

One year after the Singapore summit

an analysis of the views of the publics of the US, China, Japan and Russia about the situation in the Korean Peninsula

Issue 2019/02 • June 2019

by Ramon Pacheco Pardo, Tongfi Kim,
Linde Desmaele and Maximilian Ernst

Introduction

On the first anniversary of the Singapore summit between President Donald Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un, the KF-VUB Korea Chair published the results of a survey on American, Chinese, Japanese and Russian views of US-North Korea and inter-Korean relations (available [here](#)). We wanted to know what the publics of these four countries think about the situation in the Korean Peninsula twelve months after this historic event. In this report, we analyse the reasons behind their views of the current situation in the Korean Peninsula.

US: Up to Donald Trump to solve the North Korean conundrum

by Linde Desmaele

One year after the handshakes and photo-ops of the first-ever meeting between a sitting US President and the North Korean leader in Singapore, the American public is divided on the question of how and whether US-North Korea relations have changed since then. Whereas 25 percent of Americans think that US-North Korea relations improved compared to twelve months ago, 33 percent believe they stayed the same and 31 percent believe that they have gotten worse. This contrasts with the view in China, where 54 percent think that US-North Korea relations improved since the Singapore summit. The publics of Japan and Russia, in turn, are also rather

divided on the issue. In all cases, at least a plurality of the respondents expect improved US-North Korea relations to have a positive impact on their own country.

In a sense, it is unsurprising that Americans have different views on the state of US-North Korea relations. After all, a majority of the American public (52 percent) think that the international community should prioritise denuclearisation over improving the human rights of the North Korean population (18 percent), inter-Korean peace (13 percent) and the integration of North Korea in the international community (4 percent). American opinion-makers disagree on whether Trump's North Korea policy is working when it comes to the thorny issue of denuclearisation. For many years, the US has sought to advance the final fully verified denuclearisation (FFVD) of North Korea. Two US treaty allies, South Korea and Japan, fall within the range of Pyongyang's numerous short-range missiles. On top of that, in 2017, the North Korean regime tested a series of intercontinental ballistic missiles deemed able to reach the continental US.

Optimistic voices in the US applaud North Korea's self-imposed moratorium on long-range missile and nuclear tests. They emphasise that the road to a nuclear-free North Korea will inevitably be a long one, and that it takes time to sustainably overcome the deep mistrust that characterises US-North Korea relations. Since only continued negotiations will ultimately be able to bring about

complete denuclearisation, talks are a manner of progress in themselves. At the same time, more pessimistic American commentators point out that the North Korean regime still has not agreed to any specific weapons cuts. North Korea has not surrendered nor dismantled any nuclear weapons, and determining Pyongyang's existing nuclear capabilities remains to a large extent guesswork.

Interestingly, among those Americans who think that US-North Korea relations have improved, 57 percent credit President Donald Trump for the change and only 7 percent think that Chairman Kim Jong-un is responsible for this outcome. Meanwhile, for those who believe that relations deteriorated, 40 percent blame Trump and 22 percent blame Kim. With partisanship running deep in the US, American citizens may have political reasons to praise or attack their president's stance towards North Korea. Nonetheless, the fact that Americans ascribe both success and failure to their own president, as opposed to the North Korean leader, suggests that they believe Trump has in fact significant leverage over the diplomatic process.

The US President repeatedly heralded that the US so-called "maximum pressure" campaign – harsh sanctions and military threats designed to alter North Korea's behaviour – brought the North Korean leader to the negotiation table. Although a series of high and lower-level summits have taken place over the past twelve months, the Trump administration insists that sanctions will remain in place until North Korea achieves FFVD. A majority (55 percent) of the American public agree that the international community should opt for a combination of diplomacy and sanctions when dealing with North Korea. 12 percent think that diplomacy should guide policy towards North Korea. A minority of 10 percent opt for sanctions only. Japanese views run largely in parallel on this question. In contrast, 69 percent of the Russian public believe that diplomacy only is the preferable path when dealing with North Korea. Chinese, for their part, prefer either diplomacy only (43 percent) or a mix of diplomacy and sanctions (also 43 percent).

The American public's scepticism about US-North Korea relations contrasts with a slightly more positive view of inter-Korean relations. Indeed, 30 percent of American respondents believe that inter-Korean relations are more stable now compared with twelve months ago. Admittedly, a plurality of 34 percent do not see much of a difference. A minority of 21 percent think relations have gotten less stable. In this context as well, the American public does not have much faith in Kim. Among those who think relations have gotten worse, 78 percent blame the North Korean leader. The results are much more mixed for those who think that relations have improved, with 43 percent crediting South Korean President Moon Jae-in and 42 percent crediting Kim, respectively.

Although Americans prioritise denuclearisation over inter-Korean peace, a majority (52 percent) think that Washington should support reconciliation between both Koreas. Moreover, 63 percent believe that improved inter-Korean relations would have a positive impact on the US. Since Washington has a treaty obligation to help defend South Korea in case of an external attack, stable inter-Korean relations are clearly in the US interest.

The past year has seen a proliferation of high-level diplomacy around the Korean Peninsula. The American public is cautiously optimistic about inter-Korean relations and would welcome with open arms warming relations between the two Koreas. When it comes to the current state of US-North Korea relations, opinions are mixed. Nevertheless, Americans agree on the priority end goal of denuclearisation and on the need to combine diplomacy and sanctions to achieve that end. It looks like they are now waiting for their own president to make it all happen.

China: The Chinese are optimists

by Maximilian Ernst

The Chinese public usually has a large interest in political affairs on the Korean Peninsula. This is due to the geographical proximity, on one hand, and due to the awareness that the Korean Peninsula is a focal point of East Asian geopolitics, on the other hand, where the US and its South Korean ally face down China's sole ally; North Korea. Chinese see North Korea as their little communist brother. Moreover, the Chinese contribution in defence against the American "imperialist invaders" during the Korean War is well remembered in China.

Today, beyond the historical consciousness, most Chinese view both North and South Korea as friendly neighbours. However, the impact of the deployment of the US missile defence system THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) in South Korea, in 2017, still has a lingering effect on the relationship; the number of Chinese tourists travelling to South Korea remains about 40 percent below the number in 2016. The younger generation in China today tends to be interested in South Korea and, in contrast, views the North as a backward country that resembles their own country four decades ago. South Korea is most prominently known for cultural exports, including pop music and soap operas, as well as plastic surgery and cosmetic products.

Among the four surveyed publics, the Chinese public is the most optimistic about the state of inter-Korean relations, with 51 percent believing that relations are more stable than a year ago. A majority attribute this positive change to Chairman Kim Jong-un rather than South Korean President Moon Jae-in. Equally, the Chinese have by far the most positive perception of US-North Korea relations; 54 percent assess that relations are better, 22 percent believe they are about the same, and 21 percent believe they are worse than a year ago. Among those Chinese who think that US-North Korea relations are better today, a majority believe that this is thanks to President Donald Trump and Kim in equal parts. The

21 percent of Chinese who think that relations are worse blame Trump for this. It is noteworthy that most Chinese respondents view Kim as the leader who is most responsible for recent developments on the Korean Peninsula, whereas they view Moon's role as secondary. An explanation can be sought in some Chinese perceptions of South Korea as a US puppet state with limited influence when it comes to international security politics.

What kind of North Korea policy do the Chinese support? 43 percent regard diplomacy as the way to go. Another 43 percent think it should be a mix of diplomacy and sanctions. A minority of 9 percent believe that only sanctions are the right way to deal with North Korea. With regards to prioritised topics in North Korea policy, majorities in Japan and the US prioritise denuclearisation, 64 and 52 percent, respectively, and a plurality (44 percent) of Russians prioritise peace between the two Koreas. In this category, Chinese views are more nuanced, with 34 percent prioritising denuclearisation, and other topics such as integration in the international community (28 percent), inter-Korean peace (19 percent), and improvement of human rights (17 percent).

Chinese gave the most uniform response as to what role their country should take in future US-North Korea negotiations. Almost half (48 percent) of respondents think China should act as mediator, 27 percent think China should not intervene, 17 percent want Beijing to support North Korea, and a mere 3 percent support the US. In this regard, the Chinese public shares the position of prior and current US administrations with respect to the role China should take, albeit for different reasons. It also serves to underline the confidence Chinese people have in their country's standing in international affairs.

Most Chinese (59 percent) anticipate that improved US-North Korea relations will positively affect their own country, which is more than Japanese and Russian respondents (49 and 31 percent, respectively) but less than American respondents (64 percent). Regarding the impact

of improved inter-Korean relations on their own country, Chinese respondents were again optimistic, with 67 percent saying that it would be beneficial, followed by the US (63 percent), Russia (51 percent), and Japan (31 percent).

The fact that the Chinese expect improved US-North Korea relations to positively impact their own country challenges conventional wisdom on China's position regarding the normalisation of US-North Korea relations— i.e., such a development could undermine Beijing's clout over Pyongyang and affairs on the Korean Peninsula in general. The Chinese public does not seem to share this concern and may rather expect a spill-over into the easing of US-China relations, including on the current trade disputes. Looking at Chinese optimistic views of improved inter-Korean relations, this is likely to stem from expectations of economic development in North Korea, which would lead to new business opportunities on both sides of the rivers Yalu and Tumen.

Sino-North Korean relations are often described to be “as close as lips and teeth”. This derives from a proverb, known in both countries, which means “without lips, the teeth are cold.” While it is unclear who are the lips and teeth in this relationship, it can be seen that the Chinese public believe in their close ties with North Korea, sharing common interests, and that the trilateral relationship between them and the US is not a zero-sum game.

Japan: the two Koreas' distant neighbour

by Tongfi Kim

Among the four countries' publics, the Japanese are arguably the most sceptical about diplomatic engagement with North Korea, although 51 percent of them still think that the international community should prioritise both diplomacy and sanctions. Only 15 percent of Japanese think that diplomacy should be prioritised, while 69 percent of Russians, 43 percent of Chinese, and 12 percent

of Americans support reliance on diplomacy. The proportion of Japanese respondents who favour sanctions alone (17 percent) is significantly higher than the US (10 percent), Chinese (9 percent), and Russian (4 percent) counterparts.

This scepticism of the Japanese is particularly pronounced in their attitudes towards inter-Korean reconciliation. Whereas majorities in China (67 percent), the US (63 percent), and Russia (51 percent) answered that improved relations between North Korea and South Korea would have a positive impact on their country, only 31 percent of Japanese hold this view. Not surprisingly, only a minority of Japanese (27 percent) think that their country should support inter-Korean reconciliation, even though this option is chosen by majorities in Russia (70 percent), China (58 percent), and the US (52 percent). Interestingly, a much higher proportion of Japanese (49 percent) think that improved relations between the US and North Korea would have a positive impact on Japan.

Historical animosity between Japan and the two Koreas is well known, and recent tensions between Japan and South Korea are probably further reinforcing Japanese scepticism. Since late 2018, the Japanese public opinion towards South Korea has hardened as a result of several negative developments from a Japanese perspective. These include disputes over wartime labour compensation lawsuits, a South Korean warship's fire control radar allegedly locking on a Japanese surveillance plane, and South Korean National Assembly Speaker's demand for an apology on the so-called “comfort women” from the then Japanese Emperor Akihito, the son of the wartime emperor Hirohito. In a period which some pundits regard as the worst in Japan–South Korea relations since 1965, it is not surprising that the Japanese public does not warmly embrace the prospect of inter-Korean reconciliation.

Japanese respondents, of course, are not sympathetic towards North Korea either. Japan has the highest proportion of respondents (64 percent) who answered that denuclearisation should be the

first priority of the international community, followed by the US (52 percent), China (34 percent), and Russia (23 percent). Our surveys omitted the issue of Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea because it is much less prominent in the other three countries. In Japan, however, recovery of the abductees is arguably the most important political goal vis-à-vis North Korea. Thus, the addition of the abductee issue to our survey would have further reduced Japanese interests in inter-Korean reconciliation (8 percent), human rights in North Korea (14 percent), and integration of North Korea in the international community (8 percent).

Japan's strong focus on denuclearisation is also based on its strategic reality. Unlike the other three countries surveyed, Japan does not possess nuclear weapons and relies on US extended deterrence. Japanese experts, therefore, have been wary of the risk that North Korea's long-range missiles, armed with nuclear weapons, undermine this US protection by making it too dangerous for the United States to retaliate against North Korea on behalf of Japan. Moreover, even if Pyongyang's intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capabilities can be limited through negotiations, Japan is still within the range of numerous shorter-range missiles of North Korea. Elimination of North Korean nuclear weapons, therefore, is particularly important for Japan, which has had hostile relationships with Pyongyang and hosts US military bases in its territory. This strategic consideration is further reinforced by the Japanese public's aversion to nuclear weapons.

Our survey results, however, are not all bad news for Chairman Kim Jong-un. As mentioned in the beginning, 51 percent of Japanese think that both diplomacy and sanctions should be used in dealing with North Korea, and 15 percent think that diplomacy should be prioritised. Thus, even in Japan, there is domestic political support for some level of diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang. After all, Tokyo's previously favoured policy of maximum pressure did not produce progress on the abductee issue, and Japan needs to make the best of the changing circumstances in the Korean Peninsula.

Prime Minister Abe Shinzo is the only leader of the members of Six Party Talks who has not met the North Korean leader, and Abe has expressed his wish to meet Kim, without pre-conditions. North Korea has so far publicly rejected Abe's offer, but Japan's diplomatic stance has shifted significantly from the time when Tokyo insisted on maximum pressure on North Korea. The Japanese government indeed removed the expression of maximum pressure from its 2019 Diplomatic Bluebook. Compared with other countries, the Japanese public is sceptical about diplomacy with North Korea and cool towards inter-Korean reconciliation. It is, therefore, significant that many Japanese are willing to see diplomacy tried, albeit combined with sanctions.

Russia: the Koreans have a friend

by Ramon Pacheco Pardo

The Russian public is the most supportive of better inter-Korean relations and the most positive about its current state out of the four countries analysed. Most notably, 44 percent of Russians think that inter-Korean peace should be the main priority of the international community when dealing with North Korea. This is by far the highest number, with Chinese, American and Japanese citizens clearly trailing behind at 19 percent, 13 percent and 8 percent, respectively. Indeed, majorities in the US and Japan, and even a plurality in China, think that the main priority should be denuclearisation. This marks another difference with Russians.

Russian opposition to great power interventionism in the Korean Peninsula probably helps to explain the prioritisation of improved inter-Korean relations and relatively little concern for denuclearisation. From a Russian perspective, better inter-Korean relations would mean lower tensions in the Korean Peninsula and, potentially, less need for American troops in South Korea. An improvement in relations between both Koreas would also help to reduce the threat of a US strike on North Korea, with all the negative effects derived from a potential escalation.

In addition, Russians are probably less concerned about North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons. If there is a country of the four surveyed that would feel unthreatened by Pyongyang's nuclear and weapons of mass destruction, this is Russia. After all, there is no conceivable scenario under which North Korea would decide to strike Russian territory. Arguably, Chinese respondents would feel the same way. But North Korea's nuclear programme is a direct slap in the face of the Chinese government. Beijing has sought to rein in North Korea's programme in a way that Moscow has not. Whether North Korea keeps it or not, does not tell us anything about the influence that Moscow may, or may not, have over Pyongyang. Northeast Asia is not part of Russia's desired sphere of influence.

When answering to the current state of inter-Korean relations, 51 percent of Russians think that they are more stable than they were a year ago. This trails China (52 percent) by only one point and is significantly above the numbers for the US (30 percent) and Japan (22 percent). In contrast, only 8 percent of Russians think that relations are less stable today, substantially below the figures for the US, China and Japan. Significantly, only 31 percent of Russians think that US-North Korea relations are more stable than they were a year ago.

Russians seem to be looking at the fact that both Koreas have held three successful summits, two of them with actual working agreements, and concluded that the two Koreas are on their way to improving relations. In contrast, the no-deal outcome of the Hanoi summit has probably made Russian citizens think that better US-North Korea ties still have a way to go. Russians might also be looking at inter-Korean relations in isolation, whereas their views of the US and its relationship with North Korea are probably shaped by the myriad of problems that Washington has with both foes and allies.

Russians also back better relations between both Koreas. Up to 70 percent of Russians polled believe that Moscow should support inter-Korean

reconciliation. The figures for China (58 percent), the US (52 percent) and, especially, Japan (27 percent) are significantly behind. Also, more than half of Russia's citizens (51 percent) think that better inter-Korean relations are beneficial for their country. Only 2 percent think that Russia would be worse off if both Koreas improved their relations. This is the lowest figure among the countries surveyed.

Without any sphere of influence in the Korean Peninsula to protect, Russians probably also think that better relations between both Koreas will reduce US and Chinese interventionism in Korean Peninsula affairs. This would be a positive for Russia which has less of a say on Korean affairs. Russian citizens might also feel a degree of sympathy for Korean self-determination. After all, Russia does not have a long history of directly intervening in Korean Peninsula affairs in the way that China, Japan and – in more recent decades – the US do. Plus, Moscow would have less to fear from a reconciled – or potentially even reunified – Korea given its relatively less important role in the Korean Peninsula.

The Russian public is also clearly in favour of negotiations with North Korea. Significantly, 69 percent of Russian citizens think that diplomacy is the right way to deal with North Korea. This is in sharp contrast to the US and Japan – where the majority believe that the international community should use a mixture of diplomacy and sanctions – and China, where equal numbers support diplomacy or a mixture of diplomacy and sanctions. In sharp contrast, only 4 percent of Russians believe that using only sanctions is the right way to deal with North Korea. This is a lower figure compared to Americans, Chinese and Japanese respondents.

Realistically, multilateral diplomacy is the only way for Russia to play a significant role in Korean Peninsula affairs. This would help to explain why Russian citizens support this approach towards North Korea. Perhaps more important, Russian respondents' aversion to sanctions could stem from the fact that Moscow itself is on the receiving end of sanctions as well. It could also be related

to missed trade opportunities with North Korea because of the sanctions regime. Plus, Russians probably feel that sanctions are a “tool” used by Washington and Western governments to compel other countries to behave in a certain way. This sympathetic attitude of Russians does not hold

for Chinese citizens, who feel the effects of North Korea’s nuclear and WMD programmes more closely.

Authors

RAMON PACHECO PARDO is KF-VUB Korea Chair at the Institute for European Studies, VUB, and Reader in International Studies at King’s College London.

TONGFI KIM is a KF-VUB Korea Chair Senior Researcher at the Institute for European Studies and Assistant Professor in International Relations at Vesalius College.

LINDE DESMAELE is a KF-VUB Korea Chair PhD Candidate.

MAXIMILIAN ERNST is a KF-VUB Korea Chair PhD Candidate.

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The Chair holder is Dr. Ramon Pacheco Pardo who is also Reader in International Relations at King’s College London.

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at the Institute for European Studies
is a joint initiative between the
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Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB)
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Institute for European Studies
Pleinlaan 5
B-1050 Brussels
T: +32 2 614 80 01
E: info@ies.be
www.ies.be



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