

ISSUE BRIEF

No. 2026-04

Reframing South Korean Public Opinion Towards a Taiwan Contingency

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2026-06-24

Introduction

How would the South Korean public react to a U.S.-China conflict in the Taiwan Strait? It is widely assumed that the Republic of Korea (hereafter ROK or South Korea), regardless of the ideological orientation of the government, would be cautious about becoming involved in supporting the United States in a Taiwan Strait conflict due to the immediate threat posed by North Korea as well as fears of antagonizing China.¹ By contrast, the overwhelming majority of the South Korean public want to support the United States and Taiwan in some form, including 40% willing to send non-military assistance to Taiwan, 15% willing to provide rear-area military support to U.S. forces, 14% supporting a role for U.S. forces based in Korea, and 3% supporting direct military intervention. Only 20% of the public prefer to stay uninvolved. To what extent is the South Korean public an outlier among U.S. allies in this heterogeneity of views, and how much elasticity is there in these positions?

This *Asan Issue Brief* examines how the South Korean public views a potential Taiwan contingency, drawing on the 2024-2026 Asan Polls alongside other survey data. The *Issue Brief* proceeds as follows. First, it discusses ROK government caution towards a potential U.S.-China conflict in defense of Taiwan. Second, it examines cross-national survey data to show that the South Korean public's views are generally aligned with U.S. allied publics in the Indo-Pacific and Europe and actually more hawkish according to some polls. Third, it analyzes earlier surveys that found 20–35% South Korean support for sending troops to Taiwan in a conflict and suggests that these results inflated military resolve due to binary response options. We instead used an ordinal scale of response options that produced a more heterogeneous distribution of views, but we notably found that support for direct military intervention was in fact almost negligible at 3%. Fourth, we used the threat of Chinese

retaliation as a conditioning cue to test public resolve and found that 32% of respondents changed their response, but most shifted to the median options rather than toward neutrality or direct intervention.

Fifth, the *Issue Brief* introduces an alternative hypothesis for how ‘national interest’ framing in survey questioning might move South Korean public opinion towards a Taiwan contingency. Looking at comparable episodes of U.S. burden-sharing pressure for the ROK to join coalition military deployments during the 2003 Iraq War and 2026 Iran War, we argue that public support for stronger intervention options can shift depending on how leaders and surveys frame potential deployments. This suggests that explaining to the public the direct and vital national interests that South Korea has in upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is more important than focusing on alliance burden-sharing.

1. ROK Strategic Caution Towards a Taiwan Contingency

Even as the “importance of preserving peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait”, or some variation of the phrase, has been mentioned in ROK-U.S. joint statements since 2021,² it is widely assumed in policy and media commentary that the ROK would have little to no role in supporting the United States in the event of a U.S.-People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC or China) conflict in defense of the Republic of China (hereafter ROC or Taiwan).³ President Lee Jae Myung, then the opposition leader in 2024, seemed to speak for many South Koreans when he stated that, “Whatever happens in the Taiwan Strait, whatever happens with China and Taiwan’s domestic issues, what does it matter to us?”⁴ This assumption of the ROK staying out of a Taiwan contingency primarily rests on national interest reasons, such as the ongoing and persistent military threat posed by North Korea and the risks of “simultaneity” with a two-front conflict that the ROK would have to deter.⁵ Furthermore, there are strong fears of PRC military and economic retaliation against the ROK in the event of any intervention, as has been shown by recent Chinese coercion and threats against Japan.⁶ Operationally, there are also concerns that the ROK military lacks the necessary naval and air combat capabilities that could be usefully deployed in the defense of Taiwan, much as has been observed in the case of ROK deployments to the Strait of Hormuz.⁷

The U.S. focus on a coalition “denial defense” of Taiwan in order to prevent China’s regional hegemony has therefore precipitated efforts to recalibrate ROK-U.S. alliance roles and missions, as outlined in the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy and 2026 U.S. National Defense Strategy.⁸ This has included discussions around the “strategic flexibility” of United States Forces Korea (USFK) to be postured and ready for other missions beyond the Korean Peninsula, calls for the ROK Armed Forces to take “primary responsibility” for conventional defense against North Korea, and growing references to collective deterrence along the First Island Chain that also include the ROK by senior U.S. officials and military commanders.⁹ Political leaders in the United States and some allied countries have increasingly expressed a stronger commitment to defend Taiwan in the event of a Chinese

invasion, while adhering to their respective legal and diplomatic positions in cross-Strait relations.¹⁰ ROK governments have been an outlier in this respect.

2. Why the South Korean Public is Not an Allied Outlier

But at the public opinion level, are South Koreans also an outlier? The 2026 Asan Annual Poll found that 76% of respondents agreed that U.S.-China tensions in the Taiwan Strait are important to South Korea's national interests, while 12.6% believed it is not that important and only 3.6% thought it is not important at all. A comparison of how publics in these countries have viewed a Taiwan contingency in recent years can inform whether South Koreans are an outlier, as is often assumed.

For example, a widely cited 2022 report by *Morning Consult* found that the South Korean public was broadly in alignment with allied publics in Asia and Europe in their preferred responses to a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.¹¹ Table 1 compares support for three selected options to illustrate: imposing sanctions, sending weapons, and sending troops to defend Taiwan.¹² All allied publics favored economic over direct military responses, but notably the South Korean public was more hawkish on military options than neighboring Japan, and only slightly below the Australian respondents, with 46% willing to send weapons and 31% willing to send troops to defend Taiwan.¹³

Table 1. Public views of responses to a Taiwan contingency (% , net support (pp, a-b))

	Impose sanctions			Send weapons to Taiwan			Send troops to Taiwan		
	Support (a)	Oppose (b)	(a-b)	Support (a)	Oppose (b)	(a-b)	Support (a)	Oppose (b)	(a-b)
Australia	<u>55</u>	17	38	<u>49</u>	23	26	37	35	2
South Korea	<u>48</u>	37	11	<u>46</u>	36	10	<u>31</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>-21</u>
Japan	40	16	24	32	27	5	22	37	<u>-15</u>
France	41	28	13	34	35	<u>-1</u>	30	42	<u>-12</u>
Germany	42	35	7	31	45	<u>-14</u>	23	<u>56</u>	<u>-33</u>
UK	46	24	22	32	35	<u>-3</u>	16	<u>53</u>	<u>-37</u>

Source: Samantha Elbouez, Jason McMann, and Scott Moskowitz, "American Allies Want U.S. Leadership on Taiwan if China Invades," *Morning Consult* (November 16, 2022).

While support for direct military intervention remains a minority view in every U.S. ally, it is worth noting that this is also the case in the United States. For instance, a 2025 Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey found only 47% of Americans supported using the U.S. Navy to break a Chinese blockade of Taiwan, 43% supported sending troops to defend Taiwan, and only 38% wanted to sign a formal defense commitment, all below majority support.¹⁴ In Australia and Japan, multiple polls have found strong support for some degree of military involvement in the event of a conflict short of direct intervention. In Australia, the 2023 Lowy Institute Poll found 64% support for sending arms to Taiwan and 61% support for using the Australian Navy to break a Chinese blockade, yet only 42% support for sending Australian

troops to Taiwan.¹⁵ In Japan, a 2023 survey found 56% favored only rear-area support for U.S. forces and only 11% supported using force alongside the United States.¹⁶ Even after Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi's statements regarding Taiwan in November 2025 triggered a Chinese backlash, a Kyodo poll found Japanese respondents roughly split over whether Japan should exercise collective self-defense in a Taiwan conflict.¹⁷

Other surveys of South Korean public opinion over the same time period have reported similar levels of support for military responses to a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan, with between 20-35% support for sending ROK troops to Taiwan. For example, a 2022 East Asia Institute survey found 22.5% of South Koreans supported combined military operations in a Taiwan contingency and 42% supported rear-area military support roles.¹⁸ Similarly, a 2023 Global Taiwan Institute report used a split-sample web survey ($n=1,300$) and found 34.4% of Korean respondents supported sending military assistance to Taiwan.¹⁹ An April 2023 poll by progressive Korean polling institution *Flower Research* also found 35.6% supported sending troops to Taiwan.²⁰ In most of these surveys, support for staying uninvolved or neutral has been under 20%.

In short, existing surveys have found that, contrary to the official ROK government stance of strategic caution, a majority of the South Korean public supports providing non-military support in the event of a Taiwan contingency, while roughly a third of the public supports stronger military roles such as rear-area support and even sending combat troops to Taiwan. This confirms that the South Korean public, at least, is not an outlier when it comes to U.S. allies.

3. Bounded Caution: 2024–2026 Asan Polls' Findings

There is, however, a limitation of many of these previous surveys which we argue has inflated the levels of support for direct military action. That is, most of these surveys were undertaken with one-dimensional "support-oppose" choices. Such binary formats offer no moderate alternative against which respondents might weigh a combat military option, therefore inflating the most forward-leaning choice. To address this possible discrepancy, we conducted two surveys in 2024 and 2026 using forced choice among mutually exclusive options to give respondents an ordinal scale of response options in a Taiwan contingency rather than a series of binary questions.

We gave respondents five options to choose from in 2026, up from four options in 2024.²¹ First, total neutrality would mean South Korea denies the use of its own forces and does not permit or endorse USFK to be deployed to a Taiwan conflict. We presented this option as "There should be no intervention whatsoever (어떠한 개입도 하지 말아야 한다)." Second, partial neutrality would allow U.S. forces based in the ROK to deploy. We explained this option as "USFK should be permitted to be combat deployed (주한미군의 참전은 허용해야 한다)." Third, partial involvement would see the ROK provide non-military support. We explained this option as "We should intervene but only with diplomatic and non-military capabilities (개입하되 외교지원 등 비군사영역에 한정해야 한다)." Fourth, direct involvement

could include either only rear-area military support by the ROK Armed Forces, which we asked as “Only provide rear-area military support such as logistics and intelligence support (후방지원[군수, 정보지원 등]만 해야 한다).” And fifth, we gave the option for the actual deployment of ROK Armed Forces to the Taiwan Strait, which we asked as “Send the military and undertake combat operations (군을 파견해 군사작전을 수행해야 한다).”

The 2024 and 2026 polls gave respondents the option to choose from among these multiple options (See Table 2). Our results show much weaker support for direct combat deployment than in previous polls. For direct military intervention, when disaggregated, 15.6% favored rear-area support roles and only 3% supported sending troops to Taiwan. Aggregate direct intervention rose from 12.7% to 18.6%, but this reflects the finer 2026 survey instrument rather than any hardening of opinion: the increase closely tracks the fall in non-opinion (13% to 7.8%), as undecided respondents settled on a moderate option once direct involvement was split into rear support and combat operations.

Total neutrality (20.2%) remained almost identical to 2024 (21.4%). Partial neutrality with only the use of USFK was also within a margin of error (11.9%→14%), and non-military support to Taiwan did not significantly change as the most preferred option (41.0%→39.4%). In sum, the near-identical distributions across the two surveys suggest that the majority of South Korean public opinion is bounded around non-combat military support and some level of support for Taiwan, but there is presently almost no support for direct military intervention.

Table 2. South Korean views on Taiwan contingency²² (% , n-size)

	2024 (n=1,020)	2026 (n=1,029)
Total neutrality	21.4 (218)	20.2 (208)
Partial neutrality	11.9 (121)	14.0 (144)
Partial involvement (non-military)	41.0 (418)	39.4 (405)
Direct involvement (military)	12.7 (130)	rear support: 15.6 (161) send troops: 3.0 (31)
Non-opinion	13.0 (133)	7.8 (80)

4. The Limits of a ‘China Threat’ Condition

In the 2026 Asan Poll, we further checked the opinion shift when exposed to the threat of Chinese retaliation as a deterrent against supporting the United States in a Taiwan contingency. We asked respondents, “What should our country’s response be if there is a strong backlash by China? (이 상황에서 중국이 강력하게 반발한다면, 선생님께서는 우리나라가 어떻게 해야 한다고 생각하십니까?)” We excluded the 20.2% of respondents who chose total

neutrality in the previous question. The purpose of this question was to serve as a conditioning cue to test public resolve in the face of a cost.

However, 32% of respondents changed their response, and only around 2% of those who initially supported some form of involvement shifted to total neutrality. As shown in the transition matrix in Table 3, most respondents did not change their response: 74.6% of supporters of partial involvement, 77.4% of supporters of sending troops, and 63.9% of supporters of partial neutrality gave the same answer. Meanwhile, most respondents who changed their response shifted to the median options rather than toward neutrality or direct intervention. Those at the lower end of engagement who changed tended to move up one response (21.5% of the partial neutrality group shifted to partial involvement; 13.3% of the partial involvement group shifted to rear-area support), while those in the direct military intervention group who changed their response tended to move one response down.

Overall, the threat of Chinese retaliation was found to be insufficient to cause most respondents to back down from wanting to extend some degree of support in defense of Taiwan. This reflects what might be considered a settled, bounded disposition in South Korean public opinion in which half of the public are committed to non-military support roles and almost 20% support non-combat military support roles. By contrast, about 20% are opposed to any involvement and less than 5% are prepared for direct military intervention.

Table 3. South Korean responses, including with threat of Chinese retaliation²³ (% , n-size)

2026 Asan Poll	C. China's backlash (n=821)			Total
	Stay the same	Largest shift (To where, pp(n-size))		
Total neutrality	-	-	-	2.6 (21)
Partial neutrality	63.9 (92)	Partial involvement	21.5 (31)	16.1 (132)
Partial involvement	74.6 (302)	Rear support	13.3 (54)	48.0 (394)
Direct involvement				
Rear support	49.1 (79)	Partial involvement	34.2 (55)	19.0 (156)
Send troops	77.4 (24)	Rear support	12.9 (4)	4.6 (38)

5. Policy Recommendations for a Different Frame: 'National Interest' Over 'Faithful Ally'

The 2024 and 2026 Asan Poll results suggest that the South Korean public is less committed to direct military intervention than previous surveys have implied. They also show that there is a heterogeneity in viewpoints at present. Potential Chinese retaliation as a disincentive cue did not have a major effect on responses. These are important findings that have not been widely acknowledged in the coverage on South Korean public opinion to date. What, then,

might actually lead to a shift in South Korean opinion if the United States requests ROK military support?

One alternative hypothesis is that public support for stronger intervention options can shift depending on how leaders and surveys frame potential deployments.²⁴ There are comparable episodes of U.S. burden-sharing pressure for the ROK to join coalition military deployments during the 2003 Iraq War and 2026 Iran War. During the 2003 Iraq War, when the George W. Bush administration requested additional ROK contributions of military forces to the post-conflict occupation of Iraq in late 2003, there was over 80% public opposition (86.3%).²⁵ In the following months, President Roh Moo-hyun tried to reframe the dispatch of ROK military forces as not simply acquiescing to U.S. demands but rather as advancing the national interest by securing reciprocal U.S. engagement on the North Korean nuclear program.²⁶ By mid-2004 when the deployment had been recast in these terms, a poll found 54% of the South Korean public supported the additional military deployment, against 37% favoring troop withdrawals.²⁷

This national-interest narrative framing effect has also been observed in the 2026 U.S. military campaign against Iran and the debate over potential ROK naval deployments to the Strait of Hormuz. During Iran's blockade of the Strait, President Trump demanded that U.S. allies, including the ROK, send warships to protect shipping. A March 2026 Gallup Korea survey, which framed a possible naval deployment as fulfilling President Trump's requests, found only 30% were in favor, while 55% were opposed.²⁸ By contrast, a subsequent May 2026 Gallup Korea survey framed a possible naval deployment as a response to the May 4 attack on the South Korean HMM *Namu* cargo ship in the Strait of Hormuz and offered three response options found 48% supported deployment limited to escorting South Korean commercial vessels, while only 16% endorsed deployment as military support for the United States, and 24% opposed any deployment.²⁹

These two plausibility probes suggest that how ROK leaders and survey questions frame the security situation in the Taiwan Strait and its bearing on ROK national interests can have a decisive influence on public support for various options short of direct combat military intervention. It can widen support for indirect and rear-area support roles, but no frame has been shown to produce majority support for combat operations. This is the frame through which the Taiwan question should be read: South Korean willingness will turn on whether a contingency is interpreted as directly related to South Korea's own security as opposed to great power signals or demands.

Whatever strategy a future ROK government decides to pursue in response to a contingency or conflict between the United States and China in the Taiwan Strait should therefore take caution to frame its decision to the South Korean public not through a great power lens of reactive policy, but instead express a proactive policy that is national interest-driven. For example, a key policy consideration should be making clear how a U.S.-China conflict in defense of Taiwan would directly affect South Korea's economic and military security, including the closure of shipping and maritime commerce that is the lifeblood of the ROK economy, the collapse and retreat in U.S. power in the Western Pacific

including the Korean Peninsula that would likely result from a Chinese military victory, the dangers of a general escalation in armed hostilities in East Asia by China but also North Korea and Russia that would be emboldened by a U.S. defeat, and more. To date, the South Korean public has rarely considered a hypothetical Taiwan contingency in such stark terms, instead having it framed largely as an abstract U.S. burden-sharing question. By contrast, a decision to pursue total neutrality would need to address and rebut these national interest arguments.

Conclusion

The overwhelming majority of the South Korean public want to support the United States and Taiwan in some form in the event of a conflict even as they are divided across options. But what binds them together is a rejection of total neutrality as well as direct military intervention as desired options. This suggests that explaining to the public the direct and vital national interests that South Korea has in upholding peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait is an important precursor to building a national consensus for whatever policy action a future ROK government might choose to take. It may be time for new ways to frame one of the most consequential strategic dilemmas facing South Korea.

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For more public opinion analysis by the authors, see:

- [“Worth the Squeeze: A Conditions-based Analysis of South Korean Public Support for Nuclear Deterrence,”](#) *Asan Issue Brief* 2025-02, 28 May 2025.
- [“Comparing Allied Public Confidence in U.S. Extended Nuclear Deterrence,”](#) *Asan Issue Brief* 2024-02, 27 March 2024.
- [“South Korea’s Quad Opportunity: Aligning Foreign Policy and Public Opinion,”](#) *Asan Issue Brief* 2023-03, 15 November 2023.

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- ¹² Ibid. Net support, however, separated the allies sharply: only Australia (+26pp), South Korea (+10pp), and Japan (+5pp) leaned net positive, while France was essentially even (–1pp) and Germany leaned opposed (–14pp).
- ¹³ Japanese high non-opinion share (41%) is consistent with documented Japanese reticence on security-policy items. Due to space constraints, we do not address this in this Issue Brief. For more, see Miura, A., Yamagata, M., Higashijima, J., Kobayashi, T. and Nakamura, M., “Who trusts in scientific research? Cross-national surveys of Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States”, *Journal of Science Communication* 23, no. 8 (2024), A03. <https://doi.org/10.22323/2.23080203>.
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- ¹⁹ Two separate random sub-samples, not a ranked choice. Timothy S. Rich, “South Korean views on Cross-strait tensions,” Global Taiwan Institute (January 10, 2024), <https://globaltaiwan.org/2024/01/south-korean-views-on-cross-strait-tensions/>.
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- [0%EB%82%A0%EC%A7%9C%EA%B5%AC%EB%B6%84%20::&sdate=&edate=&pdate=&pollGubuncd=&searchCnd=2&searchWrd=%EA%BD%83&pageIndex=37](https://www.gallup.com/ko/poll/2024/04/04/south-korea-should-do-in-event-of-us-china-military-conflict-on-taiwan.aspx)
- ²¹ Peter K. Lee, "South Korean Entanglement in a Taiwan Contingency," *Asia Policy* 19, no. 2 (2024), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27308009>.
- ²² We listed multiple survey data from the Asan Institute that include a question on the Taiwan crisis. Specific question and response options are as follows: (a) Asan Poll (April 2-4, 2024; $n=1,020$): "What South Korea should do in the event of U.S.-China military conflict on Taiwan? (선생님께서는 대만에서 미-중간 무력충돌이 일어나면 우리나라는 어떻게 해야 한다고 생각하십니까?)" Responses are as follows: "should not have an intervention", "should let only the USFK to intervene", "should provide the non-military support for the U.S.", and "should support the military intervention", (b) Asan Poll (February 5-8, 2026; $n=1,029$): The same question was used with different response options, separating direct involvement to two levels, such as restricting involvement into "providing rear support for military options" and "carrying out military operations".
- ²³ The sample for China's backlash condition excludes those who chose "total neutrality" in the initial question (20.2%; $n=208$). While lower-engagement respondents who shifted moved toward more involvement, higher-engagement respondents toward less, which leaves the aggregate distribution nearly unchanged. Specific transition patterns are only indicative since combat was initially chosen by 31 respondents ($p<.001$). The one conspicuous asymmetry is that only 49.1% of rear-area supporters held, while 34.2% ($n=55$) retreated to non-military involvement, suggesting that rear support, not combat, is the least anchored position under the threat of Chinese retaliation. Of course, since these cell-level patterns warrant caution for interpretation due to the small sample size, the specific transition rates are indicative rather than precise transitions.
- ²⁴ For an example from the U.S. literature on support for military deployments, see Richard C. Eichenberg, "Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981–2005," *International Security* 30 no. 1 (2005): 140–177. <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/30/1/140/11829/Victory-Has-Many-Friends-U-S-Public-Opinion-and?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.
- ²⁵ "S Korea backs Iraq war move," *BBC News* (April 2, 2003), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/2908617.stm>.
- ²⁶ Gerald Geunwook Lee, "South Korea's Faustian Attitude: The Republic of Korea's Decision to Send Troops to Iraq Revisited," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 19, no. 3: 481–495, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09557570600869523>. Polls indicated that opposition to combat deployment exceeded 70%. The Roh Moo-hyun administration, which had been elected on a platform of a more "equal" relationship with the United States, nonetheless proceeded with deployment—not on grounds of strategic enthusiasm for the Iraq War, but as part of an explicitly transactional approach to alliance management.
- ²⁷ "Support prevails for additional deployment," *YTN* (July 4, 2004; Research & Research Survey; $n=800$), <https://news.nate.com/view/20040704n01665>. (in Korean)
- ²⁸ "Gallup Korea's daily opinion," Gallup Korea (March 20, 2026), <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1627>. 55% of respondents said that the ROK's warships "should not be dispatched" to the Strait of Hormuz, while 30% said "they should be dispatched." 15% held no opinion.
- ²⁹ "Gallup Korea's daily opinion," Gallup Korea (May 21, 2026), <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1643#D>. 24% of respondents agreed that "warships should not be dispatched," while 16% agreed that "warships should be dispatched to provide military support to the United States," and 12% held no opinion.