014.





## DESIRABLE SIZE OF U.S. FORCES IN SOUTH KOREA

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



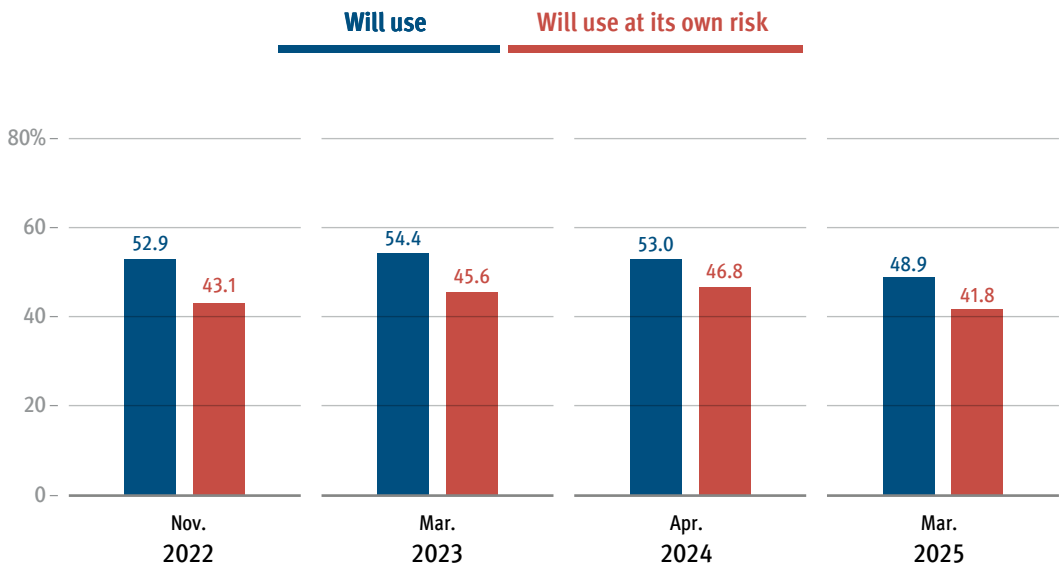
Respondents were asked about the desirable size of U.S. Forces in South Korea. This question was posed only to those who agreed with the necessity of the USFK presence. From 2024 to 2025, there was a 5.8%p increase in support (71.2%) for maintaining the current 28,500 personnel USFK. Although a majority of South Koreans have favored maintaining the current level since 2019, this year's increase likely reflects concerns about potential U.S. troop withdrawals during a second Trump administration. Those who supported reducing troop levels have hovered around 20% since 2019 (min: 15.5%, max: 26.7%). It recorded the highest in 2019 largely due to public dissatisfaction with the Special Measures Agreement (SMA) negotiations, during which the United States demanded a significant increase in South Korea's financial contribution. Finally, support for increasing troop levels fell to 8.8%, the second-lowest level on record.



## PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN U.S. EXTENDED DETERRENCE

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

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

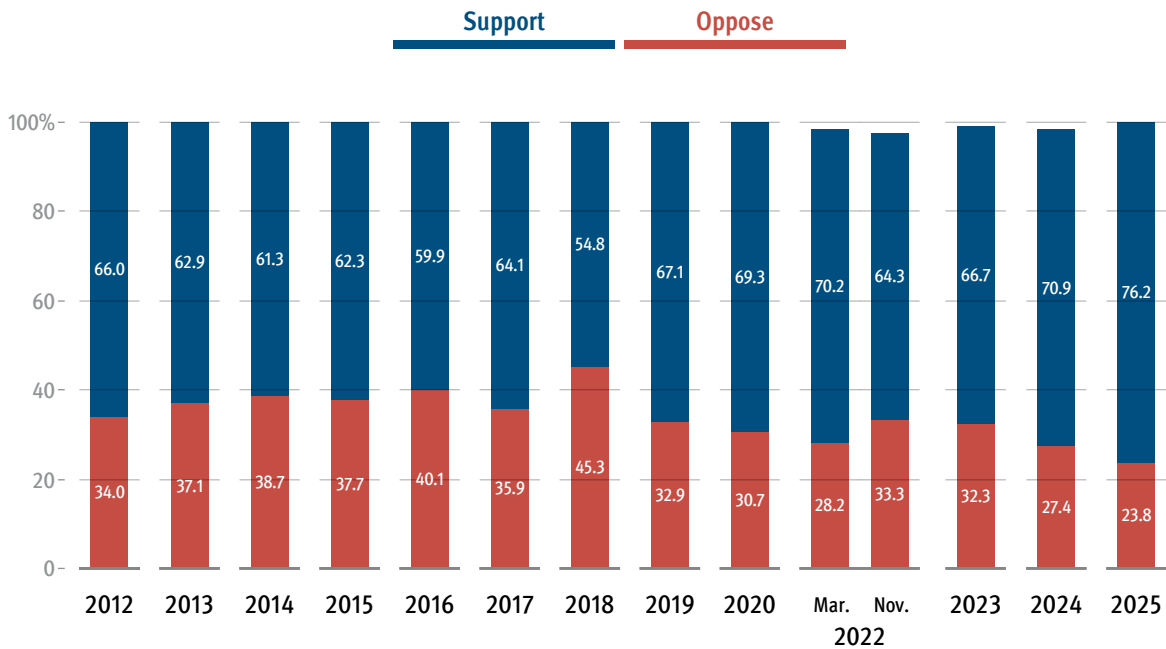


Public confidence that the United States would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea was virtually unchanged at 48.9% despite ROK-U.S. efforts to implement the Washington Declaration in the Biden administration’s final year to demonstrate more visible deterrence measures. This consistent yet moderate level of public confidence hovered around the 50% range (min: 48.9%, max: 54.4%). When asked whether the United States would fulfill its pledge even at the risk of potential nuclear attacks against itself, fewer than one in ten South Koreans changed their view in 2025, with 41.8% agreeing (min: 41.8%, max: 46.8%).



## ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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

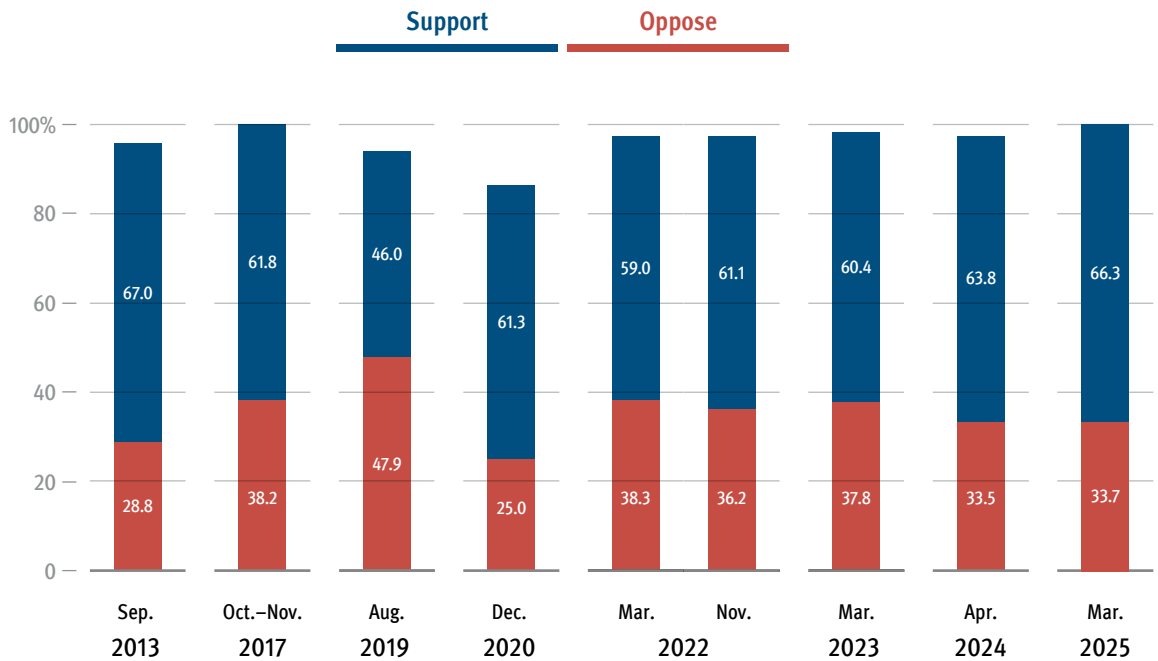


Public support for acquiring an indigenous nuclear weapons capability increased by 5.3%p in 2025 to reach an all-time high of 76.2% (Oppose: 23.8%). This is the highest figure since the Asan Institute began surveying this issue in 2010 (min: 54.8%, max: 76.2%). South Korean attitudes towards developing indigenous nuclear weapons have remained steady since 2019, following the collapse of denuclearization talks between the U.S. and North Korea. The lowest level of support was observed in 2018 at 54.8% when there was a mood of peace around the Korean Peninsula.



## ATTITUDES TOWARDS REINTRODUCING TACTICAL NUCLEAR WEAPONS

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

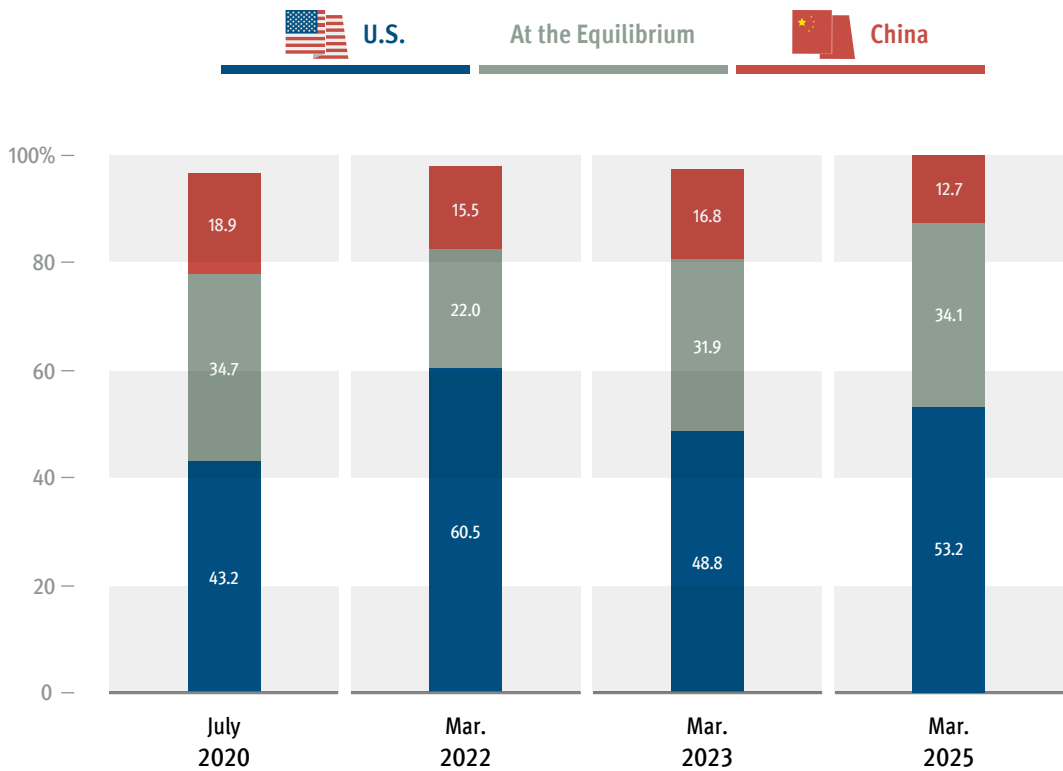


Public support for the re-deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula also increased to 66.3% (Oppose: 33.7%). Since 2013, when the Asan Institute first began gauging public opinion on this issue, a majority of South Koreans have consistently supported redeploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. Since 2022, support has remained around 60%. The only exception was in August 2019, when public opinion was evenly split over it (Support: 46%, Oppose: 47.9%). Despite developments in the U.S. security guarantee, South Korean public sentiment regarding the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons has remained largely unchanged since 2020 (min: 59%, max: 66.3%).



## FUTURE SUPERPOWER

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

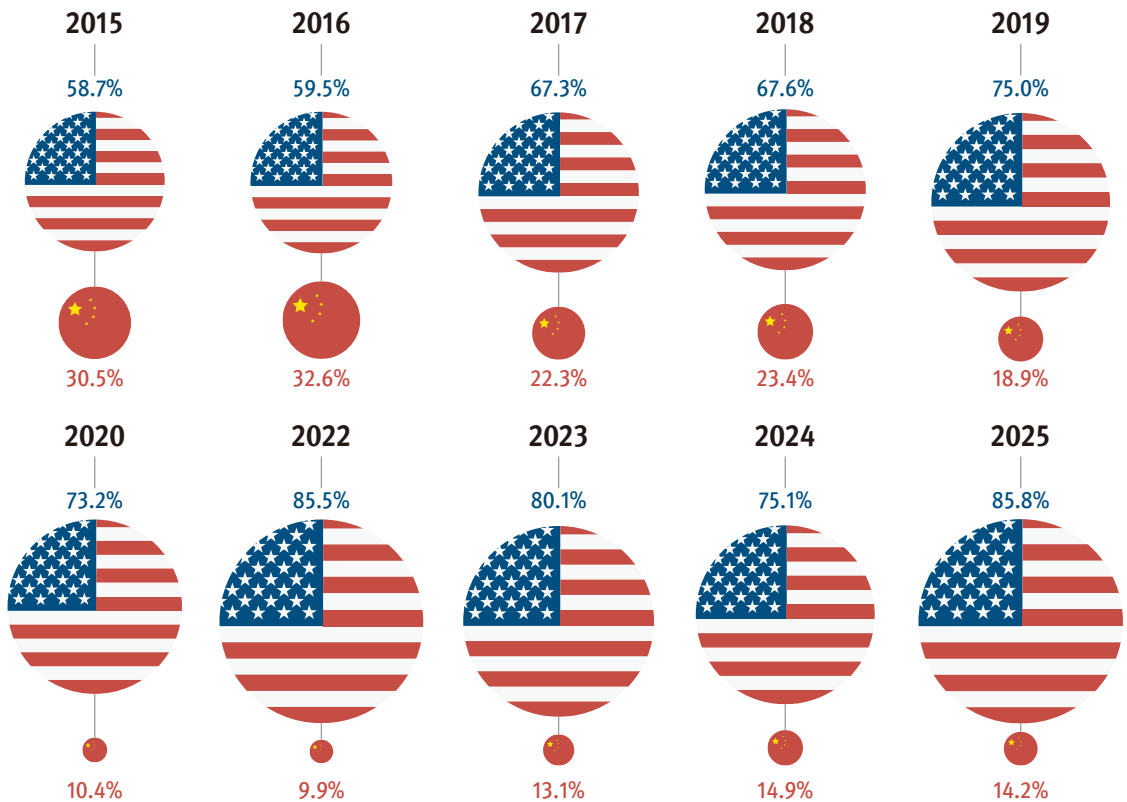


A majority of South Koreans continue to believe that the United States (53.2%) will be stronger than China (12.7%) a decade from now, with confidence in the United States marking the second highest level since the peak of 60.5% in 2022. The percentage predicting that China will be stronger than the United States in the future declined by 4.1%p from 16.8% last year and is the lowest figure since this question was asked. Meanwhile, roughly a third of respondents (34.1%) think they will be equal in power. This figure went back to the level in 2020 when it hit the highest at 34.7%.



## SOUTH KOREA'S FUTURE PARTNER

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



On taking a side in the U.S.-China competition, the South Korean public continues to overwhelmingly back the United States (85.8%) over China (14.2%), with its support for the United States reaching the highest level in 2025. Since 2014, when the Asan Institute began tracking public opinion on this issue, over half of respondents have chosen the United States over China as a future partner (min: 58.7%, max: 85.8%). As public preference for the United States has consistently exceeded 70% since 2019, support for China has fallen into the range of 10% to 20% (min: 9.9%, max: 18.9%). The gap has continued to widen ever since the 2016-17 Chinese campaign of coercion against South Korea, when the public preferred the United States 59.5% to 32.6% for China in 2016.







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



Compiled by KANG Chungku.



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