



WHY SOUTH KOREANS SEE LITTLE DIFFERENCE IN BIDEN’S NORTH KOREA POLICY

BY TIMOTHY S. RICH, IAN MILDEN, AND MALLORY HARDESTY

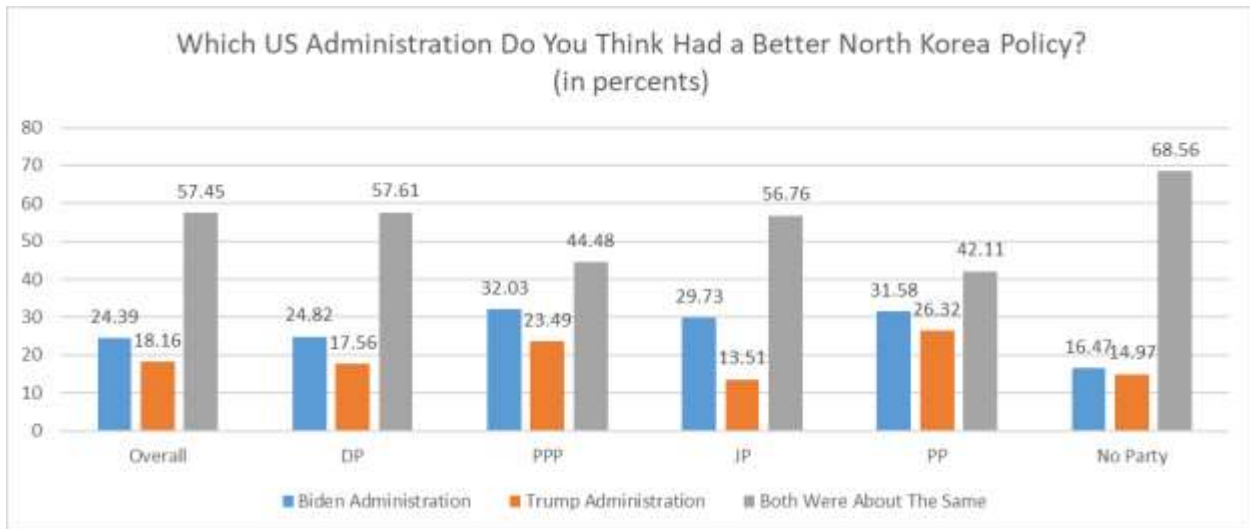
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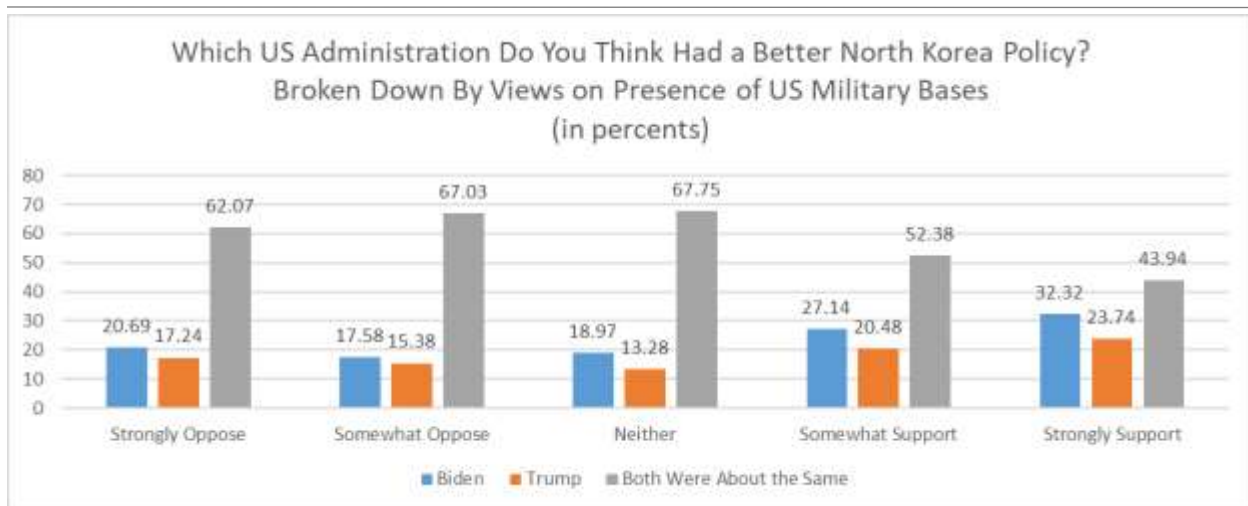
Does the South Korean public see a difference in the American administrations when it comes to North Korea? Our survey data suggests most do not.

Each US president since Bill Clinton has tried to convince North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program, and each has failed. As such, the extent to which the South Korean public sees a difference across administrations is unclear, although previous data found that the public [strongly opposed](#) the Trump administration’s demand of a [fivefold increase](#) in payments from South Korea toward hosting US troops in the country.

We conducted a national web survey in South Korea on March 11-16, administered by Macromill Emrbain, using quota sampling for age, gender, and geographic region. We asked 1,107 respondents: “Which US administration do you think had a better North Korea policy?”

A clear majority (57.45%) believe that the Trump and Biden administrations were about the same concerning North Korea policy. This option was selected the most across supporters of the two largest parties, the progressive Democratic Party (DP) and conservative People Power Party (PPP), but also the smaller parties (the social democratic Justice Party (JP) and the center-right People’s Party (PP)), as well as those with no party preference. Across all groups, respondents were slightly more likely to have chosen the Biden administration over the Trump administration as having a “better” policy, even though Biden has not publicly [said](#) much about North Korea. There was no additional question as to why this was chosen, but respondents could be evaluating Biden’s leadership style or personality traits, or weighing Trump’s demands for South Korea to pay a substantially higher cost share, rather than responding to specific North Korea policy.





We also asked respondents to evaluate, on a five-point scale (“strongly oppose” to “strongly support”) how they feel about the presence of American military bases in South Korea. We found 55.83% of respondents supported the presence, compared to 10.84% in opposition. Views of the two administrations, broken down by opinions on the US troop presence, reveal the same pattern as before: a majority (or at least plurality) say that the Trump and Biden administrations were about the same. However, we also find that those more supportive of the US presence are more likely to pick one administration as better than the other. Why this is the case is unclear, though it may reflect greater attention to the United States or interest in security matters.

The results of our data reflect increasing ambivalence about North Korea among the South Korean public. As with [previous survey research](#), our survey found that [less than 10%](#) of respondents thought about North Korea frequently. While missile tests and worsening relations between Seoul and Pyongyang may reengage the public temporarily, continued engagement remains a challenge.

The results potentially have implications for President-Elect Yoon Suk-yeol. Yoon’s [policy proposals](#) center around policy alignment with the United States, improving relations with Japan and Southeast Asia, bolstering defenses, and stricter enforcement of the North Korean Human Rights Act. Our data suggests that Yoon’s approach could encounter resistance domestically. The election of Yoon suggests a public that wants a departure from the engagement policies of Moon. Yet, the general lack of attention by the public to North Korea suggests that the public will only reengage on North Korea in light of a major breakthrough or if a crisis occurs, such as a resumption of nuclear tests or a military skirmish

that results in South Korean deaths. If this is the case, and the public attributes such inter-Korean tensions to Yoon’s policy, a reengaged public may be less supportive of Yoon.

It is also currently unclear whether South Koreans understand the Biden administration’s policy and how it differs from his predecessor, suggesting the need for a clearer articulation of a North Korea policy by an administration focused on other areas such as Ukraine, inflation, and pandemic recovery. Rather, the public may assess the Biden administration not on policy differences, but as a return to a more predictable leadership style. With a new administration in Seoul, such positive evaluations may not continue, especially in the event of increased tensions or dramatic deterioration of security conditions on the peninsula.

Furthermore, Yoon has signaled support for [pre-emptive strikes](#) on North Korea under certain circumstances (e.g. signs that a North Korean missile launch towards South Korea is imminent), and it is unclear whether this, or other measures departing from how past Seoul administrations have handled Pyongyang, would receive support from the Biden administration. Increased [public support](#) for South Korea to procure nuclear weapons themselves may undermine efforts at a unified stance on North Korea. More broadly, a Biden administration unable to present a distinct North Korea policy, other than some middle ground between Obama and Trump, provides an opportunity for North Korea to exploit differences between the allies. This may lead to both inconsistent policies on deterrence as well as frustration in the Yoon administration as to its ability to strengthen ties with Washington, further encouraging Seoul to act independently of its alliance partner. The Biden administration should use this opportunity to signal its commitment to the US-ROK alliance via a

coordinated response to North Korea, while the Yoon administration may wish to dampen expectations that the South Korean public will identify much of a change out of Washington.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.