South Korean Public Opinion Trends and Effects on the ROK-U.S. Alliance

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The relationship between North and South Korea has become more volatile with the first South Korean civilian deaths since the Korean War caused by North Korea’s November 2010 artillery strike on Yeonpyeong Island, following the sinking of the Cheonan in March 2010. A preparatory inter-Korean military meeting held on February 8-9, 2011, ended with unsatisfying results as military representatives from both Koreas could not find common ground on how to address these two military incidents. North Korea sought to exclude discussion of the incidents, but the South Korean government considered the two incidents as serious offences against South Korea and its citizens. In this context of heightened tensions, close alliance coordination between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the United States is critical, especially given that Chinese influence on the Korean peninsula and instability in North Korea are two major factors that will influence the future of the alliance. Several new Korean public opinion surveys provide insight on how the Korean public views these factors in the context of recent events.

South Korean Public Opinion Trends

The 2010 Asan Institute for Policy Studies (AIPS) survey provides a snapshot of Korean public opinion toward the United States following the sinking of the Cheonan. Based on the survey analysis, 87 percent of South Korean respondents thought it was necessary to continue the ROK-U.S. alliance in order to deter North Korea’s potential military threat. Furthermore, 90 percent of the respondents who believed China would intervene in the event of a war on the peninsula supported the alliance, while 83 percent of those who did not believe that China would intervene also supported the alliance. These figures suggest that perceptions of Chinese military intervention do not significantly alter South Korean views toward the alliance, for which the North Korean threat remains the primary basis of public support.

A public opinion brief of the East Asian Institute (EAI) last December compared the impact of both the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong incidents on Korean public attitudes toward the ROK-U.S. alliance. This poll showed that 34.7 percent of respondents supported strengthening of the ROK-U.S. alliance in January 2010, before the recent North Korean military threats. However, support for strengthening the alliance increased by 8.5 percent after the Cheonan sinking, and by a further 5.4 percent after the Yeonpyeong attack. According to this report, South Korean public trust toward the ROK-U.S. alliance increased because South Korean government policies toward North Korea were perceived to have failed.

One interesting finding in the AIPS survey is the level of support shown for the ROK-U.S. alliance among different groups within South Korea. Among those who had an unfavorable opinion of the United States, 72 percent still thought it was necessary for the alliance to
continue, compared to 87 percent of those with a neutral perspective toward the United States and 92 percent of those with favorable attitudes toward the United States. Regardless of views toward the United States, the South Korean public as a whole shared the same perception of “need” toward the ROK-U.S. alliance.

**Understanding South Korean Attitudes toward the United States**

What factors shape South Korean views on the United States? Here, it is important to note the information asymmetry between the U.S. and Korean public. A major source of influence is the media, as examined in this study, which played an important role in shaping Korean public opinion under the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations, two administrations that pursued progressive policies seeking to separate South Korea from the United States. While the government promoted “nationalism,” both conservative (pro-American) and progressive (anti-American) media outlets provided both positive and negative perspectives when reporting on the United States and the ROK-U.S. alliance. Regardless of relative influence, both conservative and progressive media managed to inform the South Korean public about the United States. In contrast, the U.S. public was not aware of issues related to South Korea or the alliance, with dominant attention focused on the “War on Terror.” With no place for raising South Korean issues, the U.S. government or public did not respond quickly to anti-Americanism in South Korea.

The focal point for anti-American expression in South Korea has included issues related to the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), North Korea policy during the Bush administration, dispatch of South Korean troops to Iraq, U.S. occupation between 1945 and 1948, and the division of Korea. However, an alternative view considers structural cleavage within South Korean society as the cause for anti-Americanism. From this perspective, many conservatives and members of South Korea’s elite group are pro-American, and it is natural for progressives and anti-conservatives to develop anti-American sentiment. It does not matter whether the U.S. government changes its SOFA or North Korea policy, or even implements new pro-South Korea policies. Anti-Americanism is rather an unintended byproduct of social struggle between two different social classes in South Korea.

This idea raises a significant question: whether there is a possibility of another Anti-American movement or trend in the future. If a progressive administration similar to the Kim Dae Jung or Roh Moo Hyun administrations wins the next presidential election, the win will only be possible with votes from younger generations. Should we expect anti-American sentiment in South Korea to rise again under a new progressive administration?

The younger generation in South Korea does not know much about the hardships that previous generations went through to achieve democratization of South Korea. They also do not consider the historical value behind the U.S.–ROK alliance since the Korean War. Unfortunately, old ideologies and histories are nothing but relics from the past for younger generations.

If international politics in Northeast Asia remain the same, one might expect another wave of anti-American sentiment based on the understanding that Americanism represents conservatism in South Korea. But, everything has changed since the sinking of the Cheonan and North Korea’s artillery strike on Yeonpyeong Island. The perceived need for the ROK-U.S. alliance has significantly increased, while hatred and fear toward North Korea is slowly
but definitely growing within the younger generation.

Pro-Americanism may be labeled as a conservative view, but at the same time it can be part of a rational policy following the two military attacks from North Korea. Just like the 9/11 terrorist attack, the Cheonan and Yeonpyeong attacks have become a turning point where awareness of North Korea has changed among the Korean public, especially the younger generation.

The “rise of China” acts as another driver for pursuing a stronger alliance with the United States because of China’s status as North Korea’s ally. Based on the AIPS survey, 60 percent of respondents believed that China will intervene in the case of another Korean war.

**Implications for the ROK-U.S. Alliance**

South Korean public opinion trends suggest a weak correlation between favoritism toward the United States and support for the alliance. If the ROK-U.S. alliance acts as a solution for South Korea’s national security and economic problems, it will win support as a result of pragmatism of the Korean public. There might be a stronger correlation between favoritism toward the United States and support for the alliance in the future.

South Korea still has about two years before the next presidential election. Regardless of the outcome, it will be unlikely to harm the U.S.–ROK alliance because the South Korean public now feels the need for the alliance more than ever. According to an earlier U.S. report in 2010, 80 percent of American respondents preferred maintaining the alliance with the United States after unification because of the rise of China. And, 62 percent of American respondents believed that the United States should have a long-term military base in Korea, the highest support rate compared to any other U.S. base. Based on recent studies in South Korea and the United States, the Korean and U.S. public share the same opinion about the importance of the ROK-U.S. alliance. This mutual public support will be an important factor determining the future of the alliance in the changing regional environment.

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