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## THE PENINSULA

### **[2024 in Review] What the US Presidential Election and the American Public's Views Mean for South Korea**

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The 2024 US presidential election loomed large as a decisive factor potentially reshaping the bilateral relationship between South Korea and the United States. Before the election, many observers noted the challenges for South Korea's economy and security in the event of a Trump victory. While some of these concerns may be warranted, a survey conducted by KEI in September 2024 suggests that American public opinion about the bilateral relationship and US regional commitments is relatively robust and broadly bipartisan.

The survey shows nearly 70 percent of Americans have a favorable view of South Korea and approximately 65 percent support maintaining or increasing the US troop presence on the Korean Peninsula. About 70 percent also saw the US-ROK alliance as being in the national security interest of the United States and an equal share of Americans also agreed that "engaging in trade with South Korea is beneficial to the United States." Finally, an equal number of Trump and Harris supporters saw North Korea (approx. 30 percent) as a critical foreign policy challenge after China (approx. 55 percent) and Russia (approx. 56 percent).

There were some notable differences, however. For instance, Harris supporters were more likely than Trump supporters to think that US-South Korea trade was beneficial to the United States (Harris: approx. 76 percent; Trump: approx. 68 percent) and appreciate the impact of the alliance on US national interests (Harris: approx. 77 percent; Trump: approx.

68 percent). Also, Americans who aligned with Trump tended to emphasize US-ROK cooperation on economic (i.e., technology, international trade rules, and supply chains) and security (i.e., North Korea and regional security in the Indo-Pacific) matters while those who supported Harris tended to be equally supportive of non-traditional security (i.e., global health, climate change, and human rights) issues as well.

Despite differences, the above results suggest that the American public generally is not interested in or supportive of a drastic shift in strategic priorities. That is, there is broad bipartisan support for and interest in staying constructively engaged with allies in Asia. For instance, Trump supporters were less likely than Harris supporters to see the European Union (Trump: 46 percent; Harris: 67 percent), Ukraine (Trump: 15 percent; Harris: 38 percent), and Mexico (Trump: 31 percent; Harris: 42 percent) as a “critical partner.” However, an equal number of Harris and Trump supporters saw South Korea (approx. 43 percent) and Japan (approx. 49 percent) as important.

Every election generates uncertainty about continuity and change in US foreign policy and how a new administration in Washington might manage relationships with counterparts on the international stage. Donald Trump has suggested that he will embark on a different kind of foreign policy than Joe Biden. However, his support base appears to place an enduring emphasis on East Asia, particularly South Korea. Strong bipartisan support for the US-ROK alliance and a continued military presence on the Korean Peninsula underscores a broad awareness of their strategic role in ensuring regional stability.

President Yoon Suk-yeol's December 3 declaration of martial law in South Korea comes as an unanticipated shock to the system and adds further uncertainty to an already precarious situation in the bilateral relationship. Yet in times like these, it is important to remember that the US-ROK alliance has outlasted multiple political upheavals and administration changes on both sides of the Pacific since the Mutual Defense Treaty was first signed in October 1953. Time and time again, through sometimes significant ups and downs, the US-ROK alliance has not only survived but thrived. Given all that the two countries have to offer each other, they will remain important partners in the Indo-Pacific.

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