

KOREAN SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY INITIATIVE

A Peninsula of Paradoxes: South Korean Public Opinion on Unification and Outside Powers

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SUMMARY

LIVING WITH PARADOXES

More by default than design, South Korea's inter-Korean and unification policies are characterized by a mixture of paradoxes. These paradoxes reflect a host of factors, including built-in structural inconsistencies, powerful historical legacies, the contrasting inter-Korean policies that various South Korean governments have pursued, the politicized nature of South Korea's domestic debate over North Korea, and the harsh geopolitical realities of Northeast Asia.

Living with these paradoxes is a fact of life for South Koreans, but this state of affairs creates contradictory impulses. South Korea's psychological predispositions on questions of national security are colored by disparate desires and contradictions that may be hard for outside observers to understand. For example, South Koreans' yearning for greater strategic autonomy has long been an abiding feature of the country's idealistic worldview, given the peninsula's long history of invasions, occupation, tributary relations, and even outright colonization. Yet, at the same time, South Korea instinctively understands the centrality of its alliance with the United States and the harsh power politics of Northeast Asia. As much as South Koreans seek greater autonomy, they are also very concerned about possibly being abandoned by the United States. A survey conducted on behalf of the Carnegie Endowment

“Living with these paradoxes is a fact of life for South Koreans, but this state of affairs creates contradictory impulses.”

for International Peace's Asia Program set out to gauge South Korean public opinion on such questions.

According to the survey, the vast majority of South Koreans believe that the Republic of Korea (ROK) should continue to have an alliance with the United States even after unification. Meanwhile, a strong majority of them also feel that a unified Korea should have an alliance with China. Clearly, it would be impossible to form simultaneous alliances with both Washington and Beijing. Yet such contradictory instincts are shaped, in part, by the fact that South Korea's closest ally—the United States—lies 10,000 kilometers away, while its biggest trading partner and North Korea's only patron—China—shares a border with the Korean Peninsula.¹ In more ways than one, South Koreans' seemingly contradictory desires to contemplate simultaneous alliances with the United States and China in the post-unification era attest to their wish to extricate themselves from the iron grip of

“South Korea stands out as one of the few strategically consequential states that has virtually irreversible ties with both the United States and China.”

geography. Indeed South Korea stands out as one of the few strategically consequential states that has virtually irreversible ties with both the United States and China.

South Korea has long exhibited mistrust of great powers, and this tendency continues to shape South Korean attitudes about the roles of foreign actors. A total of 54.4 percent of respondents in the Carnegie survey replied that China was likely to be the biggest security threat to a unified Korea.² Meanwhile, 60.5 percent of the respondents said that the United States would likely have the most influence throughout the reunification process. Two groundbreaking U.S.–North Korea summits in June 2018 and February 2019 and three inter-Korean summits in 2018 led more South Koreans to believe temporarily that North Korea would denuclearize. But by early 2020, the euphoria surrounding South-North relations had dissipated. Indeed, even many self-identified progressives—the most ardent supporters of inter-Korean détente—lacked confidence that North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons.

CAUGHT BETWEEN THE IDEAL OF AUTONOMY AND THE REALITY OF INTERDEPENDENCE

Most South Koreans, nearly 69 percent, felt that the two Koreas should be unified without foreign intervention, and 57.2 percent of those who opposed foreign involvement believed that it would undermine their independence and sovereignty. At the same time, 49.5 percent of those who did not feel that unification

should be a wholly Korean process without interference felt that way because they believed that foreign powers would inevitably be involved in one form or another.

When South Koreans think about unification, 40.5 percent said they think peaceful coexistence is the most likely outcome, while 31.6 percent said peaceful unification through dialogue and negotiations is the most probable endgame. Meanwhile, 20.6 percent responded that unification through absorption was the most likely scenario.

An overwhelming majority of South Koreans hope that unification can be achieved by compromise, but this opens up new quandaries: Would it be possible to merge a flourishing democracy with a family-run communist dynasty? How much are South Koreans willing to give up to create a unified Korea? How realistic is it to believe that North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un would be willing or even able to make key political compromises?

SOUTH KOREA AND ITS POWERFUL NEIGHBORS

The shadow of an increasingly powerful, assertive China is clearly felt in South Korea today. Despite South Korea’s growing ties with China, only 26.9 percent of South Koreans trust China to be a supportive partner in unification. Equally important, when asked which country would likely pose the biggest threat to a unified Korea, 54.4 percent said China, 29.3 percent said Japan, and 8.3 percent said the United States.

On the question of which countries (other than North Korea) would likely have the greatest influence on Korean unification, 60.5 percent answered the United States and 32.4 percent said China. Most interestingly, a majority of progressives, moderates, and conservatives alike felt that the United States would likely have the most influence.

More specifically, while South Koreans feel that unification should be handled by the two Koreas without foreign intervention, they also understand that some degree of foreign involvement is perhaps inevitable. When asked which of the regional powers should have some role in fostering Korean unification, 72.8 percent answered the United States and 61.4 percent said China.

This study highlights the contradictions and tensions between South Koreans' perceptions of the idealized version of a sovereign, unified Korea they aspire to establish and the thorny practical difficulties of actually achieving that vision. Acknowledging those tensions alone will not erase these complications, but perhaps it is still an early step toward helping policymakers in Seoul and Washington understand the constraints that they must operate under as they confront the difficult choices that lie ahead.

“Despite South Korea’s growing ties with China, only 26.9 percent of South Koreans trust China to be a supportive partner in unification.”

Narrowing the gap between conservative and progressive approaches to inter-Korean ties and, ultimately, a common unification road map, would help give South Korea more political room to maneuver in coping with its much more powerful neighbors. It is also imperative for South Korea to ensure that its commitment to universal values and the country’s liberal democratic underpinnings are not sacrificed on the altar of Korean unification.

A CLASH BETWEEN IDEALS AND POLITICAL REALITIES

South Koreans perceive inter-Korean relations and the prospects for the eventual unification of North and South Korea in multifaceted, paradoxical terms. These paradoxes are emblematic of built-in structural inconsistencies, powerful historical legacies, the different inter-Korean policies various South Korean governments have pursued, the politicized nature of South Korea's domestic debate on how best to deal with North Korea, and the harsh geopolitical realities of Northeast Asia.

Historically, since democracy was restored in the late 1980s, the principal way the Republic of Korea (ROK) government has tried to overcome these paradoxes has been by forging an overarching unification policy amorphous enough to attract support from across the political spectrum. By threading this needle, the National Community Unification Formula has remained South Korea's official unification policy since it was adopted in 1989. Yet with shifts in power between South Korean conservatives and progressives, some incoming administrations have opted to either supercharge South-North engagement through summits and other means, while others have adopted more defiant postures toward North Korea. As a result, implementation and operationalization of the unification policy have been driven by each incoming administration's changing

political priorities and, more importantly, have been highly politicized.

While inter-Korean ties and unification policies are like two sides of the same coin, they are also quite distinct. The connection between South-North relations and unification is the belief that, through growing inter-Korean exchanges and cooperation, the two Koreas will be able to overcome their outstanding differences and move to create, over time, a unified nation. This basic principle is shared by the right and the left of South Korea's political spectrum, although progressives assert that the quest for inter-Korean peace supersedes all other national security imperatives.

Left-of-center governments in Seoul generally have strived for full-fledged engagement with North Korea, bilateral summits, and expanded nongovernmental contacts and exchanges, but they also have a penchant for papering over vast differences in the two sides' respect for human rights. In contrast, conservative South Korean governments have tended to emphasize deterrence and defense, dial down inter-Korean exchanges, and emphasize the U.S.-ROK alliance. Yet this dichotomy between the right and the left is not as clear-cut as it appears. Contrary to conventional wisdom, defense spending since the early 2000s has

“How South Koreans perceive prospects for unification emotionally and psychologically can be very different from how they cognitively reason about how the unification process would actually work.”

increased under two progressive administrations: that of president Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) and current President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022).

The two complex and sometimes contradictory fundamental dimensions of the unification discourse in South Korea are striking—unification is both an emotional issue of the heart and a rational issue of the mind. How South Koreans perceive prospects for unification emotionally and psychologically can be very different from how they cognitively reason about how the unification process would actually work.

The emotional facets of the idealistic and nationalistic policy choices that pull at citizens’ heartstrings include meetings between long-separated, often elderly family members; the critical importance of forming a unified Korean nation; and the drive to regain strategic independence by preventing, or at the very least, minimizing, foreign influence and intervention in inter-Korean affairs. The sometimes opposing rational and strategic calculations encompass everything from the two Koreas’ vastly different political and educational systems, North Korea’s growing nuclear arsenal, South Korea’s alliance with the United States, North Korea’s critical dependence on China, and, especially relevant for this study, what roles foreign powers can and should play throughout the eventual unification process.

Living with built-in paradoxes is a prominent feature of the unification issue because, by design and due to political expediency, South Korea’s unification

policy is based primarily on normative principles. Equally important, this policy leaves aside much more contentious issues such as the desirability of forging a free, democratic, and unified Korea; how to merge two diametrically opposed political systems through negotiations; and how to overcome the embodiment of the North Korean state in the form of the Kim dynasty.

While South Korea’s official unification policy is premised on peaceful reconciliation and negotiations between what are thought of as two temporary Korean states (since many Koreans consider partition to be an unnatural division of the nation), it is also true that the Kim dynasty *is* the North Korean state. Hence, while Seoul’s inter-Korean policy is based on engagement between two sovereign states, the most important manifestation of North Korean sovereignty at present is Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un. He and his totalitarian regime have perfected the phrase “l’état, c’est moi” or “I am the state” made famous by French King Louis XIV.

Trying to reconcile these divergent elements of the unification discourse, however, opens up a Pandora’s box that South Koreans, especially government officials, would rather keep closed. Because once that box is opened, South Koreans will have to face several extremely difficult and unpleasant choices. How much freedom would South Koreans be willing (or need) to give up to live in a unified Korea? Would North Korea’s leaders really acquiesce to joining a political system that guarantees individual rights when North Korean citizens currently do not have any? More fundamentally, is it possible to politically merge a democracy and a family-run dictatorship? For the moment, and despite key differences in how the right and left see prospects for unification, South Korea has opted to ignore these political landmines.

South Koreans’ thinking on unification and especially the role of foreign powers is complicated by contrasting desires and interests. For example, South Koreans highly value their alliance with the United States as a way to help offset North Korean threats and, increasingly,

growing Chinese power. At the same time, Seoul feels an underlying need to increase its autonomy and reduce its security dependence on the United States. The imperative to revert full wartime operational control of its armed forces from the United States to the ROK, for example, illustrates such a sentiment. But when South Koreans think about post-unification dynamics, they worry about the inevitability of Chinese pressure on a unified Korea. That is why most South Koreans would prefer to maintain an alliance with the United States even after unification. Yet, in another twist, many South Koreans also contemplate simultaneously forging an alliance with the very power that they would see as especially threatening in a post-unification era: China.

From the outside looking in, such views look starkly contradictory, and they are. However, for many South Koreans, it would make sense for a unified Korean Peninsula to want to keep a U.S. alliance to balance against Beijing even while seeking to accommodate its powerful Chinese neighbor to some degree. In part, the tyranny of geography accounts for such discrepancies: South Korea's closest ally, the United States, lies 10,000 kilometers away, while its closest and most powerful neighbor, China, shares a border with the Korean Peninsula. Perhaps no other nation faces such daunting geopolitical choices as South Korea as it confronts the specter of unification and how a unified Korea would interact with the two great powers. The growing strategic competition between the United States and China and South Korea's shrinking room for maneuvering between the two giants have exacerbated this situation.

Given that South Korea is one of the United States' closest allies in Asia and hosts some 28,500 U.S. troops, however inter-Korean ties evolve, they will have significant implications for U.S. strategic interests in and around the Korean Peninsula.³ If a more permanent peace with Pyongyang can be attained through diplomacy and, over the long run, through the creation of a unified Korea that is free and democratic, that would end one of the last frontiers of the twentieth-century Cold War. Yet the path to unification is replete with challenges within

the two Koreas, between the two Koreas, and among the two Koreas and other regional powers.

Since democracy was restored in South Korea in 1987 and especially since the first two inter-Korean summits in 2001 and 2007, South Korean progressives have claimed that they have greater credibility and even legitimacy to forge inter-Korean détente. Indeed, all South-North summits, including the three that took place in 2018, were led by progressive South Korean leaders. This is partly because North Korea has been more receptive to progressive South Korean governments, since they have opted to ignore North Korea's crushing human rights abuses and have made South-North reconciliation, at least rhetorically, the country's highest national security priority. Conservatives have responded by criticizing the left for staying silent on North Korea's military provocations and its growing nuclear arsenal. Notwithstanding key commonalities in their basic approach to inter-Korean relations, the so-called Nam-Nam galdeung or South-South divide between the right and the left remains a key feature of South Korean politics and civic society.

It is deeply ironic that the South Korean left has remained largely silent on North Korea's abysmal record on human rights. After all, South Korean progressives historically championed this policy issue during decades of authoritarian rule in Seoul. The Moon administration and those of previous progressive presidents have tried to suppress the activities of North Korean defectors out of fear that North Korean authorities would view such activities negatively. This is one reason why, for the first time, North Korean defectors formed their own political party in South Korea prior to the April 2020 National Assembly election.⁴

But while this internal divide persists in South Korea today, especially on how deeply Seoul should engage Pyongyang when North Korea continues to pose a growing nuclear threat, the calculus involving unification is much more complex. As the divergences between the two Koreas continue to expand, the gap

between how South Koreans of different political stripes perceive prospects for unification has also widened.

Four major related challenges need to be more fully understood. First, the competition between the world's most totalitarian state, North Korea, and one of Asia's most vibrant democracies, South Korea, poses immense structural obstacles. Second, the interplay of foreign powers' interests on and around the Korean Peninsula—including those of China, Japan, Russia, and the United States—evoke equally difficult geopolitical considerations. In particular, the strategies and policies of the United States, and increasingly those of China, will have critical implications throughout the eventual unification process.

Third, deep political divisions within South Korea persist between the left and the right on how to pursue unification. Right-wing South Koreans are far more willing than left-wing South Koreans to think about unification in terms of absorption, meaning that a unified Korea would adopt South Korea's form of liberal democracy and free market economics. Many South Korean progressives pay more attention to ensuring that North Korea would be treated as an equal political partner in unification. While few progressives likely want to live under a totalitarian state with no regard for human rights, the left's emphasis on equality ironically constrains its ability to openly argue that a unified Korea should mirror South Korea's liberal democratic political system.⁵ Although this study acknowledges the many different scenarios under which unification could occur, it assumes that the South Korean government would resist revisions to its political, economic, and social systems that would undermine democratic values and individual freedoms.

And fourth, South Korea's leaders could face immense crisis management pressures that would impact political, military, and economic decisionmaking. That would be particularly apparent in the aftermath of a major trigger such as regime collapse in North Korea and the possibility of Chinese military intervention to prevent

South Korean and U.S. forces from entering into North Korea in such a scenario.

Of all the tensions informing Korean views and discourse on unification policy, the role of foreign powers—supportive or otherwise—is one of the least discussed. Since the first inter-Korean talks in 1972, the two Koreas have maintained the aspiration that unification “shall be achieved independently, without depending on foreign powers and without foreign interference.”⁶ This mindset is justifiably born of centuries of foreign influence on the peninsula—including Korea's historical tributary relations with China, the post–World War II division of the peninsula by the Soviet Union and the United States, and the ongoing fissure between the two Koreas that has persisted since the end of the Korean War. Through the prism of this history, Koreans tend to associate foreign involvement with a lack of self-determination—so much so that not only do they oppose any form of foreign influence, be it potentially supportive or not, but they also refrain from even discussing it as a possibility.

In reality, it would be nearly impossible to prevent foreign powers from attempting to influence Korean unification, regardless of how it occurs. Korean unification would almost inevitably change the economic and political balance of power on the peninsula and in the wider region, giving foreign powers strong incentives to influence how such unification would take place. Whenever it happens, unification will not occur in a vacuum, and South Korea will be tasked with managing foreign powers' involvement in a way that supports rather than impedes the country's strategic vision.

The findings of this publication are grounded in the results of a survey of 2,000 South Korean citizens (see the next section for a description of the methodology). The overwhelming majority of the survey's sample agreed generally that unification should occur independent of foreign influence. However, when respondents were asked if they believed certain countries would have a “supportive” role in unification, many of them changed their answers. Most of them believed

that the United States and the United Nations (UN) would play supportive roles, though many of them still considered China, Japan, and Russia untrustworthy. But despite strong negative views of Beijing, the majority of respondents believed that a unified Korea should be allied not only with the United States but also with China. This is just one facet of the many paradoxes that permeate South Koreans' thinking on the realities of foreign influence juxtaposed with idealized conceptions of unification. Because this survey only assessed South Koreans' opinions on unification in 2019, surveys from other institutions, such as Seoul National University and the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, are also used to convey and contextualize changes in South Korean opinions over time.

How a reunified Korea ultimately will emerge is critically important to Koreans and has profound implications for relevant regional powers. One of the most important emerging policy dilemmas for South Korea and the United States is how they are going to cope with an increasingly powerful China. The historical and geopolitical conditions on the Korean Peninsula today are quite different from the conditions that prevailed the last time a pair of countries long split by Cold War divisions contemplated a reunion. A major difference between German reunification in 1990 and how the two Koreas could be unified at some future point is that East and West Germany were rejoined just as the Soviet Union was about to collapse and the United States was on the verge of becoming, at least momentarily, the world's only superpower. By contrast, in the case of the Korean Peninsula, whenever unification materializes, it will happen at a time when Chinese power and influence are on the rise. This stark geopolitical reality alone portends enormous political and policy challenges.

Carnegie's second "Unification Blue Book" seeks to provide key insights to a U.S. audience on the multiple and, at times, contradictory aspects of the unification debate in South Korea. In 2019, the first blue book detailed the many competing interests that foreign powers would have at play with respect to Korean

"As Chinese influence grows and as U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies, it will be vital to observe how deftly Seoul can secure its core strategic interests in light of differences between the prerogatives of foreign powers and what Koreans themselves want."

unification, and it suggested ways in which South Korea can ensure that those outside interests do not impede its strategic vision for unification. To that end, the prior publication focused on how the United States could play a supportive role by assisting in efforts to stabilize the peninsula if and when unification takes place.

If the first study focused on critical obstacles on the road toward unification, this study provides contextual clues of how South Koreans conceptualize unification, including the growing inter-Korean divide, the impacts of South Koreans' political impulses, their ideological preferences, their desire for autonomy, and their growing realization of the powerful geopolitical forces at work on the peninsula. In short, it is a portrait of the various paradoxes that characterize how the average South Korean citizen looks at unification, including the vitally important question of how desirable and likely it is that foreign powers would play a role in the process.

The major challenge surrounding the unification policy going into the 2020s lies in forging a realistic, pragmatic approach as structural impediments become stronger. As Chinese influence grows and as U.S.-China strategic competition intensifies, it will be vital to observe how deftly Seoul can secure its core strategic interests in light of differences between the prerogatives of foreign powers and what Koreans themselves want. This question remains at the heart of the unification challenge, and the struggle has just begun.

ABOUT THE SURVEY

The survey commissioned for this study was designed to explore how South Koreans perceive the role of foreign powers in various unification scenarios. In addition to four demographic questions about the respondents themselves, the survey posed twenty-eight questions on four facets of the unification discourse. These included respondents’

- **Basic views on unification.** Respondents were asked about their basic opinions on unification, including which scenario (peaceful coexistence, peaceful unification through dialogue and negotiations, unification through absorption [collapse], unification through conflict, or no unification) they deemed most desirable and most likely to occur. They also were prompted to give a sense of when they thought unification is likely to occur. Finally, they were asked whether Korean unification should take place with or without interference by outside powers and why they felt that way.
- **Perceptions of North Korea.** Respondents expressed their perceptions of North Korea and Kim. This included their perceptions on the state of North-South relations, the likelihood of North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons, and the general level of trust they have in North Korea and Kim. In this section and the next one, questions

on respondents’ opinions of foreign powers were asked in two ways—first using the country’s name and then the respective leader’s name—as the altered phrasings appeared to change participants’ responses.

- **Perceptions of key outside players.** Respondents conveyed their perceptions of major external actors, including China, Japan, Russia, the United States, and the UN, as well as the roles these actors would play in unification. They were asked which countries they thought would be likely to have an impact on unification versus which countries *should* have an impact. Participants were then asked how much they trusted each country and its leader “to be a supportive partner in unification.” Finally, participants were asked which country would be most likely to exert the greatest influence on economic and security issues throughout Korean reunification.
- **Aspirations for the global role a unified Korea would play.** Lastly, participants were asked about their vision for a unified Korea’s role in the world. They were prompted to share their perceptions of which country/countries would pose a security or economic threat to Korea, whether or not Korea should have strong ties to the international community, whether Korea should have an alliance with the United States or allow the stationing of

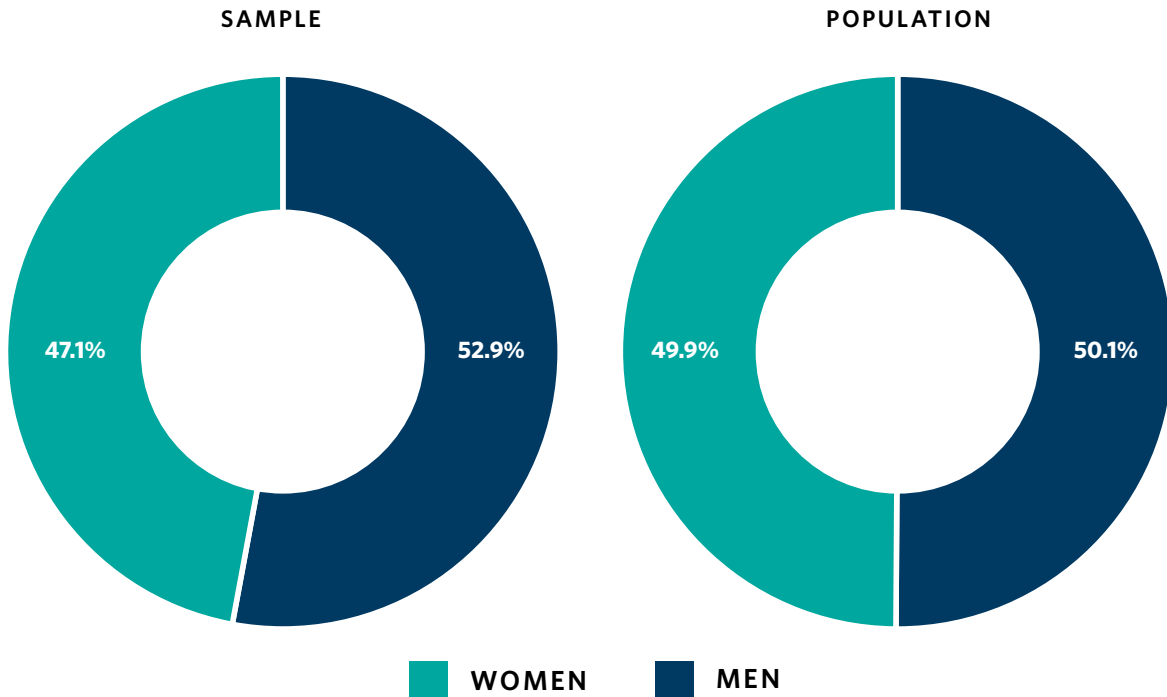
U.S. troops, and whether a unified Korea should have nuclear weapons.

The survey sampled 2,003 South Korean citizens who were all at least nineteen years old via computer-aided telephone interviews with random digital dialing. The survey was conducted over a twenty-five-day period from October 19, 2019, to November 12, 2019. A total of 70 percent of respondents were contacted via mobile phone, while 30 percent were contacted via landline telephone. The survey's sample size was large enough to be taken as representative of the South Korean population with a margin of error of about 2.2 percent.⁷

The sampling was designed to produce a subset of South Koreans representative of the country's overall

population in terms of regional location, gender, and age. Figure 1 compares the ratio of male to female respondents and the makeup of the general population.⁸ Figure 1 shows that the sample skewed male, with 1,060 male respondents (52.9 percent) and 943 female ones (47.1 percent). The proportion of men in the sample should have been between 959 and 1,047. A number within that range would have been equivalent to plus or minus the 2.2 percent margin of error for 1,003, which is the number of male respondents that would represent 50.1 percent of the sample (the same proportion as in the general population). Though the gender distribution is skewed, answers to subsequent questions in the survey did not display a strong or significant correlation with respect to gender. The gender skew of the sample likely had little impact on the survey's findings.

FIGURE 1
Comparing the Survey Sample's Gender Distribution

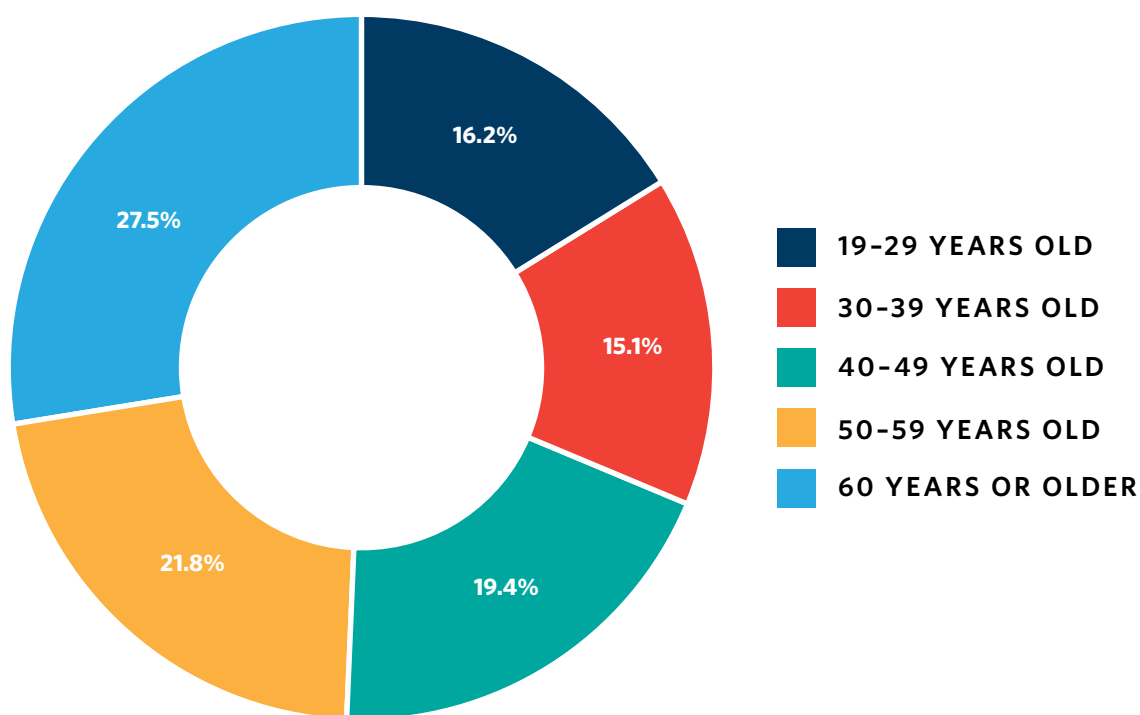


SOURCES: Carnegie survey; Statistics Korea

Figure 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the ages of the survey respondents. Meanwhile, figure 3 displays the age distribution of the sample in a breakdown comparable to that of the general population as measured by South Korea's 2018 census data. The census only broke the population into three age categories: zero to fourteen

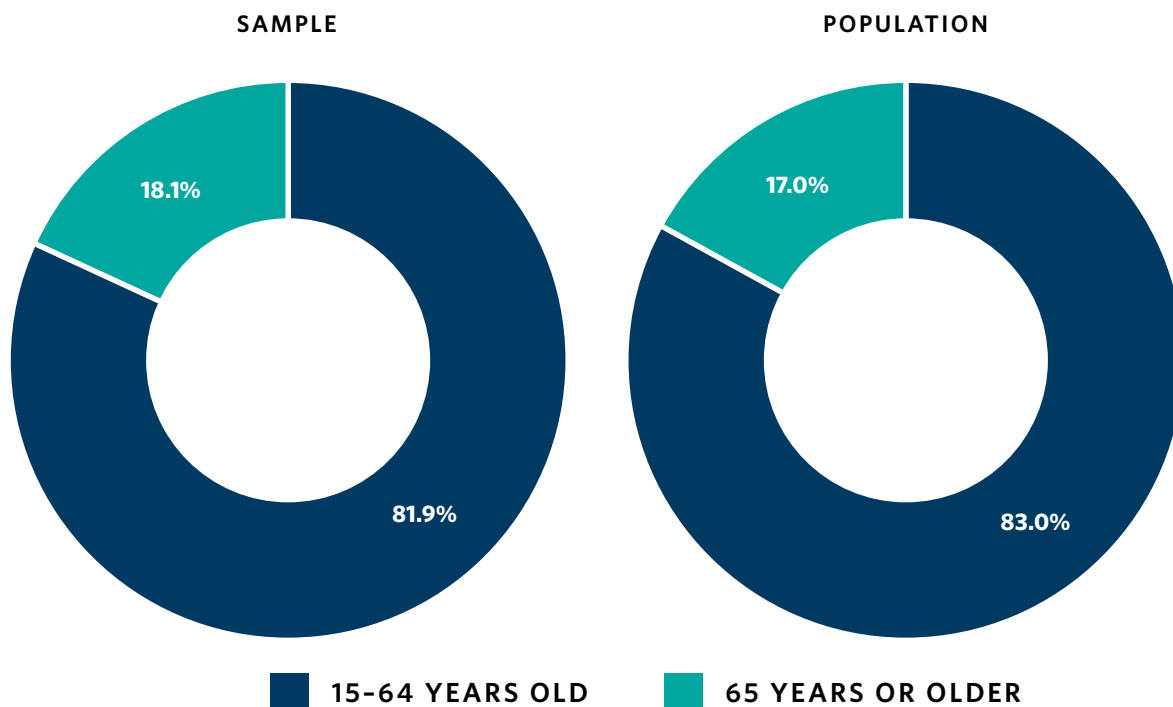
years old, fifteen to sixty-four years old, and sixty-five and older. For this reason, figure 3 only compares the age distribution of the general population to that of the sample population within the ranges between fifteen and sixty-four and those older than sixty-five.

FIGURE 2
The Survey Sample's Full Age Distribution



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

FIGURE 3
Comparing the Survey Sample's Age Distribution

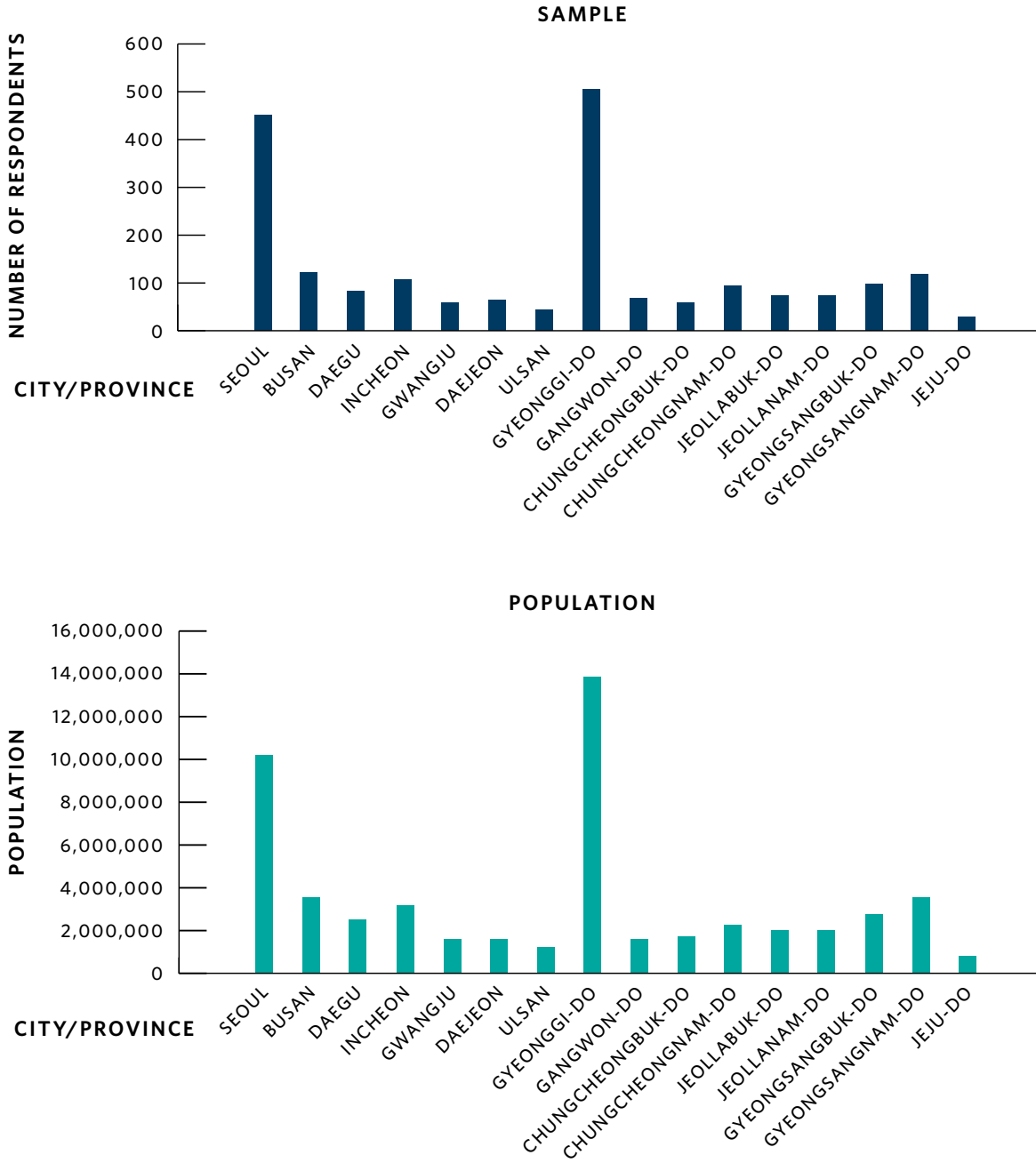


SOURCES: Carnegie survey; Statistics Korea

Figure 4 compares the distribution of respondents' geographic locations to those of South Korean citizens on the whole.⁹ Lastly, figure 5 shows the distribution of sample respondents' self-reported political inclinations. Determining whether the distribution of respondents' political affiliations reflects that of the general population's views is more difficult. Rather than asking for respondents' party affiliations, the survey asked

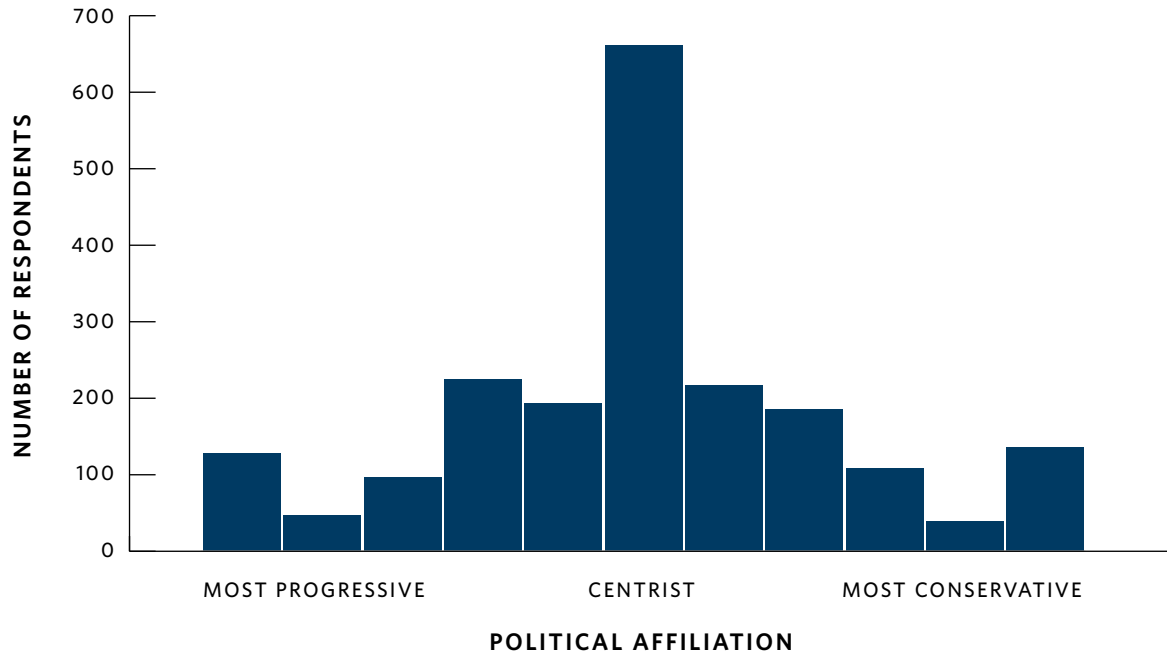
respondents to rate their political affiliation on a scale of zero to ten—zero being the most progressive and ten being the most conservative. Most respondents (53 percent) rated themselves as centrists (with scores falling between four and six), while 22.9 percent fell on the conservative end of the spectrum (seven to ten) and 24.2 percent placed themselves on the progressive end of the spectrum (zero to three) (see figure 5).

FIGURE 4
Comparing the Survey Sample's Regional Distribution



SOURCES: Carnegie survey; South Korean National Statistical Office (City Population)

FIGURE 5
The Survey Sample's Political Affiliations



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

One way to measure political affiliation is to ask respondents which political party they identify with—whether it be a conservative one, a progressive one, or a centrist one. This method is used in numerous South Korean polls, but it is also not always a robust indicator of one's political affiliation due to the rapid turnover of political parties in the country. When major political transitions such as presidential and legislative elections take place, South Korean political parties have often been renamed and reorganized. The dissolution and creation of at least ostensibly new political parties cuts across the ideological divide as both the major conservative and progressive parties have gone through numerous iterations.

To help account for this, the survey asked participants to rate their ideological leaning on a ten-point scale rather than indicate which political parties they identify with. Because this ten-point scale is unique to this study, it is not possible to directly compare the sample's distribution of respondents' political leanings to those of the general population. However, this scale did allow participants to give a more descriptive indication of their political inclinations without having to choose between three parties with sometimes fluid and loosely defined political ideologies. This method was also more inclusive of respondents who do not vote and those who have no explicit party affiliation. For these reasons, the ten-point scale was preferable to other methods for the purposes of this study.

LIMITATIONS

The task of assessing Korean attitudes on unification with specific reference to the major powers is inherently limited by the fact that it is impossible to gauge public opinion in North Korea. A number of studies conducted by South Korean institutions have, at times, included polling data of North Korean refugees who have resettled in South Korea. However, the hermetically sealed nature of North Korea's political system, the total absence of a free and independent press, and the state's relentless propaganda and surveillance apparatuses virtually preclude objective assessments of North Koreans' views on unification or any other major issue. The assessments and assertions made in this study pertain only to South Korea, keeping in mind that more than seven decades of partition have created very different approaches to unification in the two Koreas.

The polling company that conducted the survey is widely respected and has a long track record of producing high-quality surveys for leading public and private institutions in the country, and it abided by standard polling best practices (such as random dialing) to avoid selection bias. Yet a second limitation is that the survey's gender skew and lack of a means of direct comparison to the general population on political affiliation admittedly complicates and constrains efforts to draw generalizations about the South Korean population as a whole. Nevertheless, gender was not a determining factor in respondents' answers, and the ten-point scale used to assess participants' political affiliations was better suited to the survey's purposes as described above. In addition, the study sometimes makes comparisons with other major polls conducted in South Korea to offer a more holistic picture of opinion polling in the country.

Third, in some cases, it is possible that individual respondents had different understandings or definitions of key terms used in the study. While the precise wordings of the survey questions were selected to reflect the most

commonly used terms, respondents may have had different interpretations of certain words that were used. Particularly, the five unification scenarios—peaceful coexistence, peaceful unification through dialogue and negotiations, unification through absorption (collapse), unification through conflict, or no unification—may convey slightly different realities to different participants, even though these terms are common parlance. The survey did not assess the potential costs associated with specific scenarios—such as increased taxes, loss of human life, or changes to democratic processes; a lack of detailed attention to the negative effects of each scenario may have led participants to answer questions with more positive or optimistic views of unification than they would have with a fuller awareness of those potential costs. In this respect, as with all surveys investigating social realities, there is a risk of oversimplifying complex situations. Similarly, questions regarding the abilities of various external actors to be supportive partners in the unification process did not delve more deeply into which aspects of unification would be positively affected.

A fourth limitation is how difficult it is to elicit frank answers on sensitive issues. While the survey was anonymous, participants may have been hesitant to answer honestly due to the nationalist sentiments that surround unification issues in South Korea. There is still some stigma in the country associated with opposing unification, a fact that may have tempted participants to answer some questions more positively than they otherwise would have. Similarly, the stigma associated with foreign involvement with unification may have prompted participants to answer more negatively than they otherwise would have on questions regarding foreign powers.

Lastly, the survey was rather long, lasting around twenty minutes for most participants. By the end, participants may have experienced a degree of decision fatigue, leading them to answer questions less conscientiously than they did earlier in the survey.

SOUTH KOREANS' BASIC VIEWS ON UNIFICATION

Since the division of the Korean Peninsula in 1945, reunification has remained the ultimate national goal on both sides of the thirty-eighth parallel. For that reason, South Koreans' basic views on the prospect of unification marked a natural starting point for the Carnegie survey. South Korea's complex, divisive debate on unification is characterized by numerous factors, including the quest for political legitimacy, the competition between capitalism and socialism, and the clash between the country's idealized democratic norms and the tough tradeoffs that the difficult practicalities that actually achieving unification would impose. Other factors come into play, too, such as social stratification, generational differences, and ideational preferences.

Living alongside the enemy is the defining characteristic of South Korea's political identity vis-à-vis North Korea. On the one hand, Pyongyang remains Seoul's principal adversary as evinced by the former's accelerating nuclear weapons program, its hostile military posture, and the completely different political system and ideology it espouses. Yet, at the same time, South Korea must pursue coexistence with North Korea to avoid and to prevent, as much as possible, another calamitous inter-Korean conflict from breaking out.

The question of how to square this circle cuts to the heart of the unification dilemma. Although many of the peninsula's inhabitants view the goal of reunifying the Korean nation as critical, the practicalities of actually instituting realistic processes to unify two totally different political entities with vastly discordant socioeconomic trajectories spanning seven decades is the fundamental missing link in the unification debate. This paradox creates a tension between the unification policy options that South Koreans want and the options they may more realistically entertain.

IS A NEGOTIATED COMPROMISE REALISTIC?

When presented with policy options for unification, the majority of South Koreans would prefer for a unified Korea to be a democracy. In a 2018 annual poll conducted by Seoul National University's (SNU) Institute for Peace and Unification Studies, a plurality of 44 to 49 percent of respondents consistently felt that a unified Korean government should be an extension of the South Korean system (see figure 6).¹⁰ The second most popular option (chosen by 34 to 39 percent of participants) has consistently been some kind of

compromise between the North and South Korean systems. Until 2018, a third option of “maintain[ing] both systems even after unification” was the least popular option favored by only between roughly 12 and 17 percent of respondents each year. The third option represents a preference for peaceful and normalized relations between the two Koreas without the formal unification of their two systems.¹¹

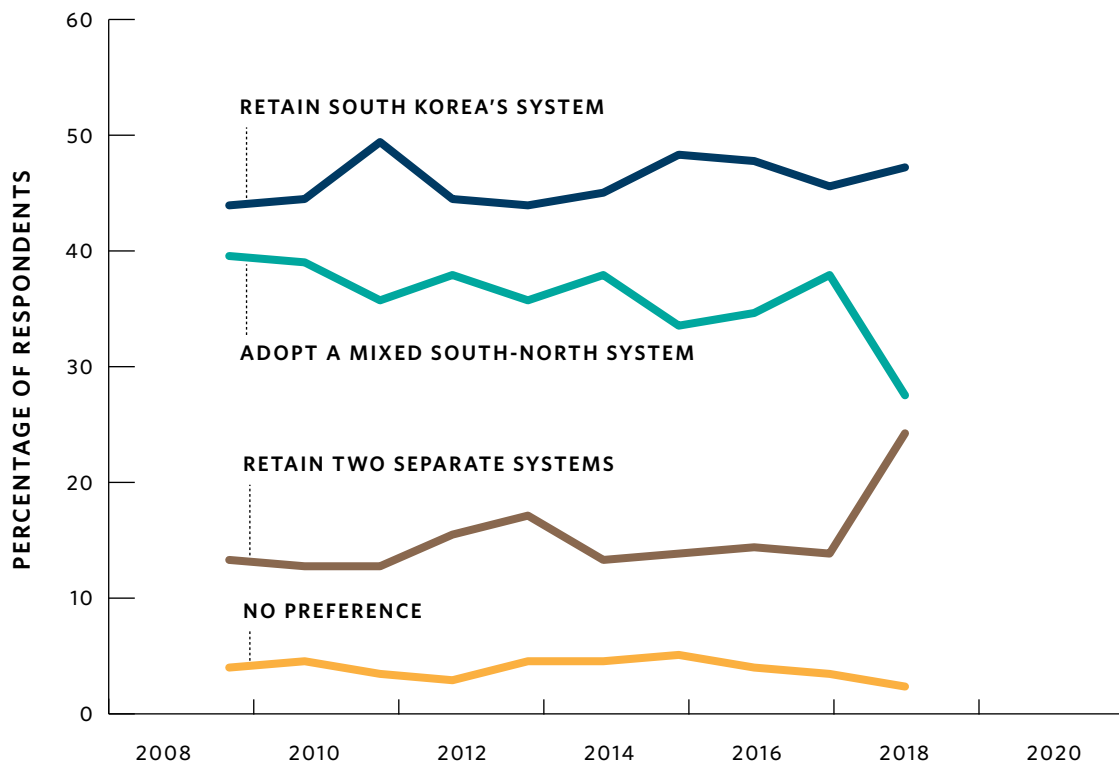
But a critical question remains largely unanswered: could North Korea under the Kim dynasty possibly accept a unified Korea that is democratic? Indeed, forging a so-called compromise government and a reunified Korean

state sounds ideal in the abstract, but putting that idea into practice would be virtually impossible.

The results of the SNU survey were quite different in 2018 compared to previous years. Although maintaining the South Korean system still accounted for nearly half of the responses, support for a form of compromise between the two countries’ systems fell by 10.4 percent between 2017 and 2018. During that same period, those who reported a preference for maintaining two separate systems increased by 10.3 percent. This trend coincides with the Moon administration’s current policy of pursuing peaceful coexistence. This strategy calls for resolving the North

FIGURE 6
The Desired Political Makeup of a Unified Korea

SURVEY QUESTION
“What kind of system do you think a unified Korea should have?”



SOURCE: Seoul National University (SNU) Unification and Peace Institute

Korean nuclear threat, establishing normalized relations, building a “single market on the Korean Peninsula” and an “inter-Korean economic community of coexistence and co-prosperity,” and restoring “national homogeneity and build[ing] an inter-Korean community.”¹² Similarly, the South Korean Ministry of Unification bills this policy as “[a form of] unification that naturally occurs as part of the process of promoting the coexistence and co-prosperity of the two Koreas and recovering the Korean national community.”¹³

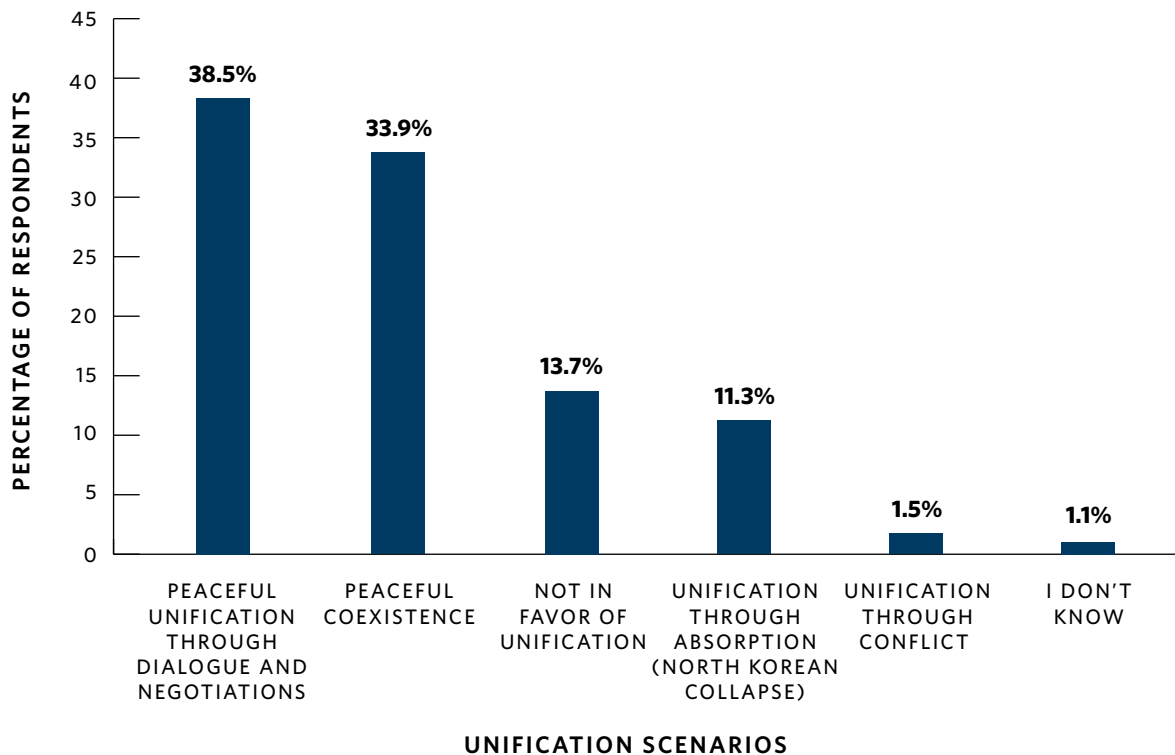
The Carnegie survey differs from SNU’s in an important respect. Rather than asking participants which political system they preferred, it asked which scenario they

preferred. Unlike the SNU question, the Carnegie survey included an option for participants that were “not in favor of unification.” Although “peaceful unification through dialogue and negotiations” was the most common preference (38.5 percent), the combined scores of the two answers that would constitute some form of maintaining separate political systems—peaceful coexistence and no unification—comprised a greater plurality at 47.6 percent. While the Carnegie survey offers no data to compare how this number differs from participants’ views a year earlier, this percentage does seem to indicate that support for maintaining two separate systems is currently quite high (see figure 7).

FIGURE 7
The Desirability of Various Unification Scenarios

SURVEY QUESTION

“In thinking about reunification, which of the unification scenarios is the most desirable?”



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

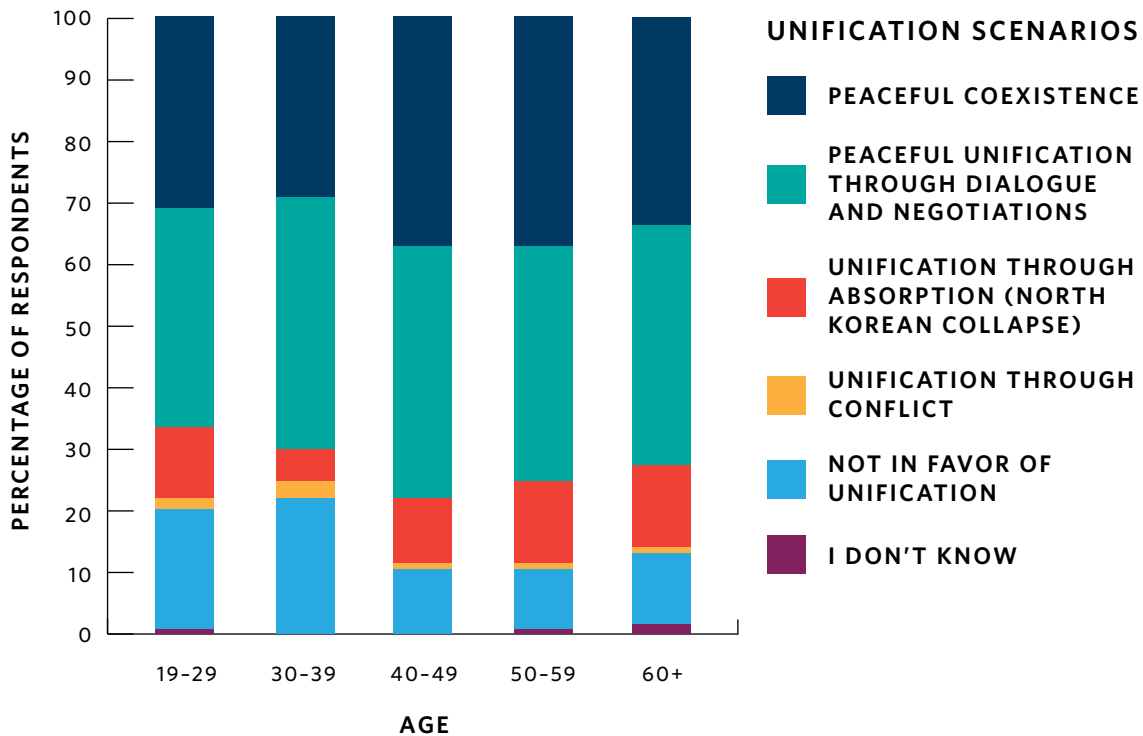
South Korean opinions on unification are commonly discussed in terms of age, with the overwhelming assumption being that younger South Koreans favor unification less than older generations. While this was true in this survey as well, the results also revealed that support for peaceful coexistence was actually higher among respondents at least forty years old than it was among respondents under forty (see figure 8). This indicates that, regardless of age, South Koreans generally would prefer unification through dialogue and negotiations followed closely by peaceful coexistence, although the complications that would arise from a negotiated form of unification could result in higher support for peaceful coexistence.

Although a plurality of participants of all age groups desired “peaceful unification through dialogue and negotiations,” it remains difficult to imagine what sort of political system that would realistically result in. Even assuming that somehow the two Koreas were able to put aside their animosities, North Korea would almost certainly oppose a democratic system predicated on the principle of one person, one vote. South Korea would have more power in such a system, as it has nearly twice the population of North Korea, with roughly 50 million inhabitants versus 25 million.¹⁴ Likewise, South Korea would oppose a weighted voting system in which one North Korean vote would count the same as, say, two South Korean votes. Other questions remain, such as

FIGURE 8
Preferred Unification Scenarios by Age Group

SURVEY QUESTION

“In thinking about reunification, which of the unification scenarios is the most desirable?”



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

how a new constitution for such a state would be framed. What role, if any, would Kim play in this process, assuming that such a compromise were to happen under his leadership in North Korea? Would South Korean citizens agree to a political system that curtailed basic rights? Conversely, would Kim agree to let North Korean citizens have vastly greater freedoms than they have enjoyed under the North Korean regime for decades?

There is no historical example whereby two states as completely different as North and South Korea opted through peaceful negotiations to create a new state. Clearly, German unification in 1990 could serve as a model, but it is critical to bear in mind that East

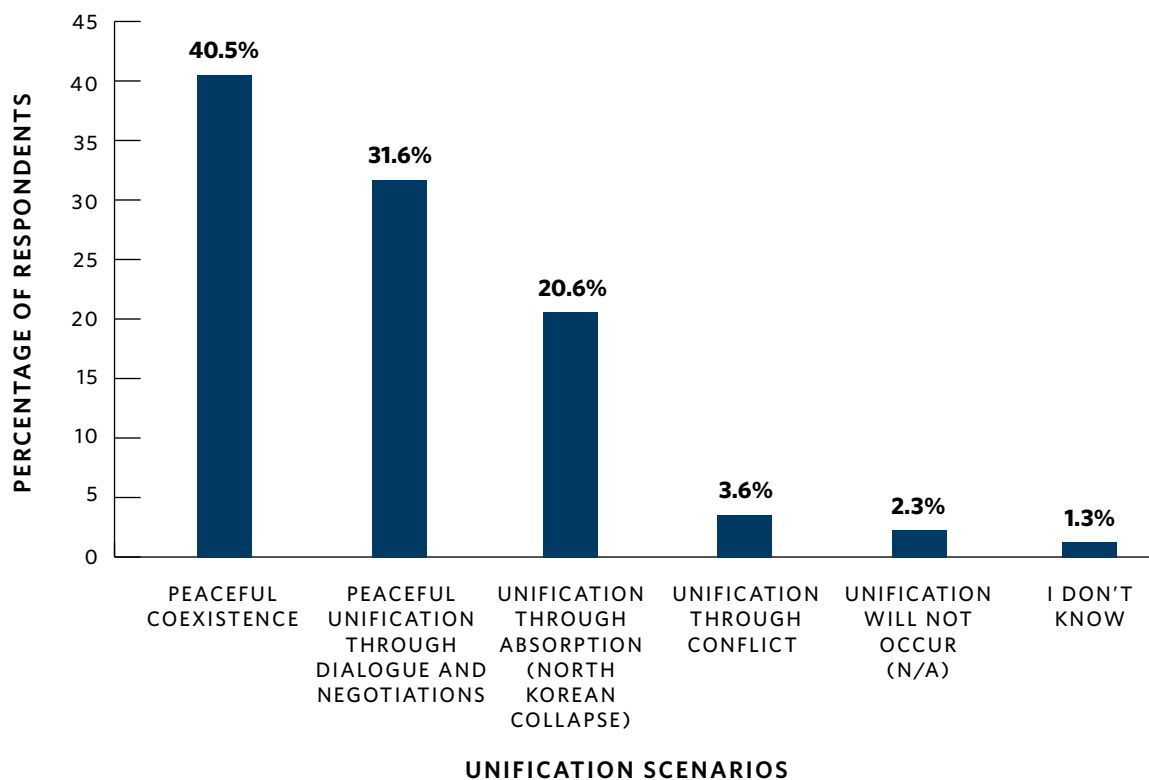
Germany voted to be absorbed by West Germany after an all-inclusive election involving voters on both sides. The two Germanies never fought a fratricidal war, unlike the two Koreas. Moreover, East Germany was never governed by a family-run dynastic dictatorship.

Most respondents thought their favored scenario was also the most likely. Two unification outcomes—unification through negotiations and peaceful coexistence—topped the list of the most desirable and most likely outcomes (see figures 7 and 9). Among those who answered that unification through negotiations was the most desirable outcome, 57.4 percent said unification through negotiations was also the most likely scenario. Similarly,

FIGURE 9
The Perceived Likelihood of Various Unification Scenarios

SURVEY QUESTION

“In thinking about reunification, which of the unification scenarios is the most likely?”



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

among those that replied that peaceful coexistence was the most desirable scenario, 67.7 percent said that peaceful coexistence was also the most likely scenario.

One way or another, hard questions about how unification would happen and what kind of political, economic, and social system a unified Korea should aspire to establish are often largely shunted aside.

PROSPECTS FOR DENUCLEARIZATION AND THE SUMMITS OF 2018

Before turning to the question of foreign involvement, it is worth gauging how South Koreans feel about North Korea, its leader, and its nuclear weapons program—all critical subjects to consider in relation to unification. Given the deep divisions that exist within South Korea on inter-Korean ties, one proxy indicator of how South Koreans perceive North Korea and the prospects for unification is how they feel about the prospects for denuclearization.

Since ramping up his inter-Korean détente policy in early 2018 through his three summits with Kim, Moon has continued to maintain that the North Korean leader is sincere about his commitments to denuclearize. Even though Kim never promised to roll back, much less dismantle, his nuclear program, the Moon administration remains steadfast in its belief that Kim is going to relinquish its nuclear arsenal. The South Korean public was somewhat receptive to the diplomatic overture embodied by inter-Korean summits in 2018, but many of them maintained reservations about denuclearization. Although nearly 45 percent of Koreans surveyed by Carnegie felt that South-North relations in 2019 were “very positive” or “positive” compared to 2016, only a meager 4.5 percent were “very confident” that North Korea would give up its nuclear

“Although nearly 45 percent of Koreans ... felt that South-North relations in 2019 were “very positive” or “positive” compared to 2016, only a meager 4.5 percent were “very confident” that North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons.”

weapons, while a modest 16.7 percent said that they were “somewhat confident” (see figure 10).

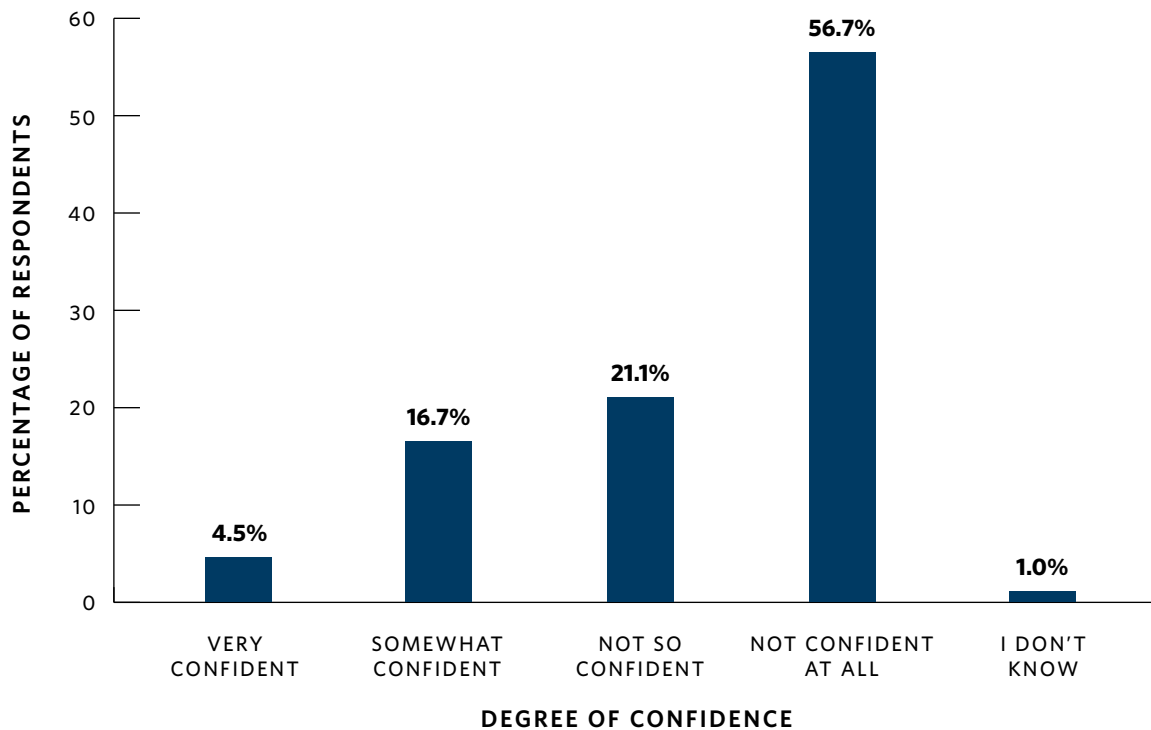
This dichotomy and disconnect between what South Koreans think about the state of inter-Korean ties and what they think of the prospects for denuclearization is quite revealing. A more granular look at Carnegie’s survey results shows that only 11.9 percent of South Korean progressives (who placed themselves zero to three on the survey’s political affiliation scale) were “very confident” that North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons, while 32.2 percent were “somewhat confident.” By contrast, 63.9 percent of progressive respondents either were “not so confident” or “not confident at all”

FIGURE 10

The Perceived Likelihood That North Korea Will Disarm (Carnegie)

SURVEY QUESTION

"How confident are you that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

that North Korea would do so. Unsurprisingly, 80.9 percent of moderates (ranked between four and six on the ten-point scale) and 90.8 percent of conservatives (ranked between seven and ten) responded that, overall, they were not confident that North Korea would give up its nuclear weapons.

Public expectations of a denuclearization road map increased to some degree after the June 2018 U.S.–North Korea summit in Singapore. Triumphantly but mistakenly, U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted after his first meeting with Kim that the North Korean nuclear threat was effectively removed.¹⁵ As a spirit

of euphoria grew after the Singapore summit, South Koreans felt that positive change was in the air. In a June 2018 Asan Institute poll conducted just after the summit, more than 62 percent of survey participants said that North Korea would end up actually denuclearizing, while nearly 32 percent said Pyongyang would refrain from doing so.¹⁶

As figure 11 shows, the spike in optimism in South Korea following the June 2018 U.S.–North Korea summit was the highest among respondents in their early thirties to those in their late fifties. Among this age range, 68.3 percent of those in their thirties, 76.2 percent of those

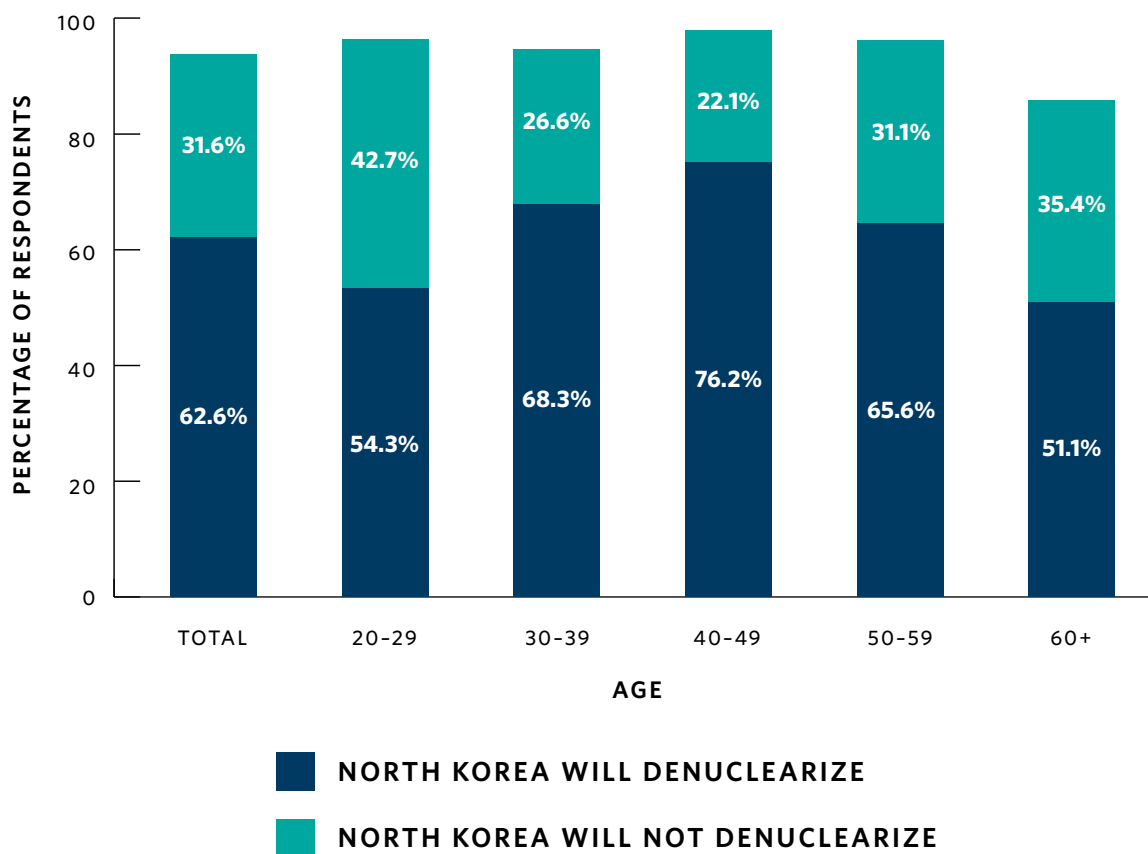
in their forties, and 65.6 percent of those in their fifties responded that Kim would likely keep his supposed promise on denuclearization. To help understand why, it is worth knowing that the post-democratization era of the 1990s and the early 2000s was a formative period for South Koreans in their thirties and forties, with more open discourse and more free-flowing information on North Korea. By contrast, slightly older South Koreans

who are now in their fifties were schooled in the 1970s and 1980s, during the dictatorships of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, when information was far more restricted. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the radical student movement in South Korea intensified, and many in this age group maintain their earlier more progressive ideological inclinations to this day.

FIGURE 11
The Perceived Likelihood That North Korea Will Denuclearize (Asan)

SURVEY QUESTION

“Do you think North Korea will keep its promise to denuclearize?”



SOURCE: Asan Institute for Policy Studies

“By the end of 2019, détente had lost its luster, and South Koreans’ willingness to give Kim the benefit of the doubt quickly evaporated.”

One of the most revealing insights from figure 11 is that those respondents in their twenties were among the most skeptical that North Korea would agree to denuclearize. A total of 42.7 percent felt that North Korea would not keep its promise to denuclearize, a higher number than the 35.4 percent of Koreans in their sixties and older who felt that North Korea would not relinquish its nuclear arsenal. Unlike those who went to university in South Korea between the late 1970s to the late 1980s when campus radicalism was at its peak, the country’s millennials do not automatically align themselves with progressives on all major issues. Brought up during a period of unparalleled economic success, these millennials are not geared toward political movements, nor do they embrace North Korea as a supposedly pure manifestation of Korean nationalism.

This link between North Korea and Korean nationalism more broadly may sound surprising to outsiders, but Pyongyang has parlayed extreme nationalism as a powerful propaganda tool since its inception. Some members of the far left in South Korea, for example, believe that North Korea espouses a supposedly more pure conception of Korean nationalism defined through a mixture of extreme ethnocentrism, a so-called cleansing of the tarnish of Japanese colonialism, and a constant reaffirmation of patriotic self-reliance amid the powerful foreign powers that surround the peninsula. In practice, however, North Korea’s jingoism never mentions the country’s critical dependence on China or the fact that Pyongyang’s claims of the ethnic superiority of Koreans do not hold water.

Months after the Trump-Kim Singapore summit, when Moon visited Pyongyang in September 2018, his détente policy still seemed to be working. Seoul and Pyongyang

signed a significant military agreement on confidence-building measures. As a result, many South Koreans at least momentarily took another look at Kim. By the time Kim rolled out the red carpet for Moon in September, the South Korean public had been exposed to a very different North Korean leader. He seemed to be at ease with the media. Every step was choreographed and pre-planned to make sure that the Supreme Leader was at the top of his game, and some were wondering whether this ensuing hype was similar to the mania surrounding former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that swept through the United States and Western Europe in the late 1980s. But the rosy assessments of this brief window did not ultimately last.

THE LIMITS OF INTER-KOREAN DÉTENTE

Even at the height of this optimism about denuclearization, there were limits to how good South Koreans felt about North Korea. A February 2019 Asan Institute poll that tracked prospects for denuclearization from 2010 to 2018 did show a significant, albeit limited, improvement in 2018. The number of respondents who said prospects for denuclearization looked promising jumped roughly 20 percentage points in one year, from 4.1 percent in 2017 to 25 percent in 2018.¹⁷ But even at this high point, roughly three-quarters of respondents believed that North Korea was quite unlikely to denuclearize.

This temporary shift in optimism about diplomacy with North Korea likely reflected the immense wave of publicity that was generated throughout 2018 and in the first half of 2019 surrounding the possibility of a potential breakthrough in inter-Korean relations and a negotiated settlement on North Korea’s nuclear program. But, as subsequent developments showed, Trump’s bromance with Kim ultimately fizzled, and his insistence that Kim was going to follow through on denuclearization did not pan out. Unsurprisingly, while the flurry and pageantry of the inter-Korean and U.S.–North Korea summits (not to mention Kim’s many meetings with Xi) affected how

South Koreans viewed prospects for denuclearization to some degree, such perceptions were not likely to stick since they were dependent on tangible progress that did not end up materializing.

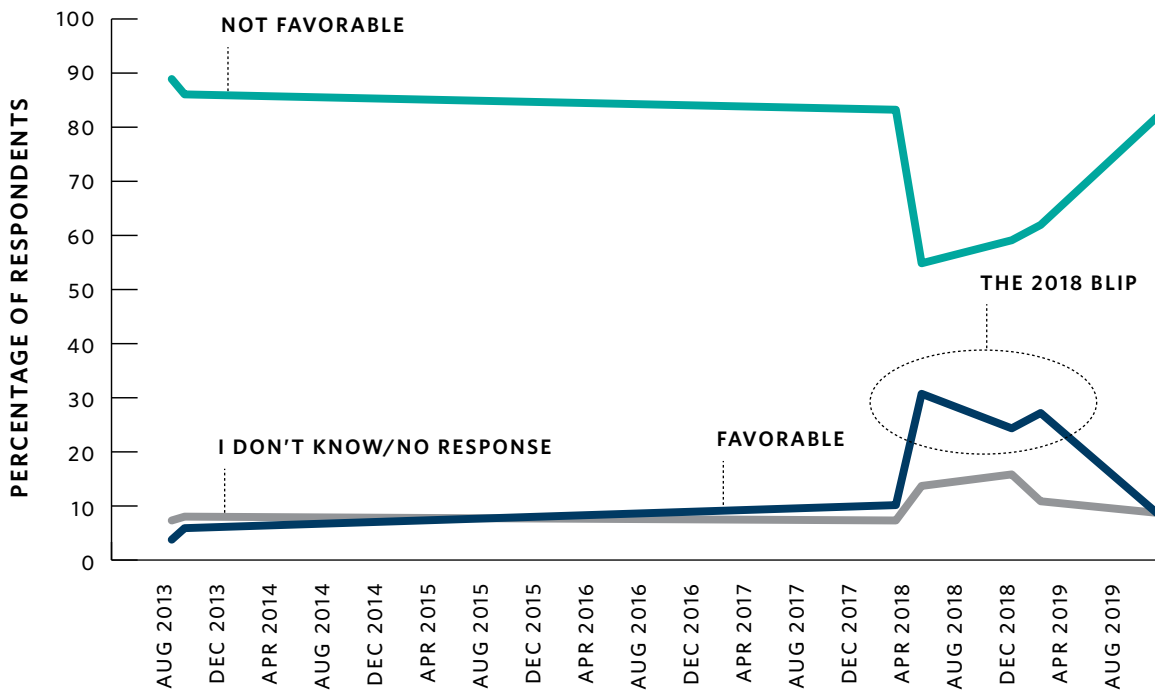
By the end of 2019, détente had lost its luster, and South Koreans' willingness to give Kim the benefit of the doubt quickly evaporated. Kim engaged in psychological warfare with Trump and hinted that if the United States continued its hostile policy toward North Korea, Kim would have little choice but to revert to his old ways. Pyongyang threatened to show the world

a new strategic weapon in early 2020. As seen in figure 12, South Koreans had very negative feelings toward Kim until the beginning of 2018. According to Gallup Korea, in August 2013, only 4 percent of South Koreans had a favorable view of Kim.¹⁸ This figure rose slightly to 6 percent in September 2013 and again to 10 percent in March 2018. By May 2018, his favorability ratings had briefly skyrocketed to 31 percent. But by November 2019, that figure had plunged back down to 9 percent.

Polls over the coming years will reveal if the 2018 surge in optimism about Kim and denuclearization was an

FIGURE 12
Kim's Favorability Ratings Among South Koreans

SURVEY QUESTION
"Do you think favorably of Kim Jong Un or not?"



SOURCE: Gallup Korea

outlier or a more significant trend. Given the subsequent drop in numbers, it seems highly likely that it was a temporary blip, but it is impossible to categorically rule out the possibility that such optimism could resurface if Trump wins reelection and decides to pursue personalized diplomacy again.

Either way, despite the enormous political capital Moon has spent on placating Kim since early 2018 and whatever dividend he was able to accrue from his three summits with Kim, the year 2020 is unlikely to result in any more key summits between Kim and Moon or, more importantly, between Trump and Kim. Moon initially

had hoped that Kim would make a return visit to Seoul before the April 2020 National Assembly elections. But the outbreak of a strain of coronavirus beginning in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019 and its subsequent spread as a worldwide pandemic likely has thwarted that hope. Meanwhile, although the Moon government continues to press the United States not to drop the ball on ongoing negotiations with North Korea, Trump's focus on combating the coronavirus pandemic and getting reelected in November 2020 means that the North Korean issue has been pushed off the president's agenda for the foreseeable future.

SOUTH KOREANS' VIEWS ON FOREIGN INVOLVEMENT IN UNIFICATION

The ongoing U.S.–North Korean diplomatic impasse, the unlikelihood that Trump will reach a nuclear deal in an election year, and the additional complications posed by the coronavirus outbreak all point to the important role that foreign powers play in the prospects for denuclearization, and by extension, the future likelihood of unification. The issue of foreign interference only compounds the multitude of questions about what a unified Korea would look like. The Korean Peninsula is surrounded by powerful countries that, if they wish to, could easily have undue influence on the unification process. The impact they could have would be clear in any scenario involving outright conflict—the outcome of which the powerful Chinese, Russian, and U.S. militaries could certainly shape in favor of one Korea over the other.

But even if the ultimate outcome was peaceful coexistence—a scenario that was both favored by 33.9 percent of participants (see figure 7) and that is a more realistic option than negotiating a compromise-based political system—foreign countries would attempt to influence the balance of power on the peninsula. In addition, policy goals such as opening trade between the two Koreas by gradually removing sanctions would increase the potential for greater interactions between

North Korea and South Korea, as well as between North Korea and many other countries. Even in a scenario involving some form of peaceful unification, regional powers would attempt to use any opening of the North, be it by force or through reconciliation, to further serve their interests. That means it is important to consider how South Koreans might react to foreign involvement, regardless of the scenario.

In keeping with the official North and South Korean governments' lines on unification, survey participants were overwhelmingly against foreign interference. When asked if Korean unification should be solely a Korean issue, 68.7 percent of respondents agreed. This sentiment was shared by many progressive, centrist, and center-right respondents alike to some degree (see figure 13), although conservative respondents were more likely than any other group to disagree.

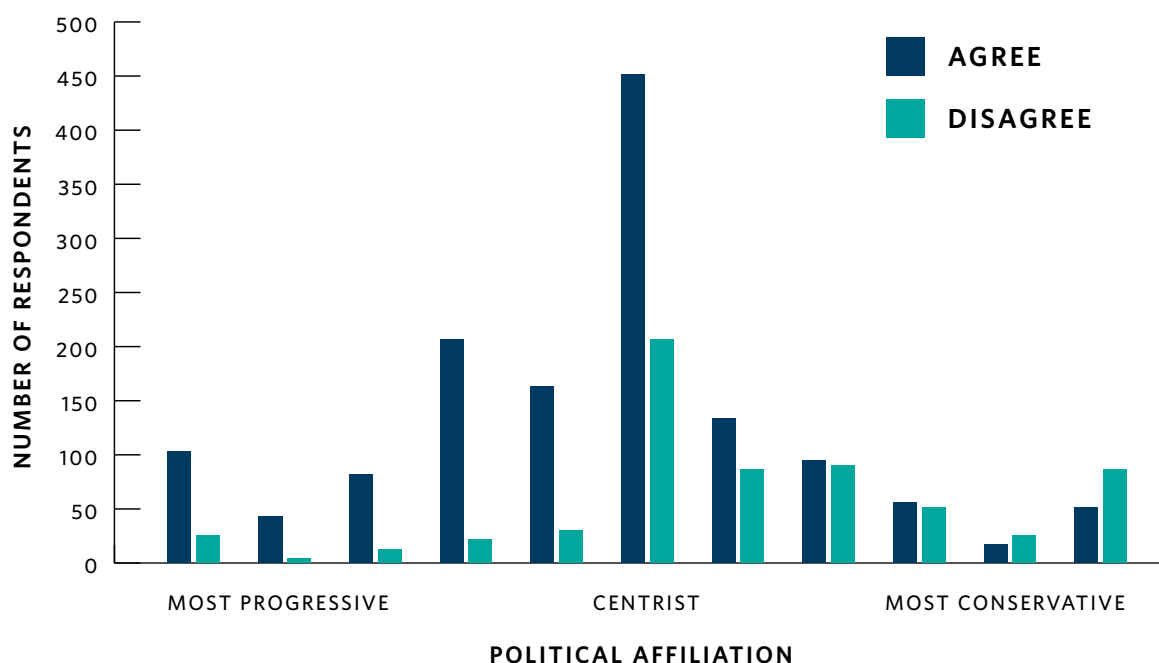
This difference of opinion is likely borne of Korean conservatives' and progressives' differing views of history and their unlike perceptions of foreign powers' intentions. With Japan's defeat in 1945 and the respective U.S. and Soviet occupations of southern and northern Korea from 1945 to 1948, many in South Korea believe that partition was forced upon the Korean

FIGURE 13

Korean Politics and Unification as an Internal Issue

SURVEY QUESTION

"The two Koreas have stated that unification should occur by the two Koreas without the participation of foreign powers. Do you agree with this statement?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

people against their will. The prevailing narrative among progressive South Koreans, and one that resonates with the Moon government, is that the ROK was founded at the behest of the United States and the rightist forces under Syngman Rhee, South Korea's first president.

Contrasting perceptions of history and political legitimacy lie at the heart of the inter-Korean debate in South Korea. While South Korean progressives cannot outright deny the legitimacy of the ROK, they have opted to denigrate Rhee as a U.S. puppet who forced the creation of the ROK that spurred the formation of North Korea. For South Korean progressives, then,

the founding of the Korean Provisional Government in 1919 after the nation's declaration of independence on March 1, 1919, is seen as the true beginning of a legitimate Korean government. By contrast, South Korean conservatives overwhelmingly believe in the legitimacy of the ROK including the Rhee presidency. They argue that, while national partition was something no one wanted, there was little choice but to create the ROK in the face of relentless Soviet efforts to create a separate North Korean state. Key policies such as strengthening the ROK-U.S. alliance and South Korea's rapid economic growth should be seen as two of the ROK's key post-1948 achievements.

Although 31.3 percent of Carnegie survey respondents disagreed that unification should occur without foreign involvement, it would be incorrect to say they disagreed because they welcome foreign involvement in unification as the ideal outcome. Rather, the most common reason for disagreement was that some participants believed some type of foreign involvement would be unavoidable (see table 1). Another 40.4 percent of respondents felt that unification should entail some level of foreign involvement because allowing such involvement might help South Korea avoid violent conflict. (For this question, respondents could select multiple answers.)

On the other end of the spectrum, of the 68.7 percent of South Koreans who responded that unification should be driven by the two Koreas, 57.1 percent said that foreign involvement in unification would undermine Korea's independence and sovereignty (see table 2). Even the support of survey participants that did believe foreign powers should be involved was a reflection of pragmatism rather than a desire to allow foreign influence. (Respondents could also choose multiple answers for this question.)

TABLE 1
Why Unification Won't Be a Korea-Only Issue

SURVEY QUESTION

"If you answered 'disagree' to the above statement (choose all that apply)." (in response to question in figure 13)

Reasons for foreign involvement in unification	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Foreign involvement in unification as unavoidable	310	49.5
Foreign involvement might help avoid violent conflict	253	40.4
Foreign involvement could support Korea's political settlement negotiations	102	16.3
Foreign involvement could help alleviate the economic burden of unification	149	23.8
Foreign involvement could help provide humanitarian assistance in unification	108	17.3
Other	67	10.7
	626	100

SOURCE: Carnegie survey

NOTE: This table only reflects responses from those who did not believe that Korean unification without foreign involvement would be possible. Respondents could list multiple answers.

TABLE 2

Why South Koreans Feel Unification Should Be a Korea-Only Issue

SURVEY QUESTION

"If you answered 'agree' to the above statement (choose all that apply)." (in response to question in figure 13)

Reasons against foreign involvement in unification	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Foreign involvement might undermine Korean independence and sovereignty in unification	787	57.2
Foreign involvement might lead to foreign military intervention in unification	511	37.1
Foreign involvement might undermine a unified Korea's economic independence	636	46.2
Foreign involvement might prevent a unified Korea from being politically neutral	526	38.2
Foreign involvement would go against the will of the Korean population	579	42.0
Other	48	3.5
	1,377	100

SOURCE: Carnegie survey

NOTE: This table only reflects responses from those who answered that foreign countries should not be involved with Korean unification. Respondents could list multiple answers.

SOUTH KOREANS' WARINESS OF POWERFUL NEIGHBORS

Having established a baseline of South Koreans' antipathy about foreign involvement on the question of unification, it is worth delving a bit more deeply into their views on relevant regional actors, especially China, Japan, and Russia. (The United States, as South Korea's closest ally, is treated separately in the following subsection.)

Before turning to South Korea in more detail, it is worth briefly touching on how North Koreans, like their neighbors to the south, would dislike the prospect of foreign involvement in Korean unification. Pyongyang's official propaganda apparatus emphasizes the importance of rejecting the participation of any foreign powers in unification, so that the Korean

nation can become, once again, whole and free from its neighbors.¹⁹ There is an element of irony in this fact, given that the very creation of the North Korean state was choreographed by the Soviet Union—a point which the North has excised from its history books. North Korea has used the inculcation of extreme nationalism or jingoism as a powerful tool of indoctrination since the end of the Korean War. This is at least partially because the country's leaders believe that those living in North Korea are supposedly pure Koreans, whereas those living in South Korea purportedly have been tainted by generations of pro-Japanese and pro-U.S. education and socialization.

For its part, South Korea advocates a less extreme position than North Korea, but South Koreans are also intensely nationalistic. Indeed, the task of contemplating how the

country should balance the twin forces of nationalism and internationalism is never far from the surface.

When asked whether or not China, Japan, and Russia, respectively, would be “supportive partners” in unification, the majority of Carnegie survey participants responded that they would not. All told, roughly 73 percent of respondents replied that they would not trust China at least to some degree (see figure 14). Indeed, South Korea’s ties with China have flourished since the diplomatic relationship was established in 1992. China is South Korea’s largest trading partner, yet Beijing retains critical relations with Pyongyang and continues

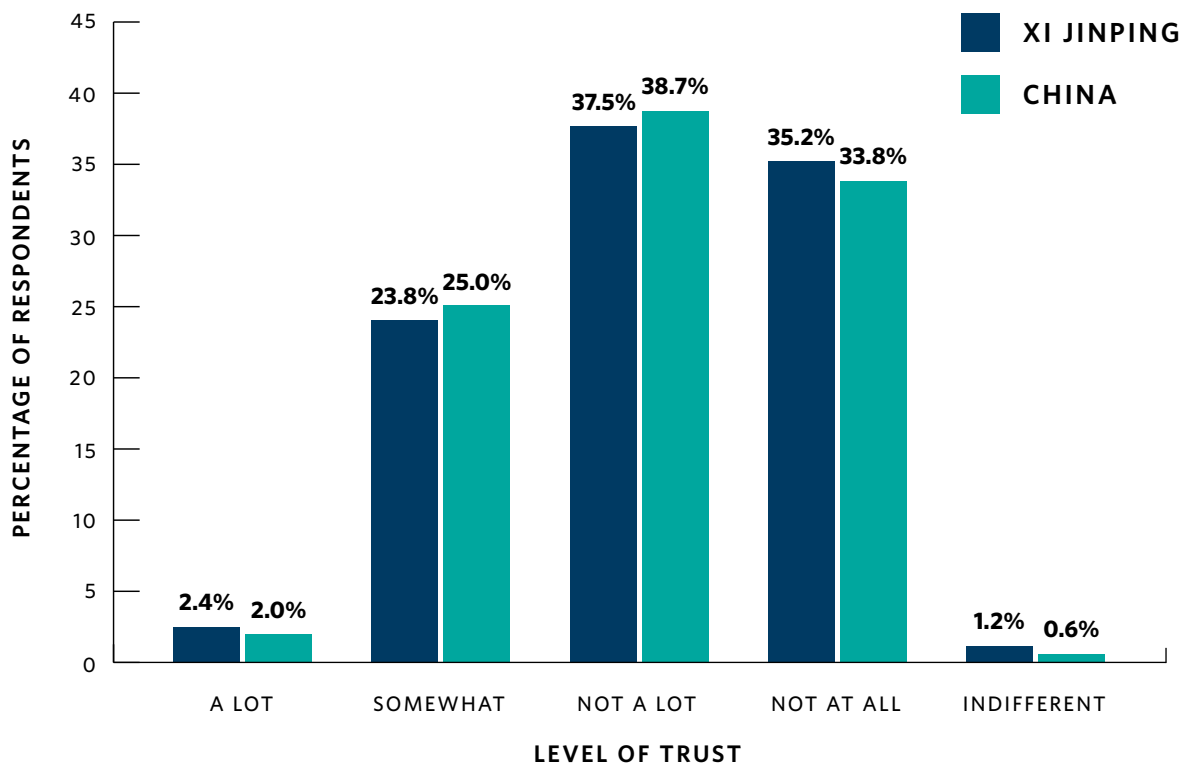
to bolster the Kim regime. Widening and deepening South Korea–China ties have paid major dividends for South Korea in certain respects in the post–Cold War era, but many South Koreans still harbor considerable mistrust toward China.

Nevertheless, as China’s power has reached new heights since the early 2000s, so too has Chinese pressure on South Korea. When Seoul opted to deploy the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in 2017 after a North Korean nuclear test, Beijing unleashed unparalleled political and economic countermeasures. More recently, the rapid worldwide

FIGURE 14
South Korean Trust in China/Xi as a Supportive Unification Partner

SURVEY QUESTION

“How much do you trust China/Xi to be a supportive partner in unification?”



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

spread of the coronavirus outbreak from China to South Korea and the vast majority of other countries around the globe has been another source of Chinese diplomatic pressure on Seoul. While the majority of cases were still in China, Beijing pressured the South Korean government not to block the entry of Chinese nationals into South Korea. Meanwhile, as the virus has continued to spread, the Chinese government has enacted travel restrictions on South Koreans (and citizens of other countries) traveling to China; indeed, in late March, Beijing temporarily closed its borders to most foreigners from all countries to prevent a resurgence of the pandemic in China.²⁰ These actions and Beijing's growing heavy-handedness in its ties

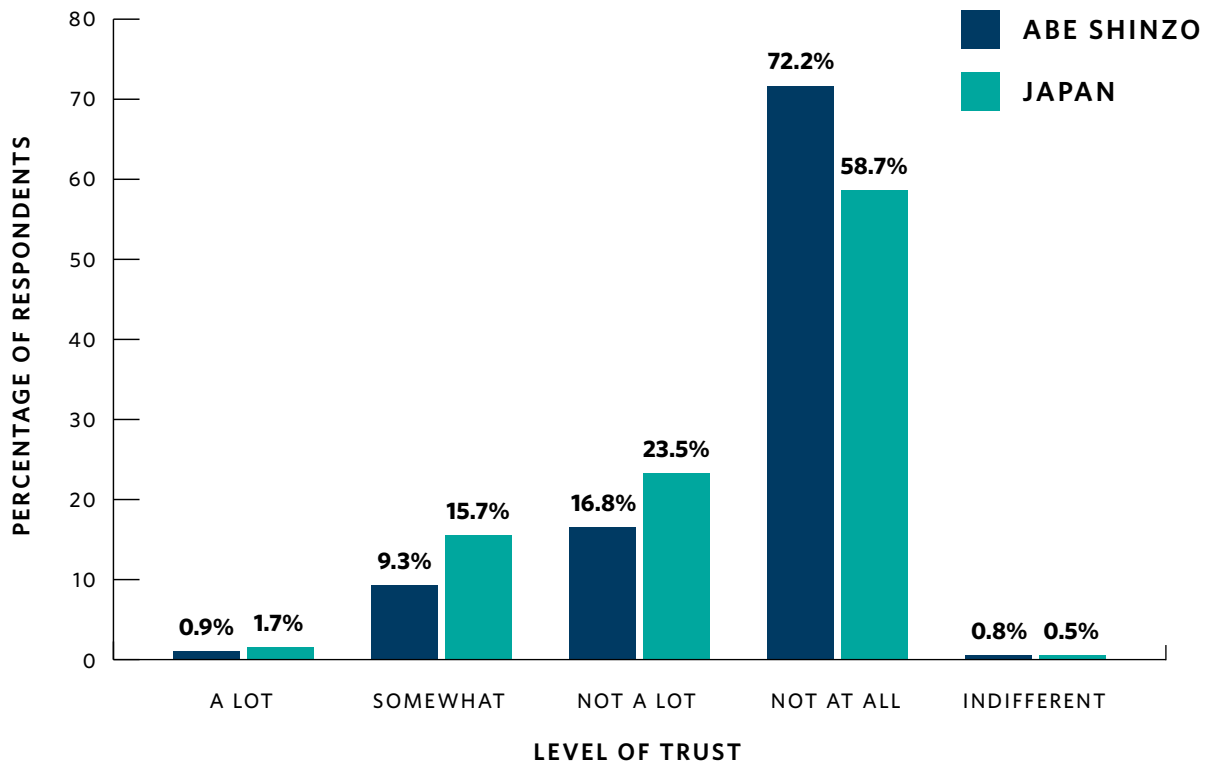
with Seoul have incrementally worsened South Koreans' perceptions of China.

The corresponding shares of South Korean respondents who said they did not trust Japan (a staggering 82.2 percent) and Russia (65.8 percent) were also quite high (see figures 15 and 16). Participants' opinions were sometimes even more negative when respondents were asked if they trusted the leaders of each country to be supportive partners. An overwhelming 89 percent of respondents said they did not trust Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, while 67.7 percent did not trust Russian President Vladimir Putin. Only 28.1 percent

FIGURE 15
South Korean Trust in Japan/Abe as a Supportive Unification Partner

SURVEY QUESTION

"How much do you trust Japan/Abe to be a supportive partner in unification?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

of participants trusted Putin as a supportive partner in unification—slightly higher than the share that trusted Xi (26.2 percent).

South Koreans' high level of mistrust of the Japanese prime minister is not surprising given the depth of historical animosity between South Korea and Japan. Bilateral ties began to significantly worsen at the tail end of the presidency of Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) and remained frozen for most of Park Geun-hye's subsequent presidency (2013–2017). Under Moon, relations with Japan took a sharp turn for the worse, as Japan excluded South Korea from a technology whitelist of preferred

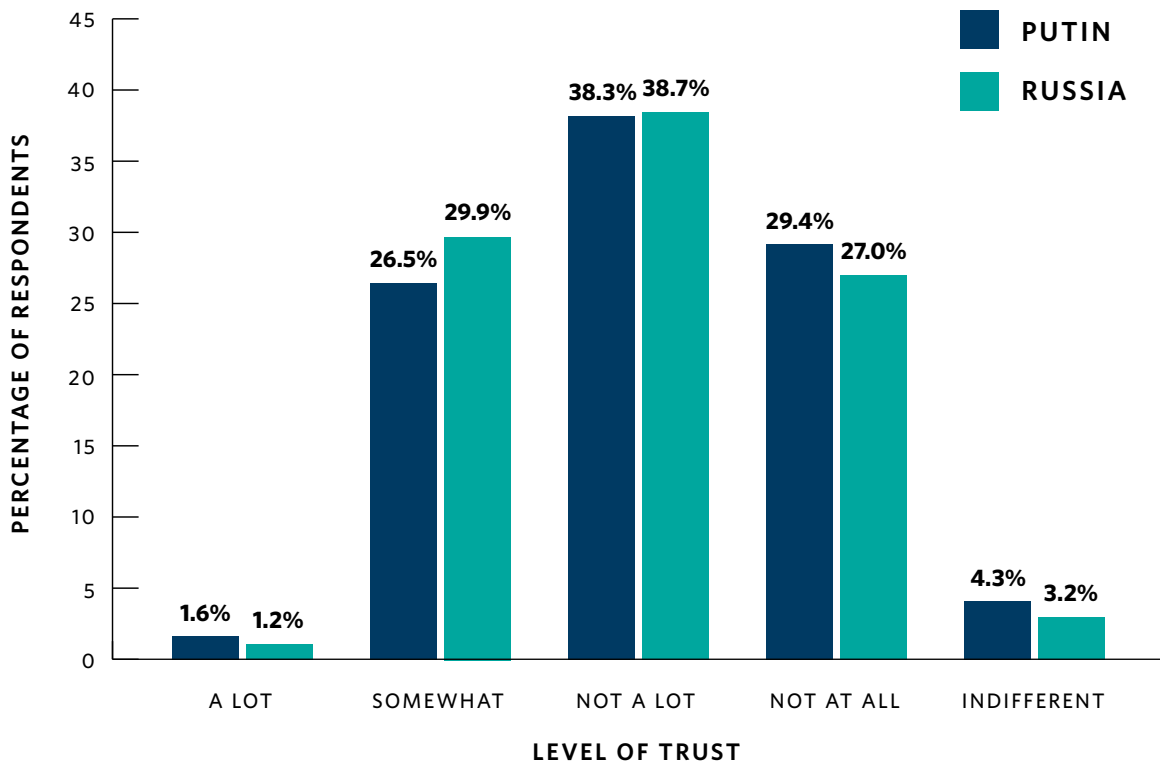
trading partners, and South Korea retaliated by threatening to scrap an important bilateral intelligence-sharing agreement.

South Koreans' ambivalence toward Russia and its leadership is not surprising either, despite the fact that Moscow is a permanent UN Security Council member that could opt to exercise its veto during a contingency involving the Korean Peninsula (see figure 16). The way that China has rapidly eclipsed Russia in terms of power has also contributed to how South Koreans view Russia and its potential role in Korean unification. While Moscow has tried to ramp up its ties with Pyongyang,

FIGURE 16
South Korean Trust in Russia/Putin as a Supportive Unification Partner

SURVEY QUESTION

"How much do you trust Russia/Putin to be a supportive partner in unification?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

“China values North Korea in terms of its strategic competition with the United States and would try to ensure the peninsula is not unified under a democratic government that, given South Korea’s larger population, would favor the United States.”

the reality is that Russia simply cannot provide North Korea with significant political, economic, or even military support.

Objectively speaking, it makes sense for South Korea to deepen and strengthen its ties with both Russia and Japan as counterweights to an increasingly powerful and assertive China. Although it is virtually impossible to foresee any scenario in which South Koreans would welcome the idea of Japan playing a role on reunification, indirect Japanese assistance through the U.S.-Japan alliance, say, should not be rejected outright. And, while Russia is not powerful enough to sway the Korean Peninsula’s geopolitical future, it bears remembering that Moscow planted Kim’s grandfather as the leader of North Korea and provided vital military aid and assistance leading up to the outbreak of the Korean War. Ignoring these two critical powers—Japan and Russia—in any future Korean political configuration would be a major oversight for South Korean foreign policy.

SOUTH KOREANS’ TRUST IN THE UNITED STATES

There was one exception to this general rule of South Korean suspicion about foreign countries’ involvement with unification: the ROK’s alliance with the United States. When asked whether or not they trusted the United States to be a supportive partner in unification, 61.4 percent of respondents responded positively (see

figure 17). This was the case even though 64.7 percent of respondents indicated that they would *not* trust Trump.

While respondents mistrusted Trump regardless of their ages or political affiliations, their political affiliations did appear to be a pertinent factor in shaping their perceptions of the United States’ trustworthiness. Progressive respondents (those from zero to three on the ten-point scale) were split nearly down the middle: 52.6 percent trusted the United States, while 47.4 percent did not. About 72.9 percent of conservatives (those from seven to ten on the ten-point scale) said that they trusted the United States, while 60.3 percent of moderates (those from four to six on the ten-point scale) replied that they trusted the United States.

Of all the countries that Carnegie survey respondents were asked about, the United States is the only one that is currently a South Korean security partner. While participants recognized that other powers were likely to have a role in unification (discussed below), the United States is the only country whose role the South Korean public seems ready to accept—or at least tolerate. This insight is critically important to U.S.-ROK policy planning for contingencies on the peninsula. By virtue of its security alliance with Seoul and its military presence in South Korea, the United States would be immediately involved in the event of a conflict or North Korean regime collapse—two scenarios that could result in Korean unification.

China, Japan, Russia, and the United States would all have an incentive to support unification outcomes that suit their own respective economic, security, and political interests. In a conflict scenario, all parties would have a common interest in prioritizing stability—they would want to prevent the loss of life, economic disruptions, and disorder. However, each of these external actors also would have an incentive to sway the regional balance of power in favor of their own strategic goals.

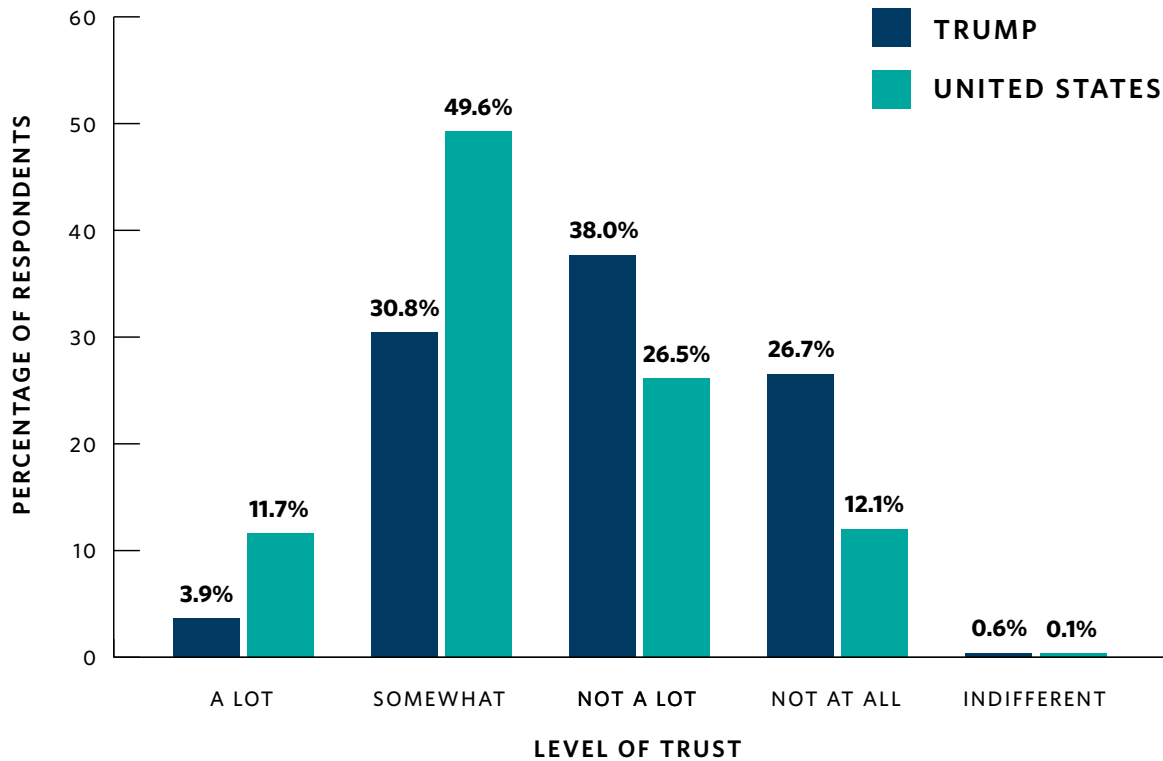
The strategic interests that each country has in supporting a stable and unified Korea would differ. It is likely that,

FIGURE 17

South Korean Trust in the United States/Trump as a Supportive Unification Partner

SURVEY QUESTION

“How much do you trust the United States/Trump to be a supportive partner in unification?”



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

while the United States would back South Korea, China and/or Russia could intervene to support North Korea in a conflict. China, in particular, values North Korea in terms of its strategic competition with the United States and would try to ensure the peninsula is not unified under a democratic government that, given South Korea's larger population, would favor the United States. Washington values Seoul as a close ally, particularly in terms of its utility for U.S. strategic competition with China, and the U.S. government would seek to ensure that its regional influence is not lost. The competing goals of these two countries inevitably leave the two Koreas in the middle and threaten to derail the realization of a unified peninsula.

In any unification scenario, including peaceful ones, foreign powers would have an interest in using the opening of North Korea to foreign investment and trade to shift the region's economic balance of power. China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, the United States, and many other nations would aim to utilize North Korea's labor force and natural resources. *Chaebol* (large, family-run South Korean business conglomerates) have repeatedly committed to investing in the North if unification were to take place; in September 2018, for instance, a contingent of *chaebol* executives notably accompanied Moon to Pyongyang to demonstrate their commitment to investment and development in North Korea.

But China and Russia are far better positioned to capitalize on North Korea's economic potential than other countries, and this could easily shift the peninsula's economic balance of power in their favor. Headquartered in free market democratic countries, Japanese, South Korean, and U.S. businesses are far more independent from the state and risk averse than Chinese or Russian companies. Moreover, North Korea already has contracts with firms in several countries, including China and Russia, for mining as well as telecommunications, railways, and other infrastructure projects. Some of these contracts have terms of up to fifty years, a politically and economically risky commitment that no company in Japan, South Korea, or the United States would be capable of making.²¹

Economic influence begets political influence. And the format of a unified Korea would also inevitably influence the security landscape. For one thing, there is no guarantee that the Korean Peninsula would be unified under a democratic government. And even if it were, North Koreans and particularly North Korean elites would have starkly different views on governance and political issues than either South Korean progressives or conservatives. Maintaining an alliance with a unified Korea would be critical for the United States as it confronts growing Chinese influence in the region, but a unified Korean government would not necessarily share the U.S. view on this matter; that is particularly the case because the threat posed by North Korea, the strongest justification for the alliance at present, would already have been mitigated in such a unification scenario.

GLIMPSES INTO THE POST-UNIFICATION ERA: ALLIANCES AND SECURITY OPTIONS

Since the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, South Korean security has been irrevocably tied to the United States. The alliance has been instrumental in preserving security and peace on the Korean Peninsula

ever since. And most South Koreans continue to believe that its alliance with the United States should continue even after unification.

Whether the ROK-U.S. alliance would be sustained in a post-unification era remains unclear. This is because the question of how the peninsula becomes unified (if and when that happens) and the convergence of geopolitical and geoeconomic forces throughout the unification process would go a long way toward determining the survivability of the alliance. That said, the desirability of maintaining the alliance after unification and whether that is politically achievable are two very different issues.

Unsurprisingly, a majority of South Koreans—60.5 percent—believe that, other than North Korea, the country that will have the most influence on Korean unification will be the United States, followed by China with 32.4 percent (see figure 18). Only 2.4 percent of South Koreans think that Russia will have the greatest influence during unification, and a mere 1.8 percent said that Japan was likely to have the most influence.

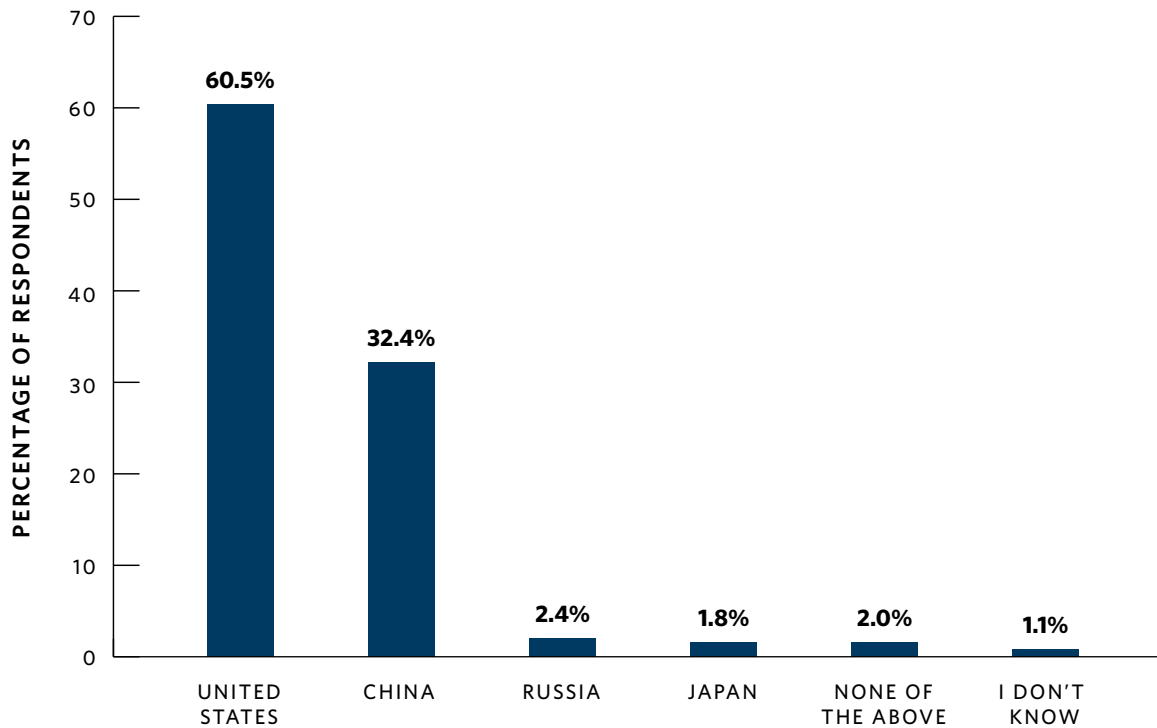
It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the underappreciated role of Moscow. Russia does not factor much into South Koreans' unification calculus, but it should. How South Koreans perceive Russia's role is more important than it may initially seem. When Carnegie survey participants were asked how much they trusted the UN to be a supportive partner in unification, 76.7 percent answered that the UN would have a positive role to play (16.9 percent answered that they would have "a lot" of trust in the UN, and 59.8 percent said they "somewhat" trusted the UN).²² But since Russia is a permanent UN Security Council member, any major decision on unification would invariably involve Moscow. This point alone means that South Koreans should pay much more attention to Russia's role and corresponding influences on the peninsula than they appear to. As it stands, recall that only 31.1 percent said that they trusted Russia to some degree to play a role in unification, whereas 65.8 percent said they did not to some degree (see figure 16).

FIGURE 18

The Most Influential External Actors During Korean Unification

SURVEY QUESTION

"In your opinion, which country (other than North Korea) is likely to have the most influence throughout the phase of Korean reunification?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

In the minds of many South Koreans, the United States is still the outside country that is likely to have the most influence on security matters during unification. A total of 58.8 percent of survey participants responded that the most influential external security actor would likely be the United States, although 28.6 percent felt that it would be China. The single biggest geopolitical difference between German unification and Korean unification (if and when it happens) is this: in Germany's case, unification occurred at the nadir of Russian power and at the height of U.S. power. But as far as the Korean

Peninsula is concerned, if unification were to happen anytime from 2020 to 2050, say, it would occur amid rising Chinese power and ebbing U.S. influence.

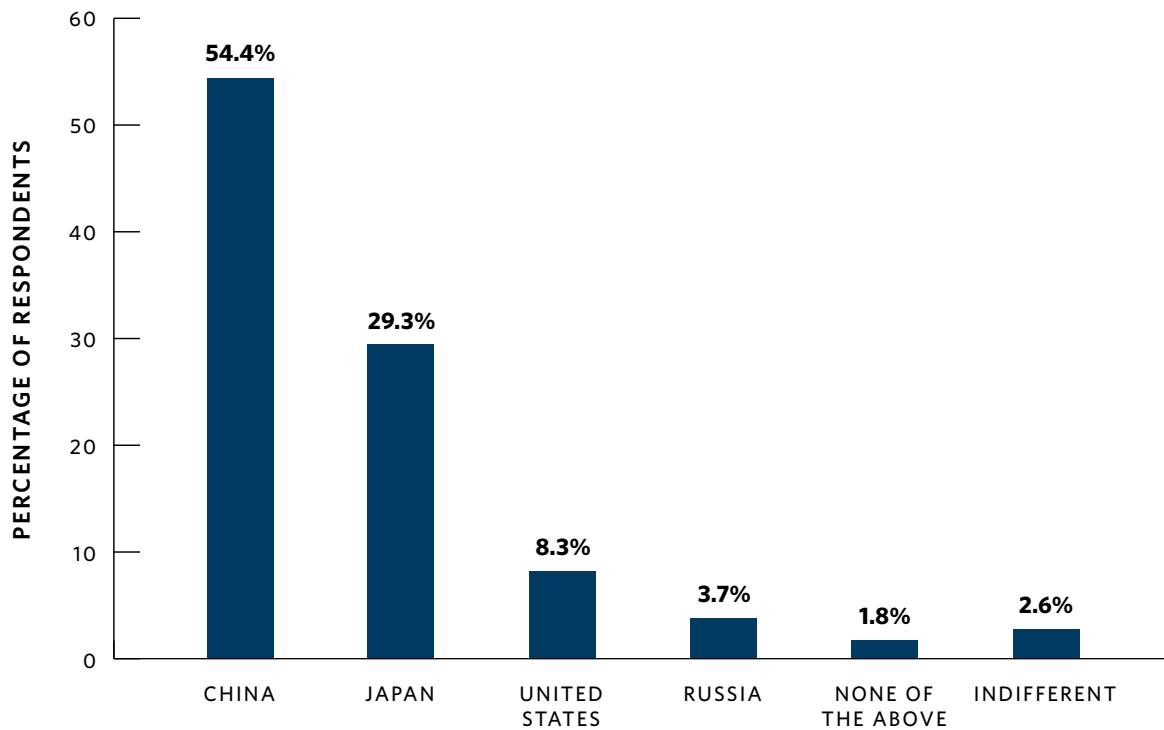
One of the strongest indicators of South Koreans' over-the-horizon security concerns is the looming threat of China. As illustrated in figure 19, more than half of surveyed South Koreans believe that China would become a unified Korea's most acute security threat, followed by Japan and the United States. The fact that Japan registers as the second-most common answer underscores the

FIGURE 19

The Single Biggest Security Threat a Unified Korea Would Face

SURVEY QUESTION

"In your opinion, which regional power is likely to pose the greatest security threat to a unified Korea?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

depth of historical animosity between Seoul and Tokyo and the deep Korean concerns on the likely path a much more militarily powerful Japan will take.

But South Korean perceptions of Japan are quite complex and are not as one-sided as the common narrative of all-out animosity would lead observers to believe. Indeed, as seen in table 3, a fair number of South Koreans perceive Japan as a key competitor (and sometimes as a cooperative partner), but only 6.8 percent said that Japan is an outright adversary.²³

What is even more revealing is that, even as Seoul and Tokyo weather the most difficult period in their bilateral relationship in some time, most South Koreans still perceived China as the country's most significant security threat in 2018 (see figures 19 and 20).²⁴

As for China, South Koreans are well aware of its growing reach. Roughly half of the Carnegie survey respondents, when asked which country would likely have the biggest economic influence throughout the unification process, said it would be the United States,

TABLE 3
South Korean Mixed Perceptions of Japan

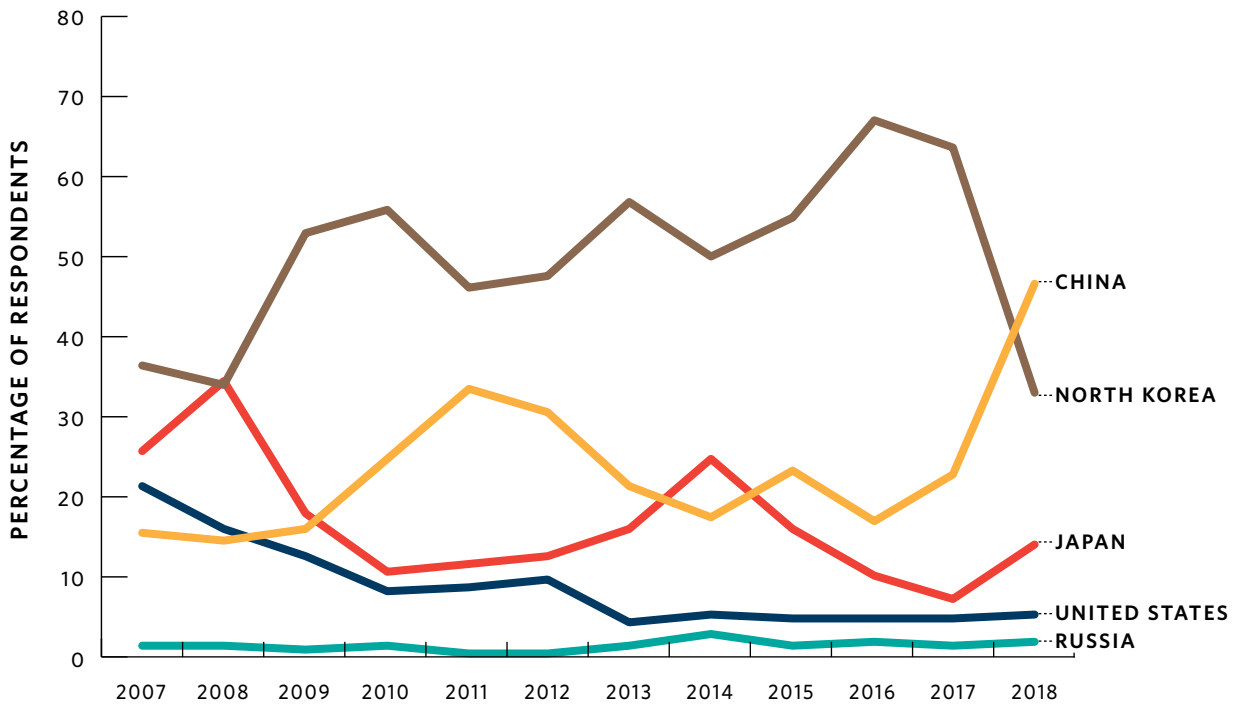
Japan is . . .	
a cooperative country	13.4%
a competitive country	48.5%
a country that is of concern	31.3%
an adversarial country	6.8%

SOURCE: SNU Unification and Peace Institute

though 37.8 percent indicated that it would be China and a more modest 8.1 percent responded that it would be Japan.

The mixed feelings that many South Koreans have about China were also reflected in a December 2019 Pew poll (see figure 21).²⁵ When asked whether they saw China's growing economy as a positive or a negative development and whether Chinese investment was a net asset or a net drawback, South Koreans and their main economic partners/competitors in Japan share some commonalities but also important differences. South Korean views about the impact of China's growing economy were evenly divided: 48 percent said it was a good thing and another

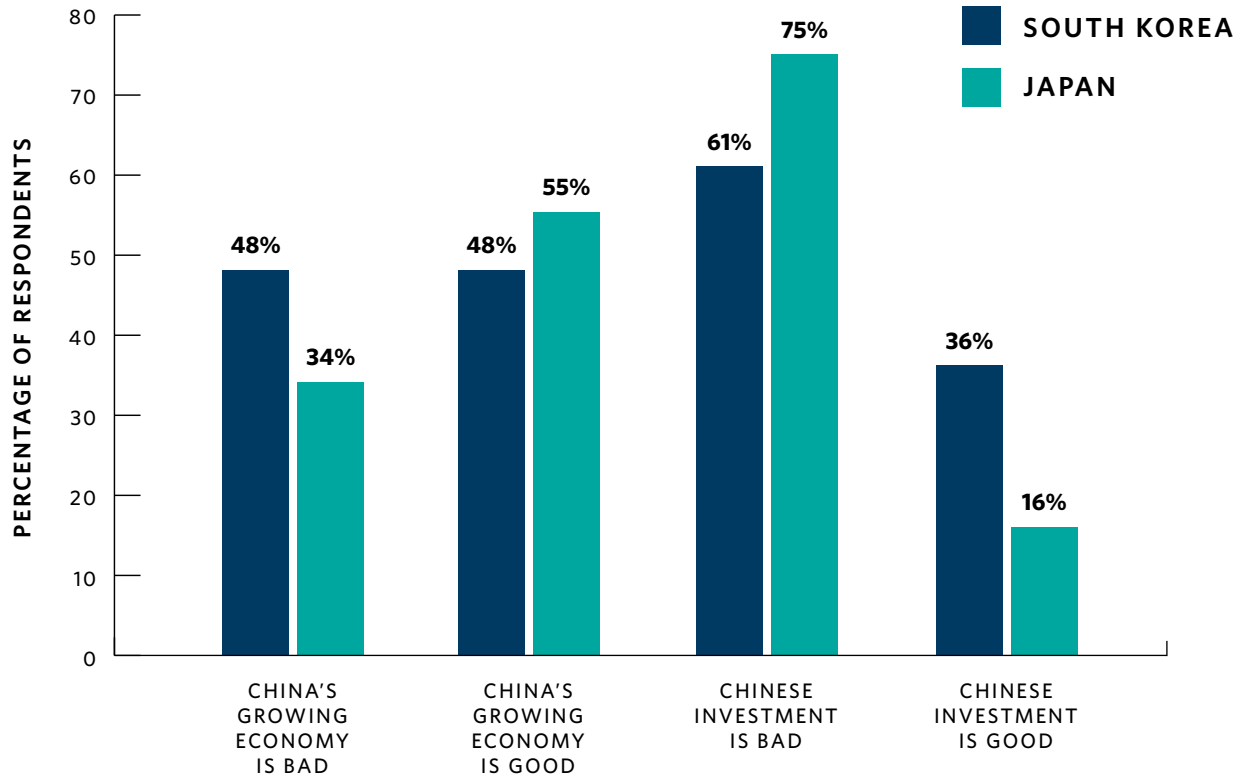
FIGURE 20
The Threat Perceptions of a Peaceful Korean Peninsula



SOURCE: SNU Unification and Peace Institute

FIGURE 21

South Korean and Japanese Views on the Chinese Economy



SOURCE: Pew Global Attitudes and Trends

48 percent said it was a bad thing. As for the effects of Chinese investment, the majority of Japanese (75 percent) and South Koreans (61 percent) both saw things in negative terms, although Japanese respondents were more negative than their South Korean counterparts.

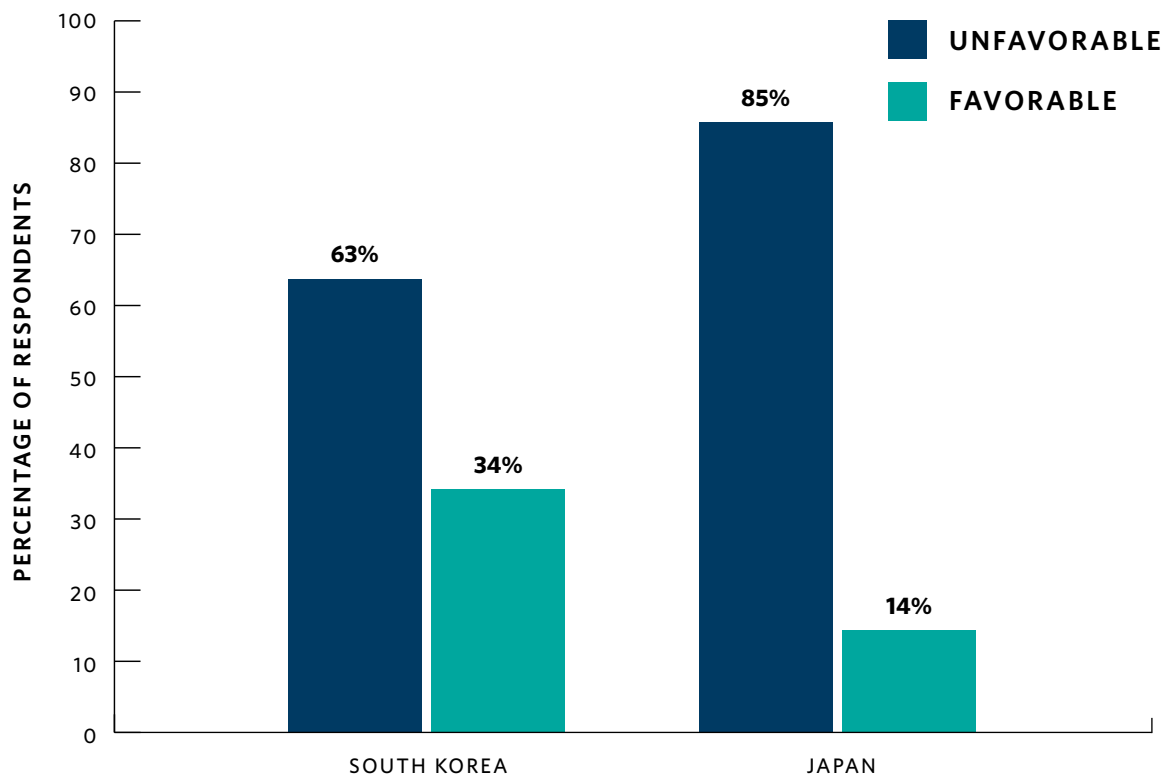
South Korea's (and Japan's) growing concerns about Chinese power come through clearly in other respects too (see figure 22). As a countermeasure to Chinese economic influence, 66 percent of South Koreans said that they saw the most value in maintaining strong economic ties with the United States—a statement that 70 percent of Japanese agreed with.²⁶ Yet the main reason why South Koreans see China as the main threat

after unification is that they do not trust China on security issues. In the aforementioned 2018 SNU survey, 51.7 percent of South Koreans said that, in the event of another war on the Korean Peninsula, China would support North Korea, and 41.4 percent of them said that China would protect its own national interests.²⁷

Even in the best of circumstances, a unification process that favors South Korea would be replete with enormous problems. Of the many issues that would face a unified Korea, arguably the most important one is how a unified Korea would seek to maximize its security while retaining a stable regional balance of power. The fact that there has not been a unified Korea since 1910

FIGURE 22

South Korean and Japanese Views on China



SOURCE: Pew Global Attitudes and Trends

when the peninsula was annexed by Japan means that it likely would take several decades before a unified Korea and other regional actors could fully adjust to the new balance of power in Northeast Asia.

A major theme of this study was to delve into the multiple paradoxes that characterize South Korean attitudes and perceptions on unification. One of the most meaningful juxtapositions is how South Koreans think about alliances in the post-unification era. As seen in figure 23, 45.2 percent of South Koreans “strongly agreed” and 43.6 percent “agreed” that a unified Korea should continue to have an alliance with the United States (for a total of 88.8 percent). Only 10.6 percent

“disagreed” to some degree. Even among progressives, 44.2 percent “agreed” and 43.2 percent “strongly agreed” that a unified Korea should continue to have an alliance with the United States. Among conservatives, 56.1 percent “strongly agreed” and 31.4 percent “agreed” that a unified Korea should continue to stay allied with the United States.

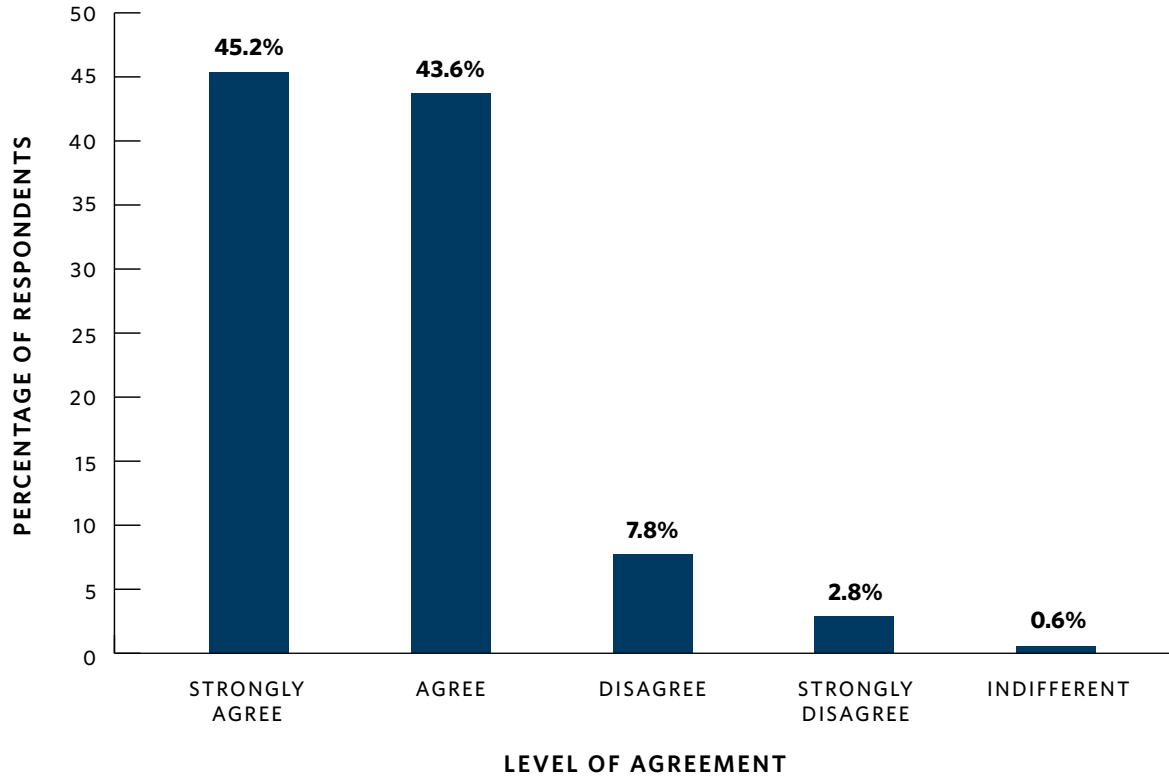
These views are quite natural, given Seoul’s strong, long-standing alliance with Washington and growing angst about rising Chinese power. But, at the same time, 25.1 percent of South Koreans “strongly agreed” and 51.1 percent “agreed” that a unified Korea should also have an alliance with China (see figure 24). Just under one-

FIGURE 23

The Future of South Korea's U.S. Alliance

SURVEY QUESTION

"In your opinion, should a unified Korea continue to have an alliance with the United States?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

quarter of respondents (22.8 percent) “disagreed.” How is it possible that 88.8 percent of South Koreans would want a unified Korea to maintain an alliance with the United States, while 76.2 percent would want to seek an alliance with China?

A unified Korea could not maintain alliances with both the United States and China at the same time. But perhaps South Koreans implicitly understand that a unified Korea—even a unified country under South Korean leadership—would have to cope with a very different geopolitical landscape with special

reference to its ties with China. Even though Beijing is a growing security concern to South Koreans and they feel strongly that this trend would continue throughout the unification process, they also seem to understand that sharing a border with China would entail a very different mindset.

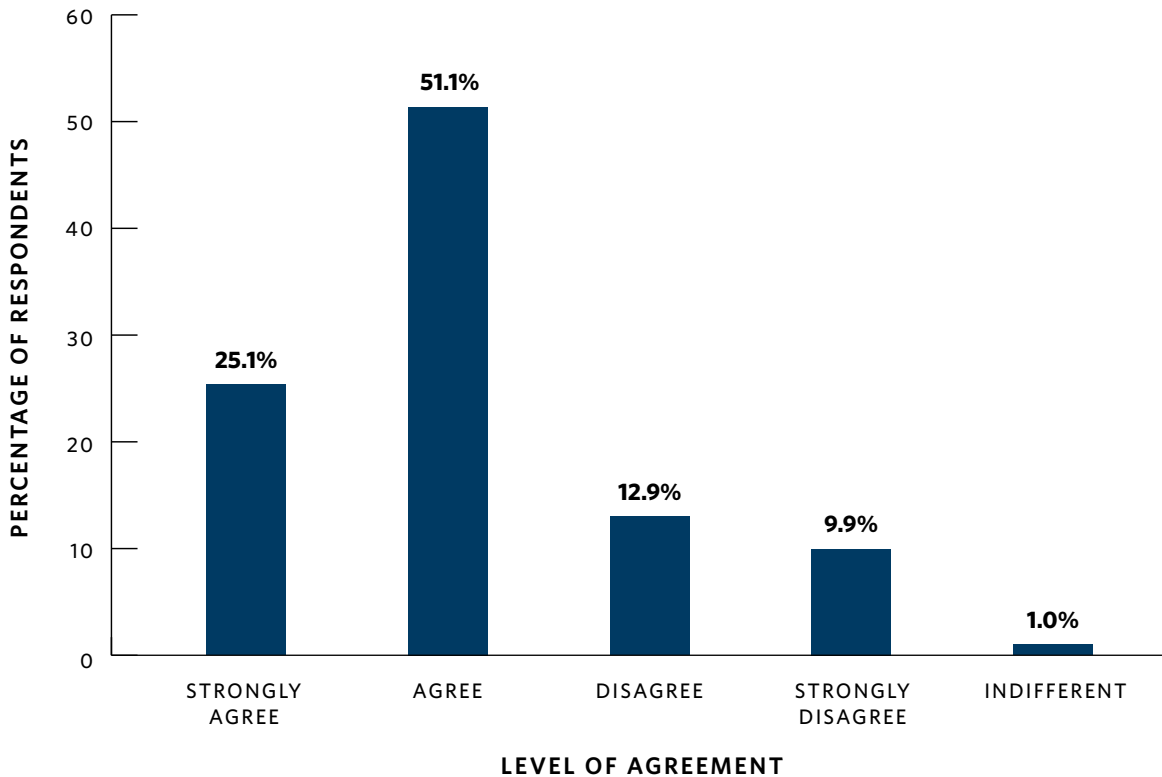
Historically, the Korean Peninsula maintained a tributary relationship with China given the enormous disparity between the two sides in terms of power, the overwhelming influence of Chinese culture, and Korea’s need for strategic survival. After all, China’s Communist

FIGURE 24

The Prospect of a Korean Alliance With China

SURVEY QUESTION

"In your opinion, after the two Koreas are unified, should a unified Korea have an alliance with China?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

leaders came to the defense of North Korea during the Korean War, and Pyongyang forged an alliance with Beijing in 1961. Even if a unified Korea were to be established under South Korean leadership, there is little doubt that Chinese pressure would be felt across the board.

Regardless of how a unified Korea would readjust its alliance with the United States (including the question of whether any U.S. ground troops would continue to be stationed on the peninsula), it is highly likely that Chinese influence in a unified Korea would be

significantly greater than it is today. The Chinese government has long officially called for the withdrawal of all foreign forces from the Korean Peninsula—effectively meaning U.S. forces. If a unified Korea were to continue to maintain an alliance with the United States and assuming that South Korea would take the lead, Beijing would almost certainly insist that all United States Forces Korea troops be withdrawn. At the very least, China will likely ask for the withdrawal of all U.S. ground forces in the absence of a North Korean threat. Beijing would also probably ask what role the U.S. Seventh Air Force (currently based in South Korea)

should continue to play in a unified Korea. Would those deployed forces be arrayed against China?

As shown in figure 25, while 53.3 percent of respondents said that a unified Korea should continue to have U.S. troops, 45.3 percent disagreed. This divide would be exploited by China if a unified Korea under South Korean auspices were to continue to assert that U.S. forces should not be withdrawn from South Korea. Moreover, the U.S. Congress could also likely call for the withdrawal of U.S. ground forces from a unified

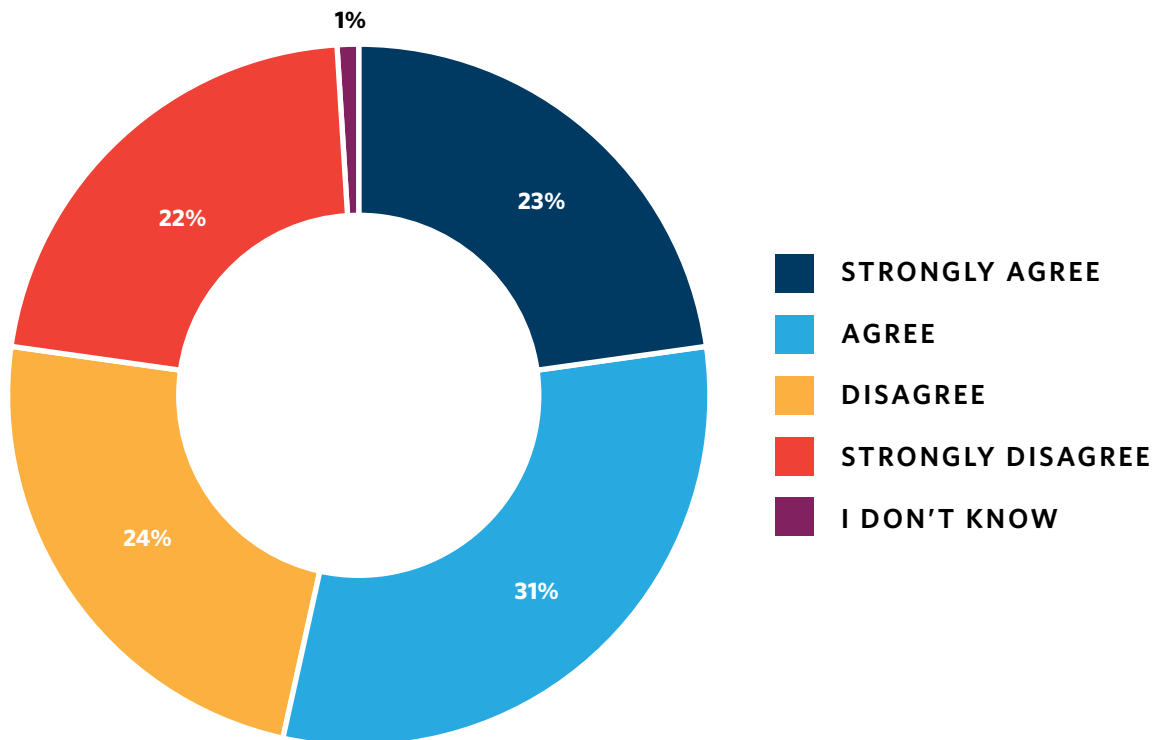
Korea. Regardless of how South Koreans feel about the pros and cons of maintaining at least a limited presence of U.S. forces in a unified Korea, Chinese and U.S. views are likely to have the biggest impact on the makeup of any residual U.S. military footprint on the peninsula.

Part of the reason many South Koreans likely want alliances with both China and the United States is because South Koreans feel that, after unification, China would be a unified Korea's largest threat; they could very well assume that one way to preempt or mitigate

FIGURE 25
The Continued Presence of U.S. Troops on the Korean Peninsula

SURVEY QUESTION

"In your opinion, should the U.S. continue to have troops stationed in a unified Korea?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

NOTE: The percentages add up to slightly more than 100 percent due to rounding.

that looming threat would be to forge an alliance with Beijing. But it would be impossible for a unified Korea to simultaneously have alliances with both the United States and China. Neither Beijing nor Washington would agree to such a move unless it was part of a security arrangement to ensure that a unified Korea remained neutral.

Such unrealistic security options illustrate the complex and difficult geopolitical chessboard that awaits a unified Korea. While South Koreans feel that unification should

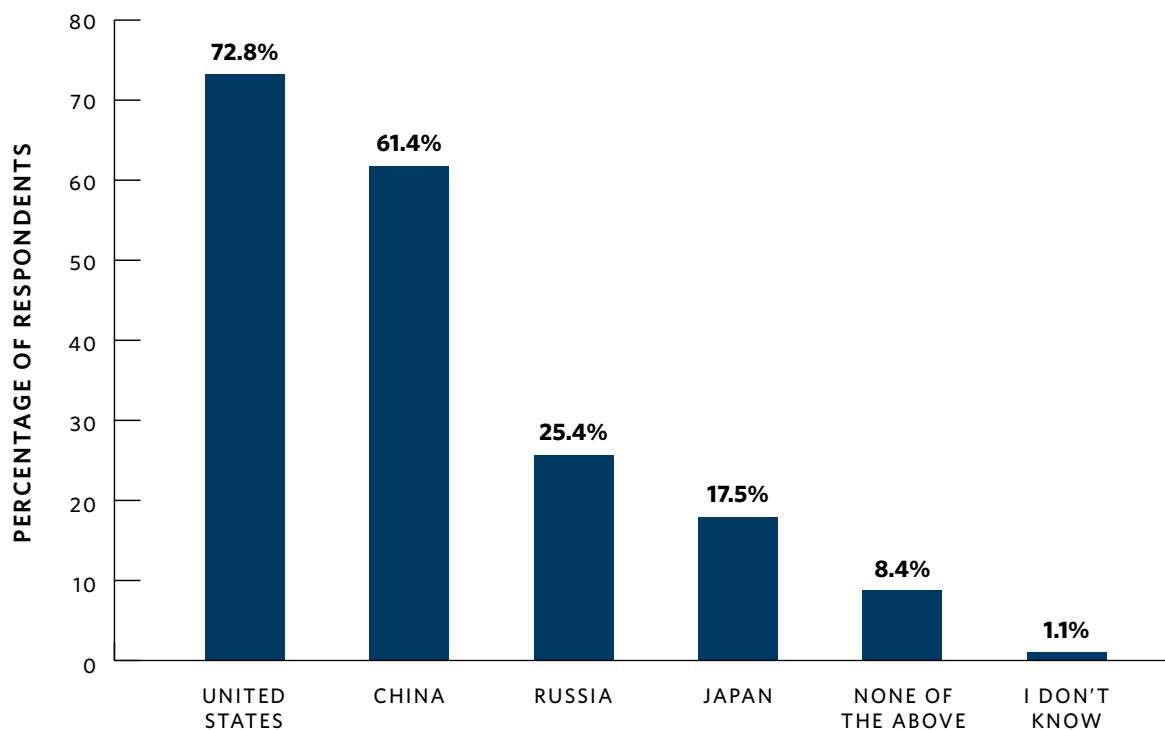
occur through the efforts of the two Koreas and without foreign intervention, they also understand that foreign countries would in all likelihood inevitably play some kind of role. When asked which of the regional powers *should* assume some role in fostering Korean unification, 72.8 percent named the United States while 61.3 percent said China (see figure 26). The scores for Russia (25.4 percent) and Japan (17.5 percent) were much lower.

As figure 26 shows, as much as South Koreans believe that unification should be handled by the two Koreas,

FIGURE 26
South Koreans' Views on Potential Unification Partners

SURVEY QUESTION

"In your opinion, which of the regional powers should have some role in fostering Korean reunification?"



SOURCE: Carnegie survey

NOTE: Respondents could list multiple answers.

they also realize that much more powerful foreign actors, such as the United States and China, are likely to play some role. If both Washington and Beijing were likely to have varying degrees of influence throughout the unification process, how best could Seoul manage its ensuing security options? Perhaps this basic quandary also helps shed light on the survey participants'

conflicting desires for a unified Korea to have alliances with both the United States and China. For South Korea, preparing to make very difficult choices remains the underlying task in navigating the various hypothetical security configurations likely to emerge in the post-unification era.

CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Can South Korea forge a consistent unification policy with matching approaches to foreign policy and defense? Equally important, to what degree can Seoul—regardless of whether conservatives or progressives wield power—build a more bipartisan and consensus-based set of inter-Korean and unification policies? These two questions lie at the heart of the tasks confronting South Korea as it thinks about unification.

As South Korea ponders the future of inter-Korean ties and the prospects for unification, one abiding reality is that core security choices are going to become increasingly difficult and politically charged. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, South Korea's overriding security concern has been preventing another major conflict. With the restoration of democracy in 1987 and the number of inter-Korean summits that have been held since the early 2000s, South Korea's security agenda has expanded but also become much more politicized. Managing South-North relations is no longer driven primarily by deterrence and defense. Particularly under progressive governments, accelerating South-North engagement, for example, has received equal billing with military vigilance.

However unification eventually comes about, the harsh reality is that—despite an overwhelming desire among many Koreans for peaceful reunification and the creation

of a unified Korea through negotiations—the daunting task of merging the two Koreas into a unified state is becoming nearly impossible. This view runs counter to the Holy Grail-like idea that unification is the ultimate national goal of both North and South Korea. Four major factors have arisen that complicate prospects for a negotiated breakthrough between the two Koreas.

First, democratization has triggered a much wider and more diverse debate over unification and security affairs within South Korea. While conservatives were in power over most of the period from 1948 to 1998 and dominated the unification discourse during that time, democratization ushered in far more diverse voices and tolerance for North Korea. Progressives have gained power three times since 1987 (including the current Moon administration), and they have been instrumental in forging new ties with North Korea, including by holding a total of five inter-Korean summits since 2001. While the left-right political divide remains a hallmark of South Korea's debate over North Korea, how South Koreans think about South-North relations and prospects for unification has become much more complex and multifaceted.

Second, South Korea's political discourse has given rise to a confluence of widely contrasting yet related South Korean desires. For instance, while many South

Koreans reaffirm the importance of maintaining a strong alliance with the United States, they also feel an irresistible impetus for greater strategic autonomy and sovereignty that leads them to push for policies like a timely reversion of full wartime operational control of ROK troops from the United States to South Korea. Similarly, no shortage of South Koreans see the necessity of forging closer ties with the country's massive neighbor (China), even though they are also increasingly wary of the growing political pressure Beijing is exerting and the more assertive foreign policy posture it is adopting. Most fundamentally, the desire the vast majority of Koreans feel to forge a single Korea coexists with a sobering awareness of the many impediments and challenges on the road toward unification. All of these impulses and forces, moreover, are going to become much more pronounced going into the 2020s and beyond. How South Korea copes with each of these desires and how Seoul ultimately decides to balance them remains a major looming (and unanswered) question.

Third, more by default than design, South Korea stands out as one of the most prominent countries caught between the United States and China. The Korean Peninsula's ties with China go back nearly 2,000 years. Since the development of full diplomatic ties between Beijing and Seoul in 1992, China has emerged as South Korea's largest trading partner, although its closest ally remains the United States.²⁸ As one of the largest economies in Asia, South Korea has emerged as a critical economic and democratic partner for the United States. Indeed, one could argue that no other country is situated right in the middle of the burgeoning competition between the United States and China quite like South Korea is. In addition, China continues to provide unwavering and crucial economic and political support to North Korea. No country, perhaps, enjoys as robust of ties with both North and South Korea as China does.

Fourth, North Korea's evolution under Kim and how South-North relations continue to unfold will have a major impact on which unification pathway ultimately materialized. As alluded to in this study, one of the major

paradoxes in South Korea's thinking about inter-Korean ties and unification lies in how the two diametrically opposite states can ever become one through peaceful negotiations. Indeed, Seoul's official unification policy assumes that the two Koreas can overcome their outstanding differences without specifying how. Given that the original partitioning of the Korean Peninsula took place against the will of the vast majority of Koreans, the desire of the peninsula's inhabitants to reunify is most natural. But turning such an ideal into realistic steps toward that goal remains a key challenge.

How South Korea copes with these four major issues lies at the heart of the South-North debate within South Korea and the search for more viable inter-Korean policies. That this search is going to collide with increasingly harsh geopolitical realities is one of the biggest hurdles on the road ahead. Other highly pertinent factors include the future of the U.S.-ROK alliance and how South Korea is going to navigate the increasingly narrow space to maneuver between the United States and China.

It would be impossible to create policies that fully overcome the many paradoxes of South Koreans' attitudes on inter-Korean ties, prospects for unification, and the post-unification challenges. Indeed, no foreign policy in South Korea or elsewhere can be completely devoid of paradoxes and conflicting impulses. But the ramifications for South Korea are exceedingly great given how profoundly the peninsula's geopolitical position affects the interests of the world's two most powerful countries and the uncertain future of the world's most isolated totalitarian state.

The road to a more realistic, more consensus-based, and, hopefully, more bipartisan inter-Korean policy will be full of speed bumps and thorny challenges. But the first step toward forging such policies must be a finer appraisal and understanding of the conflicting strands of South Koreans' attitudes, perceptions, and preferences with respect to inter-Korean ties and, ultimately, reunification.

DQ2. Have you ever lived abroad?

- 1. Have lived abroad
- 2. Have not lived abroad

DQ2. 귀하께서는 해외에서 거주했던 경험이 있으십니까?

- 1. 해외 거주 경험 있음
- 2. 해외 거주 경험 없음

DQ2-1. If so, for how long did you live abroad?

DQ2-1. (DQ2 보기1 응답자만) 그렇다면 해외에서 얼마나 거주하셨습니다습니까?

Q2. In thinking about unification, which of the unification scenarios is the most likely?

(Choose one.)

- 1. Peaceful coexistence
- 2. Peaceful unification through dialogue and negotiation
- 3. Unification through absorption (North Korean collapse)
- 4. Unification through conflict
- 5. N/A, Unification will not occur
- 6. Don't know

Q2. 귀하께서는 통일이 된다고 생각 할 때, 어떤 방식으로 통일을 하는 것이 가장 가능성이 높다고 생각하십니까?

- 1. 평화로운 상태로 남북한이 각자 공존
- 2. 대화와 협상을 통한 평화 통일
- 3. 북한 붕괴에 의한 흡수 통일
- 4. 남북 간 물리적 충돌을 통한 통일
- 5. 이 중에 없음 (통일이 되지 않을 것)
- 6. 잘 모르겠다

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

**통일에 대한 기본 인식
(Basic Opinions on Reunification)**

Q1. In thinking about reunification, which of the unification scenarios is the most desirable?

(Choose one.)

- 1. Peaceful coexistence
- 2. Peaceful unification through dialogue and negotiation
- 3. Unification through absorption (North Korean collapse)
- 4. Unification through conflict
- 5. Not in favor of unification
- 6. Don't know

Q1. 귀하께서는 어떤 방식으로 통일을 하는것이 가장 바람직하다고 생각하십니까?

- 1. 평화로운 상태로 남북한이 각자 공존
- 2. 대화와 협상을 통한 평화 통일
- 3. 북한 붕괴에 의한 흡수 통일
- 4. 남북 간 물리적 충돌을 통한 통일
- 5. 통일을 찬성하지 않음
- 6. 잘 모르겠다

Q3. When do you think reunification is likely to occur? (Choose one.)

- 1. Never
- 2. 5 years
- 3. 5~10 years
- 4. 10~20 years
- 5. 20~30 years
- 6. 30~40 years
- 7. 40 years or more

Q3. 귀하께서는 몇 년 내에 통일이 될 꺼라고 생각하십니까?

- 1. 통일이 되지 않을 것
- 2. 5년 이내
- 3. 5년~ 10년 이내
- 4. 10년~20년 이내
- 5. 20년~30년 이내
- 6. 30년~40년 이내
- 7. 40년 이상

Q4. The two Koreas have stated that unification should occur by the two Koreas without the participation of foreign powers. Do you agree with this statement? Do you disagree?

1. Agree
2. Disagree

Q4. 남북한은 외부 세력의 개입 없이 통일이 이루어져야 한다고 합의한 바 있습니다. 귀하께서는 이러한 합의 내용에 대해 동의하십니까? 동의하지 않으십니까?

1. 동의한다
2. 동의하지 않는다

Q4A. If you answered “agree” to the above statement (choose all that apply):

1. Do you agree because foreign nations might undermine Korean independence and sovereignty in unification?
2. Do you agree because foreign involvement might lead to foreign military intervention in unification?
3. Do you agree because foreign nations might undermine a unified Korea’s economic independence?
4. Do you agree because foreign involvement might prevent a unified Korea from being politically neutral?
5. Do you agree because foreign involvement in unification would go against the will of the Korean population?
6. Do you agree for a reason not stated above?

Q4A. (Q4 보기1 응답자만) 귀하께서 동의하시는 이유를 보기 중에서 모두 선택해주시기 바랍니다.

1. 통일 과정에서 한국의 독립성과 주권을 훼손시킬 수 있기 때문에
2. 통일 과정에서 외국군의 개입으로 이어질 수 있기 때문에
3. 통일된 한반도의 경제적 자립성을 저해할 수 있기 때문에
4. 통일된 한반도가 정치적으로 중립적인 입장을 가질 수 없을 것이기 때문에
5. 통일에 외부 세력이 개입하는 것은 국민 의지에 반하는 것이 때문에
6. 기타 ()

Q4B. If you answered “disagree” to the above statement (choose all that apply):

1. Do you disagree because you see foreign involvement in unification as unavoidable?
2. Do you disagree because foreign involvement in unification might help avoid violent conflict?
3. Do you disagree because foreign involvement in unification could support Korea’s political settlement negotiations?
4. Do you disagree because foreign involvement could help alleviate the economic burden of unification?
5. Do you disagree because foreign nations could help provide humanitarian assistance in unification?
6. Do you disagree for a reason not stated above?

Q4B. (Q04 보기2 응답자만) 귀하께서 동의하지 않는 이유를 보기 중에서 모두 선택해주시기 바랍니다.

1. 통일에 있어 외부 세력의 개입은 피할 수 없는 일이기 때문에
- 2) 외부 세력의 개입을 통해 남북간 물리적 충돌을 방지할 수 있기 때문에
- 3) 한국의 정치적 교섭에 도움이 될 것이기 때문에
- 4) 통일의 경제적 부담을 경감시키는 데 도움이 될 수 있기 때문에
- 5) 통일 과정에서 인도적 지원을 받을 수 있기 때문에
- 6) 기타 ()

북한에 대한 인식과 김정은

(Perceptions on North Korea and Kim Jong Un)

Q5. How would you describe the current state of South-North relations as compared to three years ago? (Choose one.)

1. Very positive
2. Positive
3. No change
4. Negative
5. Very negative

Q5. 귀하께서는 3년 전(2016년)에 비해 현재의 남북관계가 어떻다고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 긍정적으로 변했다
2. 긍정적으로 변했다
3. 변화가 없다
4. 부정적으로 변했다
5. 매우 부정적으로 변했다

Q6. How confident are you that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons? (Choose one).

1. Very confident
2. Somewhat confident
3. Not so confident
4. Not confident at all
5. I don't know

Q6. 귀하께서는 북한이 핵무기를 포기할 것이라고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 그렇다
2. 다소 그렇다
3. 다소 그렇지 않다
4. 전혀 그렇지 않다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q7. How much do you trust Kim Jong Un?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all

Q7. 귀하께서는 통일의 책임감 있는 협력자로서 북한의 김정은 위원장을 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰한다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 많이 신뢰하지 않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다

Q8. How much do you trust North Korea?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all

Q8. 귀하께서는 북한이 통일에 있어 책임감 있는 국가의 모습을 보일 것이라고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 그렇다
2. 다소 그렇다
3. 다소 그렇지 않다
4. 전혀 그렇지 않다

남북통일에 가장 중요한 주변국 인식
(The Most Important Regional Power Relating to South-North Unification)

Q9. In your opinion, which country (other than North Korea) is likely to have the most influence throughout the phase of Korean reunification? (Choose one).

1. United States
2. China
3. Japan
4. Russia
5. None of the above
6. Don't know

Q9. 귀하께서는 통일이 되는 단계에서 북한 이외의 국가 중 어느 국가가 가장 큰 영향을 줄 것이라고 생각하십니까? (R)

1. 미국
2. 중국
3. 일본
4. 러시아
5. 이 중에 없다
6. 잘 모르겠다

Q10. In your opinion, which of the regional powers should have some role in fostering Korean reunification? (Choose all that apply).

1. United States
2. China
3. Japan
4. Russia
5. None of the above
6. Don't know

Q10. 귀하께서는 통일을 하는 과정에서, 한반도 주변국들 중 특정한 역할을 맡아서 수행해야 한다고 생각하는 국가가 있습니까? 모두 선택해주세요.

1. 미국
2. 중국
3. 일본
4. 러시아
5. 이 중에 없다
6. 잘 모르겠다

Q11. How much do you trust Donald Trump to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q11. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력자로서 도널드 트럼프 대통령을 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지 않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q12. How much do you trust the United States to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q12. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력국으로서 미국을 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지 않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q13. How much do you trust Xi Jinping to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q13. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력자로서 시진핑 주석을 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q14. How much do you trust China to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q14. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력국으로서 중국을 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q15. How much do you trust Shinzo Abe to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q15. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력자로서 아베 총리를 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q16. How much do you trust Japan to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q16. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력국으로서 일본을 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q17. How much do you trust Vladimir Putin to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q17. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력자로서 푸틴 총리를 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q18. How much do you trust Russia to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q18. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력국으로서 러시아를 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지 않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q19. How much do you trust the United Nations to be a supportive partner in unification?

1. A lot
2. Somewhat
3. Not a lot
4. Not at all
5. Don't know

Q19. 귀하께서는 통일을 지원하는 협력기관으로 UN을 얼마나 신뢰하십니까?

1. 매우 신뢰하다
2. 조금 신뢰한다
3. 다소 신뢰하지 않는다
4. 전혀 신뢰하지 않는다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q20. In your opinion, which country is likely to exert the greatest influence on security issues throughout the phase of Korean reunification? (Choose one.)

1. United States
2. China
3. Japan
4. Russia
5. None of the above
6. Don't know

Q20. 귀하께서는 통일을 하는 단계에서, 한반도 주변국 중 어떤 국가가 안보 문제에 가장 큰 영향을 미칠 것으로 생각하십니까?

1. 미국
2. 중국
3. 일본
4. 러시아
5. 이 중에 없다
6. 잘 모르겠다

Q21. In your opinion, which country is likely to exert the greatest influence on economic issues throughout the phase of Korean reunification? (Choose one.)

1. United States
2. China
3. Japan
4. Russia
5. None of the above
6. Don't know

Q21. 귀하께서는 통일을 하는 단계에서, 한반도 주변국 중 어떤 국가가 경제 문제에 가장 큰 영향을 미칠 것으로 생각하십니까?

1. 미국
2. 중국
3. 일본
4. 러시아
5. 이 중에 없다
6. 잘 모르겠다

통일과 연관된 주변국들의 구체적인 역할에 대한 인식
(Perceptions on More Specific Roles of the
Regional Powers on Korean Reunification)

Q22. In your opinion, should international organizations like the UN have some role in fostering Korean reunification?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly disagree
5. Don't know

Q22. 귀하께서는 통일을 하는데 있어, UN과 같은 국제 기구가 특정 역할을 맡아서 수행해야 한다는데 동의하십니까?

1. 매우 동의한다
2. 동의한다
3. 보통이다
4. 동의하지 않는다
5. 전혀 동의하지 않는다

통일이후에 예상되는 주변국들에 대한 인식
(Perceptions on the Regional Powers After
Unification)

Q23. In your opinion, which regional power is likely to pose the greatest security threat to a unified Korea?

1. United States
2. China
3. Japan
4. Russia
5. None of the above
6. Don't know

Q23. 남북한이 통일이 된 상황에서, 안보적으로 한반도에 가장 큰 위협이 될 국가는 어디라고 생각하십니까?

1. 미국
2. 중국
3. 일본
4. 러시아
5. 이 중에 없다
6. 잘 모르겠다

Q24. In your opinion, which regional power is likely to pose the greatest economic threat to a unified Korea?

1. United States
2. China
3. Japan
4. Russia
5. None of the above
6. Don't know

Q24. 남북한이 통일이 된 상황에서, 경제적으로 한반도에 가장 큰 위협이 될 국가는 어디라고 생각하십니까?

1. 미국
2. 중국
3. 일본
4. 러시아
5. 이 중에 없다
6. 잘 모르겠다

Q25. Should a unified Korea continue to have very strong ties with the international community?

- 1) Strongly agree
- 2) Agree
- 3) Disagree
- 4) Strongly disagree
- 5) Don't know

Q25. 남북한이 통일이 된 상황에서, 한반도가 국제 사회와 강한 결속을 유지해야 한다고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 그렇다
2. 다소 그렇다
3. 다소 그렇지 않다
4. 전혀 그렇지 않다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q26. In your opinion, should a unified Korea continue to have an alliance with the United States?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly disagree
5. Don't know

Q26. 남북한이 통일이 된 상황에서, 한반도가 미국과 동맹 관계를 유지해야 한다고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 그렇다
2. 다소 그렇다
3. 다소 그렇지 않다
4. 전혀 그렇지 않다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q27. In your opinion, should the United States continue to have troops stationed in a unified Korea?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly disagree
5. Don't know

Q27. 남북한이 통일이 된 상황에서, 주한 미군이 계속해서 한반도에 주둔해있어야 한다고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 그렇다
2. 다소 그렇다
3. 다소 그렇지 않다
4. 전혀 그렇지 않다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q28. In your opinion, should a unified Korea have nuclear weapons?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly disagree
5. Don't know

Q28. 남북한이 통일이 된 상황에서, 한반도는 핵무기를 보유해야 한다고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 그렇다
2. 다소 그렇다
3. 다소 그렇지 않다
4. 전혀 그렇지 않다
5. 잘 모르겠다

Q29. In your opinion, after the two Koreas are unified, should a unified Korea have an alliance with China?

1. Strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly disagree
5. Don't know

Q29. 남북한이 통일이 된 상황에서, 한반도는 중국과 동맹 관계를 가져야 한다고 생각하십니까?

1. 매우 그렇다
2. 다소 그렇다
3. 다소 그렇지 않다
4. 전혀 그렇지 않다
5. 잘 모르겠다

NOTES

- 1 World Bank World Integrated Trade Solution, “Korea, Rep. Trade Summary 2018 Data,” <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/KOR/Year/LTST/Summary>.
- 2 Unless noted otherwise, all the polling numbers mentioned in this publication are based on the results of a November 2019 survey that the Asia Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace commissioned from a polling company called Research & Research (R&R). The poll’s overall findings have not been made public, but the data are available upon request. R&R is one of South Korea’s leading survey companies founded in 1990. It has done polls for various ministries, agencies, government think tanks, corporations, and private research institutes. Based on its track record of working with key South Korean think tanks such as the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, R&R was chosen to carry out the Carnegie survey.
- 3 Andrew Jeong, “To Make Korea Pay More for Security, Trump Has to Show His Shopping List,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 7, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-make-korea-pay-more-for-security-trump-has-to-show-his-shopping-list-11578393004>.
- 4 Timothy W. Martin and Andrew Jeong, “Unhappy With South Korea’s Stance on the North, Defectors Use Elections to Push a Tougher Line,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/unhappy-with-south-koreas-stance-on-the-north-defectors-use-elections-to-push-a-tougher-line-11582066607>.
- 5 Charlie Campbell, “What Would Korean Reunification Look Like? Five Glaring Problems to Overcome,” *Time*, April 26, 2018, <https://time.com/5255381/north-south-korea-kim-jong-un-reunification/>.
- 6 “The July 4, 1972 South-North Joint Communiqué,” United Nations Peacemaker, July 4, 1972, <https://peacemaker.un.org/korea-4july-communication72>.
- 7 In general, for populations of over 100,000, a sample size of 1,000 is considered sufficient to be representative of the general population. The survey conducted for this publication used 2,003 respondents, more than twice that level. The results of this survey have been interpreted using a 95 percent confidence level, as is standard practice. At this confidence level, if the same survey were conducted one hundred times, ninety-five times out of one hundred, the distribution of responses in the sample could be expected to fall within 2.2 percent of the distribution range of responses that would result from the total population being surveyed. This 2.2 percent represents a margin of error of 2.2 percent, which is calculated based on the 95 percent confidence level. For more information on calculating margins of error, please see the following sources: “Sample Size Calculator,” SurveySystem.com, <https://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>; and “Calculating the Number of Respondents You Need,” Survey Monkey, https://help.surveymonkey.com/articles/en_US/kb/How-many-respondents-do-I-need.
- 8 Statistics Korea, “2018 Population and Housing Census,” August 29, 2019, <http://kostat.go.kr/portal/eng/pressReleases/8/7/index.board?bmode=read&bSeq=&aSeq=378503&pageNo=1&rowNum=10&navCount=10&currPg=&searchInfo=&sTarget=title&sTxt=>.
- 9 South Korean National Statistical Office, “South Korea: Cities,” City Population.de, December 31, 2019, accessed on March 26, 2020, <https://www.citypopulation.de/KoreaSouth-MunRegPop.html>.
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