

# **Plus ça Change? South Korean Public Opinion of the United States During the Trump Administration**

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## **Abstract**

When compared to previous administrations, did South Korea public opinion towards the United States change during the Donald Trump presidency? During an unusual and sometimes tumultuous four years, President Trump questioned the value of America's alliance system, and specifically the South Korea-US alliance, and agitated against the liberal international order and democratic rule itself. However, Trump also pursued summit diplomacy with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, enabling South Korean President Moon Jae-in's pro-engagement policy with Pyongyang. It stands to reason that South Koreans took notice, but what did they think of these significant and sometimes contradictory moves? Using a longitudinal dataset constructed with data from the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Surveys, this chapter assesses South Koreans' opinion toward the United States and President Donald Trump within the context of the last two decades (2002-2019). Specific focus is given to changes in opinion during the Trump administration and attitudes towards Trump-specific policies, especially his North Korea policy. This analysis finds that South Korean's views of the US, which remained positive and significantly higher than most other regional actors, were held separate from views of Donald Trump, which were negative but not consistently so and especially not for some groups (such as conservatives). Trump was also more positively appraised than the leaders from other regional actors. Notably, the vast majority of South Koreans, regardless of age or political identification, approved of Trump's diplomacy with North Korea.

Keywords: South Korea, Public Opinion, United States, Donald Trump, North Korea

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The objective of this chapter is to assess South Koreans' opinions toward the United States and President Donald Trump using available public opinion data. To this extent, it asks some basic questions. How did South Koreans view the United States over the course of the Trump administration, and how do these views compare historically and relative to other regional leaders? Further, how did South Koreans view Donald Trump, as both a politician and as someone who took an exceptionally active interest in peninsula affairs, especially with regards to North Korea? Were there any notable differences across subgroups, such as age cohorts, and, if so, what more can they tell us about contemporary South Korea-United States relations?

Building a longitudinal data set from Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Surveys that covers the period 2002-2019, this chapter assesses these questions by looking at the following: first, the image of the United States from the perspective of South Korea and how opinions compared to other regional actors (China, Russia, North Korea, Japan) during the Trump presidency and historically; second, approval of Donald Trump, compared to other regional leaders (Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Kim Jong-un, Shinzo Abe) during the Trump presidency and leaders from these respective nations historically, including the US president; and third, opinions of major Trump administration policies, focusing on Trump's negotiations with Kim Jong-un but inclusive of other policies, such as immigration restrictions and the US-Mexico border wall. In addition, this chapter looks at select subgroups by age, political identification, and sex to determine who supports the United States today, in addition to looking at who supported (or opposed) Donald Trump and his North Korea policy.

The chapter will proceed as follows. The first section provides an overview of the state of US-South Korea relations during the Trump years, setting up the relevant questions and empirical concerns. Following that, the second section reviews the data and methodology used for analysis. The third section analyzes the data findings on South Koreans' attitudes towards the United States (as a country), President Donald Trump, and Trump administration policies. The fourth section then considers relevant subgroup analysis. Lastly, the chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and concluding discussion.

## **US-South Korea Relations During the Trump Years**

As a long-time ally with whom the US shares deep person-to-person, state, and non-state actor ties, the US-South Korea relationship is key to the United States' presence in the Asia Pacific writ large, but even more so regarding its status, aims, and objectives in Northeast Asia.

The interstate relationship has for long been defined by the Mutual Defense Treaty signed in 1953 following the Korean War. The bilateral defense treaty is a defining feature of the so-called San Francisco System of military alliances that defined the regional order (Calder 2004; Cha 2010) throughout the Cold War. Despite significant changes, most notably democratization in South Korea and elsewhere in the region, the treaty and forward deployed military personnel continues to define the relationship and broader region today. "Freedom's frontier" as some affectionately call it, South Korea is one of only three consolidated democracies in East Asia (Taiwan and Japan constituting the other two). It is even more important, then, to understand South Korean public opinion towards the United States during the Trump administration.

A populist authoritarian,<sup>2</sup> Trump did nothing less than militate against the liberal international order<sup>3</sup> and in fact against US democracy itself.<sup>4</sup> It is widely acknowledged that Trump's disdain for America's allies, countries he often likened to "free riders," put enormous strain on relationship and alliance management.<sup>5</sup> Given his preferred brand of diplomacy and politics regarding the US relationship with the Korean peninsula, including alliance management with South Korea, Trump's four years in office will likely be remembered as inconsistent and, at times, contentious. And if neither of these, it will at least be remembered as confusing.

Trump pursued an alternative foreign policy towards both South and North Korea. Threatening "fire and fury like the world has never seen" against North Korea, there was concern that the US, under Trump's direction, might take unilateral action against North Korea, thereby ensnaring South Korea in an unwanted conflict with the North.<sup>6</sup> His relationship with the Moon Jae-in administration in Seoul was marked, at least initially, by quarrelsome demands for greater cost contributions for US Forces in Korea and the THAAD missile defense battery,<sup>7</sup> in addition to other contentious ideas like ending the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement.<sup>8</sup>

But even after Trump openly questioned the value of the alliance and the US relationship with South Korea during his presidential campaign, he would, upon settling into office, roll back some of his more controversial positions and pursue a relationship at least somewhat more in line with expectations for a US president today.<sup>9</sup> Although he openly discussed the possibility of troop reductions, due to cost and equity concerns, such radical changes in US defense policy and alliance management would ultimately prove mere bluster, as was often the case with Donald Trump regarding a score of major issues.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, in his November 2017 speech to South Korea's National Assembly in Seoul, Trump left aside much of the over-the-top bravado and offensive name-calling, by then common behavior from the president, to focus on the threat posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons program.<sup>11</sup> The speech signaled a hawkish approach to Pyongyang, and while it is hard to read into the speech any indication of the summits with Kim Jong-un to come, it did at least send a message that North Korea policy was to be given more attention than perhaps other international issues. Although the relationship would continue to experience moments of heightened tension, especially regarding defense cost-sharing as defined by the Special Measures Agreement (SMA), there were no fundamental changes in the US-South Korea alliance.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, pp. 3-31.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick, 'Can Trump's Successor Save the Liberal International Order'.

<sup>4</sup> Graham, 'Trump's Coup Attempt Didn't Start on January 6'.

<sup>5</sup> Klinger et al., 'Trump shakedowns are threatening two key US alliances in Asia'.

<sup>6</sup> Baker and Cheo, 'Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S.'.

<sup>7</sup> Kim, 'South Korean Public Opinion'.

<sup>8</sup> Lee, 'Trump wants to end 'horrible' South Korea-U.S. trade deal. Koreans disagree'.

<sup>9</sup> Gamel, 'Trump presidency will test longstanding US-South Korean alliance'; Ferrier, 'Challenges in Relations with the U.S. under the Moon Administration'.

<sup>10</sup> Shafer, 'The Truth at the Center of Trump's Hollow Threats'.

<sup>11</sup> A transcript of the speech can be read here: <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/07/politics/south-korea-trump-speech-full/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Stewart and Ali, 'Exclusive: Inside Trump's standoff with South Korea over defense costs'.

Trump also demonstrated a willingness to support President Moon and his pro-engagement approach with North Korea, or at least not completely oppose it.<sup>13</sup> Trump would eventually engage in unprecedented bilateral, face-to-face meetings with Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 and 2019 in Singapore and Hanoi, respectively, and again in 2019 at the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) after the G20 Osaka summit.

The first of the two summits constituted the first ever meeting between sitting heads of state from the US and North Korea. It followed a period of tense relations, which included North Korea's testing of, it claimed, a hydrogen bomb and later an intercontinental ballistic missile (both in 2017). The meeting resulted in a joint statement, which contained a security guarantee for North Korea and a general commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, in addition to other agreements. The following year's summit in Hanoi was cut short over fundamental disagreements regarding North Korea's nuclear program and what Pyongyang was willing to give up in exchange for denuclearization.<sup>14</sup> Although both summits were ostensibly about the denuclearization of North Korea, it is widely held that neither summit yielded any new or substantive commitments from either side. It was, however, a unique moment of diplomacy for both North Korea and the United States, with obvious implications for the security of the Korean Peninsula and thus South Korea.

The point of this paper, however, is not to analyze the diplomatic efforts of the Trump administration during either of the two summits, per se, but to examine South Korean public opinion towards the United States during this period. How did the South Korean people respond to the developments described above? This is the central question addressed here.

In addition to knowing what South Koreans thought overall, it is equally, if not more, important to consider how opinions differed by some relevant groups. To more deeply explore what South Koreans thought of the United States and the Trump administration, this paper also looks at how opinions vary by age cohorts, political identification, and sex. If there are differences in how these groups appraise South Korea's relationship with the United States, then that is relevant insight. It can inform understandings of "shared values" as a basis of contemporary alliance management and how, going forward, South Koreans are likely to view the US-South Korea alliance.<sup>15</sup>

## **Data and Methodology**

To do the empirical research for this paper, a longitudinal database was created from the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Surveys, from 2002-2019. The repeated cross-sectional surveys are conducted by the Pew Research Center with local survey and panel partners, although not all countries are surveyed every year. The surveys are fielded worldwide and contain a broad selection of questions including those pertaining to the "US Image," in addition

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<sup>13</sup> Kasulis, 'Moon bets his legacy on meeting with Trump'.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenfeld, 'Trump-Kim summit was cut short after North Korea demanded an end to sanctions'; Panda and Narang, 'The Hanoi Summit Was Doomed From the Start: North Korea Was Never Going to Unilaterally Disarm'.

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of State, 'Joint Statement of the 2021 Republic of Korea – United States Foreign and Defense Ministerial Meeting ("2+2")'.

to other questions about the world economy, and world leaders. Data is made publicly available two years after being collected.<sup>16</sup>

The common core of questions is used to survey respondents from target countries about their opinion of the United States, asking them whether they have a “very favorable,” “somewhat favorable,” “somewhat unfavorable,” or “very unfavorable” opinion. Also asked are questions about confidence in world leaders, including the president of the United States. Respondents are asked to state how much confidence they have in leaders “to do the right thing regarding world affairs” and are given the options of “a lot of confidence,” “some confidence,” “not too much confidence,” or “no confidence at all.”

In this paper, both common questions are explored for every year for which data is available for South Korea.<sup>17</sup> In addition to South Koreans’ opinions of the United States, additional countries and leaders from other regional powers in Northeast Asia are considered in order to situate the US vis-à-vis other relevant actors. These countries include the European Union, China, Japan, Russia, and North Korea. The years collected and sample sizes are listed in Table 1 below.<sup>18</sup> The analysis throughout this chapter are based on summary statistics. Survey weights are applied throughout.

**Table 1. Global Attitudes Surveys Used**

<b>Survey Year</b>	<b>Sample Size</b>
2002	719
2003	525
2007	718
2008	714
2009	702
2010	706
2013	809
2014	1,009
2015	1,005
2017	1,010
2018	1,007
2019	1,006

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<sup>16</sup> The latest data available is from the Spring 2019 Global Attitudes Survey (updated March 2020). Read more about these surveys in the Global Indicators Database at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/>.

<sup>17</sup> Probability samples of the 18+ adult population were collected by various polling vendors. The questions are not administered to South Korean respondents in every year, but there is sufficient coverage.

<sup>18</sup> For more on survey methodology, see the Pew Research website’s overview for South Korea at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/international-survey-research/international-methodology/all-survey/south-korea/all-year>.

Besides exploring the opinions of the US and US image, questions which ask respondents in 2019 their opinion about Trump-specific policies are also explored. This battery of items includes the following:

- US withdrawal from international climate change agreements
- Building a wall on the border between the US and Mexico
- US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear weapons agreement
- Allowing fewer immigrants into the US
- US increasing tariffs or fees on imported goods from other countries
- US negotiations with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un about the country's nuclear weapons program

Respondents are asked whether they “agree” or “disagree” with each. For this paper, an overview of what South Koreans think of each policy move is reviewed for context, but the focus is on Trump's policy of negotiating with Kim Jong-un over North Korea's nuclear weapons arsenal.

After a longitudinal overview of South Korean attitudes towards the US and President Trump and policies specific to the Trump administration, attention is turned to understanding certain subgroup dynamics, looking at how attitudes towards key questions considered here differ (or not) by age cohorts, political identification, and sex.<sup>19</sup>

### **South Korean Views of the United States and Regional Actors, 2002-2019**

This section reviews the high-level empirical findings of the research. For years in which data is available, it looks at South Koreans' favorability ratings towards the United States from 2002-2019 and compares them to four other regional actors (China, the European Union, Japan, and Russia). Then, it looks at confidence levels for the president of the United States and leaders of the same regional actors, except the EU.

Figure 1 shows favorability ratings of South Koreans towards the US and others. Focusing on the US, 2002 and 2003 stand apart, with only 54 and 46 percent, respectively, saying they hold a favorable view (very much or somewhat) of the United States. During the George W. Bush years, the status of the relationship was considered, at best, “ambivalent.”<sup>20</sup> There was obvious tension in the alliance, exacerbated by the death of two junior high school students who were hit by a US armored vehicle.<sup>21</sup> Further, liberal president Roh Moo-hyun's domestic and foreign policies, especially regarding North Korea and the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), were at odds with American, and specifically President Bush's, aims.<sup>22</sup> According to polling data covering the period after South Korea's democratic transition, opinion towards the United States

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<sup>19</sup> Age cohorts are defined by common groupings across the life cycle (18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, and 60+).

Political identification is measured with a political scale question, which asks respondents to indicate where they would place on a scale from zero (“far/extreme left”) to six (“far/extreme right”). Respondents answering 0-2 are counted as “progressive” and those choosing 4-6 are counted as “conservative.” “Moderates” are respondents who answered three. Sex is measured by whether the respondent identified as “male” or “female.”

<sup>20</sup> Larson et al., ‘Ambivalent Allies? A Study of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.’, pp. 31-38.

<sup>21</sup> Kirk, ‘Road accident galvanizes the country: Deaths in Korea ignite anti-American passion’.

<sup>22</sup> Kim, ‘The U.S.-South Korean Alliance: Anti-American Challenges.’

as a country had never been more negative than during the George W. Bush administration.<sup>23</sup> The future of the relationship was very much an open question at this time.

The relationship, however, did not exactly collapse. Although it was a low point, nearly half of the population still favorably appraised the US. Further, as Jiyoong Kim points out,<sup>24</sup> although Roh sought autonomy from the United States, he negotiated closely on several key strategic issues, including the war in Iraq (South Korea sent troops) and the proposal for a free trade agreement with the US (what would become the KORUS FTA). He also made an official state visit to Washington DC. Continuities notwithstanding, within the period of observation considered here the Bush administration's rule was unquestionably a low point in terms of how South Koreans viewed the United States.

South Korean attitudes recovered in Bush's second term (2005-2008) and would rise even more with the election of Barack Obama in 2008. In 2009, 78 percent of South Koreans favorably appraised the United States. This number would reach its peak of 82 percent in 2015, in the second to last year of Obama's presidency.

**[Figure 1 about here]**

How did opinions change with the election of Donald Trump in 2016? Using three years of data (2017-19) the conclusion is: *not much*. After a modest decline (to 74 percent) following Trump's election, the proportion of South Koreans with a favorable view of the US would again rise to 80 percent in 2018 and then decline, but only slightly, to 77 percent in 2019. The new baseline for South Korean public opinion towards the US set under Obama remained during the Trump years.

Notably, for all regional actors except for the European Union (EU), favorability of the United States was significantly and sustainably higher. In 2019, views of the US were 35 percentage points higher than Russia (42 percent) and 42 percentage points higher than China (35 percent). At 80 percent, the EU's approval is higher, but not by a statistically significant amount. From the Obama years going forward, there are significant differences in opinions toward the US and others, with the US viewed much more favorably (again, the EU notwithstanding). Approval of China dropped below 50 percent between 2015 and 2017, which overlaps with the election and rise of Chinese President Xi Jinping. For years which data is available for Japan, the differences in approval relative to the US is even greater than that for Russia and China.

Having established country approval over the better part of the last two decades, what, then, do South Koreans think of US presidents? Figure 2 reports the proportions of South Koreans who express 'some' or 'a lot' of confidence that the president of the United States (POTUS) will do the right thing regarding world affairs, from 2003-2019.

We see, again, a negative appraisal during the George W. Bush years, with less than half of South Koreans expressing confidence towards POTUS in 2003 (36 percent) and less than a quarter in 2007 (21 percent). During the Bush presidency, only Shinzo Abe, prime minister of Japan, registers significantly lower confidence (4 percent). However, as observed with approval

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<sup>23</sup> Larson et al., 'Ambivalent Allies? A Study of South Korean Attitudes Toward the U.S.', p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> Kim, 'South Korean Public Opinion'.

of the United States as a country, Barack Obama restored confidence in the presidency in the eyes of South Koreans. Confidence in President Obama never dropped lower than 81 percent (in 2010) and ended on an exceptionally high point in 2015, at 88 percent.

**[Figure 2 about here]**

How did public opinion of POTUS change with the election of Donald Trump? The data suggest an interesting story. Immediately following Trump’s election, confidence in POTUS collapsed from 88 percent to 16 percent – an enormous 72 percentage point decline. Trump’s positions on key alliance issues, as discussed above, and probably the image and politics of Donald Trump himself were coldly received by South Koreans.

However, the leaders from regional powers did not fare any better. Over approximately the same period, confidence in Xi Jinping (Chinese President) began a sharp decline, while confidence in the Russian President remained consistently low, as it did for the Japanese prime minister and Kim Jong-un (for whom data is only available in 2019).<sup>25</sup> Despite hitting a low point in 2017, confidence in Trump made a significant rebound in 2018, climbing to 44 percent (a sizeable 28 percentage point rebound).

Figure 3 shows the percentage of South Koreans who approve of key policy actions taken by the Trump administration. With the notable exception of negotiations with Kim Jong-un over North Korea’s nuclear weapons, these policies were negatively assessed. Approximately two-in-three people disapproved of Trump’s immigration restrictions and roughly three-in-four percent reacted negatively to plans for an extended and reinforced Mexico-US border wall and the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or the "Iran nuclear deal". Even less popular were increasing tariffs on imported goods and withdrawing from climate agreements. South Koreans, the data indicates, largely prefer a US administration engaged with and open to the world.

**[Figure 3 about here]**

What stands apart from all items reported is Trump’s policy of engaging North Korea on the country’s nuclear weapons program. On this policy, 78 percent of South Koreans approved in 2019. As indicated in the joint North Korea-US statement from the Singapore Summit in 2018,<sup>26</sup> the US committed to providing an improved security environment and Kim Jong-un committed to “lasting peace and complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” a phrase and long-time policy stance taken by Pyongyang (Lewis 2021) that would be repeated (with South Korean support) in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018, too.<sup>27</sup> Although the second Trump-Kim summit, held in Hanoi from February 27-28, would end without a deal, highlighting some fundamental misunderstandings from the Trump administration regarding what Kim Jong-un committed to (a fundamental misunderstanding of what “complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” means, in the opinion of the author), it was certainly established that Trump was interested in taking steps towards denuclearization in North Korea. Whether his approach

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<sup>25</sup> For Russia, the president was Vladimir Putin for all years except 2008-2010, when it was Dmitry Medvedev.

<sup>26</sup> New York Times, ‘The Trump-Kim Summit Statement: Read the Full Text’.

<sup>27</sup> National Committee on North Korea, ‘Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018’.

was doomed to fail from the beginning, or lacked an appreciation of what North Korea thinks, or ignored the long and acrimonious relationship between Pyongyang and Washington, is considered beside the point. The objective was clear, even if the instruments and understanding employed to achieve that objective were not.

Regarding the US image and the Trump administration from the South Korean perspective, the empirical findings presented thus far show several things. First, following recovery from the early George W. Bush years, the US remained very positively regarded. In fact, high favorability of the US remained even as confidence in the US president plummeted, suggesting that the image and ideal of the United States is not necessarily linked to the person who occupies the Oval Office. Trump may have been poorly appraised, but the positive image of the US remained. This is a relatively simple finding, but one nevertheless worth underscoring.

Second, after an initial bottoming-out of confidence in POTUS in 2017, we observe a significant increase in support (+28 percentage points) in 2017, which continues into 2018. The reason for this change is not clear but obviously worth considering. What might explain it?

One possible, and rather straightforward, explanation is that Trump's about-face on North Korea policy was viewed as enabling South Korean President Moon Jae-in's pro-engagement policy with Pyongyang, thereby bolstering his approval with those who most support President Moon – namely, South Korean progressives. The 2018 Pew survey was fielded from May 25-June 19, so it would have captured any change in sentiment following this announcement and indeed the summit itself, which was held on June 12. The same logic would hold for 2019 (with confidence in POTUS at 46 percent). The top-line numbers, however, do not reveal the reason behind the variation or whether this interpretation is correct.

At the time of the survey (May 27-July 11, 2019), we observe a high level of support for Trump's North Korea policy. Although most of his policies were poorly rated, South Koreans were shown to approve of a US foreign policy that engaged North Korea, at least on the issue of nuclear weapons.

To better understand South Koreans' favorability ratings of the United States during the Trump administration and to further explore the rise in confidence towards Donald Trump and approval of his North Korea policy, the next section examines whether opinions vary by select groups. Specifically, it looks at age cohorts, political identification, and sex. By doing this, we get a more nuanced view of South Koreans' view of the US during the Trump administration. Further, differences in opinion can be identified and explanations of why opinions changed can be considered.

### **A Closer Look: Breaking Down the Numbers by Select Groups**

In this section, we examine the three outcome variables explored above in this section by age cohorts, political identification, and sex in 2017 and 2019 – that is, the first year of Trump's administration and the last year for which we have data. Before looking at the how the numbers break down, let us consider why we ought to consider how opinions differ by these groups.

It is common to consider opinions by age for all sorts of reasons. Older people tend to vote more, younger people are the future, and so forth. However, in South Korea the distinctive differences in formative years' experiences – if defined by the researcher as the kind of regime and political system in which one comes of age, as is often done – provides a strong theoretical motivation to consider our questions across age cohorts.<sup>28</sup> Consider that those 18 years-old at the time of the country's democratic transition (1987) would have been about 50 years-old in 2019. Then, those younger (the 18-29, 30-39, and 40-49 cohorts) would have come of age under democratic rule and those older (50-59 and 60+), under authoritarian rule.

The division of the population is not scientific; age cut-offs for cohorts or generations are at least somewhat arbitrary. However, opinions have been shown to straddle this divide regarding the United States and political and social life more generally, and the difference in formative years' experiences is suggested as an explanation for these differing views.<sup>29</sup> For instance, evidence shows that while most South Koreans support “democracy,” views of what democracy substantively means differ by pre- and post-democratic transition generations. Those having grown up with democracy are more likely to hold beliefs consistent with liberal democracy than citizens from the authoritarian generation.<sup>30</sup> Given the emphasis placed on “shared values” as a foundation of the US alliance system in East Asia, it is important to know whether those most likely to share the liberal democratic values espoused by the US support *actually* approve of the US – and, if they do not, then why.

As for political identification, evidence shows that South Koreans' views of the United States are conditioned by their political identities and, specifically, their views of regional security and North Korea.<sup>31</sup> It is widely held that conservatives see North Korea as a political and security threat and are thus more supportive of the South Korea-US alliance. Progressives, on the other hand, are seen as those more skeptical of the value of close US ties.<sup>32</sup> They see North Korea as a potential partner in establishing peace on the peninsula, leading eventually to national unification. The US, to many progressives, is an impediment to this goal. Thus, they prefer a more independent relationship.

Accordingly, those left-of-center tend to favor engagement with North Korea, even unconditionally, which is often at odds with US and Korean conservative policies meant to induce political reform or denuclearization. As Seung-ook Lee explains, since the transition of power to Korean progressives in the 1990s, North Korea policy options changed fundamentally.<sup>33</sup> No longer was Pyongyang seen as a purely political and military object; it was

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<sup>28</sup> See, for a few examples: Rigger, ‘Taiwan’s Rising Rationalism: Generations, Politics, and ‘Taiwanese Nationalism’; Dalton and Shin, ‘Growing up Democratic: Generational Change in East Asian Democracies’.

<sup>29</sup> Moon, ‘Korean Nationalism, Anti-Americanism, and Democratic Consolidation’; Denney, ‘Does Democracy Matter?’.

<sup>30</sup> Denney, ‘Democratic Support and Generational Change in South Korea’; and Denney, ‘South Koreans Can’t Agree What Democracy Is’.

<sup>31</sup> Chae and Kim, ‘Conservatives and Progressives in South Korea’; Chae, ‘South Korean Attitudes toward the ROK–U.S. Alliance: Group Analysis’; and Moller, ‘Domestic politics, threat perceptions, and the alliance security dilemma: the case of South Korea, 1993–2020’.

<sup>32</sup> One could use “liberals” interchangeably. This chapter does not distinguish between “liberal” and “progressive.”

<sup>33</sup> Lee, ‘A Geo-Economic Object or an Object of Geo-Political Absorption?’.

also now approached as an “object of development” through which co-operation would bring mutual economic and political benefits.

It stands to reason, then, that understanding how those who identify as progressive or conservative view the United States is important and can inform interested parties on whether attitudes are changing and, if so, why.

Lastly, we look at how opinions differ by the sex of the respondent. At first glance, the reason for looking at opinions of men and women separately may not be obvious, but given the vulgar, sexist, and demeaning language used by President Trump when referring to women, it stands to reason that electing such a man may have consequences for how women and those offended or otherwise opposed to sexist attitudes elsewhere view the United States and the president himself.<sup>34</sup> Further, given the recent backlash against feminism and the rise of misogynist discourse among some conservatives in South Korea, with a surprising uptake among young Korean men, it is fair to ask whether someone like Trump may appeal to some Korean men.<sup>35</sup>

What do we find? Figure 4 shows favorability towards the US across all three groups. Generally, support registers at or around the averages of approximately three-in-four (74 percent in 2017 and 77 percent in 2019), and there is little substantive difference in opinion between the two years of observation for any group. We also observe a noticeable difference in opinion by political identification on two scores. First, in 2017, only 64 percent of progressives held a favorable view of the United States, compared to an 84 percent of conservatives (a sizeable 20-percentage point difference). Further, among progressives, we observe a 12-percentage point drop (64 percent expressing favorability in 2017, to 52 percent in 2019).

**[Figure 4 about here]**

On average, more than half of those identifying as left-of-center approved of the US near the end of the Trump years, but this is significantly lower than centrists (75 percent) and conservatives (88 percent). It is not unexpected to see the least number of people expressing favorable views of the US among this group, as noted above, but the drop is notable. There is little difference in opinion by sex, and none of it statistically significant.

Among age cohorts, we see that in 2017 and 2019 the highest proportion of people expressing a favorable view of the US are the 60+ cohort (2017) and 18-29 cohort (2019). Perhaps most significant here is that not only do young South Koreans view the US favorably, but they are also the most likely to do so in 2019. South Korea’s young democrats (as in, those raised fully under liberal democratic institutions) positively appraise the United States. There is good will there, and that bodes well for the “share values” approach to alliance management going forward. The difference with older age cohorts, although lower (except for the 60+ cohort, who also hold the US in very high regard), should not be cause for great concern.

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<sup>34</sup> Frothingham and Phadke, ‘100 Days, 100 Ways the Trump Administration Is Harming Women and Families’.

<sup>35</sup> Park, ‘Why So Many Young Men in South Korea Hate Feminism’; and Finlay and Song, ‘Why South Korea’s Young Men Are Turning Conservative’.

The United States remained favorably appraised throughout the Trump years, but we know from our analysis above that the same cannot be said of Donald Trump himself. Figure 5 reports the same group analysis but for those expressing confidence in the president of the United States to do the right thing in world affairs. We see here that in 2017, confidence in POTUS hit rock bottom across the board. Relative to the average for that year (16 percent), there are a few groups expressing higher levels of confidence (those 60+ at 27 percent and conservatives at 23 percent), but these numbers are still extremely low when compared to confidence expressed in Barack Obama as POTUS.

**[Figure 5 about here]**

The more interesting finding here is clear to see: confidence increased from 2017 to 2019 across all groups. Except for the 40-49 age cohort, the upper bound of the confidence interval for all age cohorts exceeds the 50-percentage mark.<sup>36</sup> In fact, for the 18-29 cohort, the average exceeds it at 52 percent. The same can be said for males (51 percent) and conservatives (58 percent).

Absent for detailed analysis, one might conclude that Trump's overtures of peace for denuclearization pushed numbers up across the board for pursuing peace and/or enabling South Korean president Moon Jae-in's pro-engagement agenda. But then we would expect to see a large – and arguably, the largest – increase in the percentage of those expressing confidence in POTUS among progressives. This is *not* the case. One of the biggest gains between years of observation is seen among conservatives, or those *least* likely to approve of a pro-engagement policy with North Korea. These are somewhat puzzling findings, especially when we consider them alongside the approval data on Trump's North Korea policy.

We see in Figure 6 that Trump's preference for negotiating with Kim Jong-un over North Korea's nuclear weapons program was a *very* popular policy among the South Korean population by age, political identification, and sex. The lowest level of approval observed is for conservatives, but at 71 percent one would be hard pressed to call that low in an absolute sense. It is unexpected that conservatives would approve of an engagement policy with North Korea, especially given the exceptionally hardline stance conservatives have taken since, at least, the sinking of the Cheonan naval corvette and the bombing of Yeongpyong Island in 2010.<sup>37</sup> What might explain this counterintuitive finding? It is hard to say for certain with the data analyzed here, but some reasoned conjecture is certainly warranted.

**[Figure 6 about here]**

One plausible reading is that conservative opposition to such policies today is reserved for the domestic opposition, and Korean progressives in particular. Thus, the North Korea policy of a foreign leader, and an American conservative at that, is evaluated in a non-partisan way; the policy is evaluated on its merit. Koreans across the political spectrum favor peace and stability

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<sup>36</sup> The upper bound of the confidence interval is the highest point where we can say, with 95% confidence, the true value is located.

<sup>37</sup> Kang, 'Lee Myung-bak: North Korea Sought Inter-Korea Summit Meeting 5 Times'.

on the Korean Peninsula and, we see here, support an American president pursuing that via negotiations with Kim Jong-un.

More broadly, the findings indicate that conservative opinion is not unequivocally hardline on North Korea. Previous research (Chae 2010) finds “a developing consensus” among all political groups that the current purpose of the South Korea-US alliance is to promote “inter-Korean reconciliation”.<sup>38</sup> South Koreans, it stands to reason, may simply be responding according to this shared preference. Despite a rocky start to his administration, it is not a stretch to say that the Trump administration at least *tried* to pursue a policy that promoted inter-Korean peace and reconciliation. Whether the actions of the Trump administration could, in fact, accomplish this goal is beside the point.

Another explanation, significantly different but not wholly unrelated, is that Trump’s brash style of populist-authoritarian politics was an attractive change of approach for many South Koreans. We observed above that, in addition to approving of Trump’s North Korean policy, conservatives positively appraised Trump as a world leader in 2019 after negatively assessing him in 2016 (see Figure 4). The same cannot be said of progressives. This is a puzzling divergence in outcomes worth unpacking.

Considering that the main conservative candidate for South Korean president in 2016 was Hong Jun-pyo, another self-described political “strongman” who likened himself to Korea’s version of Donald Trump and China’s Xi Jinping, it is not surprising that conservatives would take a liking to Trump, too.<sup>39</sup> These political figures are not entirely different. Once the brawn and bluster over alliance cost-sharing and claims of free riding subsided, South Koreans were presented with a curious scenario: a Hong-like candidate willing to sit down with Kim Jong-un and negotiate. The interpretation of the findings then goes as follows: conservatives, generally, approve of Trump as a likeable personality and world leader, and they approve of his North Korea policy because of this affinity. Progressives, on the other hand, do not approve of Trump as a world leader, but they do support his negotiations with Kim because the policy is both in line with their policy preferences and enables the policy agenda of President Moon – a leader they do support. Centrists fall somewhere in-between, a position befitting their label.

Lastly, there is something to be said about sex of the respondent and approval of Donald Trump. There are no significant differences in opinion by sex towards the United States or in approval of Trump’s North Korea policy. But regarding confidence in POTUS, we see a 10 percentage-point difference in opinion between males (51 percent) and females (41 percent) in 2019. There is, of course, a significant increase for both sexes between 2017 and 2019, as observed for all groups except progressives. But it is nevertheless interesting and arguably instructive that there remains a difference in opinion by sex. As research cited above argues, many South Korean men – especially younger men – are turning to conservatism in response to a broader social change and especially changes in gender norms and relations.

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<sup>38</sup> Chae, ‘South Korean Attitudes toward the ROK–U.S. Alliance: Group Analysis’.

<sup>39</sup> Lee, ‘[Korea Party Primary Debate] THAAD issue, Hong Jun-pyo "A battle of guts" [한국당 경선토론] 사드문제, 홍준표 "배짱 승부"’.

To conclude the group analysis section, Figure 7 shows confidence in Donald Trump as a world leader in 2019 by sex and age. There is some concern given the small sample sizes of these subgroups, so one should read these numbers cautiously. However, the findings are in line with expectations, given what we know about the gender dynamics of Trump supporters and new trends in South Korea. Across all but the 50-59 age cohort, men are more supportive than women to show confidence in Trump, although the differences are not large nor are they statistically significant – except for the 18-29 age cohort. Tellingly, a large percentage of men in this age cohort (71 percent) express confidence in Trump. This finding is in line with and corroborates existing research findings that young men are turning to conservative firebrands and authoritarians like Trump as a response to changing social dynamics. Trump is reflective here, like elsewhere, of domestic preferences and developments. There is clearly more research to be done.

**[Figure 7 about here]**

## **Conclusion and Discussion**

This chapter set out to assess South Koreans' opinion toward the United States and President Donald Trump within the context of the last two decades. Specific focus was then given to changes in opinion during the Trump administration and attitudes towards Trump-specific policies, especially his approach to North Korea. Using a longitudinal dataset, constructed with data from the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Surveys, the data and analysis were used to construct an instructive story of the US, from the perspective of one of its longest-standing and most important allies. The findings are instructive.

First, findings show that, following the somewhat tumultuous years of the George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun administrations, which set low points in South Korean public opinion of the United States, attitudes started trending positively with the election of Barack Obama. Favorable opinions of the United States remained throughout the Trump years, even as confidence in the US president to do the right thing on the global stage bottomed out. The disconnect between opinions of the United States, as a country, and confidence in the president of the United States is notable. It suggests a sophistication in South Korean attitudes and a disaggregating of what the US stands for – today and historically – and who may be representing the country as an elected leader.

Notably, aside from the European Union, who South Koreans views as favorably as the United States, the US remains by and large the most favorably assessed regional state actor. Less than half of South Koreans view China favorably, consistent with global trends, and neither Russia nor Japan is viewed with much enthusiasm.<sup>40</sup> For the years data is available, Japan garners barely a 25 percent favorability rating and Russia is barely more popular than China.

Second, while confidence in the US president plunged following Donald Trump's election to the presidency, from its high point during the Obama administration, it rebounded considerably in years two and three of his administration. Notably, excluding his first year, confidence in Trump

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<sup>40</sup> Silver et al., 'Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries'.

was higher than it was for Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Even when Trump was relatively unpopular, he was still more popular than the regional alternatives.

While it may seem unremarkable to some that South Koreans do not hold Russia, North Korea, and China, as well as their leaders, in high regard, it is nevertheless noteworthy that these countries and leaders are considerably less popular than the United States and its leadership. Because if not for the US, then who? Further, until recently, the region was China's to lose. As things look at the time of writing, China, and Xi Jinping in particular, is losing it.

As noted, however, the reason for Trump's noted rebound is mainly explained by increases in confidence among centrists and, especially, conservatives. It was not, contrary to reasonable expectations, driven by progressives satisfied at Trump's enabling of Moon's pro-engagement North Korea policy – or some similar reason. As explored in more detail above, Trump's authoritarian populism and unique brand of politicking resonated with many South Koreans, especially those identifying as right-of-center and men. Above all else, it underscores that South Koreans' opinion of Trump largely reflects their domestic preferences and opinions.

Third, analysis of South Korean public opinion towards major Trump administration policies shows that South Koreans prefer a US administration engaged with and open to the world. This preference is evidenced by very low approval Trump's decision to pull the US out of climate change agreements and the Iranian nuclear deal, in addition to the poor review of implementing tariffs, restricting immigration, and preferring a Mexico-US border wall.

Analysis also showed that South Koreans support policies that they perceive as promoting inter-Korean peace and stability. South Koreans were very supportive of Donald Trump engaging Kim Jong-un over his country's nuclear weapons program. Other surveys showed that South Koreans approved of Trump's summit diplomacy with North Korea, even if, by the second summit, much of the excitement and anticipation of a peninsula redefining breakthrough began to wane.<sup>41</sup> Notably, the data analyzed here was collected after both summits, so the fact that Trump's North Korea policy remains highly regarded is an indication of what South Koreans prefer from a US administration – engagement and negotiation with North Korea over an existential threat in nuclear weapons.

As the new Joseph Biden administration determines the direction it wishes to go regarding its alliance with South Korea and what to do regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the findings presented here are of value. Reports indicate that Biden will revert to an alternative approach in dealing with North Korea and the question of denuclearization, favoring incremental approaches pursued via lower diplomatic channels rather than the more conspicuous "leader to leader" approach favored by Trump. Although some read Trump's approach to negotiations as one marked by bold proposals, such the Hanoi Summit proposal of complete dismantlement of

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<sup>41</sup> Kim, 'Ahead of the U.S.-North Korea summit, there is both optimism and pessimism about the implementation of an agreement with North Korea' [북미정상회담 앞두고 北 합의이행 낙관·비관 팽팽]; Gallup Korea, 'Understanding of North Korea and U.S.-North Korea summits, economic outlook' [북한·북미정상 관련 인식, 경제 전망].

North Korea's nuclear weapons program in exchange for sanctions relief and substantive economic aid, there is evidence that what was ultimately pursued differed little from previous US administrations – that is, incremental relief for incremental changes, with an end goal of complete denuclearization.<sup>42</sup> In fact, this case is made by both Bob Woodward in his book on Donald Trump, *Rage*, and John Bolton in his memoir covering his time in the Trump White House, *The Room Where It Happened*. While this approach would be more consistent with previous administrations, it may not be the approach most favored by South Koreans.<sup>43</sup>

Many will see the Biden administration as “repairing” US relations with South Korea after a contentious and uncertain four years under Trump, an interpretation supported by developments such as a new agreement on military cost-sharing and more positive-in-tone dialogue between top US and South Korean officials.<sup>44</sup> Moon Jae-in's official state visit to Washington DC indicates more friendly relations with South Korea will define Biden's term. But it is not yet clear – at least at the time of writing – whether a break with all parts of Trump's approach to the Korean peninsula is wise. In terms of a willingness to do more than pursue “strategic patience” with North Korea, there is broad support among South Koreans for engagement. Although it may be the preferred approach, a foreign policy that engages with Pyongyang is a complicated matter. It is unclear what the substance of such an approach would involve today. Disagreements between Seoul and Washington over a possible end-of-war declaration underscore the difficulties.<sup>45</sup>

Even still, Moon Jae-in has called upon the Biden administration to build upon “achievements that were made under the Trump administration,” emphasizing that “dialogues can pick up the pace if we restart the Singapore declaration and seek concrete measures in the negotiations”<sup>46</sup>. The implications of the breakdown in negotiations between the US and North Korea and the subsequent souring of North-South relations for the next South Korean administration remains unclear, but since North Korea acquired a nuclear arsenal in 2006, there has been little evidence that Pyongyang is willing to pursue denuclearization – not, at least, on terms preferable to the United States. The outcome of the next South Korean presidential election, to take place in 2022, is far from clear. A progressive, Minjoo Party victory would likely mean a continuation of a more pro-engagement North Korea policy. A conservative party victory, possibly from the People Power Party, would likely mean an end to engagement and a return to a policy of sanctions support and greater isolation of Pyongyang, at least from Seoul, and an emphasis on US-South Korea coordination in this effort.

To conclude, it is worth considering the future of the US-South Korean alliance amid some fundamental shifts in the region over the last few decades. Although the US remains the preferred security guarantor for South Korea and East Asia's other democracies – and even non-democratic partners (e.g., Vietnam) – the foundation of Washington's security commitment is no

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<sup>42</sup> Lee, ‘Experts: Biden Thought Likely to Reverse Trump's North Korea Policies’.

<sup>43</sup> Wertz, ‘The U.S., North Korea, and Nuclear Diplomacy’.

<sup>44</sup> Ferrier, ‘Biden Takes the Right First Steps with South Korea, But a Long Road Lies Ahead’; Gordon and Jeong, ‘U.S., South Korean Negotiators Reach a Cost-Sharing Accord on Troops’; Harris and Lee, ‘A New Chapter in U.S.-South Korea Relations: Seoul Embraces a Broader Role in Asia’.

<sup>45</sup> Chung, ‘US, ROK hint at disagreements on ending Korean after top diplomats meet’.

<sup>46</sup> Shin, ‘South Korea's Moon urges Biden admin to follow up on Kim, Trump summit’.

longer based on asymmetric economic relations. Since the turn of the century, China has upended the US as East Asia's leading trading partner and economic power. East Asian countries, such as South Korea, still maintain strong trading relations with the US, but no longer is "security secured through prosperity" in the same way it was in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup> However, given China's bellicosity and authoritarian excess, the populations of East and Northeast Asian nations view China in an increasingly negative way.<sup>48</sup> It seems unlikely that China is going to replace the United States as the preferred political power in the region, but what does that mean for the US today?

Where Washington and Seoul shared a commitment to anti-communism for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, today the two countries are more closely bound by their democratic political cultures, personal ties, and commitment to freedom and security. There is an importance place on shared values and commitments to similar ideals: namely, liberty, democracy, and human rights. The public opinion data analyzed here shows that there is a solid foundation upon which Washington can build towards a more mature and long-lasting relationship with countries like South Korea, if it chooses to do so. To avoid turning the region into a complete "powder keg", it may be imperative that the relationship not be entirely defined by military ties.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Calder, 'Securing security through prosperity'.

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<sup>49</sup> Jackson, 'America Is Turning Asia Into a Powder Keg'.

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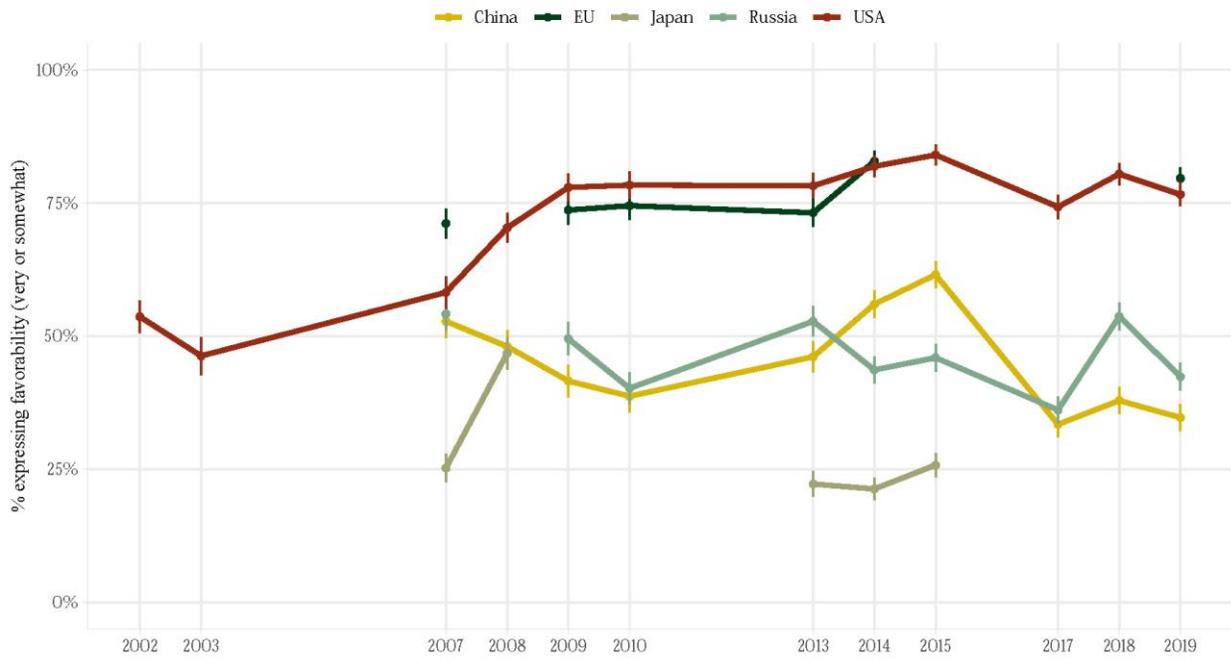
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## Images

Figure 1

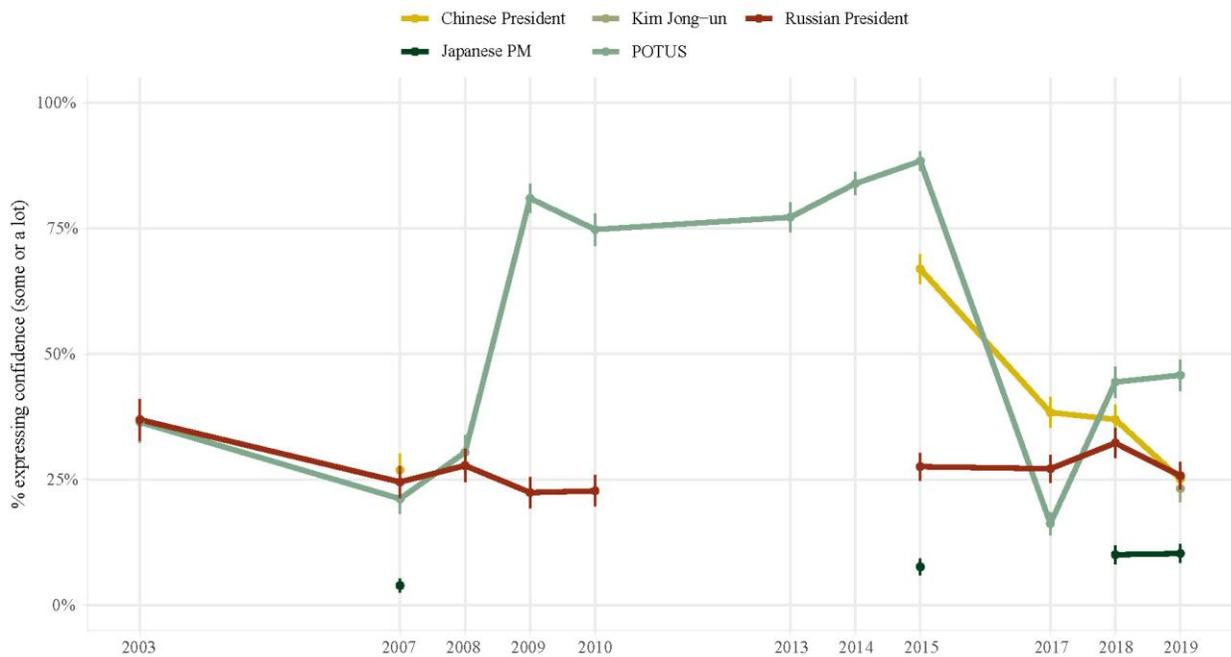
South Koreans' Favorability Ratings Toward the USA & Select Regional Powers, 2003–2019



Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.

Figure 2

South Koreans' Confidence in POTUS & Select Regional Leaders, 2003–2019



Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.

Figure 3  
**South Koreans' Approval of Trump Administration Policies, 2019**

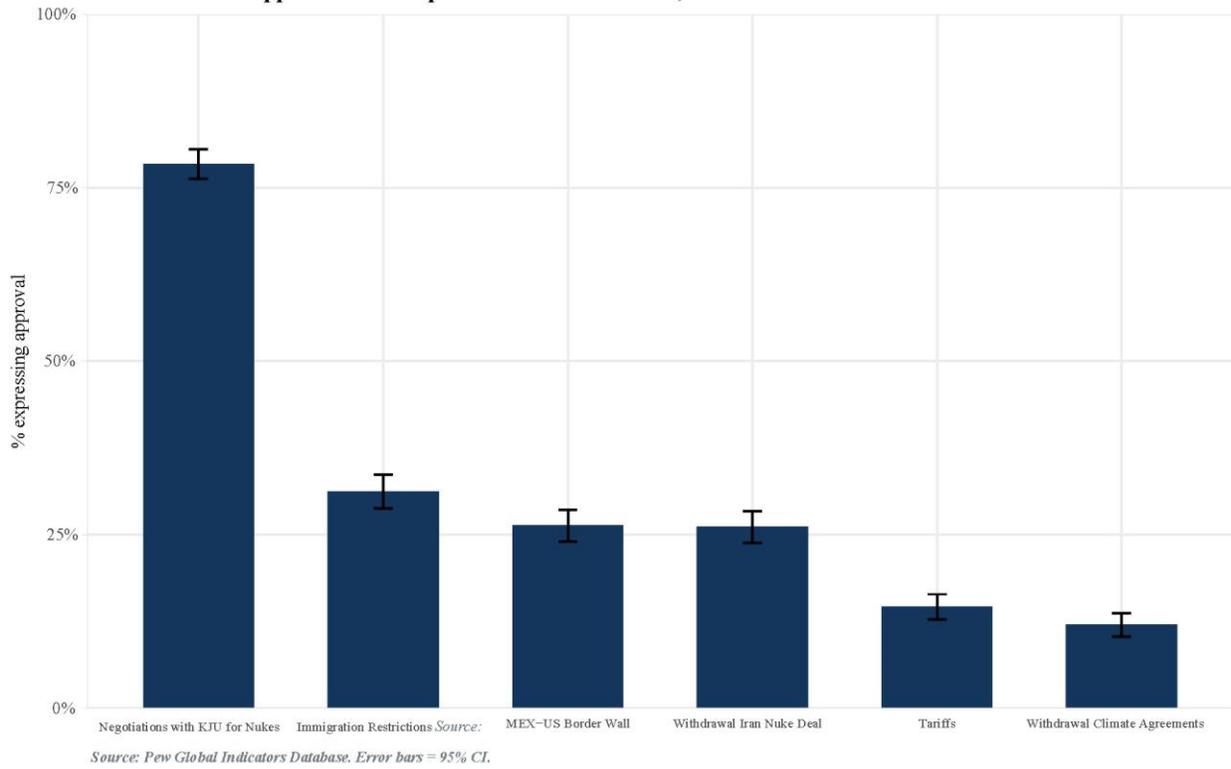
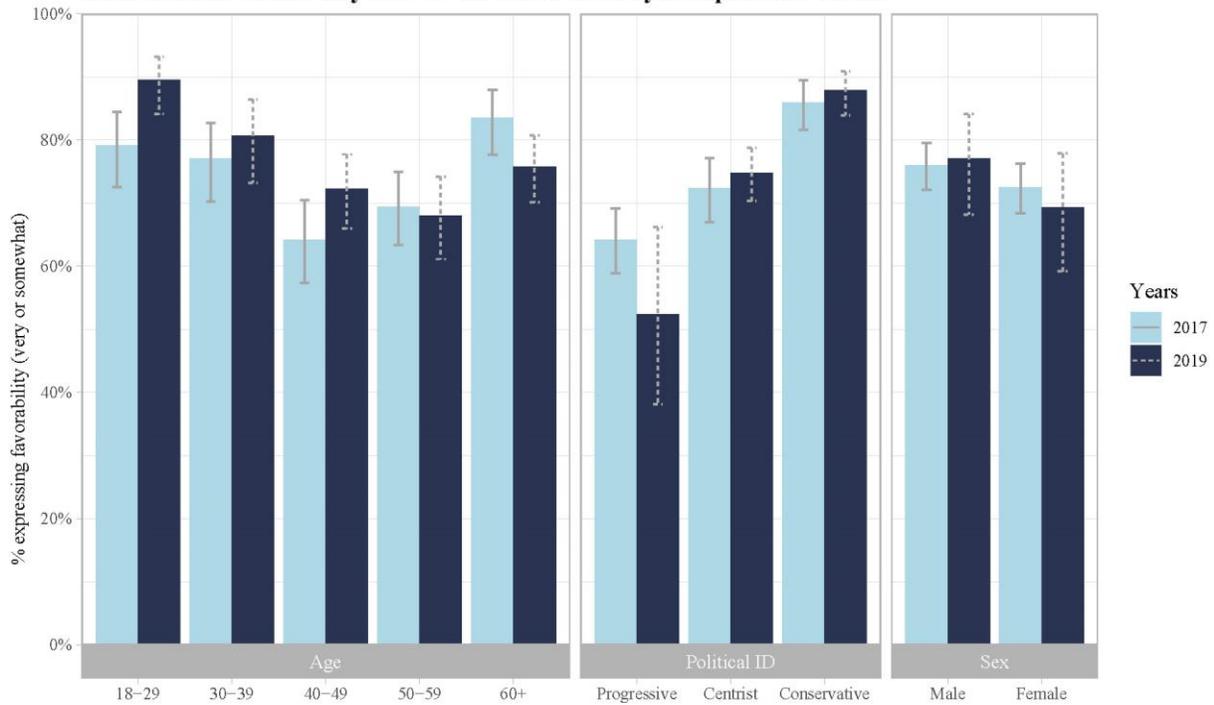
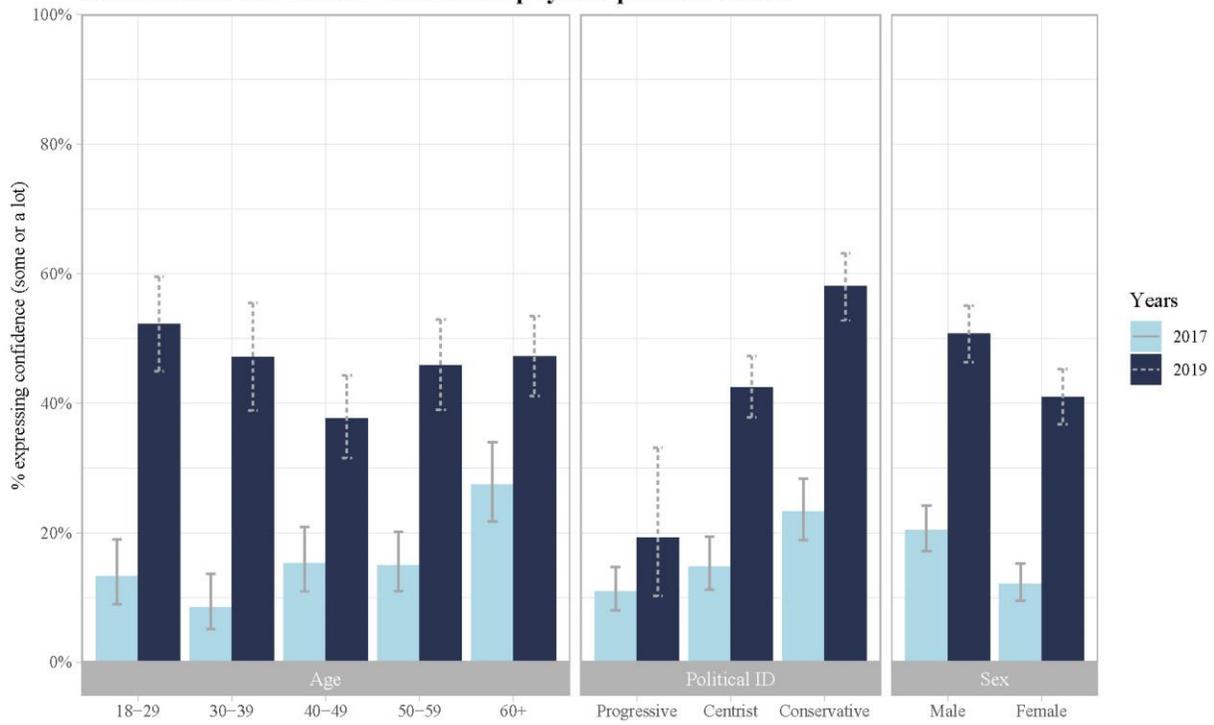


Figure 4  
**South Koreans' Favorability Towards the United States by Groups in 2017 & 2019**

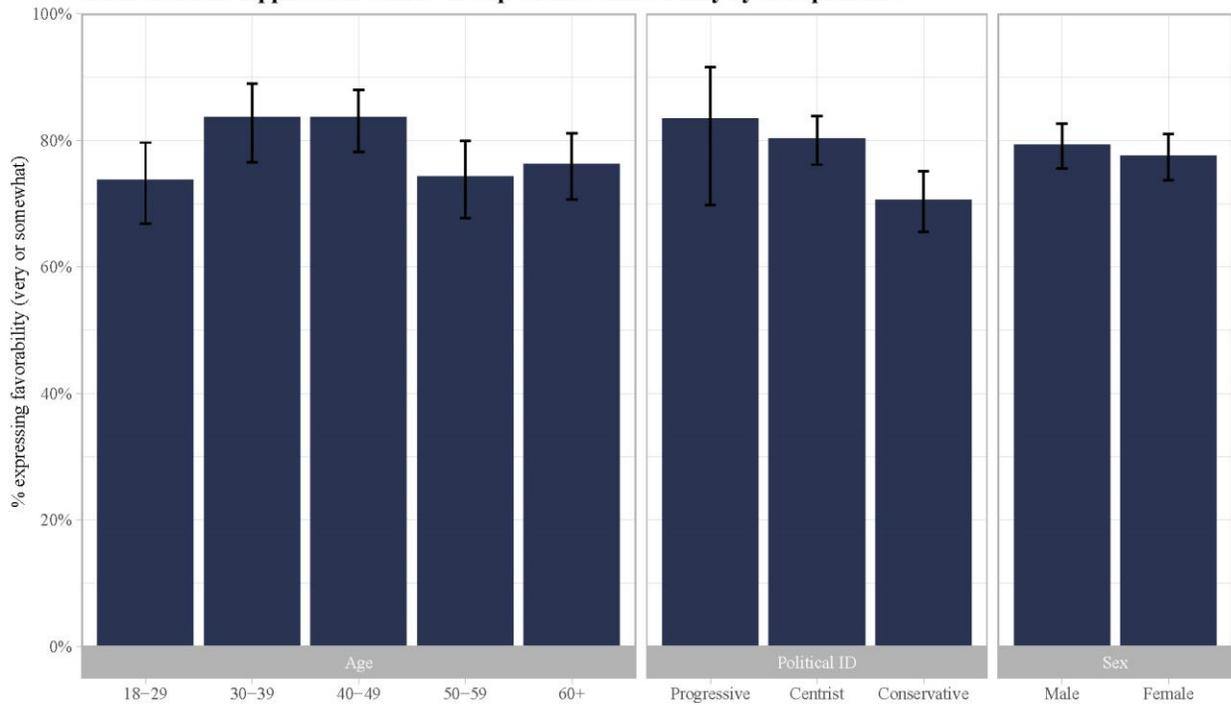


**Figure 4**  
**South Koreans' Confidence in Donald Trump by Groups in 2017 & 2019**



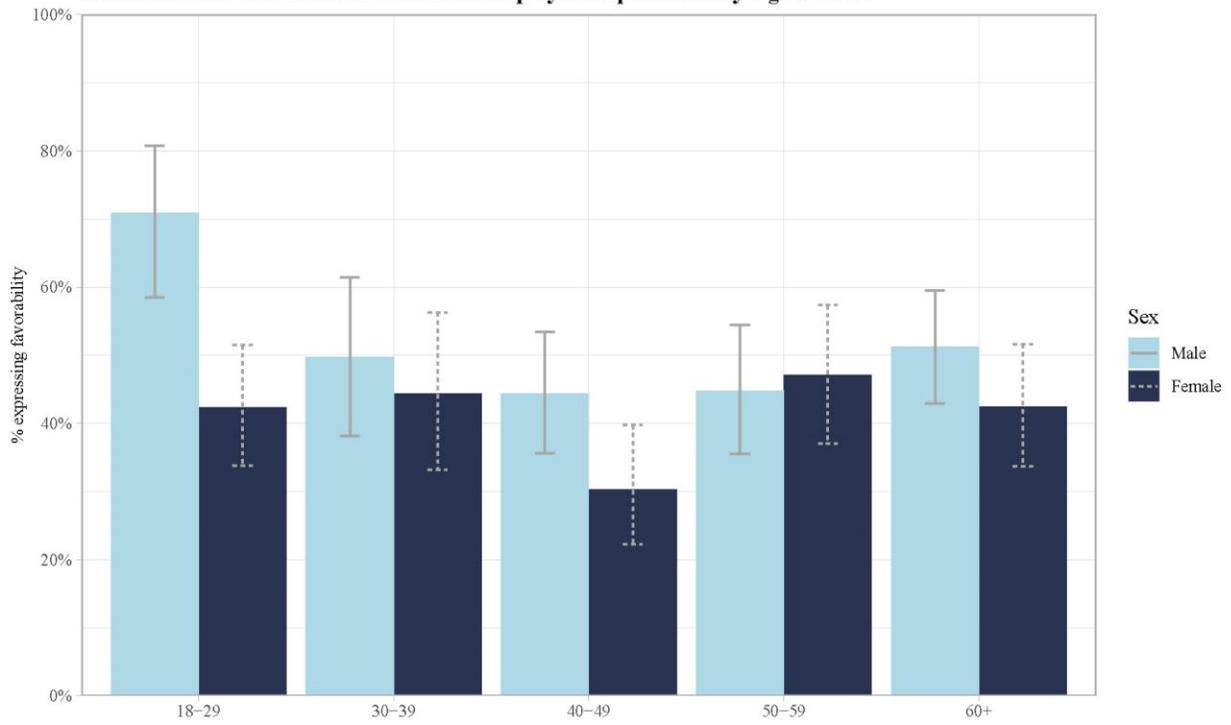
Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.

**Figure 6**  
**South Koreans' Approval of Donald Trump's North Korea Policy by Groups in 2019**



Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.

Figure 6  
South Koreans' Confidence in Donald Trump by Groups in 2019 by Age and Sex



Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.