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

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Abstract

How did South Korea public opinion towards the United States change during the Donald Trump presidency? An unusual and often 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 paper 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, across South Korea's political generations and political subgroups (i.e., progressives and conservatives). The findings shows that the US remains favorably apprised by the vast majority of South Koreans. It also finds that, although Donald Trump did not garner the confidence of most, he remained more popular than other regional leaders, especially among conservatives. Further, Trump's preference for directly negotiating with Kim Jong-un over North Korea's nuclear weapons program enjoyed high levels of approval across all groups, and especially among progressives.

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

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* This is a draft paper. Please do cite. Replication materials and Supplementary Material will be provided via Github: https://github.com/scdenney/ROK-US_relations_Trump.

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1 Introduction

The objective of this paper is to assess South Koreans' opinion 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? Further, how did they 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 relevant subgroups, such as political generations and by political identification, and, if so, what 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 paper assesses several discrete 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. 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. Lastly, using regression models, this paper looks at relevant subgroups in South Korea 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 paper will proceed as follows. The first section provides an overview of the state of South Korea-US relations during the Trump years, setting up the relevant questions and empirical concerns. Following that, the second section reviews the data and methodology used in this paper. The third section reviews relevant descriptive statistics 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, focusing on generational attitudes and political identification in South Korea and explaining why this groups matter and what their opinions reveal about the state of relations between the two countries. This section works towards a model of support for the major questions assessed in this paper. Lastly, the paper concludes with a summary of the findings and concluding discussion.

2 South Korea-US Relations During the Trump Years

As a long-time ally with whom the United States shares deep person-to-person, state, and non-state actor ties, the ROK-US 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. "Freedom's frontier" as some affectionally call it, 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.

It is all the more important, then, to understand South Korean public opinion towards the United States during the Trump administration. A populist authoritarian (cf. Norris and Inglehart 2019), Trump pursued an alternative foreign policy towards both South and North Korea, at first threatening "fire and fury like the world has never seen" (Baker and Choe 2017) against North Korea, before then engaging in an unprecedented bilateral, face-to-face meeting with Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un in 2018 and 2019 in Singapore and Hanoi, respectively.

Trump's relationship with the Moon Jae-in administration in Seoul was marked, at least

initially, by contentious demands for greater cost contributions for US Forces in Korea and the THAAD missile defense battery (Kim 2018), in addition to other contentious ideas like ending the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement (Lee 2017), but also a willingness to support President Moon and his pro-engagement approach with North Korea, or at least not oppose it (Kasulis 2019). Trump's position on the US relationship with the Korean peninsula, including alliance management with South Korea, was marked by inconsistencies and, often, confusion.

Even after Trump had openly questioned the value of the alliance and the US relationship with South Korea during his presidential campaign (Gamel 2016), he would, upon taking office, roll back some of his more controversial positions and pursue a relationship more in line with expectations for a US president today (Ferrier 2017). Although he would openly discuss the possibility of troop reductions, due to cost 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 (Shafer 2020). On his November 2017 speech to South Korea's National Assembly in Seoul, Trump would leave 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 (Henry 2017). The speech signaled a rather hawkish approach to Pyongyang, and while it is hard to read into the speech any indication of the two 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 experience moments of heightened tension, especially regarding military burden-sharing and the Special Measures Agreement (Stewart and Ali 2020), there were no fundamental changes in the ROK-US alliance.

Even so, Trump's tenure will be remembered as a tumultuous four years for US alliances globally, and in East Asia specifically. It is widely acknowledged that Trump's disdain for America's allies, states he often likened to "free riders," put enormous strain on relationship and alliance management (Klinger et al. 2019). As president of the United States, Trump

did nothing less than militate against the liberal international order (Patrick 2020), and in fact against US democracy itself (Graham 2021), straining relationships with many of the country's long-standing allies. The central question, then, is how did the South Korean people respond?

In addition to knowing what South Koreans thought overall, it is equally, if not more, important to consider how opinions differ by relevant subgroups. To more deeply explore what South Koreans thought of the United States and the Trump administration, this paper also looks at how opinion vary by political generations and political identification. Regarding the former, there is particular interest in whether South Korean belonging to generation of citizens who have grown up under democratic political rule differ in opinion from those who came of age under an authoritarian regime. Formative experiences are those belonging to these generations differed substantively, regarding both the United States and political and social life more generally (cf. Moon 2009), and these differing life experiences have been shown to affect political and social attitudes (Denney 2019a). For instance, evidence shows that generations in South Korea, while they may largely support "democracy," have differing political values. Those belonging to the democratic generation are more likely to hold beliefs consistent with liberal democracy than citizens from the authoritarian generation (Denney 2019b; Denney 2017). 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" (cf. State Department 2021) and how, going forward, South Koreans are likely to view the ROK-US alliance.

As for political identification, South Koreans' views of the United States are conditioned by their political priors (Chae and Kim 2010; Lee 2015; Work 2018). Conservatives are understood as those more supportive of the United States and its aims in the region, as their own views and policy preferences (e.g., North Korea) tend to align. Progressives, on the other hand, are viewed as those more skeptical of the value of close ties with the United States and supportive of a more independent relationship. They favor engagement with

North Korea, which is often at odds with US policies meant to denuclearize the country. In what is typically extreme circumstances, some progressives may support or be partial to an anti-American agenda. It stands to reason, then, that understanding how those to the left (progressive) and those on the right (conservative) view the United States can inform interested parties on how, and why, attitudes are (or are not) changing.

3 Data and Methodology

To support the research conducted here, a longitudinal database is created from the Pew Research Center Global Attitudes Surveys, from 2002-2019.[1] The repeated cross-sectional surveys are conducted yearly by the Pew Research Center with local survey and panel partners. They are typically conducted in the spring and the fall, with the spring surveys containing questions exploring "US Image" (opinion of the United States and confidence in the US president), in addition to other questions about the world economy, world leaders, and those pertinent to or specifically related to developments domestically or internationally for the United States.

The common core questions ask respondents from target countries their opinion of the United States, asking them whether they have a "very favorable," "somewhat favorable," "somewhat unfavorable," or "very unfavorable opinion." Also asked yearly 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 giving the options of "a lot of confidence," "some confidence," "not too much confidence," or "no confidence at all." Other questions, outside of these common ones, explore events occurring in that year or the one prior, or events important to a US presidency or period in US and world politics.

In this paper, both common questions are explored for every year for which data is avail-

[1] See more about the Global Attitudes Surveys in the Global Indicators Database at: https://www.pewresearch.org/global/database/.

able. These questions are not administered to South Korean respondents in every year, but there is broad and sufficient coverage. In addition to South Koreans' opinions of the United States, 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 China, Japan, Russia, and North Korea.

In addition to 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 president, attention is turned to understanding certain subgroup dynamics, looking at how attitudes towards key questions considered here differ (or not) by political identification and political generations. Political identification is measured with a political scale question, which asks respondents to indicate where they would place

on a scale from 0 ("extreme left") to 6 ("extreme right"). Those answering 0-2 are counted as "progressive" and those choosing 4-6 are counted as "conservative."

Analysis of political generations is less straight forward, but the demarcation of political generations is guided by objective measures of regime types. Using 1987 as the year of transition, generational cohorts are grouped according to time spent under one regime type or another. The authoritarian generation includes those who spent the entirety of their formative years (12-25) under an autocratic regime.[2] The transition generation includes those who were between the ages of 12-25 at the time of democratic transition, and the democratic transition includes only those who spent the entirety of their formative years under a democratic regime (i.e., those born after 1975).

Importantly, measurement of generations introduces a lag for the democratic generation. Transition from autocracy and democratic consolidation takes time; this grouping method takes this into account. This approach is consistent with previous studies employing generational analysis (Chang and Wang 2005; Rigger 2006; Nuendorf 2010; Dalton and Shin 2014) and more substantive definitions of what constitutes a "generation."[3] As noted above, this paper is specifically interested in the democratic generation, as these are citizens who hold values most consistent with democracy, an assumption validated by empirical research (Dalton and Shin 2014; Denney 2019a). When US officials speak of "shared values" as a core pillar of contemporary ROK-US relations, it is to the democratic cohort they are truly speaking, whether they know it or not.

[2]The authoritarian generation includes those who came of age under the Japanese colonial regime (those coming of age prior to 1945). This group is sometimes referred to as the late colonial/early authoritarian generation (Dalton and Shin 2014). There is some question as to whether earlier governments of the Republic of Korea, especially the first and second republics (1948-1960 and 1960-1961, respectively), were actually autocratic. This research acknowledges this concern, especially regarding the second republic, but holds that neither were they entirely democratic. At best, they were semi-democratic, with autocratic qualities.

[3]Generational analysis draws on the work of Karl Mannheim and his understanding of generations. Mannheim argues that a generation is more than a community of people born at the same time and in the same place. There is a certain sociological quality to a generation that makes it more than a function of biology. Described as "participation in the common destiny of [the] historical and social unit," Mannheim reasons that "Individuals of the same age are... only united as an actual generation insofar as they participate in the characteristic social and intellectual currents of their society and period...." (1928: 303-304). In this study, such periods are defined by political regime types and historical eras.

4 Empirical Findings

This section reviews the empirical findings of the research. First, this section looks at South Koreans' favorability ratings towards the United States from 2002-2019, compared to four other regional actors (China, the European Union, Japan, and Russia).

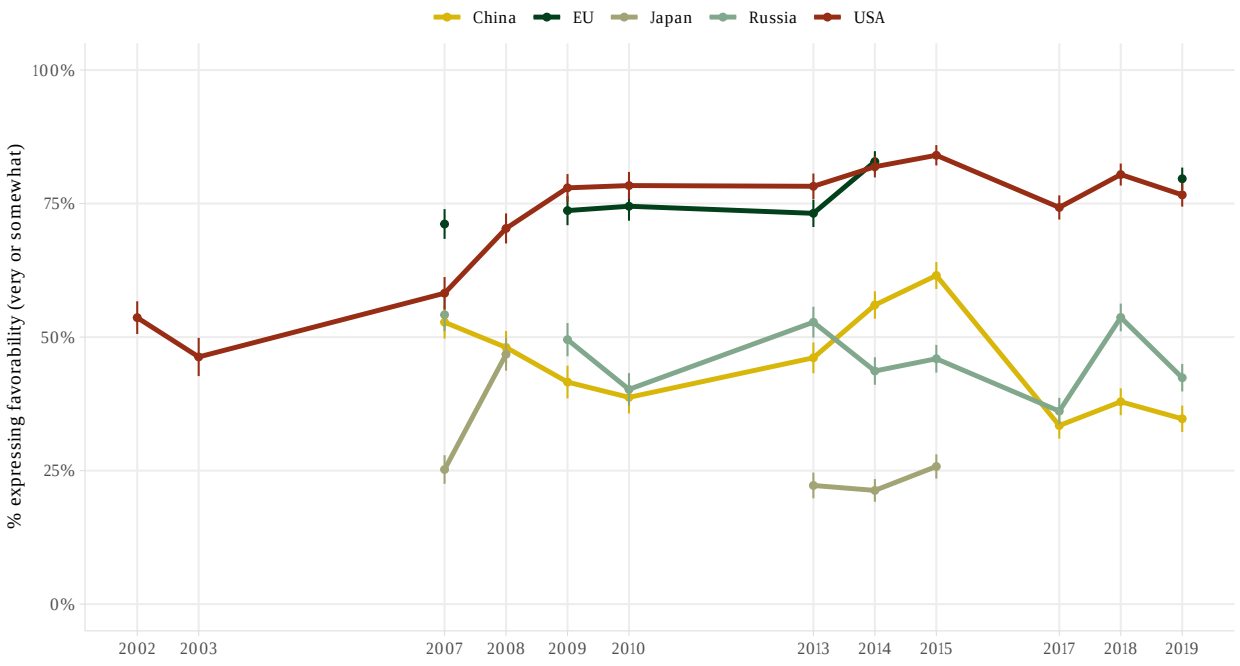
Figure 1 shows that 2002 and 2003 were the low points for the period of observation, with only 54 and 46 percent, respectively, of South Koreans saying they hold a very or somewhat favorable view of the United States. During the George W. Bush years, the status of the relationship was considered, at best, "ambivalent" (cf. Larson et al. 2004). 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 (Kirk 2002). With the period of observation considered here, the Bush administration's rule was unquestionably the high-water mark of anti-Americanism in South Korea. 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 (Kim 2003).[4] South Korean views recovered in Bush's second term (2005-08). With the election of Barack Obama in 2008, a new normal for ROK-US relations would be established. 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.

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 an initial 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 modestly, to 77 percent in 2019. The new baseline for South Korean public opinion towards the US set under Obama remained during the Trump years.

[4]The relationship did not exactly collapse. Although it was a low point, nearly half of the population still favorably appraised the US. Further, as Kim (2018) points out, although Roh sought autonomy from the United States, he negotiated closely on a number of key issues, including the war in Iraq (South Korea sent troops) and the proposal for a free trade agreement with the US. He also made an official state visit to the Washington DC.

Figure 1

South Koreans' Favorability Ratings Toward the USA & Select Regional Powers, 2002–2019



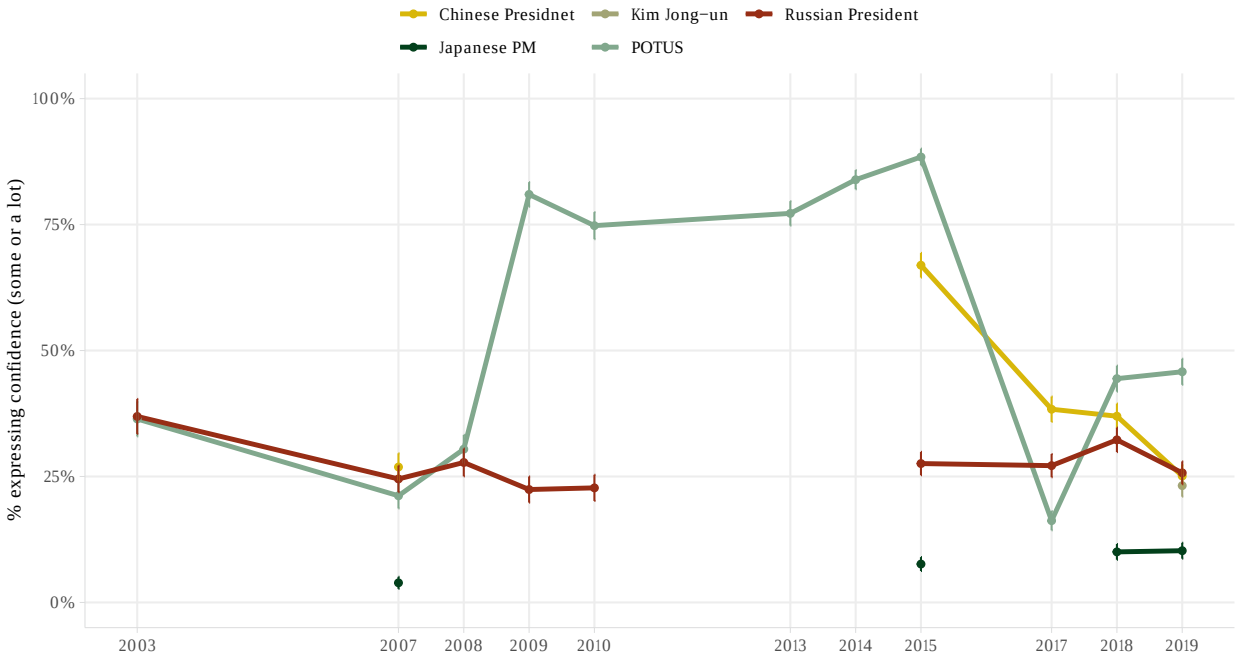
Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.

Notably, for all regional actors, except for the European Union (EU), favorability of the United States is 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 between the US and other, with the US viewed more favorably (sans EU). Approval of China dropped below 50 percent between 2015 and 2017, which overlaps with the election and rise of Chinese President Xi Jinping (more on Xi below). For years when data is available for Japan, the difference 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 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 2003-19. We see, again, a negative ap-

praisal during the George W. Bush years, with less than half of South Koreans expressing confidence in Bush in 2003 (36 percent) and less than a quarter (21 percent) in 2007. For data during the Bush presidency, only Shinzo Abe, prime minister of Japan, registers significantly lower confidence (4 percent). However, as observed with approval of the United States as a country, Barack Obama revived faith 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 exceptional high point in 2015, at 88 percent.

Figure 2
South Koreans' Confidence in POTUS & Select Regional Leaders, 2003–2019



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

How did public opinion 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 issues, as identified above, were coldly received by South Koreans. No other leaders from regional powers faired any better than did Trump. Over approximately the same period, confidence in Xi Jinping (Chinese President) began a sharp decline, while confidence in the

Russian President[5] remained consistently low, as did for the Japanese Prime Minister and Kim Jong-un (for whom data is only available for 2019). Despite hitting a low point in 2017, confidence in Trump made a significant rebound in 2018, climbing to 44 percent (a +28pp increase). This change beckons a closer examination, which is done below. Before the increase in confidence of Trump is explored, this section takes a closer look at approval of Trump-era policies.

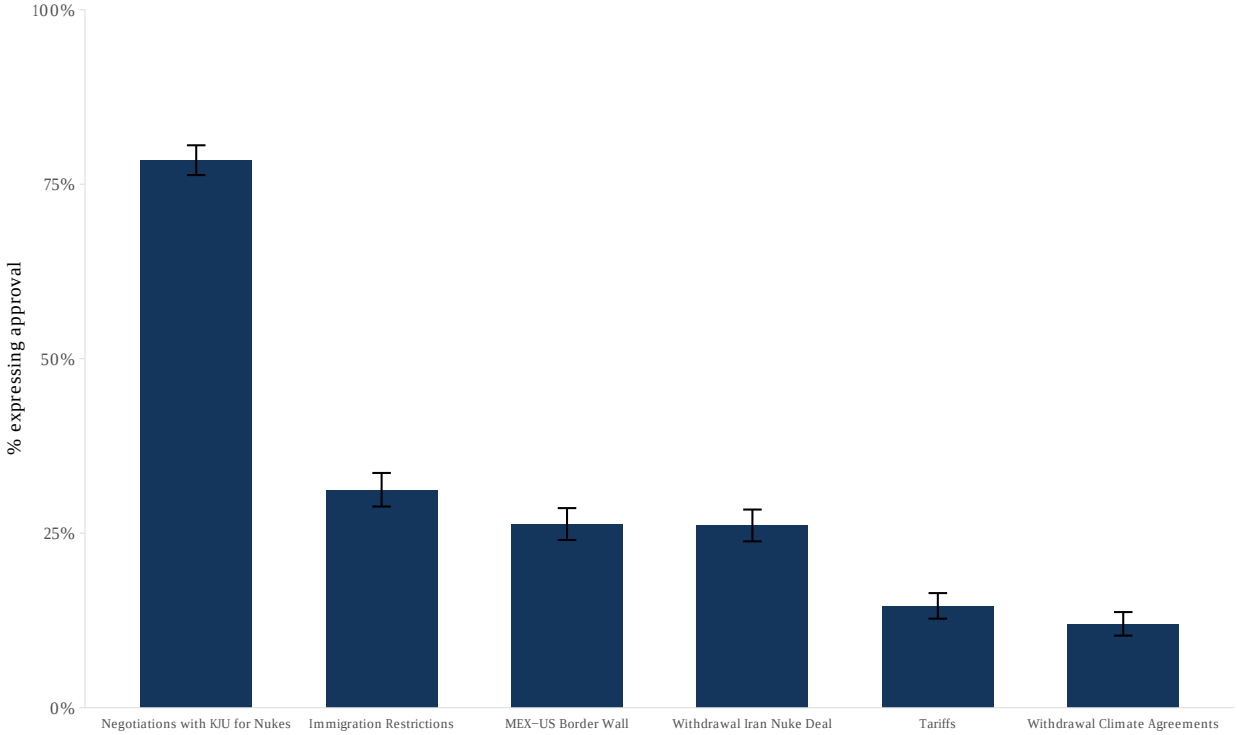
Figure 3 shows the percentage of South Koreas who approve of key policy actions taken by the Trump administration. By and large, key policies are negatively assessed, but one should not overlook that fact that one-third of the South Korean population approved of Trump's immigration restrictions and 26 percent reacted positively to plans for an extended and reinforced Mexico-US border wall and the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA; the "Iran nuclear deal"), but these cannot be considered popular moves in South Korea. Even less popular were increasing tariffs (and fees) on imported goods and withdrawing from climate agreements. South Koreans largely prefer a US administration engaged with the world (see climate change, Iranian nuclear deal) and open to the world (no tariffs, liberal immigration, and no border wall).

However, what stands apart from all items reported is Trump's policy of engaging North Korea on the country's nuclear weapons program: 78 percent of South Koreans approved in 2019. As indicated in the joint North Korea-US statement from the Singapore Summit in 2018 (New York Times 2018), the US committed to providing security 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 (NCNK 2018). Although the second Trump-Kim summit, held in Vietnam 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 misunderstanding of what

[5]Vladimir Putin for all years except 2008, 2009, and 2010, when it was Dmitry Medvedev).

Figure 3

South Koreans' Approval of Trump Administration Policies, 2019



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

"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 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 signal was clear.

Regarding Donald Trump, his administration, and the United States, the empirical findings presented thus far show several things. First, following recovery from the early 2000s (George W. Bush years), the US image in South Korea has remained extremely positive. Positive views of the US remained, even as confidence in the US president plummeted, suggesting that the idea of the United States (i.e., how its image is projected and received abroad) is not necessarily linked to any one individual. Trump may have been poorly perceived, but the positive image of the US remained. This is a relatively straight forward finding, but one nevertheless worth underscoring.

Second, after an initial bottoming-out of confidence in POTUS, there is observed a significant increase in support (+28pp). The reason for this change is not clear. What might explain it? One possible explanation is that Trump's about-face on North Korea policy, announcing in March of 2018 intentions to hold a summit with Kim Jong-un (Schwartz and Gordon 2018), was viewed as enabling South Korean President Moon Jae-in's pro-engagement policy with Pyongyang, thereby bolstering his approval with those support of 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 (confidence in POTUS at 46 percent). The top-line numbers, however, do not reveal the reason behind the variation. Further analysis is required.

The same need for further consideration holds for the third, and final, main finding discussed thus far. There is a high level of support for Trump's North Korea policy, or at least was at the time of the survey (May 27-July 11, 2019; data for 2020 is not yet available, nor is it known whether Pew Center polled South Koreans on Trump's North Korea policy). Although most of his policies were poorly appraised by South Koreans (immigration bans, border wall, etc.), South Koreans seem to approve of a US foreign policy that engages North Korea, at least on the issue of nuclear weapons.

4.1 Subgroup Analysis

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, subgroup analysis is conducted using regression analysis. Specific focus is given to political identification and generations. Using this method, differences in opinion can be identified and explanations of why opinions changed can be considered.

Since all three outcome variables are dichotomous, logit regressions (with robust standard

errors) are used to calculate the probability of someone holding an opinion; in this case, whether one favorably rates the US and whether one has confidence in Donald Trump or approves of his North Korea policy. Variables for political identification and generations are specified using the categories identified above. For generations, the transition generation serves as the reference group, and for political identification, centrist is the reference category. Statistical controls are included for sex (female equals 1, else 0), urban (which measures whether a respondent lived in a major urban area), education (university graduates and above equal 1, else 0), and religion (specifically, whether the respondent indicates they are a protestant Christian, coded as 1, else 0).

First, analysis of US favorability is examined. As explored above, approximately three-in-four South Koreans favorably appraise the United States. But is the approval the same across generations and by political identification? Table 1 shows the logit regression outcomes using a pooled response model (with survey year fixed effects). The model summary reports odds ratios (ORs) as a measure of association between the response and outcome variables, or the odds that the group, vis-à-vis its reference category, said they view the US favorably. The results show that across generations, the US is viewed positively (i.e., no generational differences). However, there are substantive differences in opinion by political identification. Reading the second column/model (which includes statistical controls), those identifying as conservative are, compared to centrists, 2.24 times (or 124 percent) more likely to hold a favorable view of the US. Conversely, progressives are 31 percent less likely to hold a favorable view. If the scope is limited to the most recent survey year (2019), the findings (column/model three) are substantively similar, although conservatives (OR 2.39) and progressives (OR .49) are even farther apart in opinion.

Table 1: South Koreans' Favorability Towards the United States
Logit Regressions

	1. US Favorability All Years	2. US Favorability All Years	3. US Favorability 2019 Only
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*
(Intercept)	3.56 ***	2.50 ***	2.29 **
	(0.55)	(0.57)	(0.60)
Authoritarian	1.18	1.09	1.66
	(0.41)	(0.39)	(0.97)
Democratic	0.85	0.87	1.00
	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.25)
Conservative	2.22 ***	2.24 ***	2.39 ***
	(0.30)	(0.34)	(0.52)
Progressive	0.73 **	0.69 **	0.49 **
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.12)
Controls	No	Yes	Yes
Survey Years	No	Yes	--
Observations	2633	2263	922
R^2 Tjur	0.031	0.041	0.064

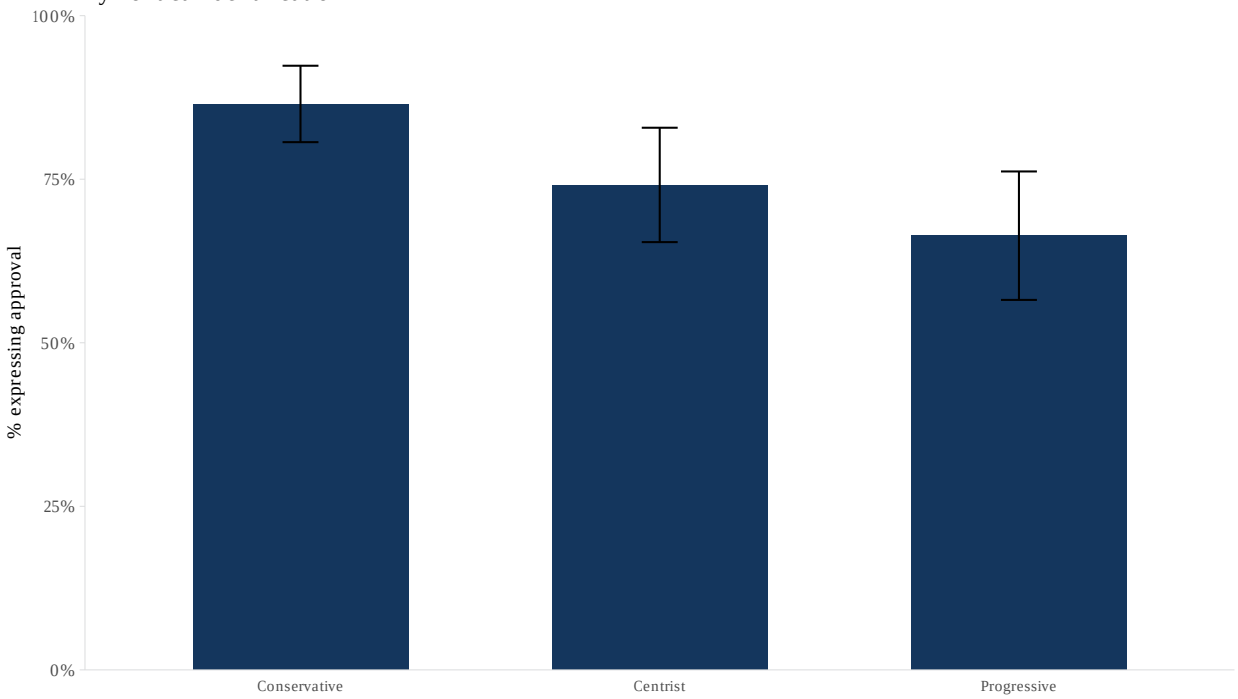
*$p<0.05$ **$p<0.01$ ***$p<0.001$

To better show differences in opinion regarding the United States by political identification, Figure 4 plots the predicted probabilities. On average, 87 percent of South Korean conservatives viewed the US favorably during the Trump administration. However, only 66 percent of progressives did (a substantive 21 percentage point difference). At roughly two-thirds, it is still fair to say that most progressives view the United States favorably, but there are significant differences observed by political identification. This finding, however, is not unexpected or surprising.

For confidence in President Trump, logit regression models are specified for the survey year 2017 (low point) and then again for the 2018 and 2019 years (higher confidence). Then, a pooled response model which includes all available survey years (2017, 2018, and 2019) with variable for survey year fixed effects is specified. Outcomes are reported in Table 2.

Figure 4

South Koreans' Favorability Ratings of the USA
By Political Identification



Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.
Estimates are predicted probabilities, derived from logit regressions.

For the individual survey year models, there are notable differences strongly indicative of what – or, rather, who – explains the change in opinions. For the year 2017 model, the results show that there were no statistically significant differences in opinion between progressives and conservatives. Those belonging to the democratic generation, however, thought very differently from older cohorts. Compared to the transition generation, they were 70 percent less likely to have confidence in Trump (there is no significant difference between the authoritarian and transition generations).

Table 2: South Koreans' Confidence in Donald Trump
Logit Regressions

	1. Confidence in Trump 2017	2. Confidence in Trump 2018	3. Confidence in Trump 2019	4. Confidence in Trump All Years
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*
(Intercept)	0.72	1.22	1.07	0.29 ***
	(0.37)	(0.29)	(0.24)	(0.07)
Authoritarian	1.07	1.14	1.53	1.27
	(1.56)	(0.51)	(0.69)	(0.39)
Democratic	0.22 **	0.49 ***	0.93	0.61 ***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.19)	(0.09)
Conservative	1.41	1.68 **	1.79 ***	1.71 ***
	(0.54)	(0.31)	(0.30)	(0.20)
Progressive	1.00	1.08	0.55 **	0.87
	(0.39)	(0.19)	(0.13)	(0.11)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Survey Years	--	--	--	Yes
Observations	372	969	922	2263
R^2 Tjur	0.084	0.041	0.056	0.093

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $p<0.001$

However, for the 2018 and 2019 survey year models (post-rise in confidence), the findings are significantly and instructively different. First, those part of the democratic generation are either less critical than older cohorts (year 2018) or no longer distinctively negative in their assessment (year 2019). In 2019, none of the effects for either authoritarian or democratic generations are statistically significant, although the OR of 1.53 for authoritarians is notable (this can be read as this group being 1.53 times (or 53 percent) more likely to have confidence in POTUS compared to the transition generation). What does show more clearly is the increase in support from conservatives and decrease in support from progressives. In

2018, conservatives were 1.68 times more likely than centrists to have confidence in President Trump, and in 2019 that number increases to 1.79. Notably, in the last survey year, progressives are much less likely than centrists to have confidence in Trump (OR of .55, or 45 percent less likely). There is a concomitant rise across survey years in support from the authoritarian generation, although none of the differences are statistically significant at the 95 percent level. The political findings presented here strongly indicate that those responsible for Trump's rise in confidence in South Korea are conservatives and, probably, authoritarians.[6]

The implications of these findings are discussed more in the conclusion and discussion to this paper, but to underscore the substantive findings from these regressions, predicted probabilities of support for confidence in Trump by political identification are shown in Figure 5. In 2019, 63 percent of conservatives had confidence in Donald Trump; 49 percent of centrists agreed; and 34 percent of progressive did.

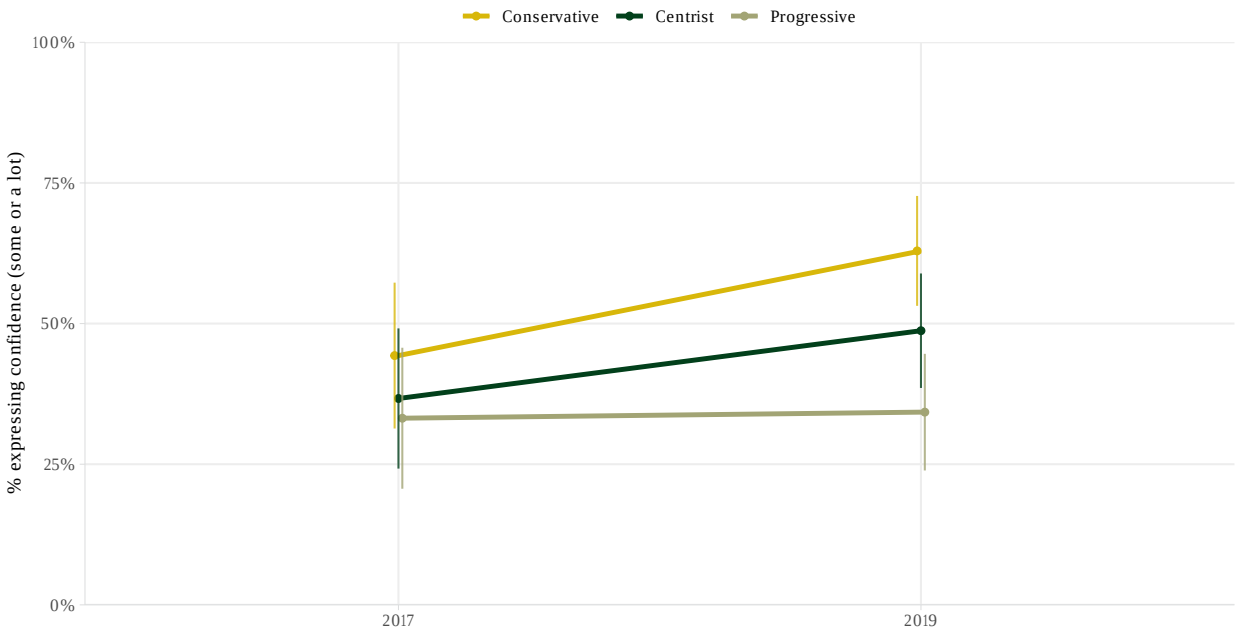
It is now established that, contrary to expectations, South Korean progressives did not drive Trump's confidence numbers upward. But it is also observed that Trump's North Korea policy was popular, and it would, again, stand to reason that Moon Jae-in supporters – that is, progressives and those predisposed to support those pursuing (or enabling) engagement with North Korea – would be those most likely to approve of a policy that engages Pyongyang. However, given that the specific focus is on negotiating with Kim Jong-un over nuclear weapons, it is not given that centrists or even conservatives would not see the move as prudent from a national security perspective and thus support it.

Table 3 shows the logit regression findings for approval of Trump's negotiations with Kim Jong-un over North Korea's nuclear weapons programs. The findings reveal that progressives are much more likely to approve of Trump engaging Kim. Reading the model with statistical controls included (column 2), progressives are 2.16 times (or 116 percent) more likely than centrists to approve. Conservatives, on the other hand, are 43 percent less likely (OR .57).

[6]For logit regression in Table 2, models without statistical controls are not reported, for space consideration. Findings from such models are not significantly different than those with statistical controls.

Figure 5

South Koreans' Confidence in Donald Trump, 2017 & 2019
By Political Identification



Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.
Estimates are predicted probabilities, derived from logit regressions.

The differences in opinion by generations are small and statistically insignificant.

Table 3: South Koreans' Approval of Trump's North Korea Policy
Logit Regressions

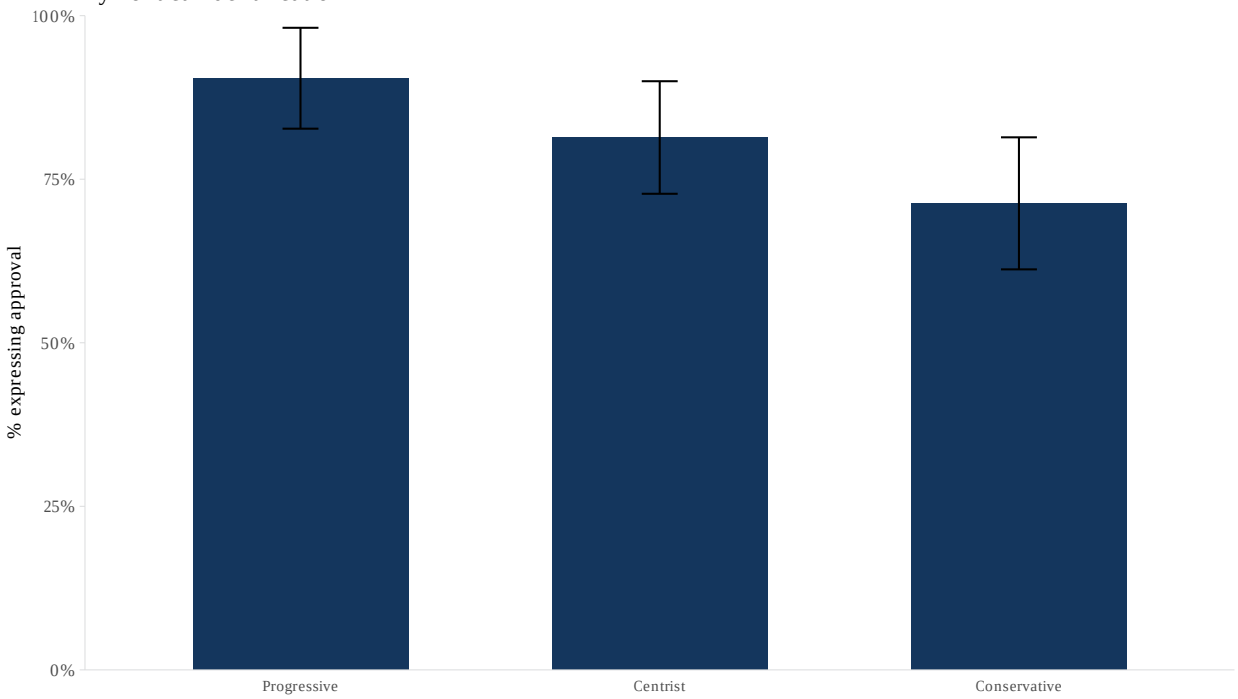
	1. Approval Trump's NK Policy	2. Approval Trump's NK Policy
Predictors	*Odds Ratios*	*Odds Ratios*
(Intercept)	3.73 ***	3.86 ***
	(0.84)	(1.00)
Authoritarian	0.88	0.84
	(0.40)	(0.38)
Democratic	1.12	1.08
	(0.26)	(0.26)
Conservative	0.59 **	0.57 **
	(0.11)	(0.11)
Progressive	2.28 *	2.16 *
	(0.80)	(0.77)
Controls	No	Yes
Observations	922	922
R^2 Tjur	0.031	0.034

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$ *** $p<0.001$

It is important to note that the difference in opinion between conservatives and progressives is relative to centrists (the baseline for measuring differences). Support overall is high and most conservatives are still supportive. To better show the overall support (and the differences), Figure 6 plots the predicted probabilities of approving of Trump's North Korea policy by political identification. There is a large, 19 percentage point difference between progressives (90 percent) and conservatives (71 percent), but it is worth underscoring the fact that nearly three-in-four conservatives also approve of Trump's policy approach to North Korea.

Figure 6

South Koreans' Approval of Trump's North Korea Policy, 2019
By Political Identification



Source: Pew Global Indicators Database. Error bars = 95% CI.
Estimates are predicted probabilities, derived from logit regressions.

5 Conclusion and Discussion

This paper 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 form 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 turned positive with the election of Barack Obama. Favorable opinions of the United States remained throughout the Trump years, even as con-

fidence 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 (Silver et al. 2020), and neither Russia nor Japan are viewed with much enthusiasm. For the years data is available, Japan garners barely a 25 percent favorability rating and Russia is barely more popular than China. Given the limited role that the EU plays in the region (cf. Denney 2017), South Korea remains the US' to loose on the public opinion front, as has historically been the case.

Second, while confidence in the US president plummeted 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 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.

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 (i.e., stifling trade), restricting immigration, and preferring a Mexico-US border wall.

However, South Koreans were very supportive of Donald Trump engaging Kim Jong-un over his country's nuclear weapons program. The finding is not exactly surprising, given

that most South Koreans approved of Trump's summit diplomacy with North Korea (Kim 2019), even if, by the second summit, much of the excitement and anticipation of a peninsula redefining breakthrough began to wane (Gallup Korea 2019). However, 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.

Lastly, generational and political subgroup analysis revealed some long-known truths but also some interesting, and arguably unanticipated, findings. The regression analysis shows that there were no generational differences in favorability ratings of the United States during the Trump years, but conservatives held the US is significantly higher regard than centrists or progressives. The lack of generational differences is notable, but the finding that conservatives are more pro-US is nothing new. Where the subgroup analysis does reveal some interesting differences in opinion is regarding confidence in Donald Trump. Here, we see democrats (i.e, those socialized under democratic institutions) significantly less impressed with President Trump than other generations. This provides some evidence of a disconnect in values, as Trump is now fully understood to have been an authoritarian populist who rejected not only the liberal international order, but democracy itself.

Further, the uptick in confidence in Trump was not, contrary to reasonable expectations, driven by progressives as a result of Trump enabling of Moon's pro-engagement North Korea policy. It was driven by a rise in support from South Korea's conservatives, indicating a show of solidarity from one conservative base to another. It is unclear what, exactly, this means, but it suggests that Trump's authoritarian populism and unique brand of politicking resonated with many South Koreans who identify as right of center.

It is observed, however, that among those who approved of Trump's negotiating with Kim Jong-un (more than 75 percent of the population), progressives were indeed significantly more likely to approve. This can be read as an indication that South Korea progressives support engagement with North Korea even if the person doing the negotiating is not someone who

they would otherwise approve. Interestingly, even conservatives, who are significantly less supportive of engaging North Korea, approved of Donald Trump's engagement with Kim Jong-un; nearly three-in-four approved.

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 (Lee 2021) that Biden will revert to an alternative approach in dealing with North Korea and the question of denuclearization, favoring incremental approaches over bold deals, such as Trump's Hanoi Summit proposal of complete dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program in exchange for sanctions relief and substantive economic aid. While this approach would be more consistent with previous administrations (cf. Wertz 2018), it may not be the approach most favored by South Koreans.

Although many see the Biden administration as "repairing" US relations with South Korea (Ferrier 2021), an interpretation supported by developments such as a new agreement on military cost-sharing (Gordon 2021) and more positive-in-tone dialogue between top US and South Korean officials (Atwood 2021), it is not yet clear – at least at the time of writing – whether a break all parts of Trump's approach to the Korean peninsula is wise. In fact, 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" (Shin 2021). 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 as many have pointed out, since North Korea acquired a nuclear arsenal in 2006, "there has been no tangible progress in denuclearization" (Lee 2020). 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, whereas 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 ROK-US coordination in this effort.

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