

Public Perception and Security Cooperation: Is an ROK-PRC Alliance Possible?

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1. Introduction

Widening and deepening cooperation between the two countries is desirable however, frustration (and even disappointment) are likely to follow if the two countries have different expectations about the pace and scope of bilateral cooperation. This paper examines the idea of an ROK-PRC alliance (as proposed by Prof. Yan Xuetong, a leading Chinese international relations expert) against the reality of South Korean public perception, as a way to gauge the divergence between the two countries about future bilateral cooperation.

Prof. Yan Xuetong, a political realist, is the author of *Inertia of History: China and World in Future Ten Years* and an article recently published in *Sungkyun China Brief*, “Is an ROK-PRC Alliance Possible?”. His writings on the prediction of a formation of an ROK-PRC alliance have received significant attention in South Korea and China. His prediction of an alliance within 10 years have taken many by surprise due to their imminent nature.

Prof. Yan Xuetong details three factors that will contribute to the emergence of an ROK-PRC alliance: Two common threats? Japan’s military normalization and North Korea’s nuclearization? and one common challenge? the need to maintain regional peace. Prof. Yan argues that security cooperation between South Korea and China is needed to respond to the threats posed by Japan and North Korea along with the challenge of maintaining peace in the region. There are two potentially two negative factors that may influence the rise of a ROK-PRC alliance, Prof. Yan argues. They are ROK-US alliance

and DPRK-PRC alliance. However, his view is that a ROK-US alliance does not necessarily exclude the possibility of an ROK-PRC alliance as well as that a DPRK-PRC alliance cannot pose any obstacle to an ROK-PRC alliance since the DPRK-PRC alliance has practically ceased to exist. Prof. Yan is aware that many consider his prediction as an unlikely fairy tale.

From a realist perspective of international relations, security interests are the most important factor to explain state behavior. For a realist like Prof. Yan, the idea that the existence of common security interests (realized through alliances) will motivate the two countries to cooperate in a logical conclusion. Is this conclusion by Prof. Yan realistic as much as it is logical? Or is it as unrealistic as it is fantasy?

Security cooperation does not occur automatically when there are common threats or challenges. Rather security cooperation is possible when states perceive each other as cooperation partners who perceive threats and challenges similarly. In addition, public perception matters a lot in democratic countries like South Korea. Security cooperation requires that the public view a foreign country as cooperation partner that faces a similar threat and challenges. Public perception is important in regards to future security cooperation with China.

Perceptions matter in cooperation as well as interests therefore, we can partially “test” Prof. Yan’s prediction of an ROK-PRC alliance by studying public perception in South Korea. However, it is not possible to fully test his prediction for the future of ROK-PRC security cooperation by studying public perceptions today. Public change slowly therefore, public perceptions today are most likely to be quite similar to public perceptions ten years from now. A careful examination of changes in public perception over the last few years will provide some insight into the current and future direction of public perception.

An ROK-PRC alliance is more likely when Koreans feel close to China however, an alliance, in essence entails cooperation against a common enemy. An alliance should only be possible as long as there exists a common enemy. The existence of amity between allies is desirable but not always necessary.

2. South Koreans’ Perception of China

1) Findings from Global Attitude Survey by Pew Research Center

In the spring of 2014, Pew Research Center Global Attitude Survey asked respondents in a number of countries about their views of China. Their responses varied widely among Asian countries. In

Pakistan, 78% of respondents answered that they had a favorable view of China, while 3% said they had an unfavorable view of China. In Japan, in a sharp contrast, 91% of respondents said that they had an unfavorable view of China, while only 7% had a favorable view of China.

Views of China in Asian Countries

	Unfavorable (%)	Favorable (%)
Pakistan	3	78
Bangladesh	22	77
Malaysia	17	74
Thailand	17	72
Indonesia	25	66
ROK	42	56
Philippines	58	38
India	39	31
Vietnam	78	16
Japan	91	7

Source: Pew Research Center, "Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America's Image" (July 2014)

Among South Korean respondents, 42% held an unfavorable view of China, while 56% had a favorable view of China. Comparatively, 82% of South Koreans had a favorable view of the United States, while 22% had a favorable view of Japan. The more than a half of respondents holding a favorable view of China indicates no problems in South Koreans' perception of China. However, it is troubling that 42% of South Korean respondents have an unfavorable view of China, even though South Korea is not in a territorial dispute with China (unlike Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and India, where China is understandably unpopular). Nor does South Korea have any potential obligation to oppose China through a treaty of alliance as the United States does. There is no acute conflict of national interest between South Korea and China mutual interests are expanding as bilateral cooperation in trade and investment increases. Nevertheless, the percentage of South Koreans with a favorable view of China is relatively low, while the percentage of South Koreans holding an unfavorable view of China is significant. This counter-intuitive result requires an explanation. What is important is that the current state of South Koreans' perception of China makes it difficult for an ROK-PRC alliance to form within 10 years. There must be a gap between objective interest and public perception.

2) Findings from Unification Attitude Survey by Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS)

Since 2007, the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) at Seoul National University conducts an annual Unification Attitude Survey to learn more about South Korean attitudes towards unification issues.

a. Favorability

Country One Feels Most Close To (%)

	US	Japan	North Korea	China	Russia
2007	53	11.5	23.8	10.1	0.9
2008	59.9	9.6	20.3	7.7	1.6
2009	68.2	8.7	15.9	6.1	1
2010	70.6	9.6	14.8	4.2	0.7
2011	68.8	9.1	16.0	5.3	0.8
2012	65.8	6.8	20.6	5.8	1
2013	76.2	5.1	11.0	7.3	0.4
2014	74.1	4.5	9.6	10.3	1.5

For the past 8 years, the percentage of South Koreans who answered that they felt most close to China has been small their percentage decreased even before the Cheonan and Yonpyeong Island incidents by North Korea only to return to the 2007 level in 2014. Therefore, based on favorability, an ROK-PRC alliance seem unlikely in 10 years.

Security cooperation does not necessarily require amity. At minimum, two countries can form alliance only if they do not feel threatened by each other. Also of interest is that the Unification Attitude Survey asked respondents to name the country that they believe poses the biggest threat to peace on the Korean peninsula.

b. Threat Perception

Country Posing the Biggest Threat to Peace on the Korean Peninsula (%)

	US	Japan	North Korea	China	Russia
2007	21.1	25.8	36	15.5	1.3
2008	16.2	34.1	33.6	15	1
2009	12.4	17.6	52.7	15.8	1.1
2010	8.2	10.3	55.5	24.5	1.2
2011	8.6	11.6	46.0	33.6	0.3
2012	9.5	12.3	47.3	30.5	0.4
2013	4.4	16.0	56.9	21.3	1.3
2014	5.5	25.1	49.3	17.7	2.3

Most respondents answered that North Korea was the biggest threat. The percentage of the respondents who answered North Korea was below 40% in 2007 and 2008. In 2009, before the Cheonan torpedo attack by North Korea, the percentage was higher than 50%. These are not unexpected, and supportive of Prof. Yan's prediction. He has based his prediction for a ROK-PRC alliance on the need to respond to North Korea, and South Koreans do believe that North Korea as the biggest threat to peace on the Korean peninsula.

What is notable is the percentage of South Koreans who chose China as the biggest threat, over 30% in 2011 and 2012. In 2014, the percentage was 17.7%, back to the pre-Cheonan sinking level. For South Koreans, China was perceived as a threat only second to North Korea in some years. Such perception does not bode well for the predicted ROK-PRC alliance.

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c. Cooperation Partner

In addition to common interests, amity and shared threat perception contribute to security cooperation. Each party must perceive each other as a cooperation partner. Do South Koreans perceive China as a cooperation partner? The *Unification Attitude* surveyed the image of China.

	US	Japan	North Korea	China	Russia
2007	21.1	25.8	36	15.5	1.3
2008	16.2	34.1	33.6	15	1
2009	12.4	17.6	52.7	15.8	1.1
2010	8.2	10.3	55.5	24.5	1.2
2011	8.6	11.6	46.0	33.6	0.3
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Exact percentages vary from year to year however, the percentage of respondents who view China as a cooperation partner has increased from less than 20% to a mid-30% over an 8 year period. This is a positive development for the predicted ROK-PRC alliance however, nearly 50% of South Koreans perceive China as a competitor even though such perception is now less common at 30%.

The following table shows the South Korean perception of the image of the United States among

South Koreans. Every year, the majority of respondents perceive the US as a cooperation partner. It is not surprising that an alliance exists between South Korea and the United States. Consequently, China also needs to be seen as a cooperation partner by the majority of South Koreans over the next ten years for an ROK-PRC alliance to form.

The US' Images (%)				
	Cooperation Partner	Competitor	Object of Caution	Enemy
2007	53.1	21.9	21.9	2.9
2008	70.2	13	14.7	2.1
2009	73.6	13.7	11.7	0.9
2010	76.4	14.6	8.2	0.8
2011	75.0	14.2	9.7	1.1
2012	77.3	11.0	10.9	0.8
2013	79.9	11.8	7.8	0.6
2014	80.6	11.8	7.2	0.5

Does a low level of favorability, a weak image as a cooperation partner, a continuing strong image as a competitor and object of suspicion suggest that South Koreans are unwilling to work with China either consciously or subconsciously? Since 2008, the Unification Attitude Survey has asked respondents if South Korea needs Chinese cooperation for South and North Korea unification. The following table shows that a vast majority think that cooperation with China is necessary.

S. Korea Needs to Cooperate with China?(%)		
	Necessary	Unnecessary
2008	80.7	19.3
2009	83.2	16.8
2010	88.9	11.1
2011	84.7	15.3
2012	68	32
2013	84.5	15.5
2014	88.6	11.4

Successive *Unification Attitude* Surveys indicate that South Koreans do not have favorable views of China. Nevertheless, as high as 88.9% of South Koreans answered that cooperation with China is necessary for unification.

3. Implications

The survey results do not support Prof. Yan' s prediction of an ROK-PRC alliance in the near future. South Koreans do not have generally favorable views of China. South Koreans view North Korea as

a major threat however, they do not find Japan as a major threat. Many South Koreans see China as a threat, as a competitor and an object of suspicion. An ROK-PRC alliance will require significant effort on both sides to change current perceptions. However, South Koreans do recognize the need to work with China to achieve unification. The results suggest that an ROK-PRC alliance (in a traditional sense) is unlikely in the near future a more likely development is an “issue-based” alliance or security cooperation in specific areas. Whether such cooperation should be called an alliance is debatable.

Misunderstandings and frustrations are likely to occur if South Korea and China have different perceptions of each other and have different expectations about bilateral cooperation. To prevent misperceptions, China needs to recognize that public opinion in South Korea is not favorable enough for ROK-PRC security cooperation and adjust expectations accordingly. It is important for South Korea to understand the nature and extent of Chinese expectations and make efforts to accommodate them when necessary. Also important is consideration of other countries, such as the United States, who require due attention and communication efforts to prevent misunderstandings and frustration.

Starting in 2015, the Jeju Peace Institute plans to conduct an annual survey of public and expert opinions in order to better understand public and expert views from East Asian countries in regards to neighboring countries. We expect our survey to reduce misunderstandings and frustration as well as assist in regional cooperation.

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