



SOUTH KOREAN VIEWS ON THE U.S. REBALANCE TO ASIA

By Karl Friedhoff

Abstract

The U.S. rebalance to Asia continues to stir debate in South Korea. This debate has thus far been carried out via the discussion of the political elite on what the U.S. initiative means for Korea. However, the perceptions of the general public on the U.S. rebalance have not yet been investigated. This paper seeks to fill that void. Understanding public opinion in South Korea is of critical importance as it can be volatile and has the power to shape approaches to foreign policy. The findings of the paper present a dilemma for the United States. The South Korean public is ambivalent on the U.S. pivot with only a slim majority in support. The rebalance is primarily viewed through a security lens and is seen as a way to blunt the threat of North Korea. However, any attempt to emphasize this aspect of the initiative may ultimately undermine its support as it will exacerbate fears of increased competition and potential conflict with China. This paper offers a snapshot of Korean public opinion one year after the launch of the U.S. rebalance to Asia, and captures a public that already perceives the nuance of the complexities of region.

Key words: *pivot to Asia, South Korea, public opinion, U.S. rebalance*

Introduction

No country finds itself in a more difficult position due to the U.S. pivot to Asia than South Korea.¹ The U.S. initiative created a flurry of debate and speculation on both its scope and intent and comes at a sensitive time for the region. A rising China, a Japan long perceived to be—but perhaps no longer—in decline, an ascendant South Korea, and an increasingly threatening North Korea combine to create one of the most complex security situations in the world. While the U.S. rebalance is sometimes thought to be a monolithic construct—a slow-moving but irreversible turn in American diplomacy—that has not been the case thus far. Instead, it moves in fits and starts, and opinion leaders in Korea continue to watch its progress—and its sometimes perceived lack thereof—closely.

The U.S. rebalance means more than just increased U.S. focus on the region. It also brings with it the possibility of increased competition and conflict—a worrying prospect for Korea. The Korean Peninsula has been the battleground for major powers before, and a repeat performance, just as Korea is truly beginning to enjoy its newfound affluence and exert its newfound influence, is the cause of much handwringing in Seoul.

Of course, this delicate position is clearly understood and well discussed among the political elite in Korea. The country finds itself between the United States—its closest ally for the past sixty years—and a rising China—the country many in Korea see becoming the most influential country in the world in the near future. The effort to strike a balanced diplomacy between the United States and China was a clear goal for the Park administration during its first year in office. But questions remain

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on how the Korean public perceives the position of the country as tensions in the region become more serious.

Understanding public opinion on critical foreign policy issues is especially important in Korea. It can be volatile, it has the ability to blunt foreign policy options and initiatives, and it can swing elections.² Thus, it is a critical element in alliance management issues for Korea and the United States.

Understanding the drivers of Korean public opinion towards the rebalance and its underlying concerns can better help the United States to communicate its policy objectives to a sometimes skeptical Korean public. Many remain unconvinced that the rebalance to Asia is not aimed at containing China, despite repeated U.S. claims to that effect.

While the Korea-U.S. alliance is nearly unanimously seen as a necessity, only a slim majority state support for the U.S. pivot. This paper investigates, via logit regression analysis, the drivers of support for and opposition to the U.S. initiative. Its findings offer the first insights into the Korean public’s thinking on the pivot, and set the terms for how the pivot may be viewed in the future.

Data & Analysis

The data employed in this paper is drawn from the Asan Institute’s 2012 Annual Survey. The survey was conducted by Media

Research from September 25 through November 1, 2012. It consisted of 1,500 respondents selected using the proportionate quota and systematic sampling method. Respondents were first selected via random digit dialing using mobile and landline telephones. Those that agreed to participate then completed the survey online. The margin of error was ±2.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

In analyzing the data, a number of independent variables were selected as outlined in a subsequent section. Because the dependent variable investigated is binary—either the respondent supported the pivot or did not—logit regression analysis was used to identify the significant factors in terms of odds ratios.

Korean Views on the Region

United States

In the sixty years since its formation, the Korea-U.S. alliance has become much more than a military alliance, although that remains an important component.³ The two countries have come to share the common values of democracy, free markets, and human rights as well as common interests in the region and the world. Thus, it is no surprise that the United States has consistently been rated as the most favorable among countries included in public opinion surveys conducted by the Asan Institute since 2010 (Figure 1).⁴

Figure 1: Country Favorability⁵



Source: Kim & Friedhoff



Observers of Korea know that public sentiment in the country can be volatile. While Figure 1 illustrates that volatility in the decline in favorability of Japan since 2010 in response to ongoing tensions, there is no better example of that volatility than attitudes towards the United States over the past decade.

In late 2002, two middle school girls were killed by a U.S. armored vehicle as it returned from military exercises. The circumstance surrounding the deaths led to mass demonstrations and a surge in anti-American sentiment throughout the country, and helped propel Roh Moo-hyun to victory in the 2002 presidential election.⁶

Surges in anti-Americanism are primed by the fact that Koreans hold conflicting views of the United States. While more than three-quarters of the Korean public state that it was economic aid provided by the United States that led to Korea’s economic development, nearly two-thirds identify the United States as responsible for dividing the Korean Peninsula.⁷

Despite these conflicting perceptions, the anti-American sentiment of a decade ago is now a distant memory. Support for the alliance is currently at one of the highest points in its history—94 percent of Koreans cited the Korea-U.S. alliance as being a necessity in 2012.⁸ Moreover, support for the alliance is consistent across all age cohorts and across the political spectrum. As in other countries, Korea is now politically polarized, and to see broad agreement on any issue is rare. Among self-identified conservatives, 98 percent cited the alliance as necessity while 88 percent of self-identified progressives agreed.

With the incredibly high support for the alliance, and the threats emanating from a hostile North Korea, it would be safe to assume that a strong majority also supports the U.S. rebalance to Asia. After all, this pivot comes at a time when the United States faces increasing fiscal uncertainty, and there is doubt about the ability of the United States to meet its commitments in East Asia as well as its willingness to defend Korea.⁹ An increased focus on

the region by the United States should theoretically help to ease those doubts, and thus be highly supported. That, however, is not the case—only 54.8 percent support the pivot (Figure 2).

Regional Relations

To put it mildly, relations in Northeast Asia are complicated. While the United States continues to be Korea’s most important security and diplomatic partner, it is no longer its largest economic partner. That role has been filled by China since 2004.¹⁰ However, China continues to support North Korea—South Korea’s primary security threat. Then there is Japan. While Japan and Korea are tied together through mutual alliances with the United States, they spar regularly over the Dokdo/Takeshima islets, the comfort women issue, and history textbooks. Meanwhile, there is no love lost between Japan and China, and the two have inched closer to open hostilities in their dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands.

All of this makes the case of China an interesting one for Korean public opinion. China offers Korean companies a massive, nearby export market and the two countries are close to concluding a free trade agreement.¹¹ Yet, some aspects of China’s rise remain worrying. In particular, China’s increasing military power carries with it the potential to one day challenge the United States,¹² putting South Korea squarely between its two most important partners.

Figure 2: Support for the U.S. Rebalance to Asia

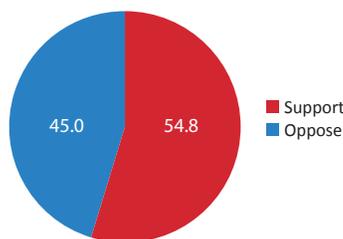
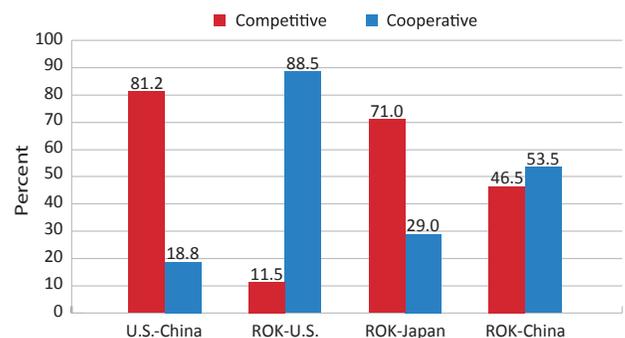


Figure 3: Regional Relations



Source: Kim & Friedhoff

As Figure 3 illustrates, the Korean public perceives these regional complexities. While the Korea-U.S. relationship is judged to be highly cooperative, the U.S.-China relationship is seen as being

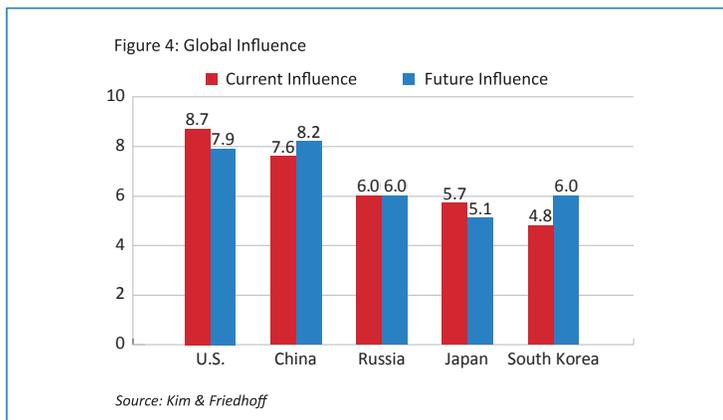


equally competitive. Meanwhile, South Korea's relationship with China is uncertain. While 53.5 percent saw the relationship as cooperative, 46.5 percent saw it as competitive.¹³

Reorganization of the Region

The rise of China coupled with U.S. financial uncertainty has combined to create room for Koreans to entertain the idea of a major reorganization of the region. While the United States is currently seen as the single most influential country on global affairs, in ten years time Koreans expect that China's influence will eclipse that of the United States. But this is not the only change Koreans see taking place.

In what is a sign of the dominant narrative in Korea—that of a Japan in decline and a Korea on the rise—Koreans expect the influence of Korea to surpass that of Japan in the next decade (Figure 4).¹⁴



Independent Variable Selection

Attitudes towards the United States in general—measured via its favorability—as well as support for the Korea-U.S. alliance are expected to be the strongest factors in predicting a respondent's support for the pivot. This relationship draws on the country-of-origin effect¹⁵ and country image literature.¹⁶ While the pivot is not a manufactured good, it is a major U.S. initiative that the Obama administration has crafted, promoted, and defended against criticism.¹⁷ Also significant will be perception that the United States is ready to defend Korea measured by belief that the United States would retaliate in-kind to a North Korean nuclear attack on South Korea.

H1: Support for the Korea-U.S. alliance, positive attitudes towards the United States itself—measured by its favorability—and perceptions that the United States is ready to defend Korea will have a significant positive effect on support for the rebalance.

Of course, United States officials have clearly stated that the pivot is not aimed at any one country.¹⁸ This is generally meant to allay fears that it is an attempt to contain China, but many of the rebalance's most conspicuous developments have been driven by threats emanating from North Korea. Missile defense systems were increased along the west coast of the United States following the early 2013 tensions on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁹ In early 2014, it was announced that a mechanized infantry battalion would be stationed north of Seoul.²⁰ While these events occurred after the 2012 survey was conducted, they are emblematic of ongoing events involving North Korea and the response elicited from the United States. Thus, the pivot should be seen as further security against North Korean threats.

However, there are also those in South Korea that hold relatively more positive attitudes towards North Korea. While these views came under harsh attack in 2013, they had not come under that kind of scrutiny in 2012. Regardless, favorable attitudes toward North Korea are expected to negatively affect support for the pivot.

H2: The possibility of the North using a nuclear weapon against the South will have a significant positive effect on support the pivot. Increased favorability of North Korea will have a significant negative effect on support.

In 2012, the narrative that the U.S. rebalance to Asia may force Korea to choose between the United States and China had already emerged in the Korean media.²¹ That narrative intensified throughout 2013 as the Park Geun-hye administration sought to rekindle Korea-Sino ties that had suffered under Lee Myung-bak. Even without the benefit of that intensification in 2013, it was expected that positive attitudes toward China would significantly decrease support for the pivot as those more favorably disposed toward China feared increased competition and tensions in the region.

H3: Positive attitudes towards China, measured by its favorability, will have a significant negative effect on support for the pivot.

There have been no suggestions within the media or elsewhere that the U.S. rebalance is an initiative that will be carried out quickly. As it unfolds, there is a broad expectation in Korea, as



shown in the data, for China to become a more influential player on global affairs than the United States in ten years time. If a respondent expects this to be the case, he or she will be less likely to support the pivot.

H4: Because the pivot is understood to be a long-term policy directive, the current influence of both the United States and China on global affairs will be statistically insignificant. Expectations of the future influence of both countries will be significant. Increased expectations for the future influence of the United States will increase the odds of support for the pivot. Elevated expectations for the future influence of China will significantly decrease the odds of support.

Finally, three demographic factors are included—self-identified ideological perspective, gender, and age. It is often thought that ideological perspective and age are closely related in Korea. However, the link between these two is often overestimated. In the data, the two are only weakly correlated, with a -0.22 correlation coefficient.²² For gender, it is theorized that men will be more likely to support the pivot than will women due to Korea's mandatory military service for men. Because Korea's conservatives consistently demonstrate stronger support for the U.S. alliance, it is expected that they will also be significantly more likely to support the rebalance.

H5: Gender, age, and self-identified ideological perspective are all expected to be statistically significant factors. While ideological perspective will be inversely related to support for the pivot, gender and age will be increase support for the pivot.

Drivers of Korean Public Support for the U.S. Rebalance to Asia

What emerges from the logit regression analysis of the data is a complexity that mirrors the perceived complexities of the region itself. Rather than being overly deterministic, the Korean public adopted a nuanced view of the pivot just one year after its announcement. This nuance shed light on the complexities and difficulties the United States faces in gaining Korean public support for the U.S. rebalance to Asia.

As predicted, attitudes towards the Korea-U.S. alliance itself were the most powerful predictor (at the $p < 0.01$ level) of attitudes towards the U.S. rebalance with an odds ratio of 2.10. (See Appendix 1 for full results.) That is, for every one point

score increase on support for the alliance (on a 4-point scale), the likelihood of supporting the rebalance increased 2.10 times. Also significant at the same level was the general favorability of the United States. However, with an odds ratio of 1.28, this was weaker than expected. Taken together, these results suggest that the Korean public sees the pivot through the lens of security, and does not strongly factor in the “soft issues” which the multi-dimensional factor of country favorability encompasses.²³

One of the core security concerns for South Korea is, of course, North Korea. Nuclear tests, missiles tests, kinetic provocations, and continued verbal threats play an important role in creating the negativity in that relationship. Despite continued assurances from the United States that it remains committed to the defense of the South and that extended deterrence is firmly in place,²⁴ concern remains.²⁵ The data suggest that continuing to reassure with regards to the U.S. nuclear umbrella may pay dividends in support for the U.S. pivot.

When respondents were asked if the United States would respond in-kind to a North Korean nuclear strike on South Korea, only 47.9 percent thought the United States would do so. However, there was a statistically significant positive link between the two. On a 4-point scale, for every one point increase in confidence that the U.S. would retaliate in-kind, the likelihood of support for the pivot increased 1.18 times (significant at the $p < .05$ level). At the same time, an increased perceived threat of the North's nuclear weapons—53 percent stated the North would use such weapons against the South in a war—was also associated with increased support for the pivot. A one point increase in perceived threat (on a 4-point scale) increased the likelihood of support 1.22 times (at the $p < .01$ level). This serves as further strong evidence that the U.S. pivot is viewed primarily through the security lens, and is partially seen as a way to blunt the threat posed by North Korea.

But attitudes in South Korea toward North Korea are not uniform. Self-identified progressives are much more likely than their conservative counterparts to cite North Korea as being favorable. Among the former, the North's favorability rating was 4.1. Among the latter, that number was 2.4. Attitudes on the North also proved to be of significance (at the $p < .01$ level) with regard to the U.S. rebalance. A more favorable attitude toward North Korea made a respondent 0.92 times less likely to support the pivot.²⁶ This finding fits into the larger narrative that the progressive bloc in Korea believes that the United States hinders inter-Korean relations.²⁷



Support for the pivot being framed around security issues is a double-edged sword, however. Increased confidence in the U.S. nuclear umbrella, the Korea-U.S. alliance, and an increased threat perception of the North using a nuclear weapon against the South are all associated with increased support for the U.S. pivot to Asia. But increased emphasis on these aspects of the pivot will enflame Korean concerns that it will be caught between the United States and China as China continues its rise and the pivot strengthens.

But this concern is not one that is playing out in the short-term. Neither the current influence of the United States or China on global affairs was a statistically significant factor in predicting support for the U.S. rebalance. But there is concern in the long-term. While the influence of the United States a decade from now was also insignificant as a predictor, the perceived future of influence of China exhibited a strong negative effect on support for the U.S. pivot to Asia. For every one point increase in the perceived future influence of China (on a 0 to 10 scale), a respondent was 0.84 times less likely to support the pivot (significant at the $p < .05$ level). This was by far the strongest negative independent variable.

The U.S. Rebalance Moving Forward

Omitted from the paper thus far is any serious mention of Japan and its possible effect on attitudes toward the pivot. While data on Japan is available within the dataset, in none of the regression analyses performed was any variable related to Japan shown to be a significant factor in predicting support or opposition to the pivot. At the time the survey was conducted, attitudes toward Japan were certainly chilly, but they had not yet reached the nadir of late 2013. Those increased tensions may make Japan a significant factor in future considerations for the Korean public. If this were the case, it would add considerable backing to the view that the Korean public does indeed perceive Japan as a real threat as the findings here demonstrate that the U.S. rebalance is already seen through the lens of security.

The concern among the Korean public that the country is being trapped between two powers will only grow in the future. Each security development that drives the pivot forward will reassure South Korea vis-à-vis North Korea, but will exacerbate worries about the possibility of regional tension and conflict. This will put a premium on the ability of the United States to clearly communicate its intentions to all of the countries in the region.

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To limit the perception that the rebalance is overly focused on the hard power of the military, the United States will likely begin to focus much more on the expected economic benefits for all involved of its increased attention to the region. However, it is unclear if this will be effective. Throughout the region, business has long been separated from politics. This is nowhere more obvious than in East Asia. Emphasizing economics and trade as part of the U.S. rebalance re-ties economic issues directly to a specific policy initiative. Because there is evidence that the rebalance is already being seen through the security lens, a focus on the economic side may increase skepticism about the true goal of the U.S. rebalance. How issues are framed matters and can often have unintended consequences²⁸

Conclusion

The findings presented here offer a snapshot of Korean attitudes towards the U.S. rebalance to Asia. The U.S. initiative is a complicated undertaking at a complicated time in a complicated region. But just one year into the pivot, the Korean public was already grasping the nuance of the implications of the pivot for Korea. Of course, the drivers of support and opposition to the pivot will shift along with future developments.

This paper offers no easy answers for the United States as it seeks to better inform the countries in the region on the intentions of its increased focus on Asia. Media coverage of the ongoing developments will inevitably focus on the increased military presence in the region, creating a jarring dissonance with U.S. statements that its intent in the region is benign. Meanwhile, South Koreans are ambivalent about the U.S. pivot. The increased



security assurance it brings is welcome, but worries will persist that it will bring the increased chance of conflict with China, potentially forcing Korea to choose between its main security partner and its biggest trade partner.

Such worries are likely not widely shared by the current political elite, as the relationship with the United States is seen as increasingly important given the current complexities of the region. However, as those who are currently in their thirties and forties—the most politically progressive segments of Korean society—advance into positions of power and influence, the discussion of recalibrating Korea’s relationship with the United States could become more serious. This serves as a stark reminder that neither side in the Korea-U.S. alliance should take the current positive attitudes toward the United States for granted. Attitudes can shift, and often quickly so. Managing unforeseen events will prove the most important factor in maintaining current positive attitudes. Maintaining those current positive attitudes will remain the single most important factor in keeping the public on board with the long-term strategic goal of the U.S. rebalance to Asia.

Survey Methodology

Annual Survey 2010: The Asan Annual Survey 2010 was conducted from August 16 to September 17, 2010 by Media Research. The sample size was 2,000 and it was a Mixed-Mode survey employing RDD for mobile phones and an online survey. The margin of error is ± 2.2 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

Annual Survey 2011: The Asan Annual Survey 2011 was conducted from August 26 to October 4, 2011 by EmBrain. The sample size was 2,000 and it was a Mixed-Mode survey employing RDD for mobile and landline telephones. The margin of error is ± 2.2 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

Annual Survey 2012: The Asan Annual Survey 2012 was conducted in two parts. The sample was recruited from September 5-14, 2012 via RDD for mobile and landline telephones. The data was gathered from September 25-November 1, 2012 via an online survey. The sample size was 1,500 and the margin of error is ± 2.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. The survey was conducted by Media Research.

Appendix 1: Drivers of Korean Public Support/Opposition for the U.S. Pivot to Asia

	Odds Ratio	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
North Nuclear Attack	1.18**	2.55	0.94	1	4
U.S. Nuclear Response to North Korea First Use	1.18*	2.43	0.87	1	4
U.S. Alliance	2.09**	3.24	0.59	1	4
U.S. Favorability	1.27**	5.96	2.31	0	10
China Favorability	1.02	3.94	2.09	0	10
N. Korea Favorability	0.91**	3.32	2.39	0	10
U.S. Current Influence	0.93	8.73	1.68	0	10
China Current Influence	1.09	7.62	1.97	0	10
U.S. Future Influence	1.03	7.88	1.91	0	10
China Future Influence	0.84**	8.16	1.89	0	10
Gender	1.44**			0	1
Age	0.99*	44.96	15.06	19	89
Ideology	0.93**	5.18	2.13	0	10

N=1500

**p < .05 *p < .01



Endnotes

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