



South Korean public opinion on the world in times of global turmoil

US yay, China nay, Japan meh

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Introduction

This report presents some of the most noteworthy findings from a public opinion survey conducted online in South Korea between 11 April and 23 June 2022 with a research sample of 1,363 respondents representative of the general population based on the quotas of gender, age (18-65 years), and region within the country.¹

This survey is part of a broader research project, 'Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges',² funded by the European Regional Development Fund and run by Palacky University Olomouc in collaboration with the Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS). The survey in South Korea was part of a wider survey of 15 Indo-Pacific countries. More outcomes from this research project will follow in the future.

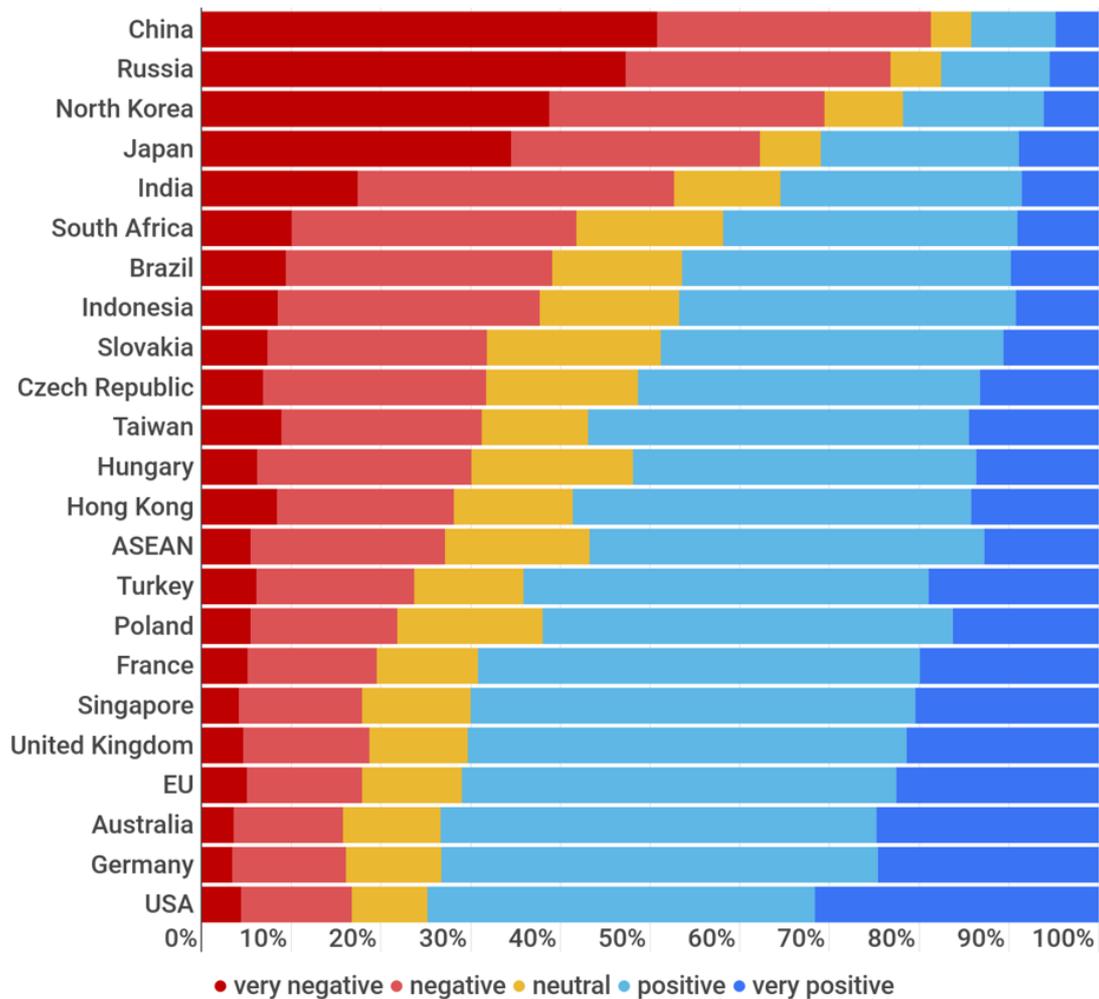
South Korea used to be known for its balancing act between its ally and security guarantor – the US – and its leading economic partner and increasingly dominant neighbor – China. In the past, this balancing used to also be visible at the level of public opinion. According to Pew Research, in 2015, South Koreans were relatively positive about China, when only 37% of them held unfavorable views.³ However, Korean attitudes toward China turned sharply negative over subsequent years due to tensions in bilateral relations surrounding the deployment of their anti-ballistic missile system THAAD, which was announced in 2016.

Our survey confirms the negative views of China among South Koreans: **China is the most negatively perceived country** among the respondents of the survey. Tellingly, on the opposite end, the **most positively perceived country is the United States**. In fact, South Korean public opinion of China is among the most negative in the world, while the public opinion of the US is among the most positive. This public sentiment in South Korea creates a factor which respective Korean governments have to take into account if they want to maintain public support for their policies.

1 Views of foreign countries

Of the 23 countries or entities respondents were asked about, **China is the most negatively viewed in South Korea**, with 81% of all respondents indicating a very negative or negative attitude towards it (*Figure 1*). Other **autocratic states such as Russia (77%) and North Korea (69%) are also viewed negatively** by most South Koreans. Furthermore, Japan is viewed negatively by more than half of the respondents (62%), followed by India (53%). Most Western states are perceived rather positively – on average, less than 20% of South Koreans view France, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the US negatively.

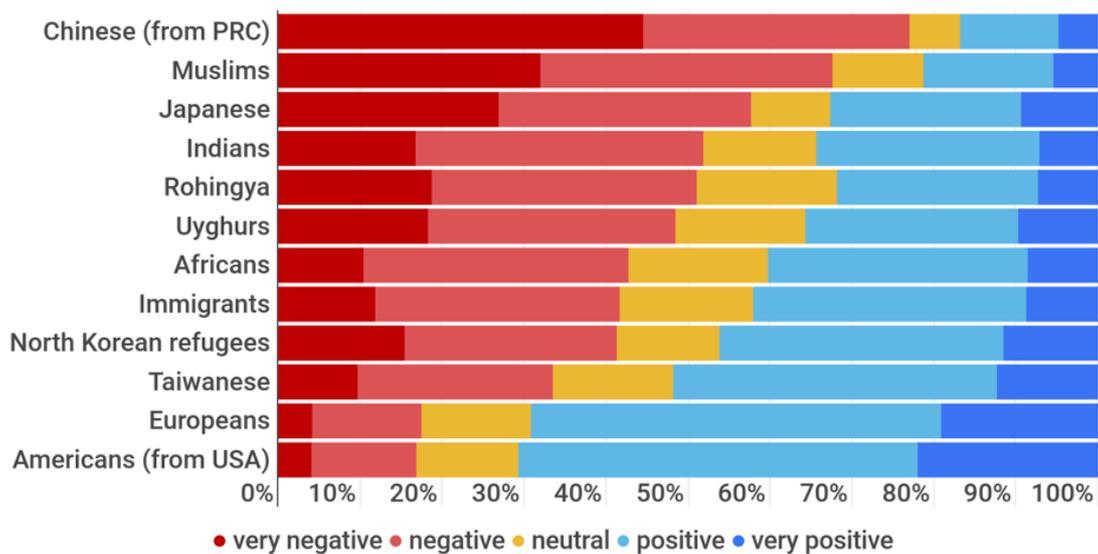
Figure 1: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following countries?⁴



Overall, the **US is the most positively perceived country** – slightly less than 75% of respondents hold a positive attitude toward it. Australia and Germany are viewed comparably positively, with about 73% of respondents indicating warm feelings toward them. Some 71% of respondents have a positive image of the EU, and the same is true for about 70% of respondents and their attitudes towards the United Kingdom, Singapore, and France. Among the Central European states, Poland is viewed the most positively (62%) and Slovakia the least positively (48%).

Negative sentiments toward China also translate into how the citizens of the People’s Republic of China are seen (*Figure 2*): **77% of South Korean respondents showed a negative view of the Chinese**, making them the most negatively perceived group of people of those polled in this survey. The second most negatively viewed group of people is Muslims (67%), followed by the Japanese (57%), Indians (52%), and Muslim minorities living in Myanmar and China - the Rohingya people (51%) and Uighurs (48%). In contrast, **Americans and Europeans are viewed predominantly positively by South Koreans**, with more than 71% and 69% holding positive feelings towards them, respectively.

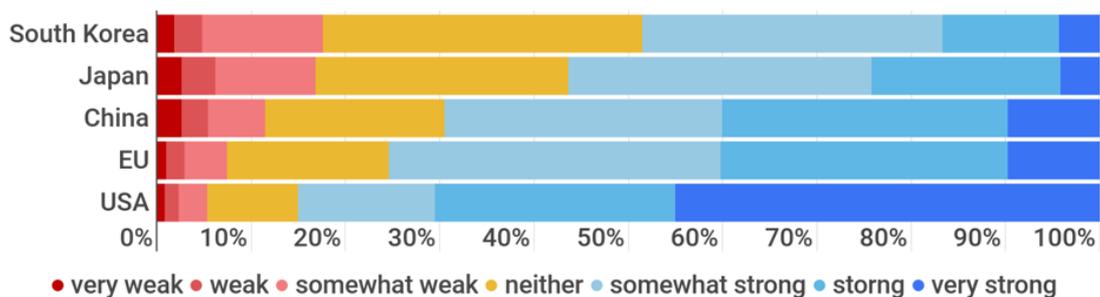
Figure 2: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following groups of people?⁵



2 Perceptions of great powers

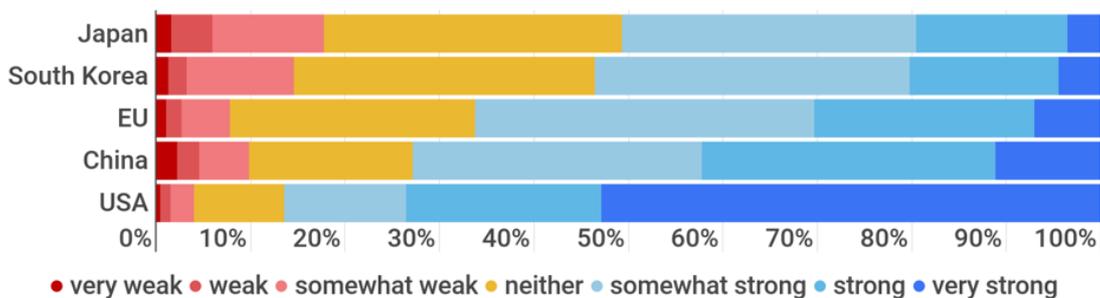
From the perspective of South Koreans, their own country is regarded as relatively economically weak compared to China, the EU, and the US (*Figure 3*). The **US is perceived as an economically powerful country by the largest proportion (85%) of South Korean respondents**, while about 75% also view the EU as strong. Some 70% of respondents perceive China to be a strong economic power, while only 56% consider Japan to be economically powerful.

Figure 3: How economically powerful or economically weak do you consider these countries/entities?



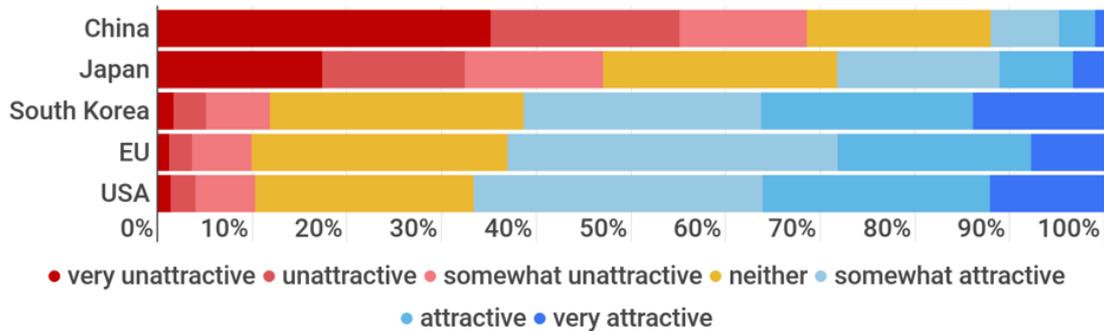
In terms of military power, the US is also perceived as a powerful country by the largest group of respondents. More than 86% of respondents view it as strong, compared to 73% and 66% of respondents who feel the same way about China and the EU, respectively (*Figure 4*). Only 53% perceive South Korea as militarily strong and an even lower proportion of respondents, slightly less than 51%, consider Japan to be militarily powerful.

Figure 4: How militarily powerful or militarily weak do you consider these countries/entities?



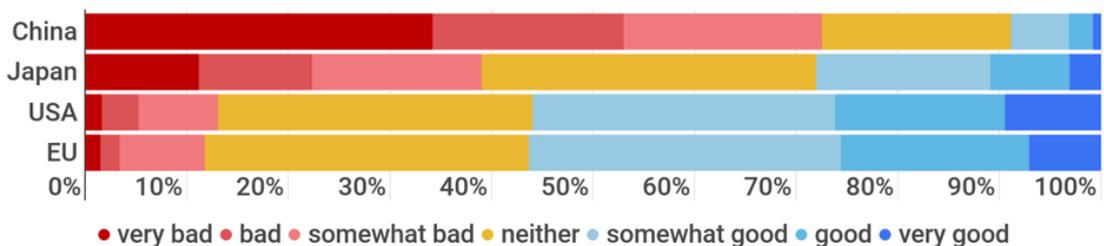
The **US is perceived as a culturally attractive country by 67% of respondents**, and 63% also describe the EU similarly. A comparatively similar proportion (61%) of South Koreans think that their own culture is attractive (*Figure 5*). On the other hand, **Japan and China are perceived as significantly less attractive**, with 47% and 69% of respondents, respectively, believing they are unattractive.

Figure 5: How culturally attractive or unattractive do you consider the cultures of the following countries/entities?



Negative perceptions of China and, to a lesser extent, Japan among South Koreans are also illustrated by the respondents' opinions toward the quality of life in these countries (*Figure 6*). **More than 72% of South Korean respondents think their life would be bad if they lived in China**, while 39% believe that Japan's quality of life is bad. In contrast, **over half of respondents believe that living in the US or the EU means a good life**.

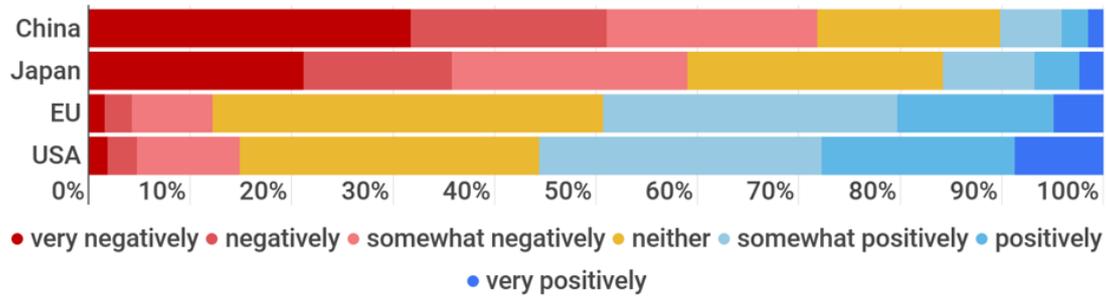
Figure 6: How good or bad would life be for a person like you if you were to live in these places?



Regarding foreign policy, China and Japan are again perceived largely negatively by South Koreans. **Nearly 72% of respondents view Chinese foreign policy negatively**; the same is true for 59% of respondents' opinions on Japanese foreign policy (*Figure 7*). On the other hand, **more than half of the respondents**

assessed US foreign policy positively, while only 15% view it negatively. Similarly, 49% of respondents think positively about the EU's foreign policy.

Figure 7: How positively or negatively do you assess the foreign policy of the following countries/entities?



3 Impressions of China

As seen in the previous sections, China is seen in a very negative light in South Korea. Indeed, most first associations among South Korean respondents do not reflect warm feelings toward China (Figure 8). **“COVID-19” and “communism” were the most frequently mentioned associations**, followed by “dirty,” “large population,” and “counterfeits.” Many respondents also mentioned the “Communist party,” “history distortion,” “pollution,” and “dictatorship.” Adjectives such as “bad,” “selfish,” “large,” “troublesome,” “noisy,” “uncivilized,” and “nationalistic” were commonly mentioned as well. Some first associations referred to the **authoritarian nature of the Chinese regime**, pointing to a lack of freedom and human rights violations, as well as censorship and a low level of trust in the authorities.

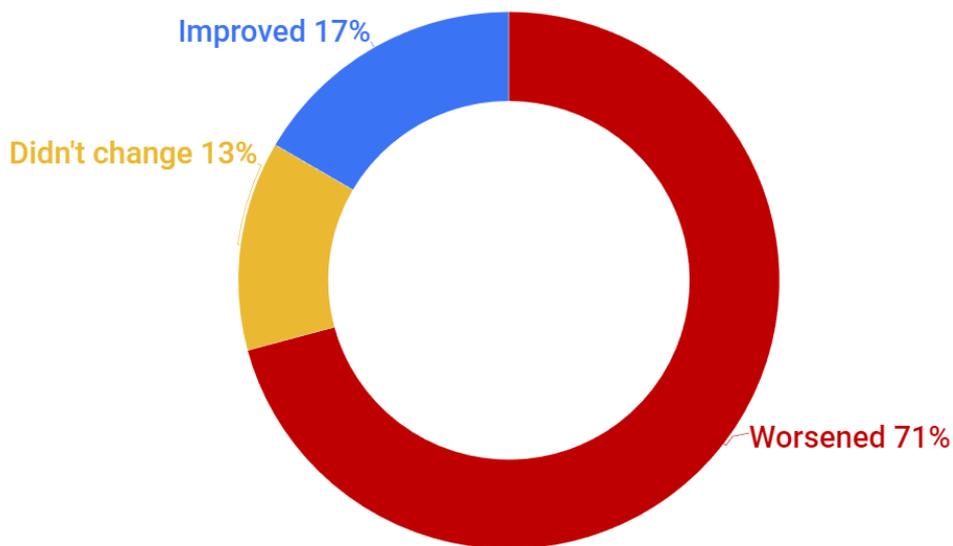
Figure 8: What first comes to mind when you think of China?⁶



As Figure 9 shows, **China’s perception among a vast majority of South Koreans worsened** over the last three years. Previous polls showed that Beijing’s response to the THAAD deployment announcement in 2017 dramatically hardened South Korean perceptions of its neighbor. As a result, the percentage of respondents in South Korea who held negative attitudes toward China nearly doubled compared to 2015 polls.⁷ Since then, the proportion of South Koreans

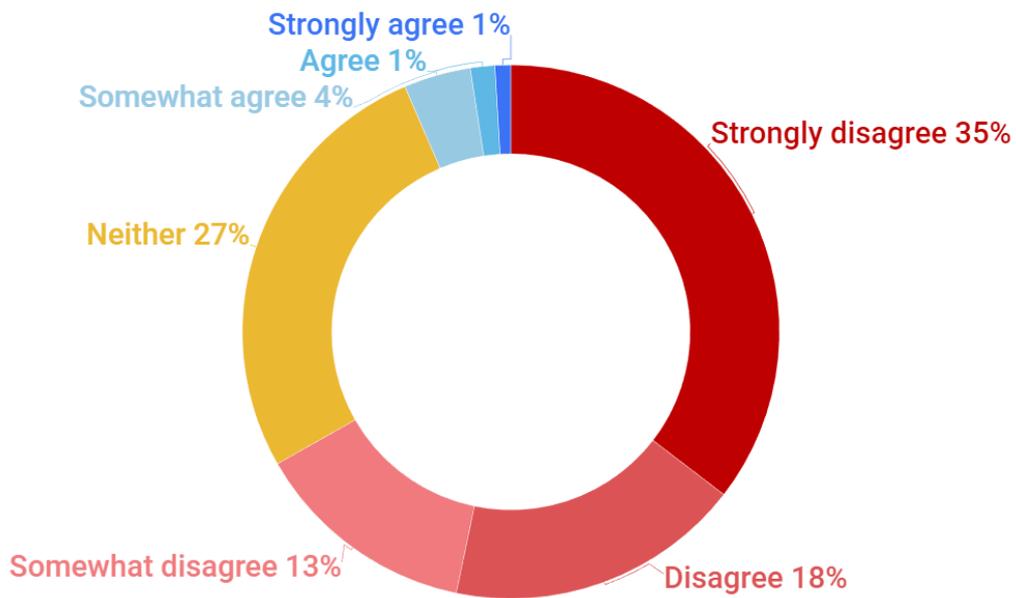
with negative sentiments toward China has been steadily increasing, reaching 75% in 2020, and 80% in 2022, seen also in Figure 1.⁸ As for the reasons behind the significant deterioration of China's image among South Koreans, many respondents indicated **COVID-19** as the main factor for their changing view of China. For others, the **communist regime's nature**, Chinese foreign policy, propaganda, oppression of minorities in China, and historical and cultural disputes between China and South Korea played a role. Respondents also pointed out Chinese nationalism, selfishness, and unreliability.

Figure 9: Has your general view of China got better or worse during the last three years?⁹



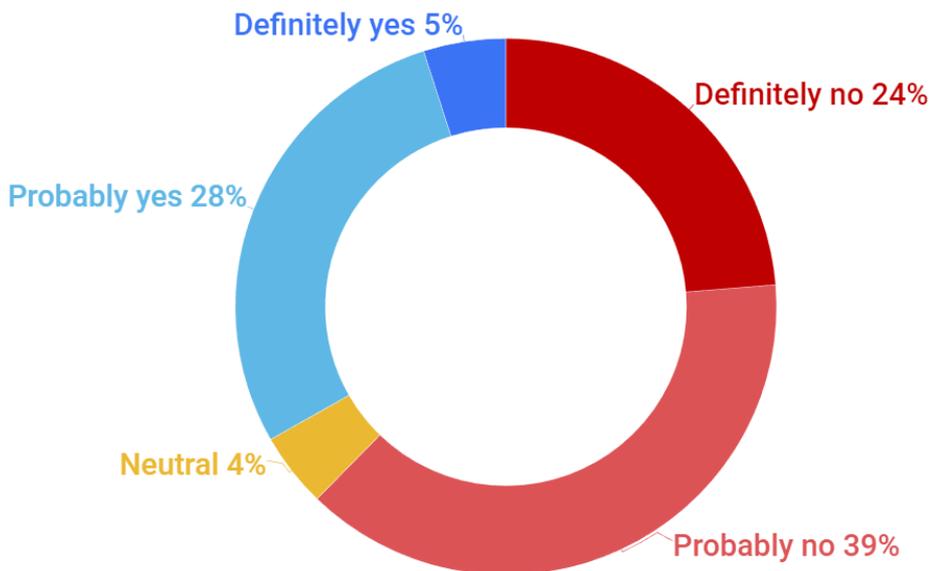
South Koreans oppose the oppression of minorities in China, as is visible from the respondents' stance on the situation in Xinjiang: **66% of respondents disagree with the way the Uyghur population is treated in China** (Figure 10), while only 6% approve of it.

Figure 10: Do you agree or disagree with the way the Chinese government handles affairs in Xinjiang?



Only about **one-third of South Koreans believe that China would become democratic in the future** (Figure 11), while 63% do not share this opinion, thinking that China will remain autocratic.

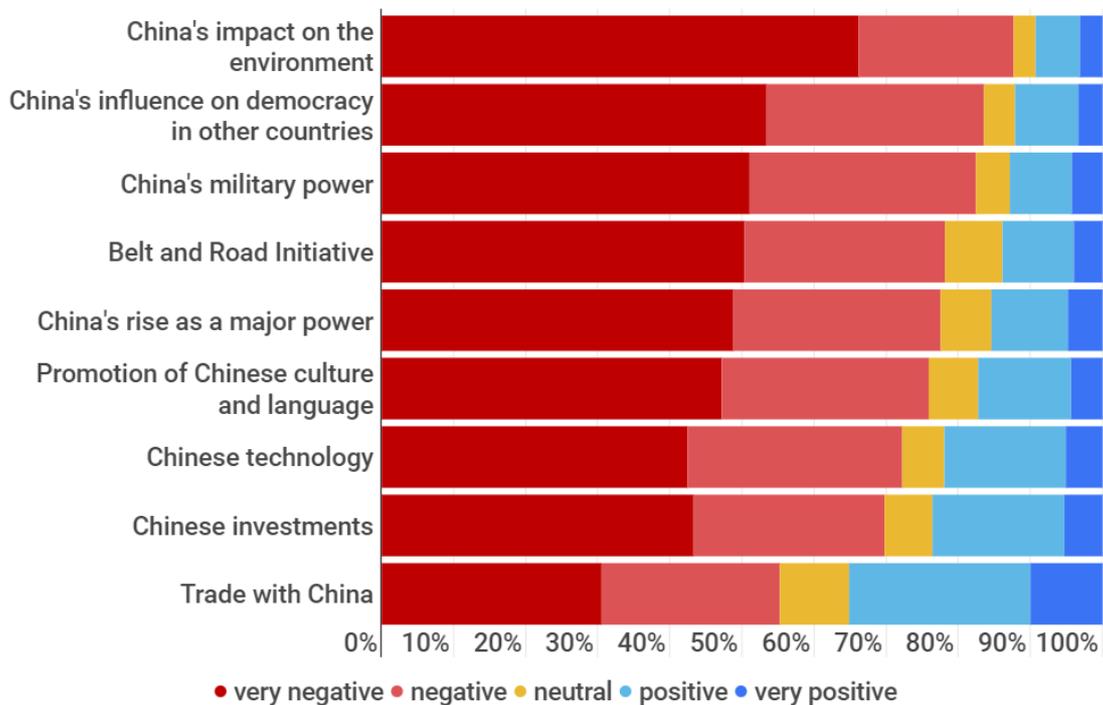
Figure 11: Do you believe that China will become democratic one day?



South Koreans hold negative views of China in regard to most of the specific issues indicated in Figure 12. Trading with China is the least negatively perceived

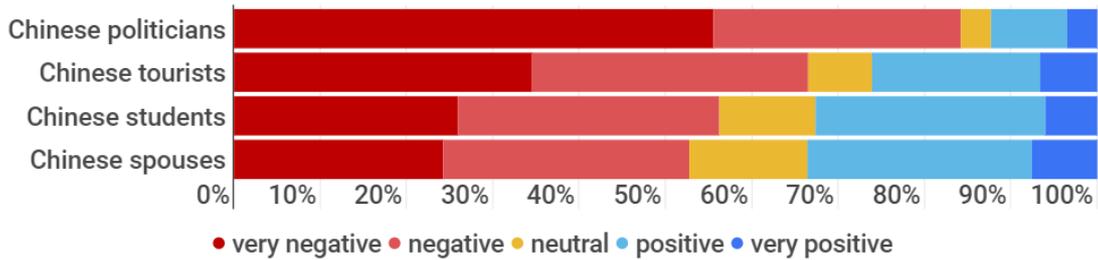
issue – still, a majority (55%) of respondents think it is problematic. **Chinese investment and technology are perceived negatively by 70% and 72% of respondents**, respectively. Nonetheless, the most negatively perceived China-related issues among South Koreans include its **environmental impact**, which concerns 88% of respondents; **China’s influence on democracy in other countries** worries 84% of South Koreans, and **its military power** is negatively perceived by a similar proportion (82%).

Figure 12: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following issues?



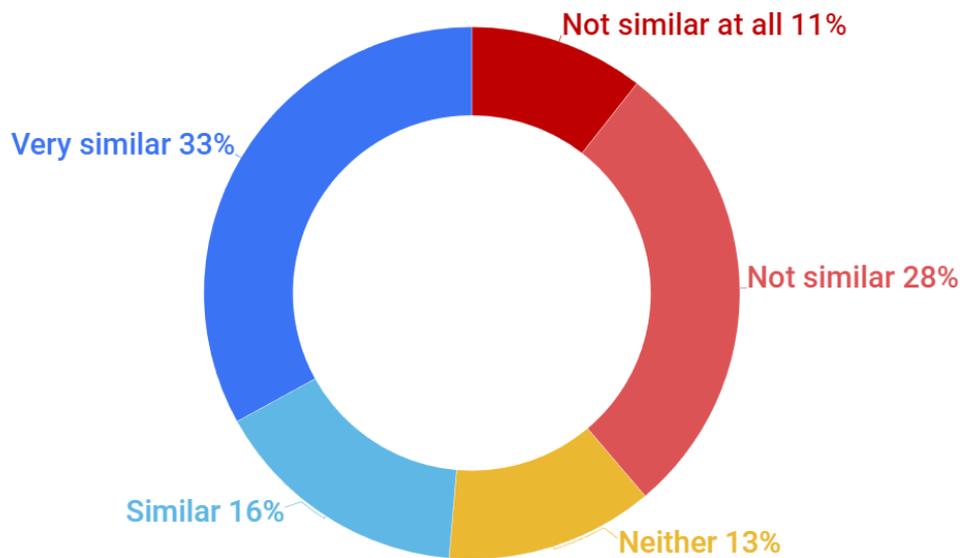
These negative views on China and its government spill over into negative perceptions of the Chinese people (*Figure 2*): **Chinese politicians are the most negatively perceived group**, with 84% of South Koreans indicating negative feelings toward them. However, **more than half of respondents also hold negative feelings toward Chinese living in South Korea with their Korean partners and towards Chinese students and tourists in South Korea**, although to a somewhat lesser extent (*Figure 13*).

Figure 13: How positively or negatively do you feel about the following groups of people?



Despite the vast differences in the form of government and the decisively negative attitudes towards basically all aspects of China, including Chinese culture and Chinese people, almost **half of respondents (49%) think both countries are similar in terms of cultural values** (Figure 14), while 39% believe that South Korea and China differ in that regard.

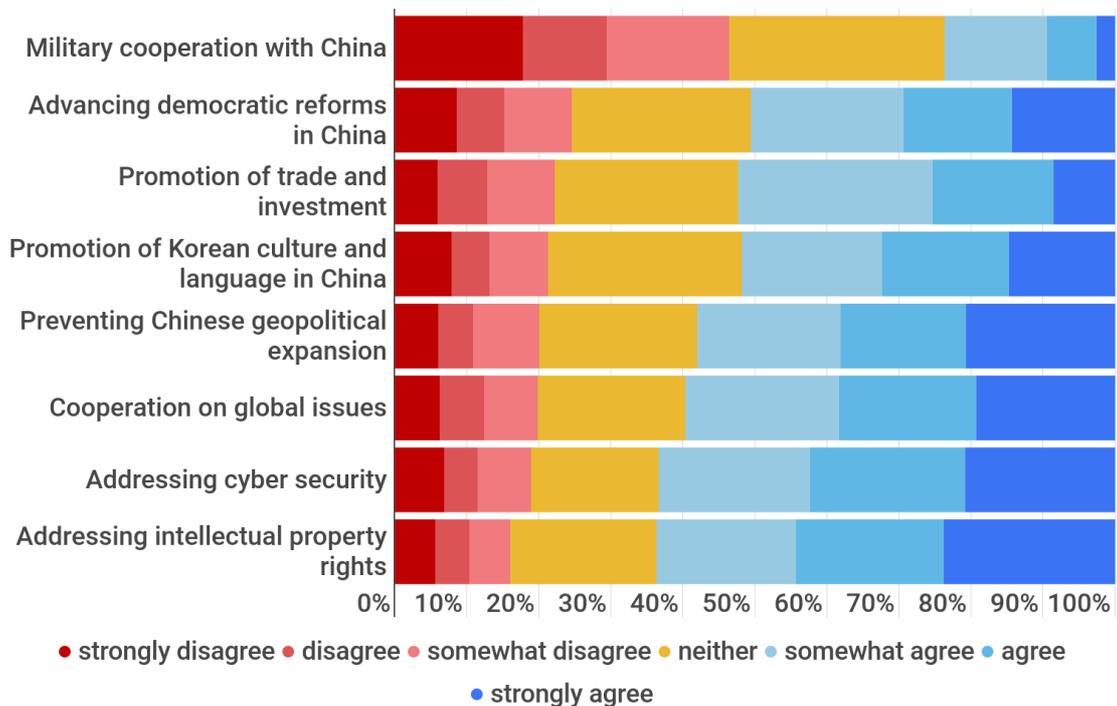
Figure 14: How similar are the Republic of Korea and China in regard to cultural values?



4 Foreign policy preferences

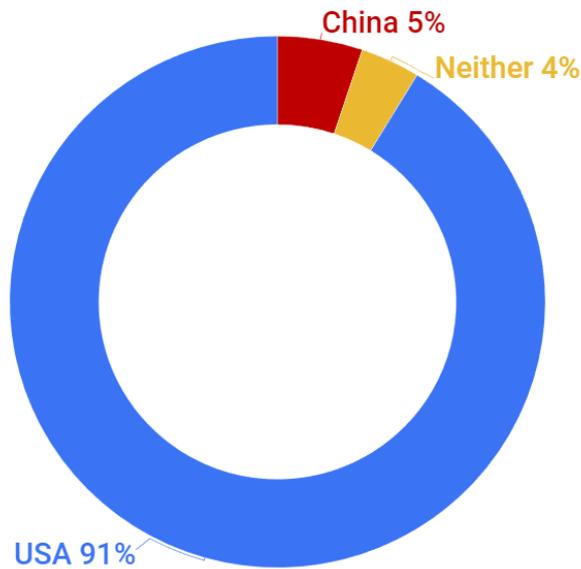
As seen in Figure 15, according to the public, the South Korean government's foreign policy priorities concerning China should address **concerns related to intellectual property rights (64%) and cybersecurity (63%)**. Some 60% of the respondents would also like to see policy focus on cooperation with China on **global issues, such as protecting the environment**. More than half of the respondents think South Korea should focus on preventing Chinese geopolitical expansion. By far, the least preferred policy area from the public perspective is military cooperation with China, supported by only about 24% of the respondents and opposed by 46%.

Figure 15: According to your opinion, what should be South Korea's priorities in its relations with China?



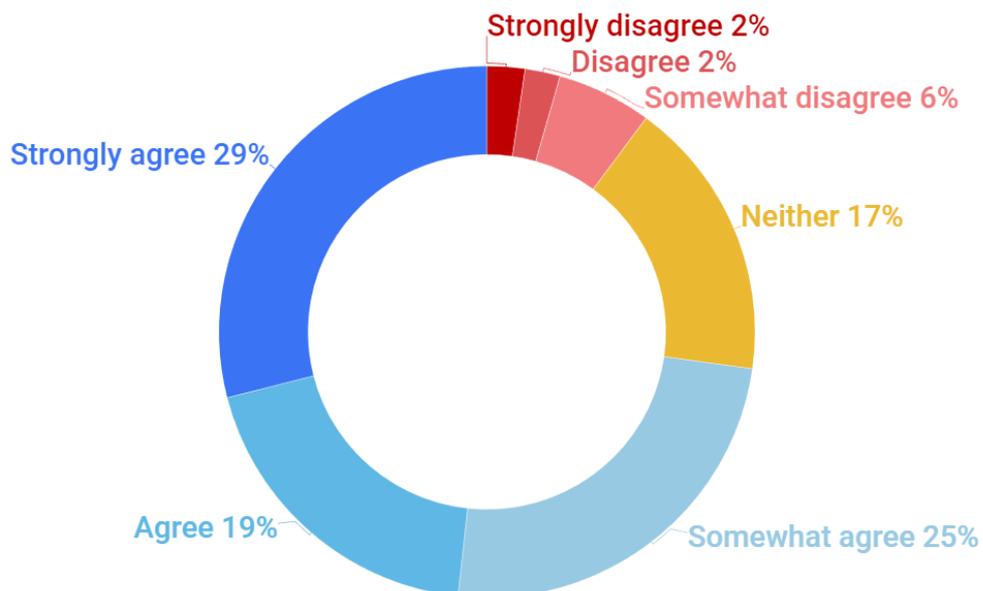
Indeed, it is not surprising that the overwhelming majority of South Koreans prefer alignment with the US over China (*Figure 16*): **91% of respondents would choose the US rather than China, while only 5% would choose China**.

Figure 16: If you had to decide between the USA and China, which would you choose to align with?



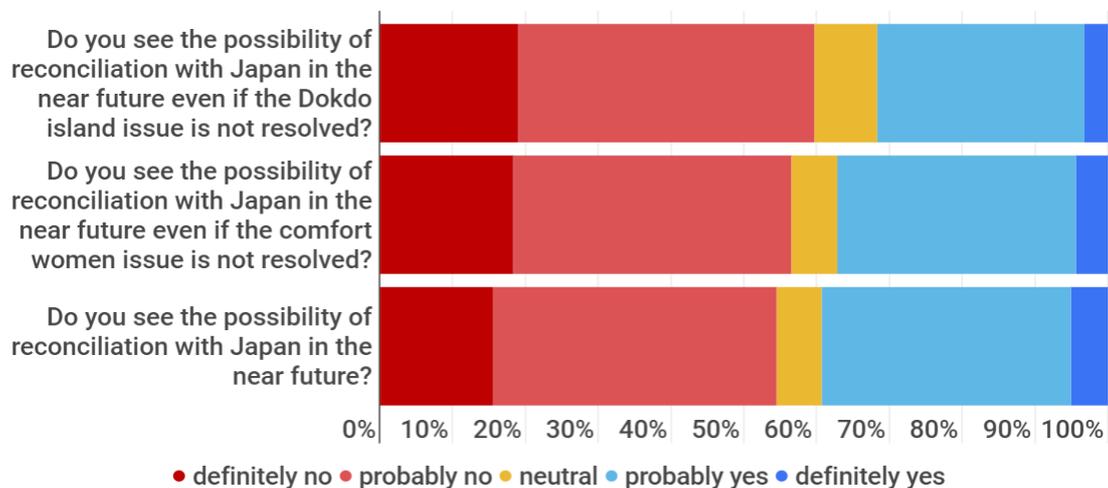
Positive attitudes regarding the US are also manifested in respondents' opinions toward military cooperation between the two countries (*Figure 17*). An absolute majority (**73%**) of **South Koreans see the alliance with the US as beneficial and support its continuation**. About 10% do not think it benefits their country.

Figure 17: Do you agree or disagree that South Korea's military alliance with the USA is beneficial and should be continued?



Previous figures have demonstrated that **Japan is not particularly well received among South Koreans** (Figure 1). The Japanese occupation of Korea between 1910 and 1945 is primarily to blame for the largely negative attitudes toward Japan in modern South Korean society, which is difficult to change. Figure 18 shows the result of a mini-experiment in which respondents were divided into three groups, each getting slightly different wording about the possibility of reconciliation with Japan. About **57% of respondents on average do not see the possibility of reaching reconciliation with Japan in the foreseeable future**. However, the share of respondents believing in reconciliation drops slightly when the issue of “**comfort women**” is mentioned. This trend amplifies when referencing the territorial dispute over the **Dokdo/Takeshima island**, which seems to be one of the most significant issues for South Koreans. Still, more than a third of respondents believe in a possible reconciliation with the direct effects of the most “sensitive” issues being relatively minor, suggesting **some hope for positive prospects in bilateral relations with Japan**.

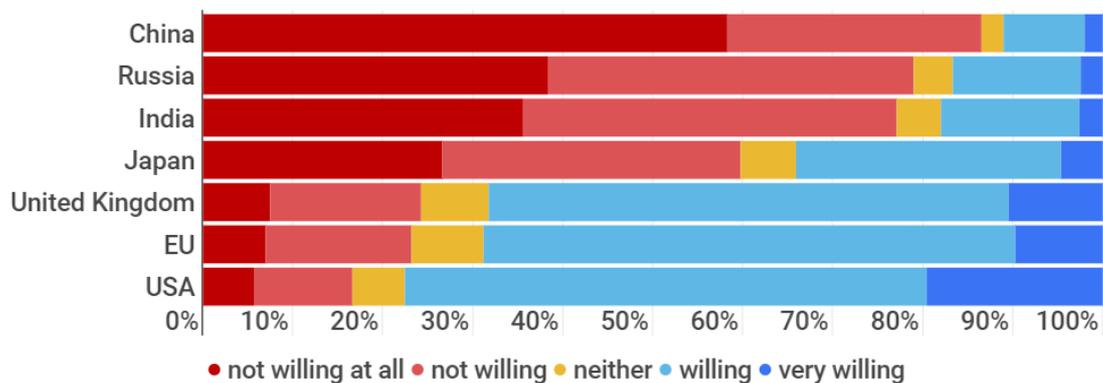
Figure 18: What do you think about the following statements?¹⁰



5 COVID-19 pandemic

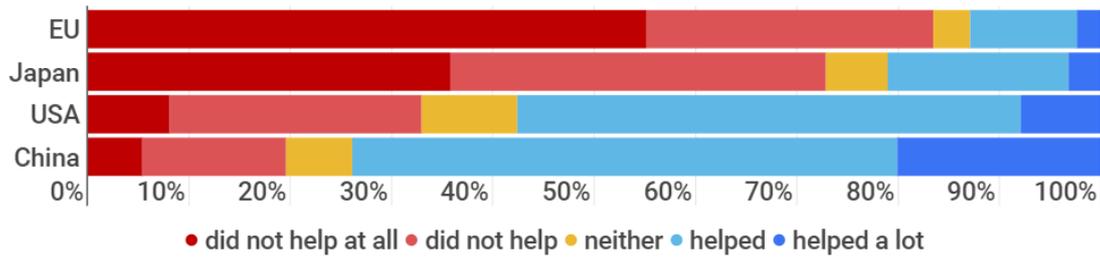
Significantly higher levels of distrust toward China and Russia among South Koreans are again revealed in Figure 19, showing that **slightly more than 10% of respondents would be willing to get COVID-19 vaccines produced by China**, while about 87% would not. Almost 80% would also not choose to be immunized with Russian vaccines. The majority of South Koreans show distrust toward vaccines from India and Japan, too. On the other hand, about **70% of respondents would be willing to receive one of the vaccines produced in the EU and the UK**. And an even higher proportion (78%) would choose an American vaccine.

Figure 19: How willing would you be to get a COVID-19 vaccine produced by the following countries/entities?¹¹



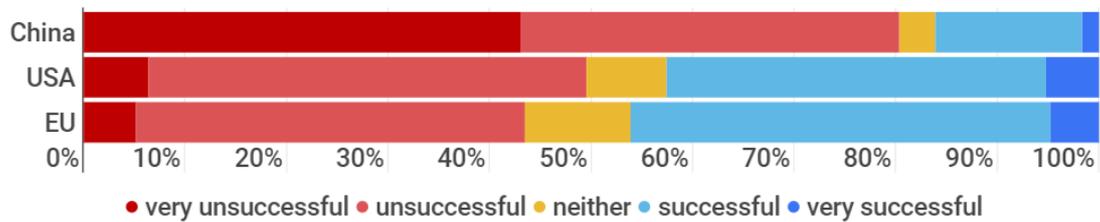
Even with the predominantly negative views on China and distrust in its immunization preparation, **73% of South Koreans believe that China provided assistance to South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic** (Figure 20). About 57% of respondents also perceive the US as helpful, while **only 21% and 13% think Japan and the EU aided their country when facing the worst COVID-19 outbreak**. However, it is noteworthy that this perceived assistance did not improve overall attitudes towards China.

Figure 20: How much did the following countries/entities help South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic?



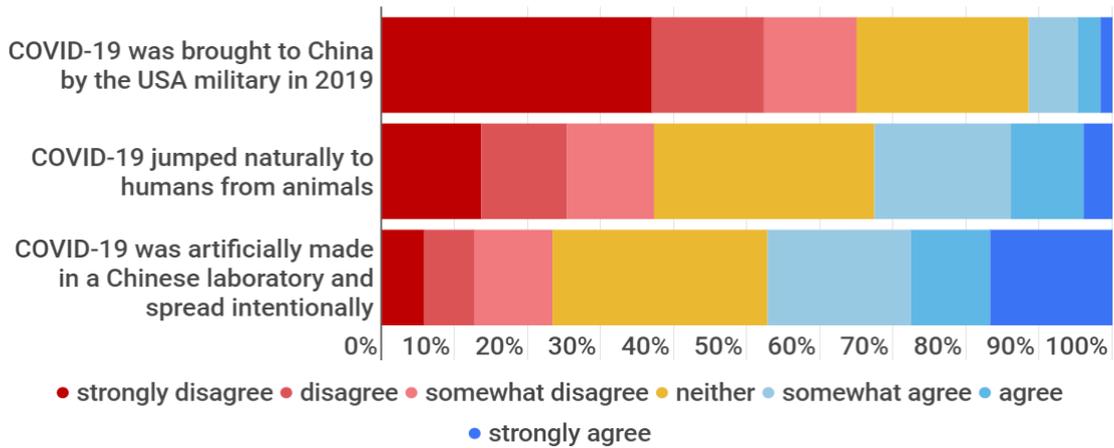
The EU’s COVID-19 measures are seen as successful by the largest proportion (46%) of South Koreans, while 43% think that the US did well in handling the disease (*Figure 21*). **Only 17% of respondents think China has been successful in the containment of the pandemic.**

Figure 21: How successfully did the following countries/entities handle the COVID-19 pandemic?



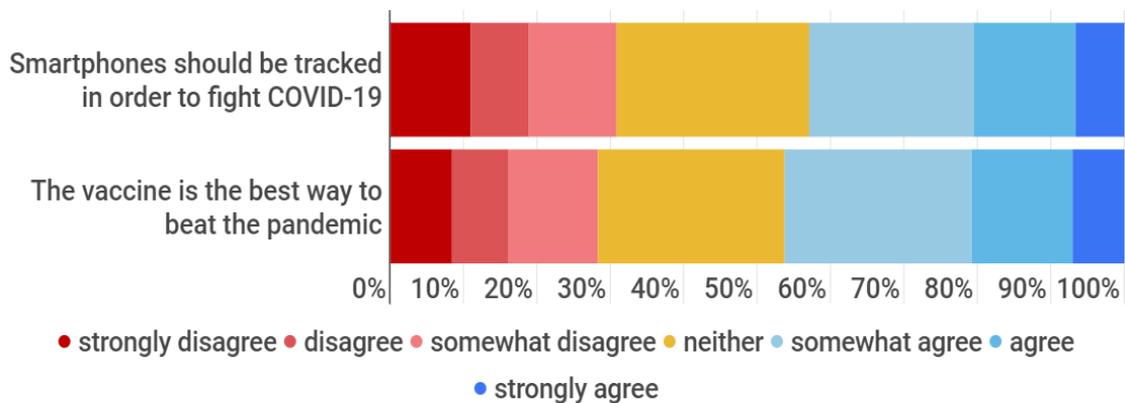
A significant share of the respondents are willing to consider certain conspiracy theories about the origin of COVID-19: **47% believe it was artificially made in a Chinese laboratory and spread intentionally, while** a vast majority of respondents reject the idea that the disease was brought to China by the American military (*Figure 22*).

Figure 22: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



On the other hand, a high proportion of respondents (46%) show **trust in vaccines as a prevention tool**, and 43% also think that technology such as smartphones should be used to tackle the spread of COVID-19 in the population (*Figure 23*).

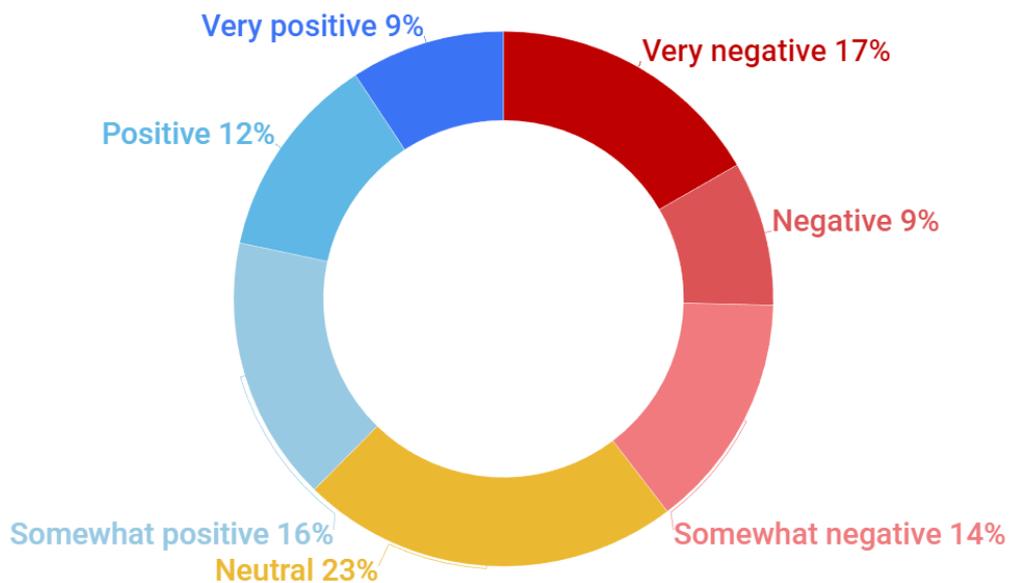
Figure 23: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



6 Perception of Korean affairs and identity

South Koreans appear divided on their perception of former President Moon Jae-in's performance. **While 40% assess his presidency negatively, 37% maintain positive views of Moon's performance** (Figure 24). Some 23% of respondents view his legacy as neither positive nor negative.

Figure 24: How positive or negative do you perceive Moon Jae-in's overall performance?



When it comes to opinions on North Korea, the **vast majority of South Koreans (71%) believe it poses a threat to their country**, while about 22% of respondents do not think of North Korea as a threat (Figure 25). Besides, North Korea is often perceived as a close ally of China and more than half of respondents believe it is influenced by China to a significant extent (Figure 26). Only about 4% of South Koreans think that China has little to no influence over North Korea.

Figure 25: What do you think about the following statement?

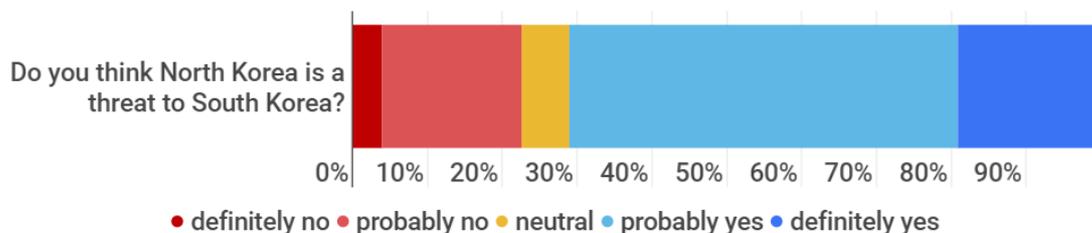
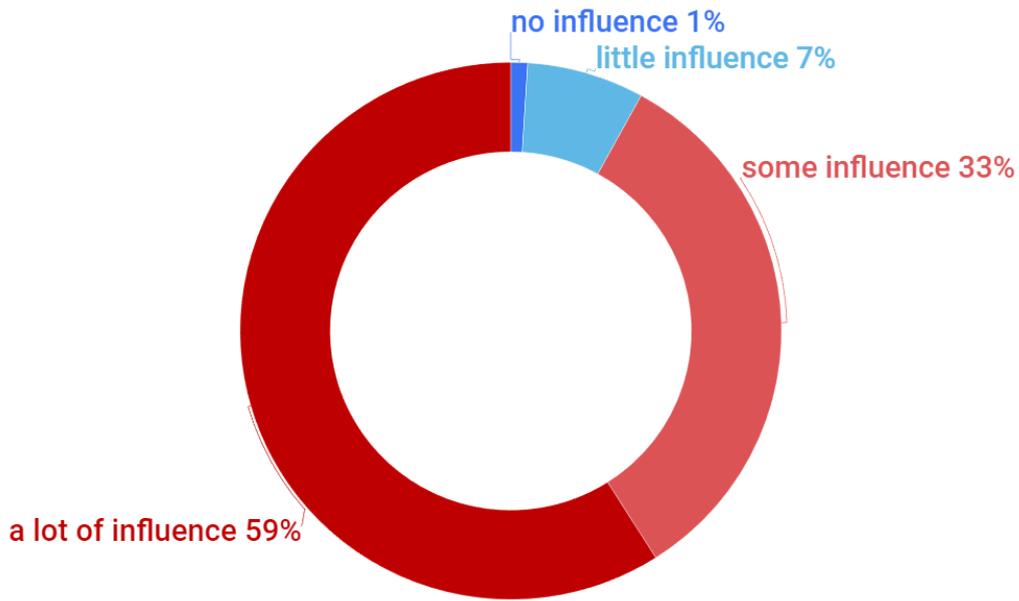
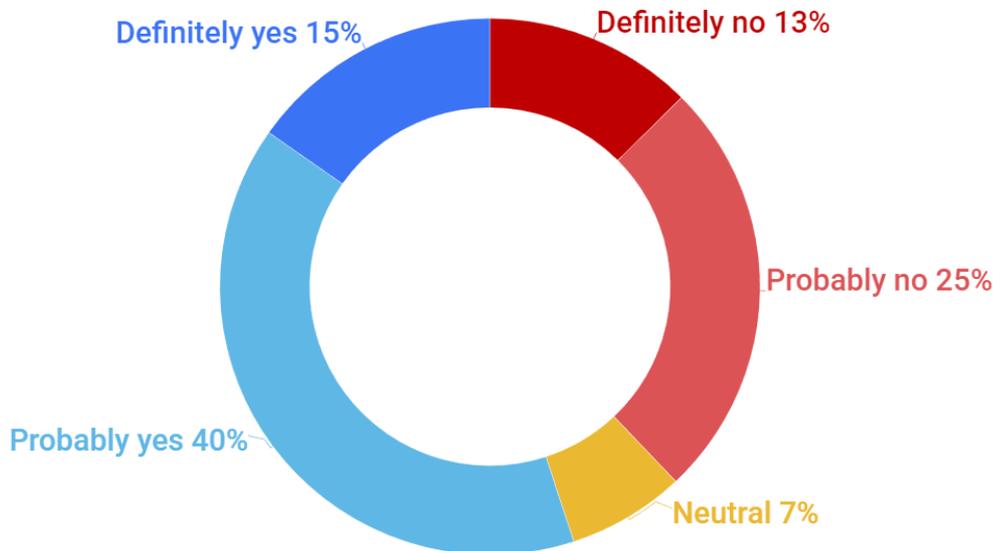


Figure 26: How much influence does China have on North Korea?



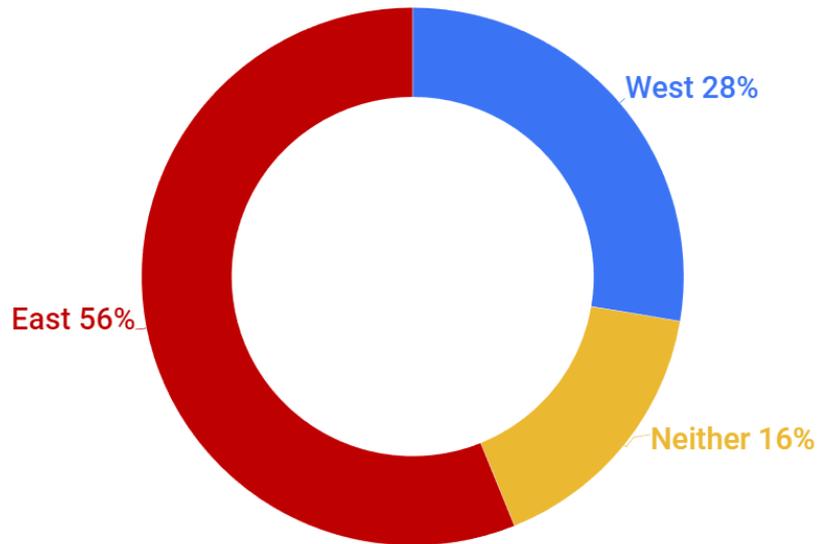
Nonetheless, **almost half (45%) of respondents would support unification with North Korea**, whereas 38% oppose the idea (*Figure 27*). Only 7% were unsure about the issue of the unification.

Figure 27: Are you in favor of a unification with North Korea?



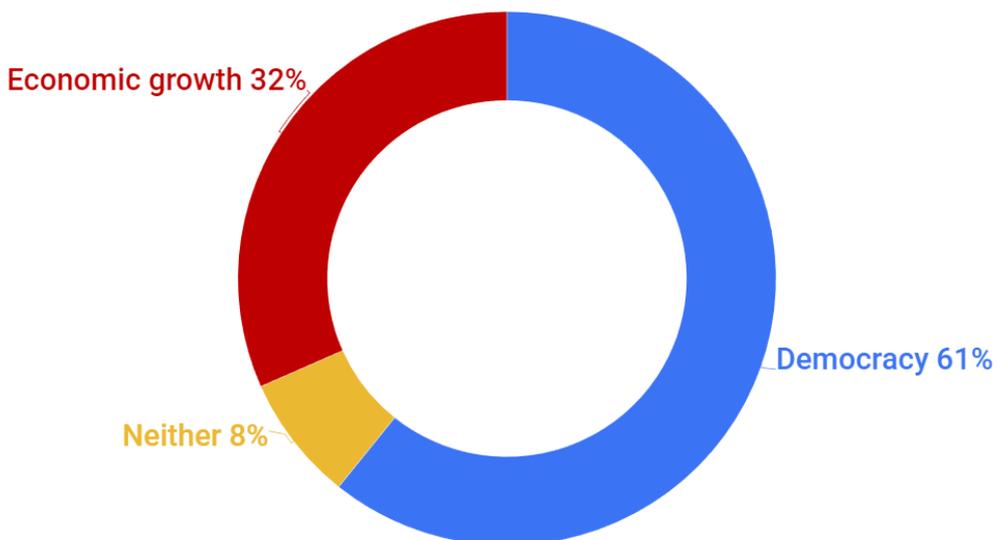
The majority of respondents (56%) consider themselves to be part of the East and 28% feel as though they belong to the West (*Figure 28*).

Figure 28: Do you consider yourself to be part of the "West" or the "East"?



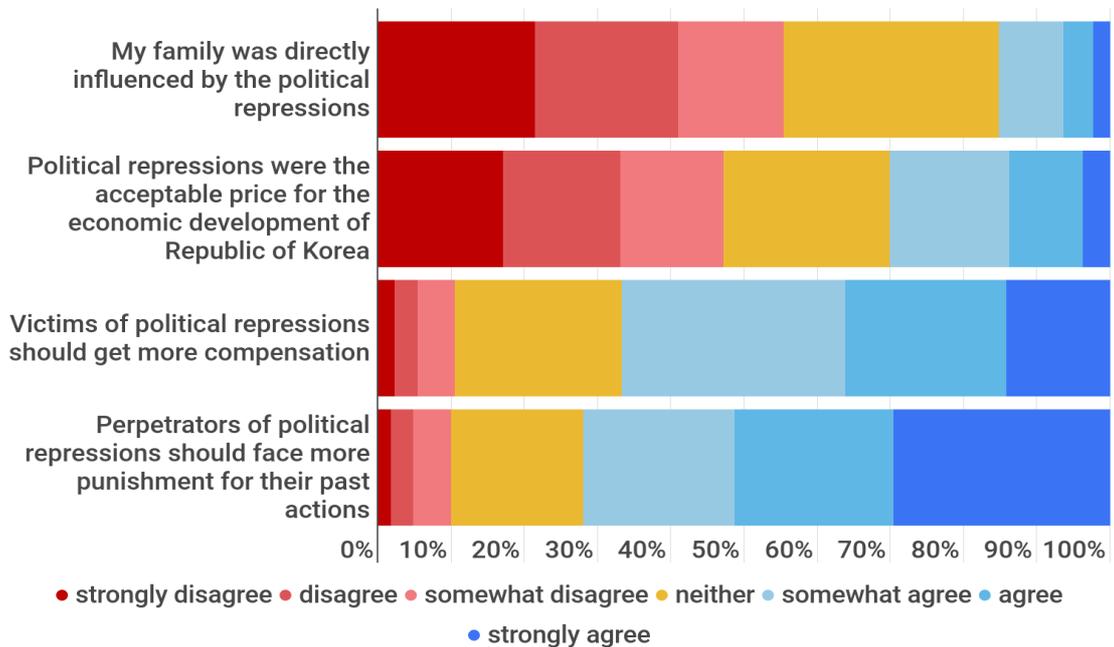
Support for democracy is rather high among South Koreans as the **vast majority of the respondents (61%) prefer democracy over economic growth**, which only 32% of respondents would prefer if they were to choose between the two (*Figure 29*). There is also a relatively small percentage of respondents who indicated uncertainty (8%).

Figure 29: If you had to choose between rapid economic growth and full democracy, what would you prefer?



South Koreans show **strong support for severe punishment of perpetrators of political repressions** in the country before 1988 and also for granting a larger compensation to the victims (*Figure 30*). Almost half of the respondents do not think that political repressions were acceptable, despite the rapid development of the South Korean economy during the latter half of the 20th century. Only a small percentage of respondents indicated that their families were directly influenced by political repressions, but **nearly 20% strongly disagreed that repression was an acceptable price for economic development**.

Figure 30: If you had to choose between rapid economic growth and full democracy, what would you prefer?



Endnotes

- ¹ The data collection was coordinated by STEM/MARK agency and relying on panels of Cint. The questionnaire included more than 300 data points, including a few open questions, and it took respondents on average about 18–20 minutes to complete. The questions asked about various aspects of attitudes towards foreign countries, consumer and cultural preferences, views about social issues, and basic demographics.
- ² Sinophone Borderlands – Interactions at the Edges main page: www.sinofon.cz.
- ³ Pew Research Center, "Large majorities continue to hold unfavorable view of China," *Large Pew Research Center majorities continue to hold unfavorable view of China*, June 27, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/29/negative-views-of-china-tied-to-critical-views-of-its-policies-on-human-rights/pg_2022-06-29_views-of-china_00-02/.
- ⁴ Feelings towards all selected countries have been measured on a 0 (negative) to 100 (positive) scale. The responses were grouped as "negative" (incl. very negative: 0-20 and negative: 21-45), "neutral" (46-54) and "positive" (incl. positive: 55-79 and very positive: 80-100).
- ⁵ Supra note 4.
- ⁶ The answers provided by 10 or more respondents are visualized.
- ⁷ Hankyoreh, "8 in 10 S. Koreans hold negative views of China, poll shows," *Hankyoreh*, July 1, 2022. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/1049338.html.
- ⁸ Pew Research Center, "Large majorities continue to hold unfavorable view of China," *Large Pew Research Center majorities continue to hold unfavorable view of China*, June 27, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2022/06/29/negative-views-of-china-tied-to-critical-views-of-its-policies-on-human-rights/pg_2022-06-29_views-of-china_00-02/.
- ⁹ Respondents were offered 7 options: much worse; worse; slightly worse; neither worse nor better; slightly better; better; much better. "Worsened" includes options much worse; worse; slightly worse (options 1–3 on a scale between 1 and 7). "Did not change" includes option neither worse nor better (option 4). "Improved" includes options slightly better; better; much better (options 5–7).
- ¹⁰ The respondents were split randomly into three groups that were asked only about one of the three questions.
- ¹¹ Respondents were offered 7 options. "Not willing at all" includes option 1 on a scale between 1 and 7. "Not willing" includes options 2 and 3. "Neither" includes option 4. "Willing" includes options 5 and 6. "Very willing" includes option 7.

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About CEIAS

The Central European Institute of Asian Studies (CEIAS) is an independent think tank based in Bratislava (Slovakia), and with branches in Olomouc (Czech Republic), and Vienna (Austria).

The main goal of CEIAS is to spread knowledge about Asia among scholars and experts in Central Europe and beyond, while also informing the public about Central European activities in Asia.

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About Sinophone Borderlands

The Sinophone Borderlands – Interaction at the Edges is an excellent research project based at the Palacký University Olomouc, Czech Republic. The project is funded by the European Regional Development Fund, project no. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000791.

The main idea of the project is to explore how the Chinese-speaking world interacts with other worlds, including those at its border (Slavophone, Tibetophone, Turco-Persophone, or Austroasiatophone worlds), as well as those who may be more distant (such as Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone, and others).

The Sinophone Borderlands research team consists of researchers from various disciplines under three main Research Groups - Political Science, Anthropology, and Linguistics. This allows for a cross-disciplinary dialogue and cross-cultural comparisons which pushes the academic studies of China and Asia beyond the limits of current disciplinary and national frameworks.

The Sinophone Borderlands is a research project that engages primarily in activities such as publishing academic journal articles, books, or participating in conferences and workshops.

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South Korean public opinion on the world in times of global turmoil

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