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PRO-AMERICAN SENTIMENT IN SOUTH KOREA
SINCE 2008**

Wellman, Zachary N.

Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**SOURCES AND REPLICABILITY OF INCREASED
PRO-AMERICAN SENTIMENT IN SOUTH KOREA
SINCE 2008**

by

Zachary N. Wellman

September 2022

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**SOURCES AND REPLICABILITY OF INCREASED PRO-AMERICAN
SENTIMENT IN SOUTH KOREA SINCE 2008**

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Lieutenant, United States Navy
BA, Arizona State University, 2015

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
(EAST ASIA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC)**

from the

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ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies two main contributing factors to the recent reemergence of durable pro-American sentiment in South Korea after a notable spike of anti-American sentiment from roughly 1999–2007. First, South Korea’s perception of threats from the North Korean nuclear program and from China have increased over the past two decades (the general North Korean conventional threat has declined, though, and occasional small-scale North Korean conventional attacks appear not to drive pro-American sentiment). Second, pro-American sentiment appears to increase when U.S. policy—especially with regard to North Korea—is in closer alignment with South Korea’s. The 1999–2007 period appears to have been an exceptional period of policy mismatch. Conservative South Korean presidents and more-popular U.S. presidents also seem to increase pro-U.S. sentiment. However, the fact that pro-American sentiment remained strong from 2017–2022, when neither of these two conditions held but the two countries’ North Korea policies remained aligned, suggests that bilateral policy agreement is more important. This thesis discusses how each of these factors helps determine levels of pro-American sentiment within South Korea, and it provides recommendations on how to approach South Korean political affairs without inciting consequential anti-American sentiment.

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. RETURN TO DURABLE PRO-AMERICAN SENTIMENT

Within South Korea there has consistently been a modest degree of anti-American sentiment and occasional emergence of broader protest directed at the U.S. Typically, the protests and demonstrations that scholars have focused on have occurred after major, traumatic events. This has not only led to academic study, but also nurtured a conventional wisdom that assumes anti-American sentiment in South Korea is strong and durable. One such incident occurred in 2002 after two schoolgirls were accidentally run over by U.S. servicemen in an armored vehicle. Following the U.S.'s controversial ruling over the service members' involvement, Republic of Korea (ROK) anti-Americanism saw a massive surge.¹ Students rallied across the country, chanting for Americans to leave South Korea once and for all. Following those rallies, scholarly interest in Korean anti-Americanism was ignited, leading to a two-decades-long pursuit of clarity on the subject.²

With protests occurring more recently in 2019, whether South Korea is a predominantly anti-American country remains a question of interest. This thesis analyzes trends in South Korean anti-Americanism, paying specific attention to differences in the U.S.–ROK relationship between two significant periods of its history. In the process, it may serve as a corrective to prevailing assumptions (without attempting to explain why these took hold in the first place).

For the purpose of this thesis, the term “anti-Americanism” will be treated in a specific way. Depending on the reader’s culture, the term can have varied meanings, and in the case of South Korea, the term can be seen as an offensive exaggeration of temporary sentiment. That is, for South Koreans who have protested the U.S. following moments of heightened emotion, they may well see the country unfavorably, while at the same time

¹ Kisuk Cho, “A Model on the Rise and Decline of South Korean Anti-American Sentiment,” *Korea Observer* 46, no. 2: 234.

² Cho, “A Model,” 234.

holding an overall pro-American sentiment. In perhaps the most extensive modern work on the subject, Straub explains:

South Koreans also do not like to have the term anti-American applied to them. Even at times when South Koreans have been most critical of the United States, only a very small minority would identify themselves as anti-American. In Korea, the term has nuances of prejudice and emotionalism ... Rather than “anti-Americanism,” some Koreans might at most concede that their country has experienced periods when anti-American sentiment has been more or less pronounced.³

This thesis agrees with that sentiment, arguing that despite the great volume of attention on causes of anti-Americanism, it is actually an increasingly small phenomenon in South Korea.⁴ Anti-Americanism is a term that will be used specifically in representation of moments when protestors have taken to the streets for unavoidably apparent anti-American purposes.

Rather than focusing on anti-Americanism, this thesis will highlight increases and decreases in pro-U.S. sentiment, as it is more common and deserves more attention. In creating the argument for South Korea’s predominant pro-American sentiment, proposed drivers of older anti-Americanism will be applied to more recent data to test the persistence of those animated moments. Have new and different explanatory factors emerged to explain the emergence of more pro-American sentiment, or was the country predominantly pro-American to begin with? Broadly speaking, this thesis focuses primarily on intra-ROK changes over time and pays less attention to comparisons between the ROK and its neighbors, or other countries worldwide.

Figures 1 and 2 show trends in South Korea’s favorability toward the U.S. since 1988. This thesis will treat these two figures as representative of the overall pro-American sentiment within South Korea. To simplify the overall trends, it will propose dividing South Korea’s 33-year democratic history into three periods: the *Baseline Period* (1988-1999), the *Lower Period* (2000-2007), and the *High Period* (2008-2021). The years prior to 1988,

³ David Straub, *Anti-Americanism in Democratizing South Korea*, (Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2015): 7.

⁴ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 7.

during which South Korea's government was authoritarian are excluded from this thesis, as their data may not accurately represent the opinions of South Koreans.

During the *Baseline Period*, the data in Figure 1 show steady pro-American sentiment, hovering around 60 percent throughout, and ending at just over 70 percent in 1999.⁵ The *Lower Period* is marked by a decrease in overall U.S. favorability, dipping to its low of 46 percent in 2003, and failing to recover until 2007.⁶ Of note, Figure 1 represents data from a U.S. State Department poll, while Figure 2 represents data acquired through a *Pew* conducted poll. Despite coming from two different sources, where the two polls overlap, they represent a similar drop in U.S. favorability from 2000–2002. Also worth noting is the gap in *Pew* data from 2004–2006, but extant literature provides no particular reason to posit that any out-of-trend spike in pro-American sentiment occurred during that time.⁷ What is remarkable about the data is that during the *High Period*, with the exception of 2020, a year that saw a global decrease in U.S. favorability likely caused by the country's inability to handle the COVID-19 pandemic, ROK pro-Americanism has hovered at around 80 percent.⁸ Over the course of two U.S. administrations, eight in ten people favored the U.S. on average.

⁵ See Figure 1. Of note, the pronounced dip seen in 1995 occurred by exception, for reasons unknown within the scope of this thesis. The overall trend outside of the 1995 represents what this thesis defines as the *Baseline Period*.

⁶ Richard Wike, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai, "America's Image Abroad Rebounds With Transition From Trump to Biden," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), June 10, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/10/americas-image-abroad-rebounds-with-transition-from-trump-to-biden/>.

⁷ Janell Fetterolf, Jacob Poushter, Shannon Schumacher, and Richard Wike, "Trump Ratings Remain Low Around the World, While Views of U.S. Stay Mostly Favorable," *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project* (blog), January 8, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/trump-ratings-remain-low-around-globe-while-views-of-u-s-stay-mostly-favorable/>.

⁸ Fetterolf et al., "Trump Ratings." Worth further consideration is that despite the global drop in U.S. favorability in 2020, South Korea comparably showed significant pro-American sentiment.

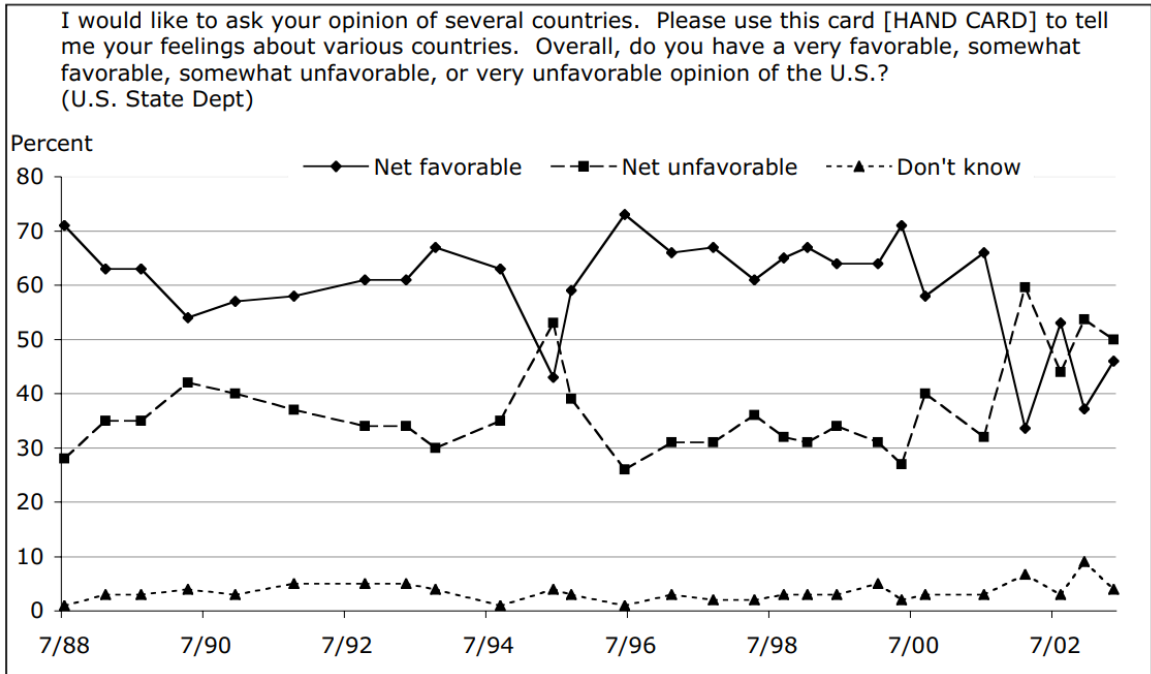


Figure 1. U.S. Favorability Ratings (1988-2001)⁹

⁹ Source: Eric V. Larson, Norman D. Levin, Seonhae Baik, and Bogdan Savych, "Ambivalent Allies?: A Study of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.," Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, December 13, 2004: 45.

Favorability of the U.S. is up sharply since 2020

% who have a *favorable* view of the U.S.

■ Highest rating ■ Lowest rating

	Bill Clinton	George W. Bush								Barack Obama								Donald Trump				Joe Biden	'20-'21 change
	'00	'02	Mar '03	May '03	'04	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	
France	62	62	31	42	37	43	39	39	42	75	73	75	69	64	75	73	63	46	38	48	31	65	▲ 34
Germany	78	60	25	45	38	42	37	30	31	64	63	62	52	53	51	50	57	35	30	39	26	59	▲ 33
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	24	56	▲ 32
Japan	77	72	-	-	-	-	63	61	50	59	66	85	72	69	66	68	72	57	67	68	41	71	▲ 30
Italy	76	70	34	60	-	-	-	53	-	-	-	74	76	78	83	72	61	52	62	45	74	▲ 29	
Netherlands	-	-	-	-	45	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	65	37	34	46	30	57	▲ 27	
Canada	-	72	-	63	-	59	-	55	-	68	-	-	64	-	68	65	43	39	51	35	61	▲ 26	
Sweden	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	46	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	69	45	44	45	33	57	▲ 24	
UK	83	75	48	70	58	55	56	51	53	69	65	61	60	58	66	65	61	50	50	57	41	64	▲ 23
Spain	50	-	14	38	-	41	23	34	33	58	61	64	58	62	60	65	59	31	42	52	40	62	▲ 22
South Korea	58	52	-	46	-	-	-	58	70	78	79	-	-	78	82	84	-	75	80	77	59	77	▲ 18
Australia	-	-	-	59	-	-	-	-	46	-	-	-	-	66	-	63	60	48	54	50	33	48	▲ 15
Taiwan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	68	-	61	-
Greece	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	35	39	34	-	38	43	36	54	-	63	-	-
Singapore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	51	-
New Zealand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	42	-

Figure 2. U.S. Favorability Ratings (2000-2021).¹⁰

Comparatively few studies have directly examined the drivers of *pro*-U.S. sentiment. One, conducted in 2017 on college students in the ROK, proposed several drivers for pro-American views: (1) knowledge of America, (2) approval of American culture, and (3) approval of America’s global status.¹¹ The study was conducted only on college students however, and would require expansion into the greater population for greater fidelity. Another study on the ebbs and flows of anti-Americanism in South Korea stated quite succinctly that “The ROK-U.S. alliance ... will remain robust and protected if the members share common ideas on ... the existence of external threats.”¹² Conducted in 2010, that study proposed a relationship between U.S. favorability and threat perception that will be explored further in this thesis.

¹⁰ Adapted from Wike et al., “America’s Ratings.”

¹¹ Young Choul Kim and Ho Keun Yoo, “Anti-Americanism in East Asia: Analyses of College Students’ Attitudes in China, Japan, and South Korea,” *International Area Studies Review* 20, no. 1 (March, 2017): 47.

¹² Heon Joo Jung, “The Rise and Fall of Anti-American Sentiment in South Korea: Deconstructing Hegemonic Ideas and Threat Perception,” *Asian Survey* 50, no. 5 (2010): 951.

This thesis identifies main factors that differentiate the *Lower Period* from the *High Period* and argues that pro-Americanism is the norm, rather than the exception, in South Korea. Put differently, findings from studies that analyzed the *Lower Period* will be assessed against the U.S.–ROK conditions during the *High Period*, both to test the validity of the findings and to highlight important factors that were missed.

B. IMPORTANCE

The U.S./ROK alliance is important to both countries, so sustainment of positive relations between the two is equally important. To the U.S., the ROK is one of several significant democratic nations surrounding communist China. In a world of great power competition between the U.S. and China, having allies near competitive states is important. While pro-American sentiment does not immediately translate to pro-alliance sentiment in the ROK, with enough general anti-American sentiment, one could reasonably expect the alliance to be called into question. Therefore, from the U.S. perspective, identifying the causal factors of nearly a decade and a half of high favorability in the ROK may prove vital in ensuring the continued success of U.S.–ROK relations. Further, from a regional perspective, any favorability increases endogenous to specific U.S. foreign policy could be replicated in other regional allied nations.

For the ROK, China's increased regional pressures over the last decade have sometimes paled in comparison to increased tensions caused by North Korea. Following Kim Jong Il's death in 2011, Kim Jong Un has increased the frequency of nuclear-capable missile tests out of North Korea. Additionally, the rhetoric coming out of North Korea has held consistently aggressive tones and has often explicitly threatened the U.S. with nuclear attack. Having a pro-American democratic nation on the border of an anti-American hostile nation will always be within U.S. interests. In this light, wherever avoidable, events that have led to past anti-American sentiments ought to be avoided. Should groups organize against U.S. presence in South Korea to the point of forcing U.S. withdrawal from domestic bases, regional stability would likely be called into question. Granted, the likelihood of South Korean protests having enough of an impact to lead to a total withdrawal of U.S.

forces is unlikely, but even lesser amounts of protest could have significant impacts on the workings of the bilateral alliance.

Headlines in any free press tend to emphasize negative events. In the case of U.S.–ROK relations, news articles may never cover a story on how strong ties are between the U.S. and South Korea. Worth noting, however, is that even at their lowest point, U.S.–ROK relations have been predominantly positive. This thesis will examine that predominantly positive history, stressing that from a regional perspective, anti-Americanism in the ROK is significantly less of a problem than elsewhere. After over a decade of pro-American sentiment, identifying the causal factors and capitalizing on them can help to maintain the alliance and ensure a democratic future for a unified peninsula.

C. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Despite the overall pro-American standard seen in South Korea, during the *Lower Period*, anti-American protests were commonplace. What causes surges of anti-Americanism? Insights on the causes of protest should also yield insights on why protests seem to have receded.

Anti-American movements between the 1980s and 2008 have been the focal point of a significant amount of academic literature. Among the leading theories on ROK anti-Americanism are that (1) it is caused by U.S. military presence, (2) only occurs after traumatic events, (3) reflects unfavorable U.S. policy toward North Korea, (4) grows stronger as South Korea grows as a democratic society, or (5) grows stronger as the older (Korean War) generation disappears.

American bases overseas are perennially controversial. South Korea is no exception. In 2002, two American servicemen were acquitted of the murder of two Korean schoolgirls, sparking massive candlelight vigils across the country.¹³ In 2006, protests erupted because of the U.S. expansion of Camp Humphries near Daechu-ri, and in 2019, dozens of South Korean college students took to the streets to protest American requests

¹³ Chang Hun Oh and Celeste Arrington, “Democratization and Changing Anti-American Sentiments in South Korea,” *Asian Survey* 47, (April 2007) no. 2: 327.

for a five-fold increase in South Korean payments in support of the U.S. presence.¹⁴ In the early 1990s, some 66 percent of polled Koreans showed favorable responses to the U.S., but after the events of the early 2000s, those numbers dropped to 46 percent in 2004.¹⁵ Notably, though, the events of 2019 did not lead to an immediate drop in American favorability.

Had the events of 2019 occurred two decades earlier, during a time of low American favorability, a more outraged response could have been expected. Yet in 2019, at the height of a decade of pro-U.S. sentiment, U.S. demands for a five-fold increase in payments for often controversial bases did little to shake South Koreans' favorability toward the U.S. Overall, the idea that U.S. bases have been one cause of anti-Americanism in South Korea has been repeatedly proposed in scholarly literature, but recent years' events might challenge the strength of that theory.

The second major explanation for anti-Americanism in South Korea is that it has occurred periodically as the result of individual instances of U.S. actions and policy perceived as harmful to South Korea. In 1980, the Kwangju massacre, where between 240 and 2000 protesters were killed by ROK soldiers, sparked a large shift in South Korean opinion against the U.S. that lingers among anti-American groups to this day.¹⁶ To many South Koreans, the massacre could never have occurred without the explicit U.S. backing of the authoritarian regime in power. As one scholar put it, "anti-Americanism has functioned as a cry for recovering injured national pride and infringed sovereignty caused by unequal Korean—American relations."¹⁷ Nearly a decade later, when South Korea began its transition to democracy, memories of Kwangju situated the U.S. as an historic obstacle to democratic consolidation.¹⁸ Consequently, in the early years of South Korea's

¹⁴ Oh and Arrington, "Democratization," 327.

¹⁵ Oh and Arrington, "Democratization," 327.

¹⁶ Mitchell, Derek J., *Strategy and Sentiment: South Korean Views of the United States and the U.S.-ROK Alliance*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2004: 20.

¹⁷ Kyong Ju Kim, *The Development of Modern South Korea: State Formation, Capitalist Development and National Identity*, London: Routledge, 2006: 158.

¹⁸ Mitchell, *South Korean Views*, 22.

democracy, anti-Americanism rose and stayed elevated. Later, in 1997, a financial crisis struck South Korea, and to aid in the recovery, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) offered financial assistance in exchange for structural reforms that ultimately benefitted the U.S.¹⁹ Some in South Korea saw this move as manipulation by the U.S., correlating with another instance of anti-Americanism on the rise during a period of national trauma. These two instances, along with the deaths of two schoolgirls caused by the American military in 2002, and others, are the basis for the argument of ROK anti-Americanism as trauma induced.

North Korea provides the basis for the third prominent argument on ROK anti-Americanism. South Korea's relationship with its northern neighbor has gone through multiple evolutions since the 1950s. Beginning in the 1990s, pro-reunification sentiment in South Korea began to gain ground. Year over year, the threat of North Korean invasion seemed to dwindle as aggressive rhetoric decreased. Consequently, in 2002 when the George W. Bush Administration placed North Korea in the "axis of evil," many South Koreans took considerable offense.²⁰ To many South Koreans, their northern neighbors were more like misguided relatives than enemies. The dip in American approval ratings apparently ran deeper than a simple distaste for placing North Korea alongside Al-Qaeda. First, the policy statement was surprising given how little the Bush administration had previously addressed North Korea. Second, the "axis of evil" speech prompted suspicion among some South Koreans who viewed America's ultimate intent to be regime change in Pyongyang.²¹ Figure 1 correspondingly shows a dip in U.S. favorability in 2002, which was sustained—presumably not entirely coincidentally—until the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Beyond the general drop in overall approval ratings, surveys of ROK opposition specifically to an American attack on North Korean nuclear facilities increased as well.²²

¹⁹ Mitchell, *South Korean Views*, 22.

²⁰ Gi-wook Shin and Hilary Jan Izatt, "Anti-American and Anti-Alliance Sentiments in South Korea," *Asian Survey* 51, no. 6 (December 2011): 1126.

²¹ Oh and Arrington, "Democratization," 344.

²² Oh and Arrington, "Democratization," 344.

A fourth argument prominent in the literature is that democratization has played a significant role in forming South Korean anti-American sentiments. During the transition from autocratic rule, South Koreans still largely favored the U.S.–ROK alliance.²³ Under South Korea’s authoritarian regimes prior to 1987, the country lacked a free press and relied heavily on the U.S. for government support. But during the period of democratic consolidation in the late 1980s and 1990s, public attitudes shifted toward demands for greater equality. Under democratic rule, opposition voices were no longer silenced; this represents another relationship between democratization and anti-Americanism.²⁴ One element of many democratic transitions is an increase in nationalism. Following the Seoul Olympics in 1988, national pride grew in South Korea and with it grew a distaste for the U.S. military presence.²⁵ One 2010 study proposed that South Korean democratization increased anti-Americanism through the Internet-based free press as civic organizations used mass media to spread their beliefs.²⁶

Since the Internet has done nothing but grow in importance since 2010, this theory may still hold ground today. At the same time, if nationalism reflects only the *early* years of democratization and recedes rather than increases as democracy further consolidates, then this would be consistent not only with a spike in nationalism and resulting anti-U.S. sentiment in the early 2000s, but also with a return to a more pro-American sentiment in later years.

A fifth explanation is generational. In South Korea, older generations whose formative years came during and after the Korean War have distinctly different opinions of the U.S. than do younger generations. In a 2007 Gallup survey on Korean perceptions of the U.S. (separated by age), only 22 percent of 20- to 40-year-olds approved of the U.S., compared to 45 percent of 40- to 60-year-olds.²⁷ For senior citizens, the U.S. was an ally during the Korean War, the Cold War, and had militarily protected them from a violent

²³ Shin and Izatt, “Anti-American,” 1114.

²⁴ Oh and Arrington, “Democratization,” 330.

²⁵ Oh and Arrington, “Democratization,” 335.

²⁶ Jung, “Rise and Fall,” 949.

²⁷ Oh and Arrington, “Democratization,” 334.

reunification with North Korea. Whereas younger generations learned about those conflicts through textbooks, the older generations lived them. Emotional ties to the U.S. ran deep, so in theory, as the older generation dies, anti-Americanism should grow. Contrarily, the younger generation has to this point lived entirely democratic experiences. They have been more likely to demand equality, to hold the U.S. accountable, and to rise up in mass protest to U.S. wrongdoings. Furthermore, the younger generations have stronger Internet interactions and screen time, further expanding the opportunity for anti-American sentiment to develop.

However, in opposition to this generational theory, as the older generation has died off, anti-Americanism has seen no correlating movement in either direction.²⁸ Year over year, since 2008, South Korea has grown younger and consistently viewed the U.S. with favorability unseen in previous decades.

One prevailing theory on anti-American outburst in South Korea is that they have occurred in response to traumatizing events but were not reflective of a broader national anti-American status in South Korea.²⁹ One such event was the USFK highway incident in 2002, a traumatizing event in which USFK personnel allegedly ran over two South Korean school girls during an exercise, killing them.³⁰ Following a controversial ruling by the U.S., massive anti-American protests occurred throughout South Korea, showing an obvious connection between the controversial event and South Korean anti-Americanism; however, following a formal apology by the U.S. president, the protests stopped. This relationship between a dramatic U.S. involved incident and immediate, but short-lived, anti-Americanism was written about extensively by Straub. The USFK incident, and its relative impact on the hypotheses proposed in this thesis, will be revisited, but not at length.

Other explanations for drivers of public opinion and anti-Americanism in South Korea include hypotheses that South Korean perceptions of the U.S. shift depend on which

²⁸ Jung, "Rise and Fall," 949.

²⁹ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 7.

³⁰ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 158.

U.S. or Korean political party is in power, and that pro-American sentiment is driven by positive economic interactions.³¹

The hypotheses investigated in this thesis expand on previous explanations for varying American favorability in South Korea. The two areas this thesis examines are: 1) the relationship between South Korea's threat perception and pro-American sentiment, and 2) the impact that U.S.–ROK policy mismatch has had on U.S. favorability, with additional insight on further political factors like U.S. presidential approval ratings and ROK political party differences.

- (1) *Hypothesis 1: As South Koreans feel threatened, favorability of the U.S. increases*

South Korea is positioned economically between the interests of two great power countries, has an aggressive neighbor to the north, and faces a less immediate but possibly broader military threat from China. Should South Koreans feel threatened, the anticipated reaction would be an increase in favorability toward its alliance partner, the United States.

Current polls show that Chinese favorability in South Korea is low, but whether that is due to threat perception or some other factor requires more investigation.³² One 2012 study asked South Koreans to specifically pick between the U.S. and China and showed overwhelmingly that from 2009–2011 the U.S. was most favored.³³ Though that particular data set ends in 2011, it illustrates a potential zero-sum relationship between U.S. and Chinese favorability within the ROK. This thesis explores that correlation from a threat perception perspective, surmising that as Chinese aggression increases South Korea's threat perception, U.S. favorability increases.

³¹ Cho, "A Model," 251, and Jung, "Rise and Fall," 947.

³² Laura Silver, "China's International Image Remains Broadly Negative as Views of the U.S. Rebound." *Pew Research Center* (blog). <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/30/chinas-international-image-remains-broadly-negative-as-views-of-the-u-s-rebound/>.

³³ Jae Ho Chung, "Korean Views of Korea-China Relations: Evolving Perceptions and Upcoming Challenges," *Asian Perspective* 36, no. 2 (June 2012): 225.

Following George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech, polled South Koreans reacted negatively to the harsh stance taken against North Korea.³⁴ At the time, South Koreans, on average, saw their northern neighbor as less of a threat. When the U.S. declared North Korea “evil,” American favorability dipped to an historic low³⁵ Over the past decade, though, Kim Jong Un has taken an increasingly aggressive stance against the U.S. and has raised regional tensions significantly. To South Koreans, a North Korea willing to make war on one of the world’s two great powers might be just as likely to make war upon South Korea, increasing their threat perception. In particular, this thesis considers whether pro-American sentiment has increased more directly with North Korean *nuclear* threats specifically.

(2) *Hypothesis 2: Smaller gaps between U.S. and ROK foreign policy increases pro-American sentiment*

One of the past drivers of anti-Americanism in South Korea has been domestic responses to U.S. policies. Primarily, following the Bush administration’s placement of North Korea in the “axis of evil,” American favorability dipped low and stayed low until his replacement by President Obama.³⁶ During the Obama administration, the U.S. “pivoted to Asia,” showing an increased focus on Asia and less of a focus on the Middle East.³⁷ Looking at specific Asia-related policies during the *High Period*, the anticipated relationship was that policies benefitting South Korea, either through condemnation of China, hard stances on the increasingly aggressive North Korea, or others would correlate with an increase in favorability during those years. Conversely the opposite was expected to be true as well. The thesis does ultimately argue that U.S.–ROK policy misalignment regarding North Korea specifically helped to contribute to the low pro-American sentiment of the *Lower Period*.

³⁴Shin and Izatt, “Anti-American,” 1126.

³⁵ Fetterolf et al., “Trump Ratings,” *Pew*.

³⁶ Fetterolf et al., “Trump Ratings,” *Pew*.

³⁷ Kim and Yoo, “College Students,” 51.

Outside of specific U.S. foreign policy, the remaining political factors to be examined are the importance of South Korean political parties, and the potential importance of the U.S. president. Traditionally, the ROK's conservative parties have been more pro-American in nature. During the early 2000s, South Korea's presidents were more progressive and tended not to align with America on issues concerning ROK security. When a conservative president was elected in 2007, U.S. favorability increased. Whether the two events are connected will be explored further in this thesis, especially in light of the return of a progressive ROK president from 2017 through early 2022. Similarly, approval of the U.S. president has been polled extensively in the ROK. Over the past two decades, polls showed low approval for both U.S. Republican presidents, with high approval only for democrat Barack Obama. Whether those approval ratings had any impact on overall pro-American sentiment in the ROK is also explored. The thesis finds that policy outweighs narrow partisanship and popularity: as long as U.S. policy is closely aligned with South Korean interests, U.S. presidential favorability matters less.

D. THESIS OVERVIEW

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Following this introductory chapter, Chapters II and III examine the two main hypotheses in turn using available data, scholarly work, and media representation. The final chapter synthesizes all the data and creates a framework for mapping public opinion following events within Korea, the U.S., and China. This conclusion also adds recommendations for how the U.S. might sustain and even take advantage of the positivity seen over the last decade. The current degree of South Korean approval of the U.S. is unprecedented, despite events that would have sparked massive protests in the past. Currently, the U.S.-ROK relationship is clearly healthy, and the conclusion of this thesis will also provide recommendations for how to continue that trend. Finally, of course, the conclusion will identify shortcomings in the research to be addressed by future scholarly works.

II. THREAT PERCEPTION TRENDS IN SOUTH KOREA

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter expands upon a previously identified correlation between anti-Americanism and threat perception in South Korea: the idea that South Korean anti-American sentiment increases as its threat perception decreases.³⁸ Through analysis of the Cheonan Incident in 2010, the Second Battle of Yeonpyeong in 2002, the growth of North Korea's nuclear capability, and the rise of China's influence, the chapter argues that *certain* components of South Korean threat perception correlate with pro-American sentiment. With regard to the DPRK specifically, the general underlying conventional threat posed by that economically downtrodden country in the post-famine years was less of a worry (Figure 4 illustrates this point, where months after a North Korean naval provocation there was an 18-point shift in South Korean's perceived threat from the North). This seems consistent with the *Low Period* decline in positive sentiment toward the U.S. Meanwhile, despite multiple additional conventional provocations from the DPRK—that is, spikes in the apparent conventional threat amid more general decline—these conventional attacks failed to lead to any meaningful increase in pro-American sentiment. This appears to be true even for the Cheonan incident, which occurred during the *High Period* year of 2010. However, from 2008 onward, the *nuclear* threat from North Korea, along with the increasingly aggressive growth of China's military, appears to have contributed to sustained pro-American sentiment.

B. NORTH KOREA

1. The Conventional Threat

Since the end of the Korean War, and especially in the first postwar decades, the U.S.–ROK alliance has been vital in protecting South Koreans from another invasion. In the early years, South Korea was economically and militarily weaker than North Korea. Additionally, the peninsula acted as a proxy arena between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

³⁸ Jung, "Rise and Fall," 948.

During the Cold War, the American presence in South Korea was a necessity from a threat perception perspective. Though never tested, to conservatives in South Korea, the U.S. was required “as the guarantor of South Korea’s security.”³⁹ By the end of the Cold War the balance on the Korean peninsula had shifted in South Korea’s favor due to a combination of the ROK’s massive economic growth and the Democratic Republic of Korea’s (DPRK) backsliding. The ROK had surpassed its northern neighbor economically and, with the downfall of authoritarian rule, greater freedom of speech allowed opposition voices against continued American presence to be heard.

The North Korean conventional military advantage over the ROK is purely numerical. Figure 3 represents the numerical differences between the two Korean militaries, showing a large disparity between the two that has remained relatively consistent since 1985. North Korea’s million-member military alone provides a constant threat to South Koreans as invasion could come at a moment’s notice. Previously, that conventional threat had significantly more meaning; however, the 1990s saw a tremendous shift in relative power on the Korean peninsula. As the DPRK endured a famine, the ROK thrived, its military grew in capability, and the North’s conventional threat diminished. With Soviet supply lines cut off following the end of the Cold War, North Korea’s military equipment began to age far faster than South Korea’s. Over time, North Korea’s, “deteriorating economic conditions have hindered its ability to maximize the quality of its military assets, while South Korea has continuously improved its capabilities.”⁴⁰ For example, South Korea’s military today possesses 40 F-35s, a brand new Lockheed Martin asset that is arguably the best in the world.⁴¹ North Korea, by comparison, “hasn’t acquired a new combat aircraft in more than 30 years,” and flies, “hundreds of geriatric MiG-17s, MiG-

³⁹ David Shin, “A Cautionary Report: Resilience of the U.S.–ROK Alliance During the Pro–North Korea Engagement Era of Progressive Rule in South Korea,” *North Korean Review* 15, no. 2 (2019): 63.

⁴⁰ Kim Min-seok, “The State of the North Korean Military - Korea Net Assessment 2020: Politicized Security and Unchanging Strategic Realities,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Accessed September 7, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/18/state-of-north-korean-military-pub-81232>.

⁴¹ “South Korea to Buy 20 More F-35s,” Defense News, July 20, 2022. <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2022/07/20/south-korea-to-buy-20-more-f-35s/>.

19s and MiG-21s and Chinese-made copies of those Soviet designs.”⁴² Figure 4 is representative of the two’s military arsenals as of 2018. Arguably, due to a combination of the decreasing plausibility of a North Korean invasion and the relative improvements to South Korea’s military capability, it is understandable that South Korean fear over North Korea’s conventional military capacity has decreased.

If the threat perception hypothesis is correct, then pro-Americanism should increase in moments of North Korean hostility (conventional or otherwise). Two main examples of kinetic clashes between North and South Koreans indicate a somewhat different relationship. The first event was a naval clash that took place during the *High Period*. The second took place during the *Lower Period*. Neither provocation seems to have increased pro-American sentiment.

⁴² David Axe, “North Korea’s Warplanes Scattered, Granting Analysts A Rare Chance To Count Them,” *Forbes*. Accessed September 7, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/06/22/north-koreas-warplanes-scattered-granting-analysts-a-rare-chance-to-count-them/>

North Korea Military Size - Historical Data			South Korea Military Size - Historical Data		
Year	Number of People	Annual % Change	Year	Number of People	Annual % Change
2019	1,469,000.00	0.00%	2019	613,000.00	0.82%
2018	1,469,000.00	0.00%	2018	608,000.00	-4.10%
2017	1,469,000.00	0.00%	2017	634,000.00	0.00%
2016	1,469,000.00	6.53%	2016	634,000.00	-0.08%
2015	1,379,000.00	0.00%	2015	634,500.00	0.32%
2014	1,379,000.00	0.00%	2014	632,500.00	-4.09%
2013	1,379,000.00	0.00%	2013	659,500.00	0.00%
2012	1,379,000.00	0.00%	2012	659,500.00	0.00%
2011	1,379,000.00	0.00%	2011	659,500.00	0.00%
2010	1,379,000.00	0.00%	2010	659,500.00	0.00%
2009	1,379,000.00	6.49%	2009	659,500.00	-4.70%
2008	1,295,000.00	0.00%	2008	692,000.00	0.00%
2007	1,295,000.00	0.00%	2007	692,000.00	0.00%
2006	1,295,000.00	0.00%	2006	692,000.00	-0.14%
2005	1,295,000.00	0.00%	2005	693,000.00	-0.43%
2004	1,295,000.00	1.89%	2004	696,000.00	0.80%
2003	1,271,000.00	0.00%	2003	690,500.00	0.00%
2002	1,271,000.00	0.00%	2002	690,500.00	0.44%
2001	1,271,000.00	2.17%	2001	687,500.00	0.00%
2000	1,244,000.00	0.00%	2000	687,500.00	1.63%
1999	1,244,000.00	0.00%	1999	676,500.00	0.00%
1998	1,244,000.00	0.00%	1998	676,500.00	0.00%
1997	1,244,000.00	6.42%	1997	676,500.00	1.27%
1996	1,169,000.00	-5.95%	1996	668,000.00	4.21%
1995	1,243,000.00	13.00%	1995	641,000.00	-14.53%
1994	1,100,000.00	0.00%	1994	750,000.00	0.00%
1993	1,100,000.00	-8.33%	1993	750,000.00	0.00%
1992	1,200,000.00	0.00%	1992	750,000.00	0.00%
1991	1,200,000.00	0.00%	1991	750,000.00	15.38%
1990	1,200,000.00	15.38%	1990	650,000.00	0.46%
1989	1,040,000.00	24.11%	1989	647,000.00	8.19%
1985	838,000.00	24.11%	1985	598,000.00	8.19%

Figure 3. North/South Korean Numerical Military Comparison (1985-2019)⁴³

⁴³ Adapted from “South Korea Military Size 1985–2022,” Macrotrends, Accessed September 9, 2022. <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/KOR/south-korea/military-army-size>.

TABLE 1
The Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula

CLASSIFICATION	SOUTH KOREA		NORTH KOREA (ESTIMATES)	
	IISS	ROK Ministry of National Defense	IISS	ROK Ministry of National Defense
ARMY	490,000	464,000	1,100,000	1,100,000
NAVY	70,000 (including 29,000 Marine Corps)	70,000 (including 29,000 Marine Corps)	60,000	60,000
AIR FORCE	65,000	65,000	110,000	110,000
STRATEGIC FORCES (nuclear and ballistic missiles)	X	X	10,000	10,000
TOTAL TROOPS (excluding reserves)	625,000	599,000	1,280,000	1,280,000
RESERVES	3,100,000	3,100,000	6,300,000	6,300,000
EQUIPMENT				
ARMY				
Armored fighting vehicles	2,614	2,300	4,060	4,300
Armored vehicles	2,956	2,800	2,532	2,500
Artillery	4,853	5,800	6,000	8,600
Multiple rocket launchers	214	200	5,100	5,500
Surface-to-surface missile launchers	30	60	100	100
NAVY				
EQUIPMENT				
Combat-capable surface vessels	144	100	385	430
Amphibious vessels	9	10	267	250
Mine warfare vessels	10	10	24	20
Logistics and support vessels	7	20	23	40
Submarines	22	10	73	70
AIR FORCE				
EQUIPMENT				
Combat-capable aircraft	590	410	545	810
Transport aircraft	38	50	217	340
Intelligence and surveillance aircraft	38	70	30	30
Surface-to-air missile launchers	206	206	350	350
HELICOPTERS (Army/Navy/Air Force)	693	680	286	290

Figure 4. The Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula.⁴⁴

The sinking of the ROKS Cheonan in 2010—an attack significantly worse than previous clashes in 1999 and 2002—suggests a lackluster correlation between a North Korean conventional threat and pro-American sentiment. In total, 46 ROK lives were lost, along with the loss of the ROKS Cheonan.⁴⁵ Although this might appear to be contributing to the generally high levels of pro-U.S. support that characterize the *High Period* (U.S.

⁴⁴ Source: Min-seok, “The State.””

⁴⁵ BBC News, “North Korea: ‘No Apology’ for S Korea Cheonan Sinking,” March 24, 2015, sec. Asia. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32013750>.

favorability in 2010 was at 79 percent in South Korea), deeper evidence suggests otherwise (and it might be notable that pro-U.S. sentiment did not increase even *higher* upon this incident—that year’s poll took place just two months after the Cheonan sinking—though it is also possible that the overall high favorability of the U.S. at the time left little room for further increases). Instead, the ROK public seems to have looked to its own military for an internal solution to the North Korean provocation.

Following the Cheonan incident, the Asan Institute for Policy Studies held a symposium to discuss South Korea’s path forward with North Korea. The discussion covered the incident from the points of view of China, North Korea, South Korea, the U.S. and the alliance. From the South Korean perspective, this incident was interpreted as representing a downturn in South Korea’s military effectiveness. If anything, U.S. support was described as detrimental in some ways: “The ROK military’s ability to conduct the full spectrum of military operations has been stymied, in part, by the armed forces’ [sic] almost instinctive reliance on joint operations and interoperability with the USFK and other U.S. military assets.”⁴⁶ ROK representatives pointed to a complacency that had been recently seen in its military forces, and while they did stress the importance of the continued ROK-U.S. alliance, the central argument revolved around empowering the ROK military to defend itself. If anything, the Cheonan incident prompted soul-searching about strengthening the ROK military, *not* increasing reliance on the U.S.

South Korea’s media similarly pointed to a necessity in reshaping the ROK military following the Cheonan incident. In an article released by The Korea Herald, it was stated that the incident, “sharply raised public security awareness” and that the military “had lapsed into complacency.”⁴⁷ In the immediate response to the incident, South Korea “cut almost all trade after the sinking,” and continues to maintain that trade blockade today.⁴⁸ Whether it was reducing trade, or empowering its own military, the South Korean response

⁴⁶ The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, “[Symposium] Post-Cheonan Regional Security,” August 21, 2010. <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/symposium-post-cheonan-regional-security/>.

⁴⁷ Song Sangho, “Cheonan Sinking Reshapes Military Strategies,” The Korea Herald, March 20, 2011. <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20110320000368>.

⁴⁸ BBC News, “No Apology.”

to the immediate conventional threat was internal. Instead of leaning on the alliance, they looked to increase the efficiency of its own military forces.

In 2002, a naval clash between North and South Korea (known today as the Battle of Yeongpyeong) occurred. Like the later Cheonan incident, this incident also suggests, though in a less clear way, that North Korean conventional-aggression incidents (as opposed to the level of its general underlying conventional threat) might not correlate to pro-American sentiment. In total, six ROK sailors were killed and 18 more were injured.⁴⁹ Given that the purpose of the ROK /U.S. alliance had traditionally been to prevent a successful invasion from the North, one might expect pro-American sentiment would have risen following the incident. What actually occurred was quite different. Just two months after the naval battle, massive anti-American demonstrations took place following a controversial not-guilty verdict over the death of two 14-year-old schoolgirls at the hands of United States Forces Korea (USFK) forces during an exercise the previous June.⁵⁰

On their face, these naval clashes would certainly have accentuated that the North poses a legitimate threat to the ROK, and therefore might have been expected to contribute to pro-U.S. opinion. Although the close timing of the naval clash and the USFK incident make it difficult to gauge the all-else-equal effect of the naval clash alone—it is theoretically possible that the naval clash provoked pro-U.S. sentiment that was trumped by the effects of the USFK incident—a closer look suggests that the naval clash had little independent impact.⁵¹ That there was no American involvement in the immediate response seems to have been significant. ROK forces were able to force a DPRK retreat, on their own, without USFK support. Since the U.S. was not particularly relevant in the response to these situations, it is unlikely that South Korean pro-American sentiment increased resultingly.

⁴⁹ “4 Killed in West Sea Battle,” Donga, June 30, 2002. <https://www.donga.com/en/article/all/20020630/223463/1>.

⁵⁰ Jung, “Rise and Fall,” 953.

⁵¹ Jung, “Rise and Fall,” 947–948.

During the ROK's authoritarian period, South Korean attitudes toward the U.S. tended to correlate with reciprocal attitudes toward the North. Over time, that correlation diminished, and more South Koreans became pro-North without necessarily becoming anti-American. Without a catalyst to spark anti-American sentiment, this shift allowed South Koreans to shift their attitudes toward the North without generating distaste for their most important ally, the U.S. This evolution is important because in events like the 2002 naval clash followed by the USFK incident, the South Korean response evolved individually between the North and the U.S., without directly impacting each other. One scholar described the broader evolving attitudes toward North Korea succinctly, which had previously been tied closely to attitudes of the U.S., stating:

People started to update their attitudes toward the North independent of their views toward America. To be anti-American was not necessarily to be pro-North. And even being pro-North was not always unacceptable, as the hegemonized "demonizing" images of the North as a whole were disaggregated into the "bad" North Korean regime and the suppressed "innocent" North Korean people.⁵²

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the trends in ROK public opinion surrounding the events in late 2002. In June of 2002, the naval clash occurred, illustrating a legitimate threat from North Korea. Yet by November of 2002, when polled, 57.9 percent of those polled answered "that there was little or no chance" that North Korea would initiate a war.⁵³ This instance suggests that a conventional attack from North Korea is not necessarily linked to upticks in pro-U.S. sentiment—or, at the least, can be drowned out by more-salient controversial actions by the U.S. In this instance, perhaps the more notable finding is that despite the attack from North Korea, South Koreans, when polled, showed a decreased threat from the otherwise peaceful year before. If a literal conventional attack did not increase South Korean threat perception, what would?

⁵² Jung, "Rise and Fall," 954.

⁵³ Larson et al., "Ambivalent," 56.

Question: To What Extent Do You Think That North Korea Would Initiate a War against Us?	(1) Highly Probable	(2) A Little Bit	(1) + (2)	(3) Not So Much (Very Low Prob.)	(4) Not at All	(3) + (4)	Don't Know/No Answer
2001	8.0	37.6	45.6	28.3	17.6	45.9	8.5
2002	4.7	28.1	32.8	26.5	31.4	57.9	9.3
Changes	-3.3	-9.5	-12.8	-1.8	+13.8	+12	+0.8

Figure 5. Views on the Probability of North Korea’s Military Provocation⁵⁴

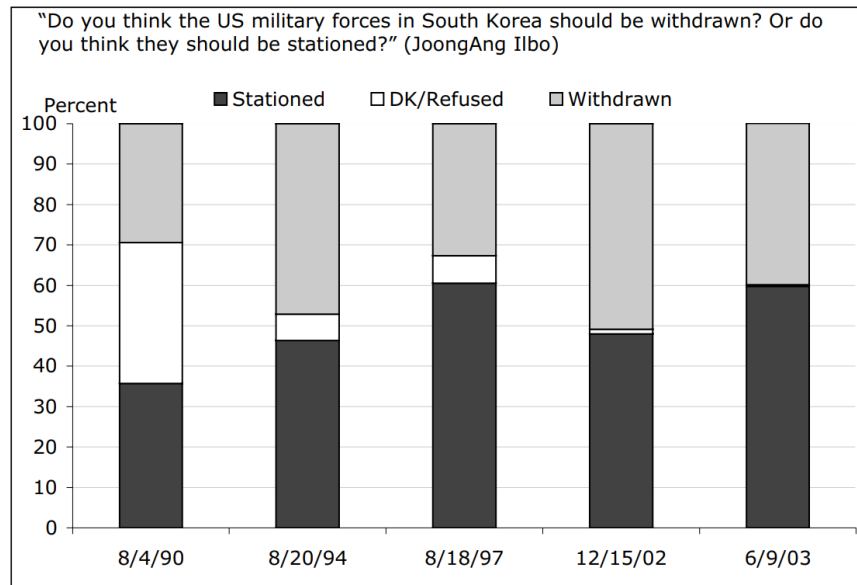


Figure 6. South Korean Opinions of Continued USFK Stationing Over Time⁵⁵

In both naval clash cases, one during the *Low Period* and the other during the *High Period*, there was little to no correlation between the conventional threat posed by North Korea and a spike in pro-U.S. sentiment. The 2002 incident occurred during a period of low American approval ratings, and while it did not directly lead to the anti-U.S.

⁵⁴ Source: Jung, “Rise and Fall,” 957.

⁵⁵ Source: Larson et al., “Ambivalent,” 56.

demonstrations just a few months later, it did serve as an opportunity for the public to question the necessity of America's continued presence (at their most extreme, the 2002 protests "call [ed] for the immediate withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea").⁵⁶ USFK forces were present in South Korea largely as a deterrent against North Korean provocation, and yet, North Korea still attacked. Later, in 2010, the Cheonan incident occurred during a period of high American approval ratings. Following the attack, rather than a spike in U.S. approval, the shift was negligible. The ROK appeared to be looking for internal solutions to the North's conventional attack rather than connecting them to greater or wider acceptance of the U.S.

As previously noted, the Cheonan incident occurred in a period of unprecedentedly high pro-American sentiment in the ROK. With pro-American sentiment already so high, variability in a positive direction as reflected in polling data would likely be lower. With eight of ten polled South Koreans *already* holding favorable opinions of the U.S., there is a strong likelihood that the remaining two will remain unphased by *any* event. Meanwhile, the 2002 naval clash occurred amidst significantly controversial American events, making its independent impact difficult to judge. At the very least, though, these apparently explicit demonstrations of the North's conventional threat seem to lack a clear link to pro-U.S. sentiment.

2. The Nuclear Threat

The North Korean nuclear threat has evolved over the last four decades, beginning in 1985 when North Korea signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). In 2002, it was revealed that North Korea had been secretly developing nuclear weapons, and in 2003 the country formally withdrew from the NPT.⁵⁷ Following its withdrawal, North Korea has conducted multiple nuclear tests and has bounced between agreeing to end its program, on the one hand, and threatening nuclear attack on the other. For South Koreans, the nuclear

⁵⁶ Jung, "Rise and Fall," 953.

⁵⁷ CNN, "North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts," October 29, 2013. <https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/29/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-timeline---fast-facts/index.html>.

threat imposed by North Korea *does* appear to have had a positive correlation with domestic pro-U.S. sentiment.

During the peak of anti-American sentiment, the *Lower Period* of 2000–2007, the North Korean nuclear threat—or, at least, South Korean perceptions thereof—was still in its infancy. When polled, South Koreans frequently placed North Korea as the lowest regional security threat despite the saber rattling of Kim Jong Il. In one Pew survey conducted early in 2007, following five years of North Korea’s nuclear threats, only 50 percent of those polled in South Korea claimed North Korea was its largest threat (as compared to 64 percent for China).⁵⁸ In earlier years, there may have been few South Koreans who believed North Korea had a legitimate nuclear capability, despite its successful testing. On the other hand, this 50 percent result represented an 18-point increase from the 2002 polling data shown in Figure 5, showing that, over time, the North Korean threat was increasing. By 2019 poll, the number of South Koreans threatened by North Korea’s nuclear program had increased to 67 percent.⁵⁹

As North Korea’s nuclear capability has increased, South Korea’s threat perception has shifted notably. Where the South Korean military had assessed itself able to handle the conventional provocations of North Korea, the nuclear threat was different. Until 2007, the Sunshine policy kept South Koreans hopeful about future unification; that policy had a profound impact on South Korean threat perception. When North Korea began to leverage missile tests and aggressive rhetoric in exchange for economic benefits, beginning essentially in 2006, South Korea’s response to its northern neighbor shifted and, for the last decade, North Korea has posed a consistent nuclear threat to South Korea that the public appears to recognize and find legitimate.

⁵⁸ Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project, “Chapter 3. Perceived Threats and Allies,” July 24, 2007. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2007/07/24/chapter-3-perceived-threats-and-allies/>.

⁵⁹ Jacob Poushter, and Christine Huang, “Climate Change Still Seen as the Top Global Threat, but Cyberattacks a Rising Concern,” Pew Research Center’s Global Attitudes Project (blog), February 10, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/10/climate-change-still-seen-as-the-top-global-threat-but-cyberattacks-a-rising-concern/>.

Just as important, Figure 7 shows that while more South Koreans believe that it is South Korea's responsibility to handle the problem, they also believe the U.S. will likely be the actor that solves it.

IMPORTANT NEIGHBOR TO DENUCLEARIZATION OF THE KOREAN PENINSULA

2014. 5/4-6
 2016. 3/22-24
 2018. 3/21-22
 2019. 3/19-20



Q1. Which country *should* take an active role in solving North Korea's nuclear-related problems?

Q2. Which country *will* take an active role in solving North Korea's nuclear-related problems?

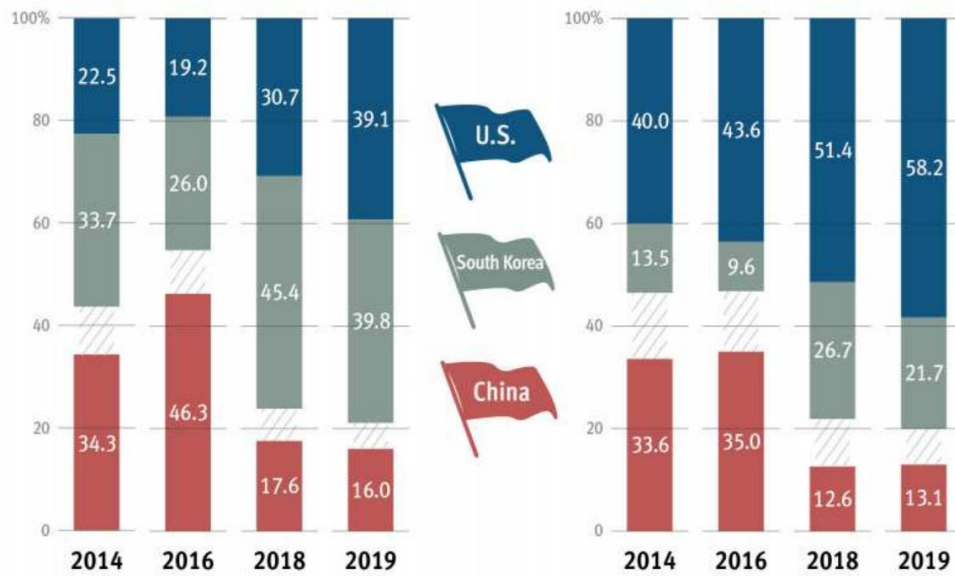


Figure 7. Important Neighbor to Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.⁶⁰

While the South Korean conventional military has increased in its self-reliance, the U.S. maintains necessary deterrence against North Korea's *nuclear* threat, and the public

⁶⁰ Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, "South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2019," April 26, 2019. <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2019/>.

apparently knows this. In 2010 it was argued that “as South Koreans recently came to feel more threatened by the *nuclear* North, they conceived more favorable attitudes toward America.”⁶¹ This argument was validated in 2011 during an Asan poll that showed two things: first, 96 percent of respondents “perceive(d) the current relations between the two Koreas to be in trouble,” and second, 91.1 percent of respondents stated the necessity of a continued ROK-U.S. alliance.⁶² Moreover, in a survey following North Korea’s third nuclear test, in 2013, 63 percent of respondents stated insecurity over the test, 40 percent cited North Korea’s nuclear capability as “the greatest social risk” to South Korea, and 61 percent cited the United States as the most important country in handling the North’s nuclear development.⁶³ Consistently, as North Korea has conducted nuclear tests, approval ratings for the ROK-U.S. alliance have increased. When comparing the high pro-U.S. sentiment era (2007-present) to before, one key difference for South Koreans is that from 2006-present, North Korea has provided a nuclear threat that requires U.S. assistance to deter.

C. CHINA

1. The Military Threat

The growth of China’s military over the last twenty years has been remarkable. China has grown from a moderate power into a global leader both economically and militarily. If it continues its trajectory, China’s military may become the world’s largest in short time. Due to the turbulent nature of Sino-U.S. relations, South Korea, as an alliance member to the U.S., might suffer collateral damage in a future regional conflict. Given the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, the fact that North Korea is backed in part by China, and the fact that the U.S. has constantly been the best defense against North Korean nuclear

⁶¹ Jung, “Rise and Fall,” 948.

⁶² The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, “South Korean Public Opinion on North Korea & the Nations of the Six-Party Talks,” October 27, 2011. <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-korean-public-opinion-on-north-korea-the-nations-of-the-six-party-talks-2/>.

⁶³ Kim Jiyeon, Karl Friedhoff, and Kang Chungku, “The Fallout: South Korean Public Opinion Following North Korea’s Third Nuclear Test,” Asan Institute for Policy Studies, 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08157>. Of note, 94% of respondents were supportive of the continued ROK-U.S. alliance, which was an all-time high.

provocation, we would expect that the South Korean public will side with the U.S. on security matters in response to fears about China. Over the past decade, this relationship can be seen in a series of public opinion polls taken regarding South Korea's security dilemma and its place in the ever-present great power conflict. The increase in this element of threat perception seems consistent with the transition from South Korea's *Lower* to *High* period of pro-U.S. sentiment.

South Korea's perception of China as a threat is a relatively new phenomenon. Figure 8 represents the evolution of China's favorability in South Korea over nearly two decades. In 2002, only 31 percent of South Koreans polled held unfavorable views of China, a number which increased to 75 percent by 2020. The graph covers both the *Lower* and *High* periods of South Korean pro-American sentiment, showing that during the *High Period*, favorability of China decreased. While pro-American sentiment remained high, anti-China sentiment increased as well. The most important period, however, is from around 2016 to 2020. After some five years of increasing favorability for China, there was a sudden decrease in China's favorability around 2016: in 2016, while the ROK argued for the self-defensive nature of its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) employment, the PRC foreign ministry "condemned the move for 'undermining China's security interests.'"⁶⁴

⁶⁴ See-Won Byun, "Interdependence, Identity, and China–South Korea Political Relations," *Asian Survey* 61, no. 3 (June 1, 2021): 486.

Increasingly negative evaluations of China across advanced economies

% who have a(n) ___ view of China

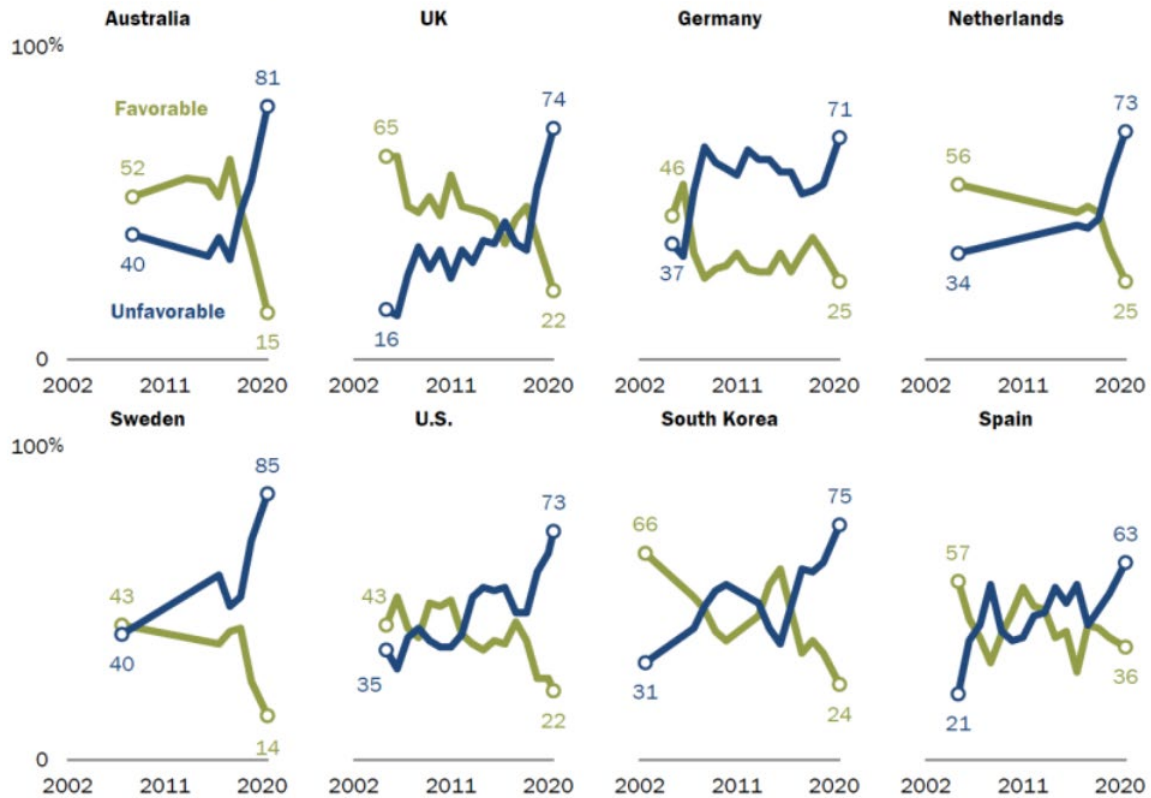


Figure 8. Increasingly Negative Evaluations of China Across Advanced Economies.⁶⁵

Following the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, many polls show a similar trend: South Korean's state China's rising military is problematic, and South Koreans also side with the U.S. on issues regarding regional security stability. During the *Lower Period*, anti-China sentiment had increased in South Korea only to drop to negligible levels prior to 2016. The post-2016 anti-China rise in South Korea is representative, at most, of a newly emerged connection between anti-China and pro-U.S. One Chicago Council survey taken in South Korea in 2021 shows the currency of this relationship, finding that, of those polled, 83 percent answered that China is a security threat, 60 percent answered that China seeks

⁶⁵ Source: Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project, October 6, 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/10/06/unfavorable-views-of-china-reach-historic-highs-in-many-countries/>.

to replace the U.S. as the world's most powerful nation, 74 percent answered that "U.S. military presence in Asia increases stability," and finally 84 percent answered that the U.S. military presence should either remain stable or be increased.⁶⁶ Taken as presented, the data does not show causation between pro-American sentiment and the view of China's military as a threat, but that does not rule out the possibility of its importance if factors from the *Lower Period* reemerged.

Following the Cheonan incident in 2010, the Asan held symposium that highlighted South Korea's desire for further self-reliance also highlighted another important point: China did not do enough to prevent the attack. This finding illustrated an early instance of the deterioration of ROK-China relations that started diplomatically and has since turned more military. For the South Koreans, the pattern of placing partial blame for North Korean aggression upon China has been consistent. Since China is the North's number one ally, both militarily and economically, matters concerning nuclear development, conventional provocation, and aggressive political rhetoric reflects poorly on the intentions of China. China has grown into South Korea's number one economic partner over the past two decades and has continually attempted to pull South Korea out of the U.S. sphere of influence. When incidents such as Cheonan occur, South Koreans largely expect China to take a leading role in the global response. What actually occurred in 2010 did little for producing pro-China sentiment in South Korea. During the Asan symposium, China's response was assessed as a "failure ... [that] reflects stagnation and uncertainty in Chinese decision-making at the highest levels."⁶⁷ Moreover, China's response "was seen as out of step with South Korea, drawing criticism from both Seoul and Washington," illustrating that even in a direct conflict between North and South Korea, the ROK expected China to

⁶⁶ Karl Friedhoff, "South Koreans See China as More Threat than Partner, But Not the Most Critical Threat Facing the Country," Chicago Council on Global Affairs. Last modified April 6, 2021. <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/research/public-opinion-survey/south-koreans-see-china-more-threat-partner-not-most-critical-threat>

⁶⁷ Asan, "[Symposium]."

play some part in its aftermath.⁶⁸ Overall, “China’s attitude in the wake of the *Cheonan* sinking ... disappointed the South Korean public.”⁶⁹

During the *Lower Period*, China’s military was still in its modern infancy and posed comparatively less threat. Despite its increasingly aggressive regional rhetoric and its territorial disputes with many South China Sea bordering nations, until the last decade, China was seen as more of a partner than a security threat to South Koreans. South Korea’s perception of China as a modern military threat is a relatively new phenomenon. During the *Higher Period*, China *has* existed as a military threat to South Korea and ROK pro-Americanism has been unprecedentedly high.

While there is little polling data available that might *directly* link China threat perception to pro-U.S. sentiment, indirect support for this link can be found. Figure 9 shows that since 2014, South Koreans have increased their desire to side with the U.S. in a continued rivalry between the two great powers. In this specific case, South Koreans *did* poll specifically on a relationship between being pro-America and anti-China, and the results showed that when given the choice, the U.S. won out 85 percent of the time.

⁶⁸ Asan, “[Symposium].”

⁶⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, “South Korea Seeks to Balance Relations with China and the United States,” Accessed September 9, 2022. <https://www.cfr.org/report/south-korea-seeks-balance-relations-china-and-united-states>.

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

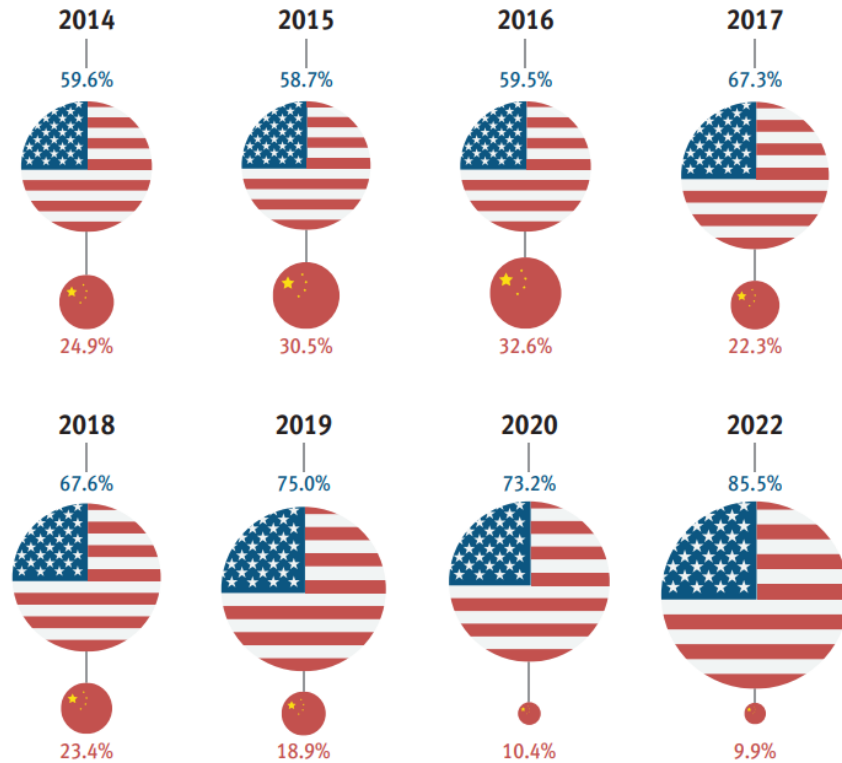


Figure 9. Who Should South Korea Side Within Continued Sino-U.S. Rivalry.⁷⁰

2. The Economic Threat

Following the deployment of THAAD in South Korea, China launched multiple economic attacks on the ROK. In total, “it shut down Chinese tourism to South Korea, banned the sales of certain Korean products in China, closed an entire chain of South Korean supermarkets for purported fire safety violations, and restricted the South Korean entertainment sector’s access to the Chinese market,” netting South Korea a loss of \$7.5

⁷⁰ Source: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, “South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2022,” June 8, 2022. <https://en.asaninst.org/contents/south-koreans-and-their-neighbors-2022/>.

billion in 2017.⁷¹ The economic threat posed by China, understandably, was immediately felt by the South Korean public (Figure 8). By 2016, South Korea had evolved into China's "most economically dependent Asian partner and the most willing participant of the Sinocentric historical order."⁷² When China decided to launch an economic attack in 2016, public opinion backlash in South Korea was inevitable.

Prior to 2016, South Korea's second most important trading partner had been the U.S. One would thus expect that following an economic downturn with China, South Koreans would view the U.S. economic relationship with greater importance. In fact, in an ASAN poll taken in 2022, there was shown to be a nearly linear correlation. In 2015, 55.1 percent of South Koreans polled viewed China as its most important economic partner while 34.3 percent responded in favor of the U.S.; by 2022, those numbers had flipped nearly perfectly with 60.1 percent of respondents voting in favor of the U.S. as compared to 32.2 percent in favor of China.⁷³ The deployment of THAAD helped to exacerbate this relationship. THAAD was deployed specifically to address South Korea's security concerns. So, when China grew agitated over its deployment and turned the event into an opportunity to attack South Korea's economy, public sentiment moved understandably in the direction of the U.S. Pro-American sentiment thus increased in line with an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment over China's economic threat. In this case, as in the security case, the two are correlated.

D. CONCLUSION

This chapter discussed the relationship between South Korea's threat perception and the evolution of its now-high pro-American sentiment. The threat perception narrative is cited frequently, as it is often identified as a potential catalyst for beneficial relations.

⁷¹ Haneul Lee, Tobias Harris, Alan Yu, "Rising Anti-China Sentiment in South Korea Offers Opportunities To Strengthen US-ROK Relations," Center for American Progress, Aug 2, 2022. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/rising-anti-china-sentiment-in-south-korea-offers-opportunities-to-strengthen-us-rok-relations/>.

⁷² Byun, "Interdependence," 474.

⁷³ Asan, "Neighbors 2022."

North Korea's conventional threat, North Korea's nuclear threat, and China's developing threat toward South Korea were analyzed against shifts in pro-American sentiment.

North Korea's conventional threat is difficult to associate with pro-American sentiment. Both of the naval clash cases studies presented had obvious problems in their correlations. The 2002 naval clash between North and South Korea might have led to an increase in pro-American sentiment, but it occurred amid a number of controversial events that likely drowned out any possible correlation (if there was one). Similarly, but to the opposite end, the Cheonan incident occurred during an already peaked moment in pro-American sentiment, leaving open the possibility that relations between the two alliance members were already so positive that any event would have had a negligible impact on polling responses. What can be concluded, however, is that in both the *Lower* and *High* periods, North Korea's general conventional threat has remained relatively stable, though at a lower level than the earlier *Baseline Period*, and that explicit conventional *provocations* appear not to spur short-term increases in pro-U.S. sentiment.

North Korea's nuclear threat levels appear to provide more explanation for pro-American ROK sentiment. Prior to 2006, North Korea's nuclear capability was still in development, with tensions increasing prior to the 2008 election. For the duration of the *High Period*, North Korea's nuclear threat was a constant, while during the *Lower Period*, it did not exist until the final years.

Finally, this chapter identified China's deteriorating relationship with South Korea and its newly perceived threat as occurring during positive ROK-U.S. relations.

In total, while the North Korean conventional threat appears not to drive pro-U.S. sentiment, the increased North Korean nuclear threat and China threat do appear consistent with South Korea's transition to its *High Period* of pro-U.S. sentiment. Threat perception is not the only explanatory factor, though: there are political factors that also play a significant role, as the next chapter discusses.

III. PRO-AMERICAN POLITICAL FACTORS IN ROK

A. INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyzes the importance of varying political factors both within South Korea and the U.S. Although history has suggested that ROK progressive parties and unpopular U.S. presidents tend to breed anti-American environments, the enigma of the 2016–2021 years—with high pro-U.S. sentiment alongside a progressive ROK president and an unpopular U.S. president—requires further assessment. What was different about these years? Analysis of South Korean historical trends, along with the extensive polling data that has emerged over the last two decades, shows a likely correlation between U.S. foreign policy and pro-American sentiment that outweighs the relative importance of who is holding presidential office. Specifically, North Korean policy alignment between the U.S. and ROK is found to be a significantly important driver in South Korean pro-Americanism.

The remaining political factors addressed in this chapter, to a lesser extent, are the importance of South Korean political parties and the importance of U.S. presidential approval ratings. These do appear to carry some independent explanatory value. In South Korean politics, progressive and conservative parties split the country fairly evenly. The progressive parties and their presidents tend to take a softer stance on North Korean issues while also taking a tougher stance on ROK-U.S. alliance issues. The conservative party is the opposite, taking a harder stance on North Korea and relying more heavily on the ROK-U.S. alliance for more than just security. The difference between the two parties can explain some of the anti-American sentiment seen before 2007. During the peak period of anti-Americanism in South Korea, a progressive party held office, and when two consecutive conservative presidents held office, pro-American sentiment reached unparalleled highs. Similarly, the U.S. president has played some role in defining South Korean public opinion. To measure U.S. presidential approval ratings, South Korean public opinion polls have been conducted annually since 1998. Prior to the Trump administration, general pro-American sentiment seemed to correlate directly to public opinion of the U.S. president. When the South Korean public approved of the U.S. president, pro-American sentiment

was high, and vice versa. During the Trump administration, this pattern was not seen. Even more striking, despite a progressive South Korean president holding office as well, pro-American sentiment remained at all-time highs.

B. POLICY MISMATCH

1. The Sunshine Policy

During the initial years of South Korea's democratization, its policy toward North Korea had been one of containment. Under authoritarian rule, North Korea was treated with suspicion, but when the Cold War ended, so did Soviet funding and, consequently, much of the regional tensions lessened as well. The late 1990s Sunshine Policy represented a change in South Korean sentiment toward the North. It "signaled a paradigm shift in South Korea's approach towards North Korea ... [and] replaced a policy of containment ... with proactive engagement to induce gradual change in the North through reconciliation and economic cooperation."⁷⁴ The policy was so dramatic a shift that it landed President Kim Dae-Jung the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000.⁷⁵ Under progressive rule, the goal for South Korea shifted from acquiring a military advantage over North Korea to goals of peaceful reunification. The early 2000s was representative of this policy shift within South Korea, but with the new attitudes toward the North also came conflict with the U.S.

Under the Kim Dae-Jung administration, financial aid and other concessions to North Korea increased. At the time, North Korea's nuclear development was more rumor than fact. North Korea had been working with the U.S. to limit its nuclear capabilities, and given this cooperation, the South Korean public had little apparent reason for suspicion. In addition to shifting South Korea's policy toward the North, Kim Dae-Jung also "encouraged the U.S. and Japan to normalize relations with the North."⁷⁶ It was this element that created conflict with the U.S. Contrary to the new attitudes in South Korea,

⁷⁴ Youngho Kim, "The Sunshine Policy and Its Aftermath*," *Korea Observer* 34, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 692.

⁷⁵ "The Nobel Peace Prize 2000," Nobel Prize, accessed August 19, 2022. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2000/dae-jung/facts/>.

⁷⁶ Kim, "Sunshine," 691.

the U.S. was still highly suspicious of North Korea and was hesitant in boosting relations. To be sure, unification was something that both sides of the 38th parallel seemed to take seriously at the time, but in each meeting between the two sides, North Korea attempted to use various elements of U.S. concern as bargaining chips in negotiations. In explaining the awkwardness of the time, scholar Youngho Kim writes:

The North's perennial demand for U.S. troop pullout only intensified with signing of the Agreed Framework. Though reportedly Chairman Kim Jong-il verbally assured President Kim during the June 2000 summit that U.S. troops could remain until Korean reunification - a concession President Kim reiterated in the 2001 New Year's conference and a televised national broadcast as a major Sunshine Policy accomplishment - optimism proved premature. In the eight-point joint declaration of the 4 August 2001 Russo-North Korean summit Chairman Kim stressed U.S. troop withdrawal as requisite for regional peace and reunification talks.⁷⁷

Despite genuine South Korean desire for successful execution of the Sunshine Policy, North Korea continued its historical trend of selfish behavior. From the North's perspective, pro-unification attitudes in the South served as a convenient route toward more than just financial concessions. On multiple occasions, in meetings between the regional powers, Kim Jong-Il would make agreements with caveats regarding continued U.S. presence in the South. This pattern has continued, with the Kim Jong-Un regime similarly releasing aggressive statements in response to U.S. regional presence. Ultimately, from the U.S. perspective, the Sunshine Policy of the early 2000s did little more than to drive a wedge between U.S. policy and South Korea's. At the time, the U.S. had declared the North Korean regime as a terrorist organization. In President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech, the North Korean regime was placed alongside Iran and Iraq as partially responsible for global terror.

2. U.S.–North Korean Policy

In the period from 1998–2017, the U.S. consistently took a firm stance against North Korea. The containment policy that South Korea took part in prior to Kim Dae-Jung

⁷⁷ Kim, "Sunshine," 691.

was a policy put forward by the U.S. with the U.S.–ROK alliance in mind.⁷⁸ When South Korea took up its Sunshine Policy, the U.S. pushed back. With the two naval clashes in 1999 and 2002, it was clear to the U.S. that North Korea was still as much of a threat as it had ever been, and when it came to working with the North Koreans, the Bush administration had no patience for it. According to Bush’s famous “Axis of Evil” speech, North Korea was no better than Iran or Iraq. Arguably, the conflicting U.S. North Korea policy could have a negative effect on pro-American sentiment in South Korea.

When President Bush gave his “Axis of Evil” speech in January 2002, he alienated much of the pro-North-engagement population in South Korea.⁷⁹ Following his speech, U.S. relations with South Korea became tense. It occurred far before the USFK schoolgirl incident in June but served to “reinforce the ‘arrogance without excellence’ image of the United States in South Korea.”⁸⁰ To many South Koreans, cooperation with the North was the new norm. The Sunshine Policy had replaced containment, suspicion had been replaced with pity, and when South Korea’s number one military ally formally declared the North Korean regime a terrorist organization, the follow-on impact on pro-American sentiment was predictable. Of note, while the speech itself served only to amplify the already developing anti-American sentiment within South Korea, it did not directly cause new distrust. Though it was upsetting, South Koreans already knew America’s stance on North Korea, and when polled in March 2002, only 18 percent of those polled stated the “Axis of Evil” speech as the biggest reason for their distaste of America.⁸¹

When assessing what caused the return of durable pro-American sentiment in the *Higher Period*, the key thing to focus on regarding U.S. North Korea policy is its alignment with South Korea. During the *Lower Period*, the U.S. was misaligned with South Korea. Until 2017, the U.S. took a firm stance against North Korea. During the Bush administration, both progressive parties in South Korea advocated for cooperation, and the

⁷⁸ Youngho, “Sunshine,” 691.

⁷⁹ Choong-Nam Kim, “The Management Of The Rok-U.S. Relations In The Post-Cold War Era,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* 17, no. 1 (2003): 69.

⁸⁰ Kim, “Management,” 69.

⁸¹ Larson et al., “Ambivalent,” 69.

policy was misaligned. During President Barack Obama’s administration, the South Korean president was conservative and due to North Korea’s nuclear development, South Korea’s policy against the North began to look more like the U.S.

While North Korean policy alignment alone cannot explain the evolution of South Korea’s pro-American sentiment, there is some utility here. During the *Lower Period*, two consecutive progressive parties held office in South Korea. Pro-American sentiment was lower during progressive administrations due to historical party practices, and the opposite was both expected and shown during the following conservative administrations. The outlier was the 2017–2022 Moon Jae-in administration, in which, despite progressive ROK policy toward the North, beliefs, pro-American sentiment remained high.

In 2015, when assessing the potential drivers for future anti-American sentiment in South Korea, Straub surmised that “leading candidates are disagreements over policy toward North Korea ... due to the rapidly changing strategic situation in Northeast Asia and the increase in competing nationalisms.”⁸² Straub also assessed the likely future in which a progressive president would win election in South Korea, stating both the likelihood that the new president would seek advanced cooperation with North Korea, while also stating that, “should this scenario come about ... it could result in a major fissure between the United States and South Korea.”⁸³ Fortunately for Americans, Straub’s warning of a potential North Korea related fissure between the ROK and America was never realized, even upon the election of another ROK progressive in 2017.

The difference between the progressive parties of the past and the Moon Jae-in administration was that by 2017, the United States had changed *its* North Korea policy. During the Trump administration, North Korea policy alignment with South Korea helped to continue the high levels of U.S. favorability in South Korea.

The same Trump administration policy shift can help explain how South Korean pro-American sentiment remained high during 2017–2022 despite the fact that a disliked U.S. president held office. Figure 10 shows South Korea’s favorability toward various

⁸² Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 214.

⁸³ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 215.

regional leaders from 2016–2022 and explains the maintenance of pro-American sentiment in a most unexpected timeframe. From the data shown, there is a clear spike both in the approval of Donald Trump and Kim Jong-Un near the end of 2018.⁸⁴ This spike correlates to a shift in U.S. North Korea policy that occurred near the time of South Korea’s shift to a progressive presidency. Rather than following in the footsteps of every administration before him, President Trump’s North Korea policy was one of unprecedented cooperation from the U.S. perspective. Contrary to what could have been expected, ROK conservatives were not alienated by Trump’s pro-DPRK policy either. The bipartisan acceptance for both South Korea’s Trump-Aligned DPRK policy was reflected by a poll following a 2008 meeting between President Moon and Kim Jong-Il in which, “78 percent ... say they trusted the North Korean leader.”⁸⁵ By 2018, following an in-person meeting with Kim Jong-Un, President Trump announced on Twitter that North Korea was “no longer a Nuclear Threat.”⁸⁶ The results of this meeting correlated directly to South Korean opinions both of President Trump and Kim Jong-Un, as shown in Figure 10, which shows a dramatic spike around the time of the meeting in 2018.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Asan, “Neighbors 2022.”

⁸⁵ “Nearly 80 Percent of South Koreans Trust Kim Jong Un,” Time, Accessed September 11, 2022. <https://time.com/5262437/kim-jong-un-trust-south-korea-poll/>.

⁸⁶ Eileen Sullivan, “Trump Says ‘There Is No Longer a Nuclear Threat’ After Kim Jong-Un Meeting,” *The New York Times*, June 13, 2018, sec. U.S. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/us/politics/trump-north-korea-nuclear-threat.html>.

⁸⁷ Asan, “Neighbors 2022.”



How would you rate the favorability of the following leaders?

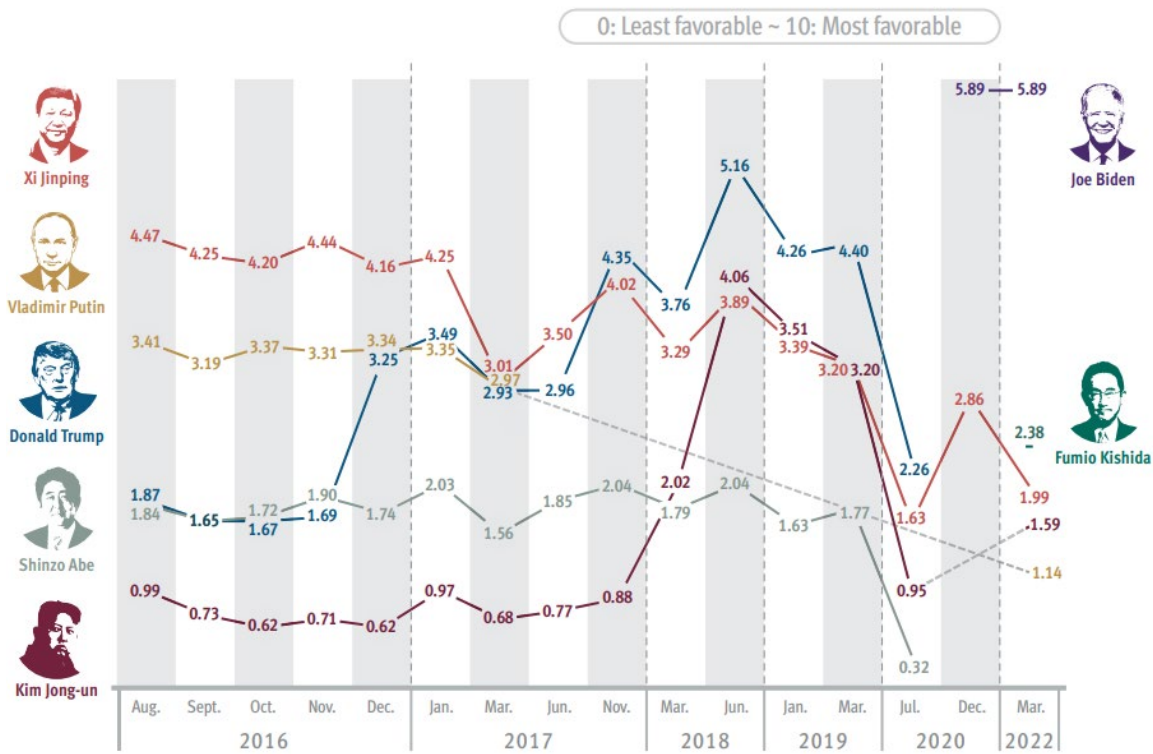


Figure 10. South Korean Favorability of Regional Leaders (2016–2022)⁸⁸

3. The Iraq War

Another critical piece to understanding the *Lower Period* of pro-American sentiment in South Korea is the impact of the Iraq War. The Iraq War lasted from 2001–2008 and was consistently controversial worldwide. For South Korea, the war was critical in fueling opposition to President Bush and consequently against the United States in general. It can be reasonably argued that the war’s controversial nature directly contributed to anti-American sentiment in South Korea.

South Korean public opinion was strongly in opposition to the Iraq War. In a 2003 poll taken by conservative newspaper *Chosun Ilbo*, “roughly 70 percent of South Koreans

⁸⁸ Source: Asan, “Neighbors 2022.”

disapproved of the American invasion of Iraq.”⁸⁹ In the same year, President Roh announced his decision to send 700 non-combat soldiers to Iraq despite, “rising public tide opposing war.”⁹⁰ The word “non-combat” was important. South Korean opposition to the war was easier to get around if it was believed by the public that South Korean soldiers would never be in harm’s way. In two polls following his speech, despite the war’s unpopularity, more than 50 percent supported the decision to send non-combat troops to Iraq with less than 40 percent opposed.⁹¹ However, as time continued, so did South Korea’s involvement in the war. One study in 2006 showed the highest South Korean approval rating for the Iraq War peaked in 2003 at 26 percent.⁹² To help understand this somewhat confusing data, South Korean public opinion at the time is described:

Those who supported the invasion were not truly sympathetic with the American cause: the public accepted that the ROK had to fight a war of “immoral and illegal invasion” for its own national interest. An editorial in a conservative newspaper reasoned that South Korea should send the troops and fight a war in Iraq not because this was a just war but because it was a good war for Seoul’s relationship with the US.⁹³

So, roughly one in four South Koreans approved of the war. To correlate that finding with diminished pro-American sentiment in South Korea is not hard. The war lasted from 2001–2008; the period of low pro-American sentiment peaked in 2002 and remained low until 2008, as did South Korea’s direct involvement in the war.

In 2003, on South Korea’s Independence Day, protestors from both sides took to the streets in Seoul divided along party lines.⁹⁴ Although the conservative protestors marched in support of the U.S., “6,200 people from progressive groups ... gathered at

⁸⁹ Gerald Geunwook Lee, “South Korea’s Faustian Attitude: The Republic of Korea’s Decision to Send Troops to Iraq Revisited,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (September 2006): 485.

⁹⁰ Lee, “Faustian,” 486.

⁹¹ Lee, “Faustian,” 486.

⁹² Lee, “Faustian,” 491.

⁹³ Lee, “Faustian,” 492.

⁹⁴ “Rhetoric from Conservative and Progressive Groups Filled the Independence Day.” Donga, accessed August 30, 2022. <https://www.donga.com/en/Search/article/all/20030815/230368/1>.

Maronier Park ... to protest against the U.S. and war.”⁹⁵ Further, in 2004, South Korean musician PSY, who eventually became world famous for his song “Gangnam Style,” performed a “vulgar song urging the killing of Americans,” which he later attributed to a “deeply emotional reaction to the war in Iraq.”⁹⁶ In a 2003 interview between Donald Rumsfeld and a South Korean reporter, the reporter asked “Why should Koreans send their young men and women halfway around the globe to be killed or wounded in Iraq,” only for Rumsfeld to respond with “why should the U.S. have sent its soldiers ‘halfway around the world to Korea some fifty years ago,” in reference to the Korean War.⁹⁷ From his perspective, South Korea was in debt to the U.S. For President Roh, the decision to send troops to Iraq was not made in support of the war, but rather in support of the Alliance. Still, South Korea’s opposition to the Iraq War, in concert with the North Korean policy misalignment, highlighted a key narrative in moments of decreased pro-American sentiment: U.S. foreign policy that directly impacts South Korea matters most. Figures 11 and 12 show two polls taken between 2002 and 2003 that highlight this relationship and help to clarify a prevailing theme of this thesis: South Koreans do not agree with being subject to another country’s unilateral, controversial decisions.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Donga, “Rhetoric.”

⁹⁶ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 200.

⁹⁷ Shin, “Cautionary,” 65.

⁹⁸ Larson et al., “Ambivalent,” 70.

Table 4.4
Main Reasons Some People Dislike the U.S., July 2002

Regardless of how you yourself feel about the U.S., using this card [HAND CARD] what do you think are the main reasons why some people dislike the U.S.? Please look over all the items on this card before telling me which you think are the main reasons why some people dislike the U.S. Any other? [ACCEPT UP TO TWO RESPONSES]

	1st	2nd	Combined
U.S. acts on its own without consulting others	35%	50%	85%
U.S. economic and trade pressures	21	47	68
Americans look down on Koreans	8	22	40
Envy of U.S. power and wealth	13	22	35
U.S. military intervention abroad	6	20	26
Presence of U.S. troops in Korea	5	10	15
Negative influences of U.S. culture and society	6	8	14
Hard-line U.S. policy toward North Korea	3	9	12
Issues from past (e.g., Kwangju, Nogun-Ri)	1	5	6
None of these	1	1	2
Don't know	2	2	4

Figure 11. Why South Koreans Dislike America (2002)⁹⁹

Reasons People Dislike the United States, September 2003

“For what reason do people dislike America?”

Percent	Opinion
58%	Selfish pursuit of own interests and benefits
13.5	Disrespect toward Koreans and past problems
14.3	Dissatisfaction against U.S. forces stationed in Korea and military and diplomatic interference
4.5	Harsh policy against North Korea
1.3	Resistance against American society and culture
6.7	Show-off of its power and wealth
1.8	No answer

Figure 12. Why South Koreans Dislike America (2003)¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Source: Larson et al., “Ambivalent,” 70.

¹⁰⁰ Source: Larson et al., “Ambivalent,” 70.

In two surveys, taken at the lowest era of pro-American sentiment in South Korea, the most supported answers fell along lines of American self-interest and disrespect toward South Koreans. The Iraq War, America's North Korea policy, and the U.S. response to the USFK schoolgirl incident all were examples of controversial U.S. foreign policy decisions that directly rejected the concerns of South Koreans. One of Straub's earliest statements on South Korean anti-Americanism was that "South Koreans critical of the United States generally express feelings of being opposed simply to what they regard as indefensible American policies," and each of these scenarios that occurred within the *Lower Period* serve to confirm that narrative.¹⁰¹ In explaining South Korea's return to durable pro-American sentiment during the *High Period*, the absence of controversial U.S. foreign policies that directly impact South Korea (e.g., the Iraq War) likely plays a significant role. If Pro-American sentiment in South Korea is the standard, (as illustrated by the *Baseline Period*) and pro-American sentiment decreased during the *Lower Period* due to controversial U.S. foreign policy decisions, then the absence of similar controversies in the *High Period* help to explain the return to durable pro-American sentiment.

C. OTHER POLITICAL FACTORS

1. South Korean Political Parties

South Korea's political parties have traditionally been divided into two groups: progressive and conservative. Regarding policy issues that can impact pro-American sentiment, North Korea policy and US-ROK alliance issues are the two largest catalysts in South Korea's party politics.¹⁰² On the left, the progressive party has consistently taken a softer stance on North Korea and has pushed for further autonomy from the U.S. militarily. The conservative party has consistently done just the opposite, leaning harder on the U.S. alliance, and has typically taken a harder stance against North Korea's military development. With this understanding in place, it should follow that the political

¹⁰¹ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 6–7.

¹⁰² Scott Snyder, *South Korea at the Crossroads: Autonomy and alliance in an Era of Rival Powers*, New York (Columbia University Press, 2018) 107–113

landscapes in which pro-American sentiment has been at its lowest occurred under progressive administrations. In fact, until 2017, the data supports this trend.

During the *Lower Period*, two consecutive progressive presidents held office. The first was Kim Dae-Jung, who held office from 1998–2003.¹⁰³ Prior to Kim, South Korea’s policy of containment, “had proven domestically burdensome and [was] a growing source of dissatisfaction.”¹⁰⁴ Under his administration, South Korea’s policy toward the North was arguably the softest it has ever been. Kim’s Sunshine Policy “was embraced as a hopeful alternative to containment’s benign neglect,” which previously failed to “resolve the tragedy of separated families, curb North Korea’s secret attempts to develop nuclear weapons programs, or address humanitarian concerns ... due to the widespread famine in the North.”¹⁰⁵ By 1998, when Kim took office, South Korea had established itself as the economically superior Korea. Even one year after the Asian Financial Crisis (AFC), South Korea was still far better off than its northern neighbor. Kim’s Sunshine Policy embraced this, and under his administration, South Korean’s began to look at the North with sympathy more often than with fear.

Despite multiple naval conflicts that occurred between the two countries, Kim’s approach to North Korea continued until the end of his administration. Both in 1999, and in 2002, naval clashes between the North and the South created opportunities for skepticism about the North’s genuine embracement of the Sunshine Policy. For the U.S., those naval provocations did exactly that, and the Bush Administration showed its skepticism through reluctance to provide any concessions to the continually aggressive North. The policy misalignment between Kim’s Sunshine Policy and Bush’s “Axis of Evil” speech created a durable controversy that negatively impacted pro-American sentiment in the ROK.

¹⁰³ “President of South Korea.” *Wikipedia*, accessed August 30, 2022. https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=President_of_South_Korea&oldid=1107506928.

¹⁰⁴ Youngho, “Sunshine,” 695.

¹⁰⁵ Youngho, “Sunshine,” 695.

The 2002 presidential election in South Korea occurred at a peak moment in the *Lower Period*. The two candidates were broadly divided over how they would handle both the issues of North Korea and the U.S.–ROK alliance. Progressive Roh Moo Hyun ran on a platform that “advocated the ‘Sunshine Policy’ ... emphasized the leading role of Korea in crafting policy toward North Korea and called for the establishment of ‘balanced’ bilateral relations with the United States.”¹⁰⁶ His opponent, Lee Hoi Chang, contrarily took a strong pro-American position, “demonizing Roh as an anti-American politician ... [he] supported strengthening the favorable relationship with the United States and stopping the provision of a ‘free lunch for North Korea.’”¹⁰⁷ With both candidates divided over North Korea and U.S.–ROK alliance issues, it may be expected that the eventual victor would reflect the degree of South Korean pro-American sentiment at the time. However, as one 2008 study revealed, “the public’s attitudes toward the ... U.S. army in Korea ... [had] no significant impact on the likelihood of voters choosing Roh,” while also finding that, instead, religious affiliation, support for the Sunshine Policy, national economy issues, and approval of Kim Dae-Jung played a more significant role in voter choice.¹⁰⁸ In the end, Roh won the presidency by a margin of just over 2 percent, and whether anti-American sentiment contributed to his victory or not, his administration continued the decreased pro-American sentiment of before.¹⁰⁹

Under Roh’s administration, the decreased pro-American sentiment of the *Lower Period* continued to its ultimate end in 2008. David Straub described the environment in Roh’s early years:

Opinion polls at the time revealed extraordinarily hostile popular attitudes toward the United States. In typical poll from late 2002, 53.7 percent of all South Korea respondents held unfavorable views, including about 80 percent of college students ... During the period, American service people in Korea were vilified, assaulted, taken hostage, and, in one case, murdered. The harassment eventually extended to American civilians and other

¹⁰⁶ Byong-Kuen Jhee, “Anti-Americanism and Electoral Politics in Korea,” *Political Science Quarterly* 123, no. 2 (2008): 314.

¹⁰⁷ Jhee, “Electoral Politics,” 314.

¹⁰⁸ Jhee, “Electoral Politics,” 315–316.

¹⁰⁹ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 201.

foreigners whom some Koreans mistook to be Americans ... the results of another opinion poll [revealed] 34 percent of first-year army cadets at the Korea Military Academy (KMA) identified the United States as South Korea's "main enemy."¹¹⁰

Like President Kim Dae-Jung, progressive President Roh had little direct impact on creating anti-American sentiment within South Korea. Though his candidacy ran on a platform that sought to challenge American influence and continue soft relations with North Korea, voters were influenced most by domestic issues. However, the decreased pro-Americanism *did* continue under Roh; thus, it can be argued that Roh's association with the progressive party, similarly to Kim Dae-Jung before him, fostered an environment that more easily allowed for anti-American protest. The president echoed much of the public opinion of the day, but he did not create it. When taken together, the *Lower Period* was marked by two consecutive progressive administrations. Despite that single correlation, it was policy misalignment, and controversial U.S. actions that served to deteriorate pro-American sentiment, rather than the importance of the party itself. Regarding the *High Period*, the expected relationship between party affiliation and pro-American sentiment was only true until 2017, when progressive Moon Jae-in was elected president.

In the two conservative administrations of Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, relations between the U.S. and South Korea reached unparalleled peaks. Given the nature of each party's political agenda, this was understandably the case. By most accounts, the events of 1999–2002 and the extended ripple of decreased pro-American sentiment seemed to have been all but forgotten by 2008, and Figure 2 represented that relationship well. Straub highlighted this reality, stating that, "leaders in both the ROK and the United States have trumpeted bilateral relations as having never been better---and, indeed, objectively that is the case."¹¹¹ Much like the second half of the *High Period*, under the consecutive conservative administrations there was a decrease in media coverage of controversial U.S. actions (largely because there was less to report on), and the public sentiment toward the U.S. normalized. While it is understandable that this evolution occurred under two

¹¹⁰ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 200–201.

¹¹¹ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 180.

conservative presidencies, what is less understandable is the period from 2017–2022, in which U.S. favorability remained high, despite the progressive party holding power.

From 1998–2017, the ROK party holding presidential office aligned with a reasonable expectation for pro-American sentiment. When a progressive president held office, pro-American sentiment was low, and when a conservative president held office, pro-American sentiment was high. Given the nature of each party, that was to be expected, but the relationship between party politics and pro-American sentiment is far from being that simple. The *Lower Period* was also host to controversial U.S. foreign policy choices that likely held more weight in determining the pro-American sentiment of the day. Given that President Moon Jae-in, a progressive, correlated to a period of extended high U.S. favorability in South Korea, any direct correlation to party affiliation and pro-American sentiment is unclear. Arguably, North Korea policy misalignment, or some other U.S. influenced political factor, played a more important role in explaining the differences between the *Lower* and *High* periods of pro-American sentiment.

2. U.S. Presidential Approval

The final political factor that plays at least some role in the development of pro-American sentiment within South Korea is the overall approval of the U.S. president in South Korea. If there is any direct correlation, the expected result would be that during the *Lower Period* of pro-American sentiment, South Korean approval of the U.S. president was low, while during the *High Period* the opposite was true. Based on polling data alone, the actual relationship between U.S. presidential approval and pro-American sentiment is actually a bit more complicated. Figure 13 shows polling data taken by Pew between 2001 and 2021 on global favorability of U.S. presidents. Similar to the effect seen on South Korean political parties, U.S. presidential approval only correlated directed to broader U.S. favorability until President Trump’s election in 2017. So how much weight then does U.S. presidential approval hold in fostering increased pro-American sentiment in South Korea?

Confidence in U.S. presidents

% who have **confidence** in U.S. President ___ to do the right thing regarding world affairs

■ Highest rating ■ Lowest rating

	George W. Bush						Barack Obama								Donald Trump				Joe Biden	'20-'21 change
	'01	'03	'05	'06	'07	'08	'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16	'17	'18	'19	'20	'21	
Sweden	-	-	-	-	21	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	93	10	17	18	15	85	▲70
Belgium	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	79	▲70
Netherlands	-	-	39	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	92	17	19	25	18	86	▲68
Germany	51	33	30	25	19	14	93	90	88	87	88	71	73	86	11	10	13	10	78	▲68
France	20	20	25	15	14	13	91	87	84	86	83	83	83	84	14	9	20	11	74	▲63
Italy	33	43	-	-	30	-	-	-	-	73	76	75	77	68	25	27	32	16	75	▲59
Canada	-	59	40	-	28	-	88	-	-	-	81	-	76	83	22	25	28	20	77	▲57
Spain	-	26	18	7	7	8	72	69	67	61	54	58	58	75	7	7	21	16	73	▲57
UK	30	51	38	30	24	16	86	84	75	80	72	74	76	79	22	28	32	19	72	▲53
Australia	-	59	-	-	-	23	-	-	-	-	77	-	81	84	29	32	35	23	75	▲52
South Korea	-	36	-	-	22	30	81	75	-	-	77	84	88	-	17	44	46	17	67	▲50
Japan	-	-	-	32	35	25	85	76	81	74	70	60	66	78	24	30	36	25	73	▲48
New Zealand	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	74	-
Singapore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	70	-
Greece	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	30	35	27	-	41	19	17	25	-	67	-
Taiwan	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	63	-

Figure 13. Global Confidence in U.S. Presidents¹¹²

When looking at the four administrations, the previously discussed political elements help to explain disparities between pro-U.S. president and broader U.S. favorability. President Bush was highly politicized and South Koreans protested against his decision to launch a war against Iraq. The South Korean public largely supported President Obama, which correlated to the beginning of South Korea’s return to durable pro-American sentiment. What is notable, and important, is that South Korea’s anti-Trump opinions did *not* translate to anti-America sentiment. As a president, Trump was controversial across the world. But for South Koreans, his policies on North Korea in conjunction with the generally rising threat perception of the region caused both by North Korea *and* China served to outweigh the negative views the public held of the man himself. During his tenure, THAAD was also deployed to South Korea which served as another support-gaining event for the otherwise unpopular president. While the data does not show a raw correlation between presidential approval and pro-American sentiment, it does show a highly important point: through non-controversial policy choices—that take South Korea’s interests into account—U.S. presidents can help to further pro-American sentiment in South Korea.

¹¹² Source: Wike et al., “America’s Image.”

IV. CONCLUSION

The U.S.–ROK alliance has existed since the end of the Korean War and has been incredibly important to both states for its duration. In the early years, U.S. presence in South Korea was a requirement against the potential expansion of North Korea’s communist regime. When the Cold War ended, the world’s war-focused narrative shifted, leading to the peace-centric era of the 1990s. South Korea’s democratization similarly occurred during that period, and with it came anti-American voices that had been largely silenced under authoritarianism. When anti-American protests began to occur in increasing frequency during the early 2000s, scholars, analysts, and the like began their assessments of the situation. Were those anti-American protests warnings of a future of problematic U.S.–ROK relations? Or were they outbursts following controversial events that likely gave little indication of the overall South Korean opinions? In the last decade, those questions have been answered, pointing to a South Korean standard that is largely pro-American.

In previous studies on the subject, explanations of South Korean anti-Americanism varied tremendously. Generally, the narrative focused on the protests that occurred following major controversial moments in U.S.–ROK history. History has shown that South Korean protests quickly fizzle out following correction of the protested behavior so it should have followed that South Korean anti-Americanism would diminish following the conclusion of controversial American events; however, with South Korean American favorability remaining low for an 8-year period from 2000 to 2008, the question remained: what caused this durable anti-American sentiment? Since 2008, there have been few anti-American protests in South Korea and U.S. favorability has consistently been above 75 percent. What was different about the last decade? This thesis examined these questions with regard to two main explanatory factors over the divided *Lower* and *High* periods.

A. THREAT PERCEPTION HYPOTHESIS REVISITED

1. The *Lower Period*

When assessing the South Korean threat perception relationship to pro-American sentiment, both North Korea and China were analyzed as potential favorability drivers. Simply put, the suggestion was that when South Koreans feel threatened, they tend to show stronger pro-Americanism. If that were the case, then to correlate low South Korean pro-Americanism to the lower period, it would follow that during that period, South Koreans did not feel threatened. To test North Korea, its threat to South Korea was divided between a conventional and nuclear threat. Arguably, South Koreans have grown more threatened by North Korea's nuclear capability than its conventional one. Conventionally, South Korea's military has significantly more capable equipment, and despite its numerical disadvantage, is an incredibly large force to be reckoned with. What South Korea does not have is an answer to North Korea's nuclear capability, a capability which did not exist in full form until 2006.

The impact of North Korea's conventional threat on South Korean pro-Americanism during the *Lower Period* can be illustrated by a naval clash that occurred in 2002. Following the naval clash, no appreciable gain in pro-American sentiment was seen, but the polling data available was likely flawed in its timing. Just prior to the naval clash, the USFK highway incident occurred, sparking widespread anti-American outrage. To argue that this case study indicated a negative correlation between pro-Americanism and North Korea's conventional threat is difficult as well. Without a poll taken that excludes the emotions of the USFK highway incident, the direct correlation between that case study and South Korean pro-Americanism will remain a mystery. Conventionally, during the *Lower Period* while the case study provides little clarity on varying pro-Americanism, it does at least set a baseline for comparison against the *High Period*. Between the *Lower Period* and the *High Period*, North Korea's conventional threat has arguably decreased in relevance. To be sure, it has remained constant compared to the other variables.

North Korea's nuclear threat is a different story entirely. During the *Lower Period*, North Korea's nuclear capability was still in development. Unfortunately for South Korea,

2006 saw North Korea's first successful nuclear test, which signaled a major change in North Korea's military capabilities. It can be argued that during the *Lower Period*, North Korea's nuclear threat alone was not enough to positively impact South Korean pro-Americanism; however, given the 2007 *Pew* response of 58 percent American favorability in South Korea, a 12-point increase from 2003 (the previous year that polling took place), North Korea's newly illustrated nuclear capability likely played *some* part.

2. The *High Period*

China's threat to South Korea has been increasing slightly in polls over the past two decades but reached its climactic point following China's provoking actions after South Korea's deployment of THAAD. Throughout the *Lower Period*, China did not appear as one of South Korea's largest threats. Following China's economic attacks after the ROK employment of THAAD in 2016, South Korean attitudes shifted. The polling data explored revealed that South Koreans began to view China with more skepticism. Between 2016 and today, South Korean approval of Xi Jinping has decreased from 4.47 out of 10 to 1.99.¹¹³ Additionally, when polled, South Koreans have in recent years placed China as one of their greatest threats, even topping North Korea at times. Given the recency of this relationship, China's existence as an economic and military threat to South Korea cannot be reasonably established before 2016.

Has China's new threat to South Korea played a role in South Korean pro-Americanism? While there is not a poll that asks this explicit question, different polling results were shown to have indicated a rough correlation. When asked who South Koreans should strengthen their ties with, and given a choice between the U.S. and China, they overwhelmingly chose the U.S. in every year after 2016.¹¹⁴ But a poll indicating a response between two choices is hardly indicative of overall pro-American sentiment. What that data show are that South Koreans like America more than they like China. Beyond that, any further declared meaning is a reach. What can be concluded safely is that the Chinese

¹¹³ "Neighbors 2022," Asan.

¹¹⁴ "Neighbors 2022," Asan.

threat to South Korea is a newly realized phenomenon, beginning in 2016, and possibly plays a role in overall South Korean pro-American sentiment.

B. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS REVISITED

1. North Korea Policy Differential

The second hypothesis of this thesis proposed that differences in U.S.–ROK North Korea policy, in combination with other potential political factors, play a role in determining South Korean pro-American sentiment. During the *Lower Period*, the U.S. and ROK North Korea policies could not have been any further separated. Following North Korea’s famine during the *Baseline Period*, President Kim Dae-Jung put forth a cooperative policy that engaged, rather than avoided, positive interactions with North Korea. In the U.S., the Bush administration did exactly the opposite, treating North Korea with overt skepticism and placing them in the famed “axis of evil.” These two policy mismatches contributed significantly to nearly a decade of low ROK pro-Americanism. Straub accentuated the importance of these policy differentials, writing, “it was the U.S. North Korea policy under President George W. Bush that most upset the progressive governments of Presidents Kim Dae-Jung ... and his successor Roh Moo-hyun.”¹¹⁵

The relationship between U.S. and ROK North Korea policy was one that also helped to explain the overall pro-American sentiment during the *Baseline Period*. Prior to the Bush administration, the Clinton administration not only had a positive relationship with its South Korean counterparts, but also agreed on matters considering North Korea. In his final years as president, Clinton “cooperated closely on North Korea policy,” with South Korea, contributing in part to high pro-Americanism in the late 1990s.¹¹⁶ Given the high pro-American sentiment of the *Baseline Period*, the alignment in North Korea policy at the time serves as an early indicator in potential public opinion drivers in South Korea. Clearly, from early on, South Koreans valued domestic policy concerns regarding their threatening northern neighbor. As with each other found variable in this thesis, the very

¹¹⁵ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 115.

¹¹⁶ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 116.

least that can be said is that during the *Baseline Period*, pro-Americanism was high, and U.S.–ROK North Korea policy was aligned.

Finally, the *High Period* illustrated the most important results surrounding U.S.–ROK policy differentials. Throughout this period, the U.S. and ROK worked closely on all matters concerning North Korea. Whether North Korea was being held at arm’s length under the Obama/Lee administrations, or it was being cooperated with as was seen under the Moon/Trump administrations, in each year during the *High Period* the U.S. and ROK worked together to address the North Korean issue. This finding was not new and was posited by Straub and others years ago; however, only in the post-2017 years was the strength of the policy-alignment argument really tested. Prior to 2017, North Korea policy mismatches occurred when a progressive president held office in South Korea (Kim/Roh), and alignment occurred when a conservative held office. From 2017–2022, progressive Moon Jae-in broke the mold, aligning with the U.S. on a North Korean issue that even Straub predicted might cause problems.¹¹⁷ Given that the only time period that North Korean policy misalignment occurred was during the *Lower Period*, which was also the only period of low pro-Americanism in South Korea, it can be reasonably argued that U.S. North Korean policy misalignment with South Korea contributes directly to decreases in ROK pro-American sentiment.

2. The Iraq War

The Iraq War was highly controversial on a global scale. For South Koreans, the war was more than just controversial, it was personal. Being a conscript state, every South Korean when they come of age will have to serve in its military. If South Korea is not at war, that fact alone does little to strike fear in a growing teenager or parent. But if South Korea is actively at or supporting someone else’s war, serving in the military gains new meaning. South Koreans never supported the Iraq War, going as far as to call it “an immoral and illegal invasion.”¹¹⁸ But despite South Korean disapproval of the war, serving the needs of its most important alliance member, the U.S., proved a more important task to

¹¹⁷ Straub, *Anti-Americanism*, 215.

¹¹⁸ Lee, “Faustian,” 492.

overcome. The Iraq War and its distaste among the South Korean public drove South Korean sentiment for the duration of its involvement. South Korea sent the first non-combat troops to Iraq in 2003 and stopped contributing soldiers to the U.S. conflict in 2008 when the war ended. The war took place among other contributing factors toward pro-American sentiment, so at most it can be stated that the war occurred during the *Lower Period* and likely played some role in variable pro-American sentiment. The reasoning for this finding had little to do with the nature of war itself, but rather to its controversiality. The Iraq War was not South Korea's to fight, nor in the eyes of many was it a war that any should have fought. With such low approval, its better described as a controversial U.S. state action that South Korea's took offense to. It was also a controversial state action that was absent from the *High Period*, indicating that absent a controversial state action, higher pro-American sentiment in South Korea can be expected.

3. Other Political Considerations

The remaining political considerations that were explored in hopes of establishing factors in South Korean pro-American sentiment included the political parties holding office in South Korea and U.S. presidential approval rating. In each case, trend analysis would have shown that prior to 2017, progressive parties in South Korea were associated with overall low pro-American sentiment, while conservatives were the opposite. In 2017, when progressive President Moon Jae-in was elected president, there was no appreciable decline in South Korean pro-American sentiment. In fact, except for 2020, for the duration of President Moon's administration, South Korean pro-Americanism remained at its high levels from the previous administration. What might have been a trend before 2017 was quickly disproven, indicating that something else held heavier weight in determining South Korean pro-Americanism.

U.S. presidential approval ratings followed a similar trend. Though data is lacking before the *Lower Period*, Clinton's close relationship with President Kim and his predecessor, along with the two's close North Korea policy indication indicate that Clinton's approval in South Korea was likely high. Of course, that is purely a guess based on the other trends seen in this thesis, so only the data from the *Lower* and *High* periods

was considered. Until 2017, the trend showed that low presidential approval ratings in South Korea contributed to low pro-Americanism, and vice versa. The Trump administration, however, changed that trend as his personal favorability in South Korea never broached 50 percent despite pro-Americanism averaging 72.5 percent over the same period.¹¹⁹ Similar to which party held office in South Korea, the relationship between South Korean pro-Americanism and U.S. approval rating only held water until 2017. If the presidential approval did not matter, something else must have.

C. THE FINDINGS ILLUSTRATED

In combination of all the thesis findings, Figure 14 was created to illustrate each of the found South Korean pro-American variables directly against the Pew data for overall U.S. favorability. The *Lower Period* was highlighted in red, and the *High Period* was highlighted in green. Absent data for the *Baseline Period*, it was not included in this final chart. Overall South Korean pro-American sentiment is displayed as either neutral (50-60 percent), bad (less than 50 percent), or good (60 percent and above) in a yellow, red, green scheme respectively. What the findings show is that absent a controversial U.S. state action, so long as North Korea policy is aligned between the U.S. and South Korea, high pro-American sentiment is likely. Other findings that are less conclusive are the addition of the Chinese threat in the *High Period* along with the North Korean nuclear threat that exists throughout the *High Period* while being nearly entirely absent for the *Lower Period*. In the presence of the stronger factors of North Korean policy alignment and U.S. controversial state action, the correlation between either the North Korean nuclear threat and the Chinese threat are diluted. None of the variables should be taken in isolation, as determinants of South Korean pro-Americanism are varied and complicated. As a tool, this chart shows just how complicated determinants of South Korean favorability can be.

¹¹⁹ Wike et al., “America’s Image.”

Year	2000	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
NK Conventional	Baseline	Yeongpyeong Naval Clash	Constant	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Cheonan	Baseline
NK Nuclear	Developing	Developing	Developing	Developing	Developing	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed
China Threat	Increasing (low)	Increasing (low)	Increasing (low)	Increasing (low)	Increasing (low)	Increasing (low)	Increasing (low)	Increasing (medium)	Increasing (medium)	Increasing (medium)	Increasing (medium)
NK Policy Alignment	Non-Aligned	Non-Aligned	Non-Aligned	Non-Aligned	Non-Aligned	Non-Aligned	Non-Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned
U.S. Controversial State Action (SK Involvement)	Absent	Iraq War / USFK Highway	Iraq War	Iraq War	Iraq War	Iraq War	Iraq War	Iraq War / US Beef Imports	Absent	Absent	Absent
SK Presidential Party	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative
U.S. Presidential Approval			36				22	30 (Bush)	81	75	
Overall SK U.S. Favorability	58	52		46			58	70	78	79	
Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	
NK Conventional	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	Baseline	
NK Nuclear	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	Developed	
China Threat	Increasing (medium)	Increasing (medium)	Increasing (medium)	Increasing (medium)	Increasing (high)	Increasing (high)	Increasing (high)	Increasing (high)	Increasing (high)	Increasing (high)	
NK Policy Alignment	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	Aligned	
U.S. Controversial State Action (SK Involvement)	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	Absent	
SK Presidential Party	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative	Conservative	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	Progressive	
U.S. Presidential Approval		77	84	88		17	44	46	17	73	
Overall SK U.S. Favorability		78	82	84		75	80	77	59	77	

Figure 14. Thesis Findings

D. SUGGESTIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

South Korean overall pro-Americanism is, and will remain, the standard so long as the U.S. continues to work with, rather than against, South Korea politically. The U.S.–ROK alliance is incredibly important for both states. For South Korea, the U.S. serves as a continuous, present, deterrence against North Korean nuclear aggression. For the U.S., military presence in South Korea, much like in Japan, serves as a means both of preserving precious alliances as well as to keep China’s growing military at arms-length. What this thesis shows is that, all-else-equal, South Korean pro-Americanism rises only in situations that are unlikely to occur in the near future. The relationship survived the incredibly low approval of President Trump *because* of his administration’s North Korea policy. In the future, policymakers ought to keep this in mind. North Korea, at its least, is a South Korean problem. How to handle matter regarding North Korea *should* be a South Korean led effort, and if South Korea embarks on a policy of cooperation with its northern neighbor, the U.S. should follow suit.

Outside of the arguments presented in this thesis there is work left to be done. There are potential cultural factors that have brought the U.S. and ROK closer together in recent years. For example, South Korea’s soft power strategy of Korean media export, now known

as Hallyu, began in China in the 1990s.¹²⁰ In the earliest years of Hallyu, ROK cultural exports were widely accepted in China, but in recent years an increasing anti-Hallyu movement has emerged in China. This movement began in the online community, and resulting from its growth, “the anti-Korean nationalism in Chinese online community has expanded to discussions on territorial disputes alleged by nationalists.”¹²¹ Counter to the expanded anti-Hallyu movement in China has been the increasing growth of South Korea’s cultural presence in the U.S. Whether it is the newly seen K-pop festivals in Los Angeles, “Parasite” winning the Oscar’s Best Picture, or “Squid Games” reaching the number one spot on Netflix’s “most-watched” series in America, Korean cultural acceptance is increasingly high in the U.S. Arguably, there could be a relationship between China’s increasing ROK cultural rejection, and increasing acceptance in the U.S. To date, no studies have been conducted analyzing this relationship (if there is one).

Similarly, the ROK-Japan relationship and its impact on U.S.–ROK relations is another area to be explored. Whether the surges of anti-Americanism seen in the *Lower Period* were indicative of a greater societal sentiment toward the U.S., or not, it is clear that in today’s world, South Korea is a pro-American society. Moving forward, further studies on this positive relationship and on maintaining it should be conducted. In the past, it took anti-American protests to spring forth academic research. Rather than researching after the fact, efforts should be made to sustain the U.S.–ROK relationship and move it into a cooperative future like the last 14 years of alliance history.

¹²⁰ Meicheng Sun, and Kai Khiun Liew, “Analog Hallyu: Historicizing K-Pop Formations in China,” *Global Media and China* 4, no. 4 (December 1, 2019): 419.

¹²¹ Lu Chen, “The Emergence of the Anti-Hallyu Movement in China,” *Media, Culture & Society* 39, no. 3 (April 1, 2017): 387.

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