

Americans Remain Committed to South Korea, View North Korea as an Adversary

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Under the Biden administration, US relations with South Korea have returned to more solid ground. The May summit between President Joseph Biden and President Moon Jae-in was seen as [a success](#), and negotiations over costs for stationing US troops in Korea were [resolved](#). However, North Korea's [launch](#) of a long-range cruise missile and subsequent [ballistic missile test](#) might signal a new phase of escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey finds the American public continues to hold positive views of South Korea, while majorities of Americans identify North Korea as an adversary. But while Americans support using US troops to defend South Korea, there is little support for taking military action to eliminate North Korea's nuclear program.

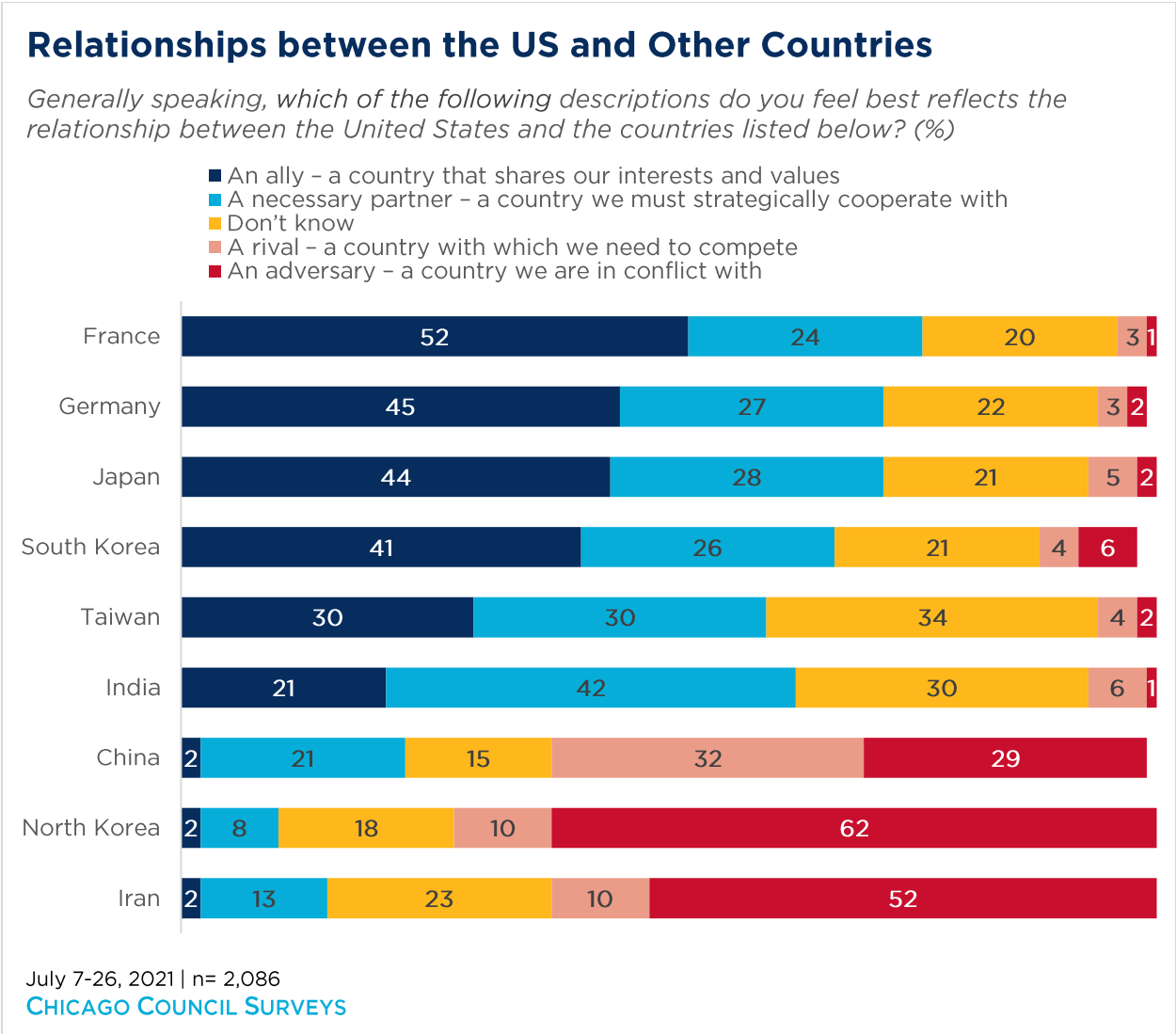
Key Findings

- Two-thirds of Americans (67%) identify South Korea as either an ally (41%) or a partner (26%). Only four countries in the survey are identified as an ally by more Americans—France (52%), Germany (45%), and Japan (44%).
- Six in ten (62%) identify North Korea as an adversary—the highest of any country included in the survey. A further 10 percent say North Korea is a rival.
- A majority of Americans (63%) hold favorable views of South Korea's President Moon Jae-in. Just 5 percent hold favorable views of North Korea's Kim Jong Un, with 93 percent viewing him unfavorably.
- In 2021, 63 percent of Americans support defending South Korea if North Korea invades. This is in line with the record high of 64 percent in 2018.
- In dealing with North Korea, there is strong support to negotiate a formal peace agreement but only if North Korea agrees to suspend its nuclear weapons program (76%). If North Korea keeps its nuclear weapons, support for a formal peace agreement drops to 24 percent.
- One-third (35%) of Americans support taking military action to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

The 2021 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

Majority of Americans Consider South Korea an Ally or Partner

South Korea has been a treaty ally of the United States since 1953. Since that time, alliance leaders claim that the relationship has grown beyond mutual security interests and now incorporates values such as a commitment to democracy and human rights. For the American public, this broader view of the alliance seems to have taken hold. A plurality of Americans (41%) identify South Korea as an ally—a country that shares US interests and values, and a further 26 percent say South Korea is a necessary partner. This makes South Korea one of only four countries included in the survey to be identified as an ally by more than four in 10 Americans.¹ There is virtually no difference between Democrats (40%) and Republicans (39%), and the results suggest that South Korea is one of the most important US allies.



¹ The other countries are France (52%), Germany (45%), and Japan (44%).

In South Korea, too, this more comprehensive view of the alliance seems to be accepted. In a [survey conducted in March 2021](#), 54 percent of the South Korean public said the alliance with the United States was based on the security interests of both countries and on shared values such as democracy and human rights. On this, there were virtually no gaps based on generation or on party identification. Among those who support South Korea's Democratic Party, 53 percent said the alliance was based on both security and democracy and human rights, and that number was 58 percent among those who support the People's Power Party.

Publics in both countries also express favorable views of one another. In South Korea, views of the United States remain positive, with the United States receiving a mean favorability score of 6.0 on a 0-10 scale, where 0 represents least favorable. Meanwhile, Japan received a mean score of 3.2, China 3.1, and North Korea 2.8.

In the [March 2021 survey in the United States](#), Americans gave South Korea a mean score of 60 on a 0-100 scale, where 0 represents a very unfavorable view and 100 a very favorable view. That is unchanged from 2020 and remains the highest recording yet for South Korea's favorability. The results from the July 2021 Chicago Council Survey find that these warm feelings extend to South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Nearly two-thirds of Americans (63%) hold favorable views of Moon—down slightly from 67 percent in 2018. His favorability ratings among Americans are also largely bipartisan, with 61 percent of Republicans and 66 percent of Democrats in agreement. But these views are more likely based on overall favorable views of South Korea rather than views of Moon himself.²

But even as favorability of South Korea remains at record highs, the perceived influence of Seoul has declined among the American public over the past two years. In 2021, Americans rate South Korea's perceived influence in the world at a mean of 4.5 on a 0-10 scale, where 0 represents no influence at all. This is down from 5.0 in 2019 but above the low of 4.4 recorded in 2012.

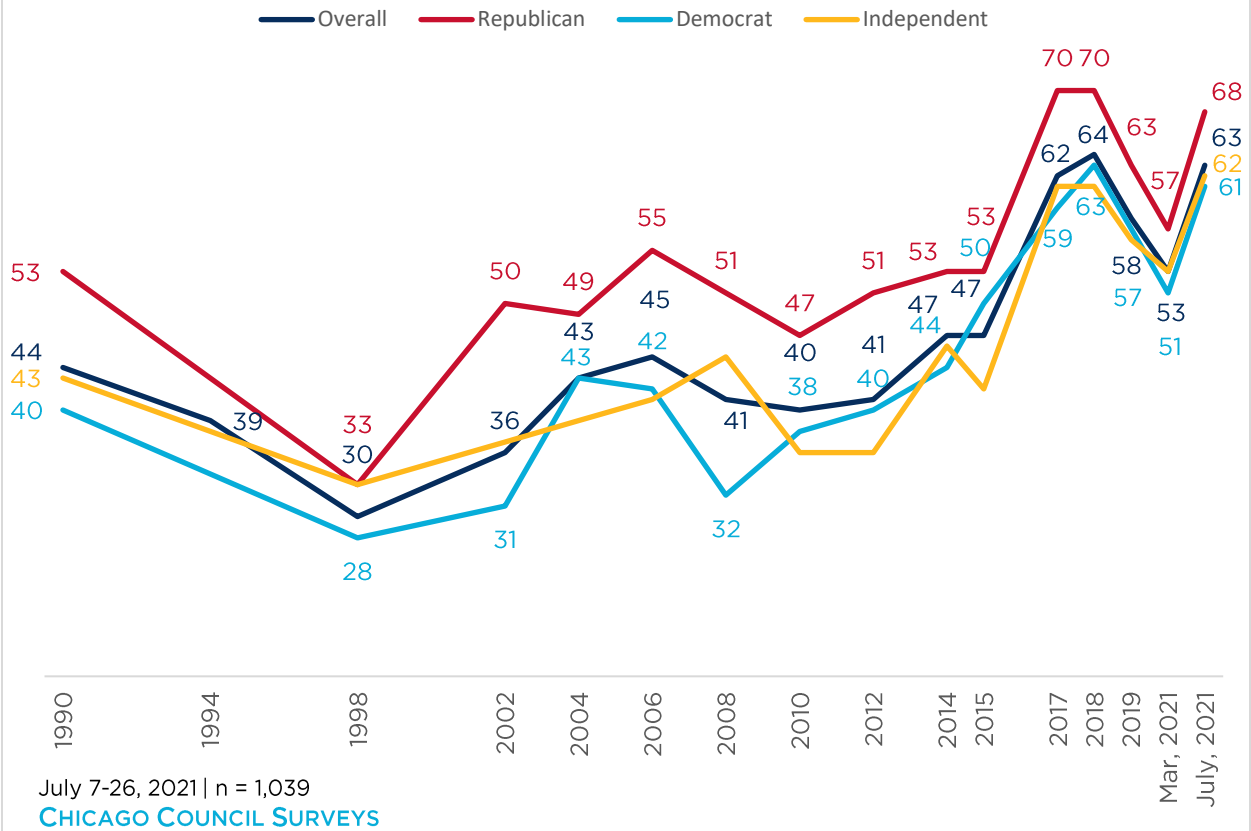
Americans Remain Ready to Defend South Korea

The US-South Korea alliance comes with a commitment from the United States to defend South Korea should it come under attack. [Deadly provocations](#) in the past did not elicit a military response from the United States or South Korea. But should a more threatening scenario arise, a majority of Americans (63%) support using US forces to defend South Korea if North Korea invades. This is up from 58 percent in 2020 and just below the record high 64 percent in 2018, when "[Fire and Fury](#)" tensions were at their peak. And importantly, that support is bipartisan—as it has been in years past—with 68 percent of Republicans and 61 percent of Democrats in favor.

² Those positive views also extend to Korean immigrants. Three-quarters of Americans (77%) report holding positive views of Korean immigrants in the United States, up from 67 percent in 2016.

Use of US Troops in Defense of South Korea

There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops: If North Korea invaded South Korea (% favor)



This survey also included an experiment that replaced the word “invaded” in the hypothetical scenario with the word “attacked.” This was to test if framing North Korean aggression as an invasion—which implies North Korean forces entering South Korea—made it more likely that the American public would support defending South Korea. An attack, on the other hand, covers a range of more limited provocations and might reduce support among the American public to defend South Korea. Despite this change in wording to the scenario, American support to defend South Korea did not waiver. When framed as a North Korean attack, 62 support defending South Korea.

The American public also remains supportive of a US troop presence in South Korea. Two-thirds (66%) supported maintaining long-term military bases in South Korea in the March 2021 survey, and Democrats (65%) and Republicans (70%) agree.

South Korean attitudes toward the US military presence in South Korea remain robust. Multiple [surveys](#) have shown strong support among South Koreans for the

long-term presence of US troops in the country. Moreover, nearly seven in 10 (68%) say the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific should be maintained, while 15 percent wanted it to be increased (versus 15 percent that prefer it to be decreased). One reason for that support: nearly three-quarters (74%) say the US military presence in the Asia-Pacific increases stability in the region. Those attitudes are highly consistent across age cohorts and among partisans: 68 percent of Korea's Democratic Party supporters and 85 percent of those who support the People's Power Party agree the presence increases stability.

Americans Prefer Diplomacy with North Korea

The Biden administration continues to say it is ready to meet North Korean delegates without preconditions to begin a new round of negotiations aimed at reigning in North Korea's nuclear weapons program. To date there has been no progress on that front. While North Korea has refrained from ballistic missile and nuclear tests since 2017, its September launch of a long-range cruise missile, which may be capable of carrying a nuclear warhead, might signal the start a new spiral in tensions. The March 2021 survey was conducted before the recent cruise and ballistic missile test, and North Korea had been largely absent from the headlines throughout 2020 and the first half of 2021. Accordingly, at that point, just 59 percent of Americans identified North Korea's nuclear program as a critical threat. While this number is up from 2020, when 51 percent saw the issue as a critical threat, it remains well below the high of 75 percent recorded in 2017.

One key element in the debate over ways to further diplomacy with North Korea is signing a peace agreement that would formally end the Korean War, possibly paving the way for future negotiations.

But the American public has conditions in negotiating a formal peace agreement to end the Korean War. A majority of Americans (76%) support formally ending it, but only if North Korea suspends its nuclear weapons program. Just 24 percent of the American public supports a formal peace agreement if it allows North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons.

Dealing with North Korea				
<i>Please tell me whether you would support or oppose each of the following kinds of US actions in its relations with North Korea: (% support)</i>				
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Establish diplomatic relations despite North Korea's development of nuclear weapons program.	44	38	43	50
Negotiate a formal peace agreement and allow North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons.	24	17	28	26
Negotiate a formal peace agreement with North Korea in exchange for the suspension of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.	76	71	77	79
Isolate and pressure North Korea with economic sanctions while it continues to build its nuclear weapons program.	70	77	65	70
Take military action to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.	35	51	29	30
July 7-26, 2021 n= 2,086				
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS				

An intermediate step might see the two countries establish diplomatic relations, and on that the American public is split. While 44 percent favor establishing diplomatic relations despite North Korea's continued development of nuclear weapons, 51 percent oppose doing so. As in past surveys, the least popular option is to use military force to denuclearize North Korea: only 35 percent favor taking military action to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. Here, however, there is a significant partisan divide. While 51 percent of Republicans favor taking military action to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, only 29 percent of Democrats say the same.

Conclusion

The US-South Korea alliance has reached significant agreements over the past six months. However, North Korea's missile tests will challenge their preferences in dealing with Pyongyang, with South Korea pursuing engagement at the highest levels while the United States continues to uphold its sanctions regime. But those differences have not filtered down to the American public. Americans continue to hold favorable views of South Korea, and that favorability extends to President Moon as well as Korean immigrants living in the United States. And rather than wanting to pull back from its security guarantee to Seoul, Americans are ready to use US military force should North Korea attack or invade South Korea. Those numbers remain near all-time highs and are bipartisan. When it comes to North Korea, the American public seems ready to negotiate and may support formally bringing an end to the Korea War. But Americans expect something in return: for North Korea to suspend its nuclear weapons program.

Methodologies

2021 Chicago Council Survey

The 2021 Chicago Council Survey, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy, is the latest effort in a series of wide-ranging surveys on American attitudes toward US foreign policy. The 2021 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

The survey was conducted from July 7 to 26, 2021, among a representative, probability-based national sample of 2,086 adults. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/- 2.33 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.1817. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups or for partial-sample items. Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an independent, or what?"

The survey was conducted by Ipsos Public Affairs, a polling, social science, and market research firm in Palo Alto, California, using a randomly selected sample of Ipsos's large-scale nationwide research panel, KnowledgePanel® (KP). KnowledgePanel is the first and largest online research panel that is representative of the entire US population. Ipsos recruits panel members using address-based sampling (ABS) methods to ensure full coverage of all households in the nation.

March 2021 Survey in the United States

The survey was conducted March 19–21, 2021, by Ipsos using its large-scale online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,019 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is +/-3 percentage points. The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups.

March 2021 Survey in South Korea

The survey was conducted March 24–28, 2021, in South Korea by Hankook Research among a representative national sample of 1,000 adults 18 and older. The sample was constructed using RDD for mobile and landline phones, and the margin of error is +/- 3.1% at the 95 percent confidence interval. Among that sample, 797 respondents took the survey via mobile telephone and 203 took the survey via landline. The data is weighted so that the country's sample composition best reflects the demographic profile of the adult population according to the February 2021 Population Registration maintained by the Ministry of the Interior and Safety.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

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