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States form images of each other based on assessments of each other's material capabilities or on interpretations of each other's intentions. Images matter in the foreign policy making process since they form popular public opinion on official policies and, in more basic ways, construct people's identity toward other countries. Some images are more transient and therefore manageable. Remarks by foreign leaders, official documents, or media coverage tend to belong to this category. States try to make their images favorable in the minds of a foreign audience through their public diplomacy efforts. On the other hand, some images are more fundamental and hard to change, so that foreign policies are pressed to operate within their perimeter. Political ideology, religious orientation, and accumulated bilateral historical experiences tend to form these more durable images.

Today's globalized world has witnessed the rise of the Internet as an important medium constructing popular images of a foreign country. As mass communication across countries becomes more open and instant, foreign policy makers face the increasing challenge of controlling information flows and separating foreign policy agendas from domestic interests. Citizens with less direct contact are more prone to embracing popular images mediated by mass media. Elites, in contrast, who have more direct contact and knowledge, tend to have more rationally interpreted images of foreign countries. Formerly, elites used to monopolize foreign policy inputs. In the porous world

of today, however, it is difficult for elites to resist and persuade popular opinion, which is more emotionally driven. This challenge is felt in China, where the leadership is sometimes at odds with irrational populism. In this respect, it is important to understand Chinese images of South Korea. How do elites and ordinary citizens of China hold South Korea in their political imagination? What are the implications of Chinese images of Korea for Seoul's China policy?

### The Transformative Bilateral History of the Last Century

For hundreds of years before modernization, Korea was a tribute country to imperial China. Except for two invasions by pre-Qing Manchu China in the seventeenth century, the Chosun Dynasty of Korea preserved peace and relative autonomy in its relationship with China. During this period, Korea for China was a more civilized country on the Eastern periphery of the Chinese order. The centuries' old absolute power of

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imperial China was shattered quite suddenly. The late nineteenth century Chosun witnessed with great awe China's struggle to preserve its sovereignty in the face of encroachment from the West. The Korean Peninsula became a testing ground of Chinese influence vis-à-vis Japan and Western powers. Once Korea was colonized by Japan, China, in the midst of revolution and civil war, provided breathing room for the Korean independence movement. However, following the communist revolution China became an enemy state to South Koreans by assisting North Korea during the Korean War and so contributing to the division of the Korean Peninsula. To China, South Korea reborn as the Republic of Korea in 1948 was a mere puppet pro-U.S. state while North Korea was a buffer zone to stop the encroachment by America. South Korea and China went through a dark age, with no official interaction until the Cold War ended and diplomatic relations were normalized in 1992. China, already in a high growth stage at the time of normalization, rapidly expanded its trade and investment relations with South Korea to become its number one trade partner in 2004. For China, South Korea became its most frequently visited country, with an image of affluence and an urbane culture.

Having passed through a transformative post-normalization period, South Korea faces China as a big power not only in dealing with North Korea but also in engaging the Asian region and the rest of the world. While South Korea is anchored in its alliance relationship with the United States, how to manage and develop the relationship with China is the foreign policy challenge for South Korean leaders. On the other hand, for China, keeping a prosperous and dynamic South Korea closer is an important strategic goal as well. Preventing South Korea from embracing Japan at the expense of China is strategically important in the tripartite relations in Northeast Asia. Of more importance would be for China to pursue closer economic ties with South Korea and to remain neutral were the roughly 28,000 U.S. soldiers there to

become involved in any conflict outside of the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, China's strategic concern is in helping North Korea to survive and remain stable. Accordingly, China has taken a neutral position toward recent North Korean provocations, such as the sinking of the South Korean vessel *Cheonan* and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island. China is now locked into a dilemma: its poor ally North Korea is emboldened to attack the South, only strengthening South Korea's military ties with the United States against China's wishes. In a nutshell, South Korea and China share overall interests in keeping Northeast Asia peaceful and prosperous but their vital security interests derived from their relationships with North Korea and the United States remain divisive.

Against the backdrop of the rapidly changing South Korea–China relationship of today, it is worthwhile to examine how the Chinese view South Korea. This view has not been examined sufficiently. The first ever cross-national soft power survey, carried out in 2008 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and the East Asia Institute (EAI), revealed that the Chinese viewed South Korea's soft power as stronger than that of Japan's.<sup>1</sup> But there has been no effective survey done on Chinese images of South Korea and their views of South Korea–China relations. To address this dearth of data, the EAI launched a telephone survey from July 27 to August 2 of 2010 targeting 1,000 urban Chinese citizens from 10 major cities.<sup>2</sup> In August 2010, an additional online survey was also carried out for 150 elites who were composed of 49 experts, 77 businessmen, and 24 bureaucrats. To the extent that elite views are important in foreign policy making, the survey was intended to explore differences between ordinary citizens and elites views in China in their views toward South Korea. The following are the major findings regarding South Korea's image in the Chinese political imagination.<sup>3</sup>



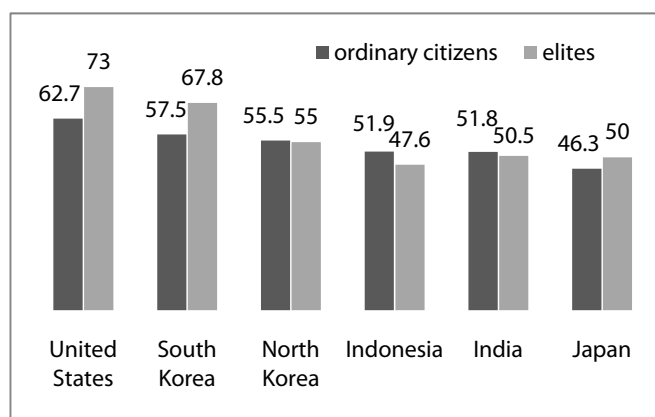
## South Korea Favored but Not Much

Contrary to the expectation that elites would find information on South Korea more through books or textbooks, elites receive data mostly through the Internet (46%). On the other hand, ordinary citizens pick up information on South Korea via television/radio (30.6%) or newspapers/magazines (20.3%).<sup>4</sup> This may be because elites check information more frequently through the Internet. Whatever the medium for getting information, most Chinese view South Korea through the cultural lens. When answers to open questions on South Korea's images are categorized, 40.7% of images are culture related—primarily popular TV dramas, movies, and entertainment celebrities. Twenty-three percent of images concern business and industries ranging from plastic surgery/beauty businesses to IT/automobile industries; 17.3% of images concern Korean personalities and national characteristics. It is notable that half of the images in the personalities/national characteristics category describe Koreans as too nationalistic or patriotic. Lastly, 12.4% of images could be categorized as political ones. One third of images in this category describe South Korea as a divided nation and 23.1% of images point out South Korea as a pro-U.S. country of its military ally or diplomatic partner. Images concerning South Korea's president or democratic achievement tally 16.9%. Images belonging to cultural or economic categories tend to be positive while those belonging to national characteristics or political categories tend to be critical. In cities where the exposure to South Koreans and Korean culture is relatively high, there seem to be more negative images related to cultural and historical issues. A significant number of Chinese believe that South Korea plagiarizes China's own cultural heritage, such as Confucianism, and contradicts Chinese history.

The favorability score the Chinese have reported toward South Korea on a scale of 0 (very unfavorable) to 100 (very favorable) was 57.5. This score is slightly higher than the scores the Chinese report toward

North Korea, Indonesia, India, or Japan. Only the United States is more favored than South Korea in this survey. In addition, Chinese elites view South Korea more favorably than do ordinary Chinese citizens by about 10%. However, compared to other previous surveys, the favorability ratings of South Korea have declined, as have North Korean ratings.<sup>5</sup> For example, the Chinese favorability score toward South Korea on the same 0–100 scale was 73.0 in the July 2006 Survey and 64.5 in the January–February 2008 Survey, both conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. In these two surveys, North Korea favorability also declined from 72.6 to 55.5. If these polls are viewed on a continuum, the Chinese favorability score toward South Korea has declined continuously from 73.0, 64.5, to 57.5 during the period of 2006–2010.

**Figure 1 Chinese Favorability Scores toward Major Countries**

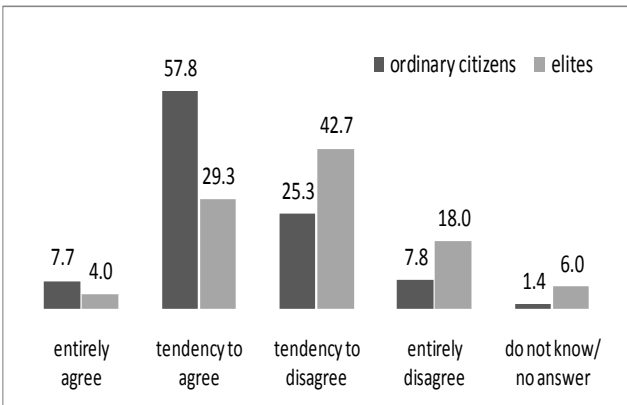


Chinese favorable attitudes are strongly related to their perception of South Koreans' respect for China. Of Chinese ordinary citizens, 65.5% (57.8% plus 7.7%) agree that South Koreans respect China while 33.1% (25.3% plus 7.8%) disagree. But among Chinese elites, South Koreans' disrespect for China is strongly felt, with 60.7% feeling ignored and only 33.3% feeling respected. As Figure 3 illustrates further, disagreement with the idea that South Koreans respect the Chinese, that is, the more Chinese think they are ignored by South Koreans, a favorable attitude toward South Korea disappears rapidly. Chinese who think South Koreans ignore their country don't like South Korea. For

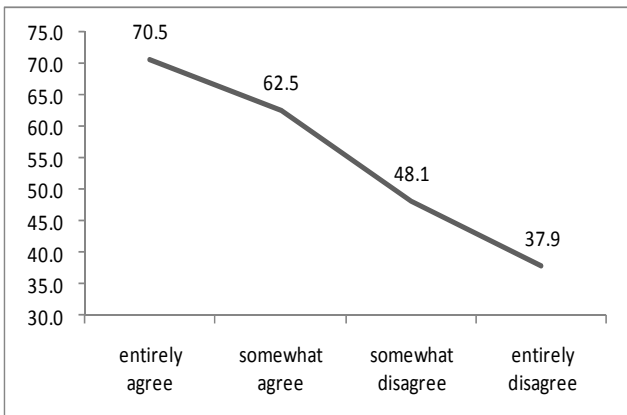


the South Korean government, therefore, how to prevent the increasingly proud Chinese from feeling less respected is an important task. For the Chinese side, on the other hand, diverting Chinese nationalism to equally respect South Korea is more productive in reducing this perceived respect gap.

**Figure 2 Chinese Views of South Korea's Respect for China**



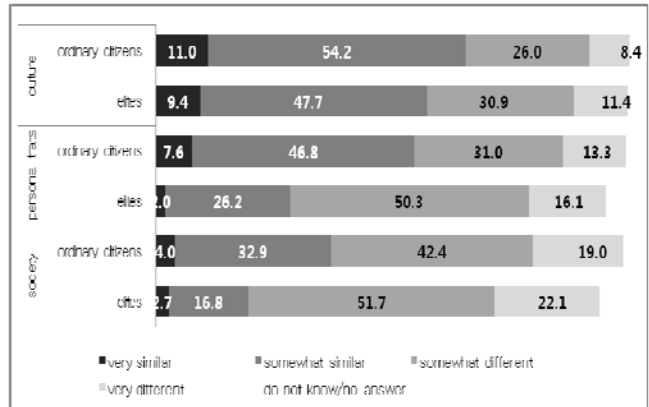
**Figure 3 Chinese Favorability toward South Korea by Respect Perception**



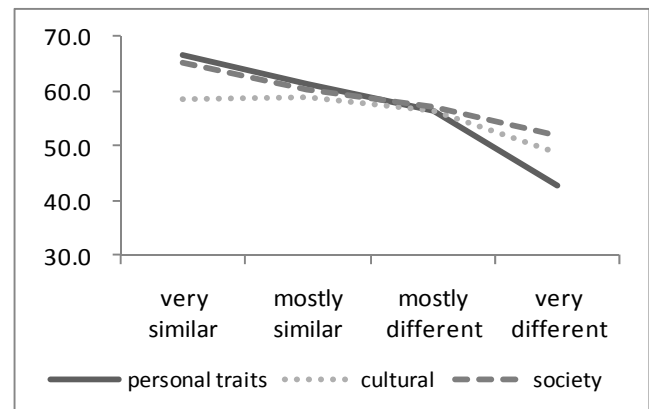
Reflecting their different social systems, both Chinese ordinary citizens and elites view South Korean society as different from theirs, with elites more sensitive about this difference. On the other hand, both Chinese citizens and elites view Korean culture as the same as Chinese. For national characteristics, Chinese elites view the personal traits of South Koreans as quite different from theirs, unlike ordinary Chinese citizens who find Koreans more or less similar. Both perceive that cultural and social likeness makes Chinese favor South Korea. This positive effect of similari-

ty upon favorable attitude is greater in the case of personality likeness. Chinese who think a Korean's personality is similar to their own tend to like South Korea while those who do not tend to dislike South Korea.

**Figure 4 Chinese Perception of the Similarity between China and South Korea**



**Figure 5 Chinese Favorability toward South Korea by Likeness Perceptions**



**Power Assessment of South Korea**

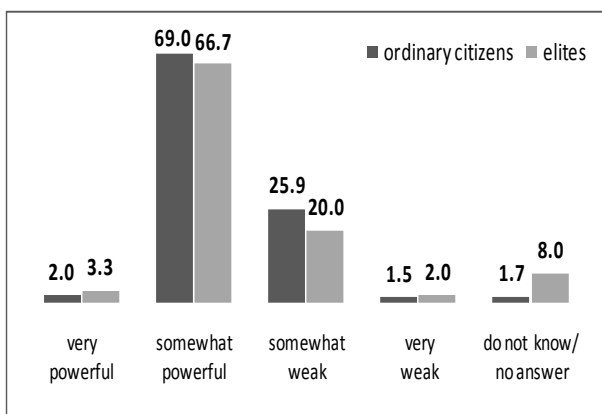
In the hierarchy of state-to-state relations, China is a big power with more hard power than South Korea. As for economic size, China is the second largest country while South Korea is the thirteenth largest economy. In terms of per capita purchasing power, however, Chinese income is only a quarter of South Koreans.<sup>6</sup> This economic quality indicator explains why South Korea's popular culture appeals to Chinese urban consumers with its image of an advanced materialistic culture. Military power is also asymmetrical between China



and South Korea in terms of absolute military expenditure. In 2009, China was the second largest military power in the world in terms of expenditure. That was about four times bigger than South Korea's military expenditure, which was the eleventh largest for that year.<sup>7</sup> Still, the absolute military gap can be reduced, as South Korea has a strong military alliance with the United States, which spends 6.7 times more than China per year. These statistics suggest that the material capability gap between China and South Korea may be smaller than the state-level comparison in the eyes of individual Chinese citizens.

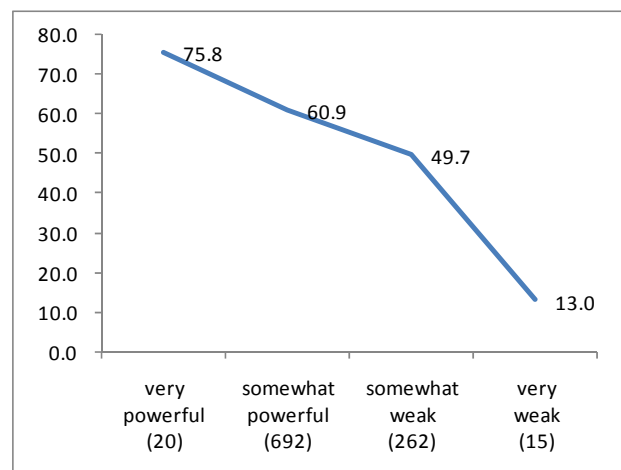
According to the survey, most Chinese view South Korea as "somewhat powerful": 69.0% of ordinary citizens and 66.7% of elites view South Korea in this way, while 25.9% and 20.0% of each group view South Korea "somewhat weak." When the Chinese view South Korea as more powerful, they are more favorably disposed toward South Korea. Chinese who view South Korea as very powerful give a 75.8 favorability score on average. On the other hand, a small number of Chinese who view South Korea as very weak give it only a 13.0 favorability score on average. This strong positive relationship between perceived national power and favorable attitude suggests that the material capabilities of South Korea attract the Chinese rather than posing a threat.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 6 Chinese Perception of South Korea's Influence



In order to measure the perceived interest alignment with South Koreans, five topics were covered. As expected, history issues with Japan, dissemination of Confucian culture, and the South Korea–China Free Trade Agreement were all viewed as in alignment with South Korean interests. Chinese elites tend to see stronger interest alignment with South Korea on these three issues. On the other hand, North Korea and Taiwan are the issues on which Chinese views differ from those of the South Koreans. Chinese elites find that China's interests differ from South Koreans more than ordinary citizens in the case of North Korea while Chinese ordinary citizens think so in the case of Taiwan.

Figure 7 Chinese Favorability toward South Korea



### Interest Alignment

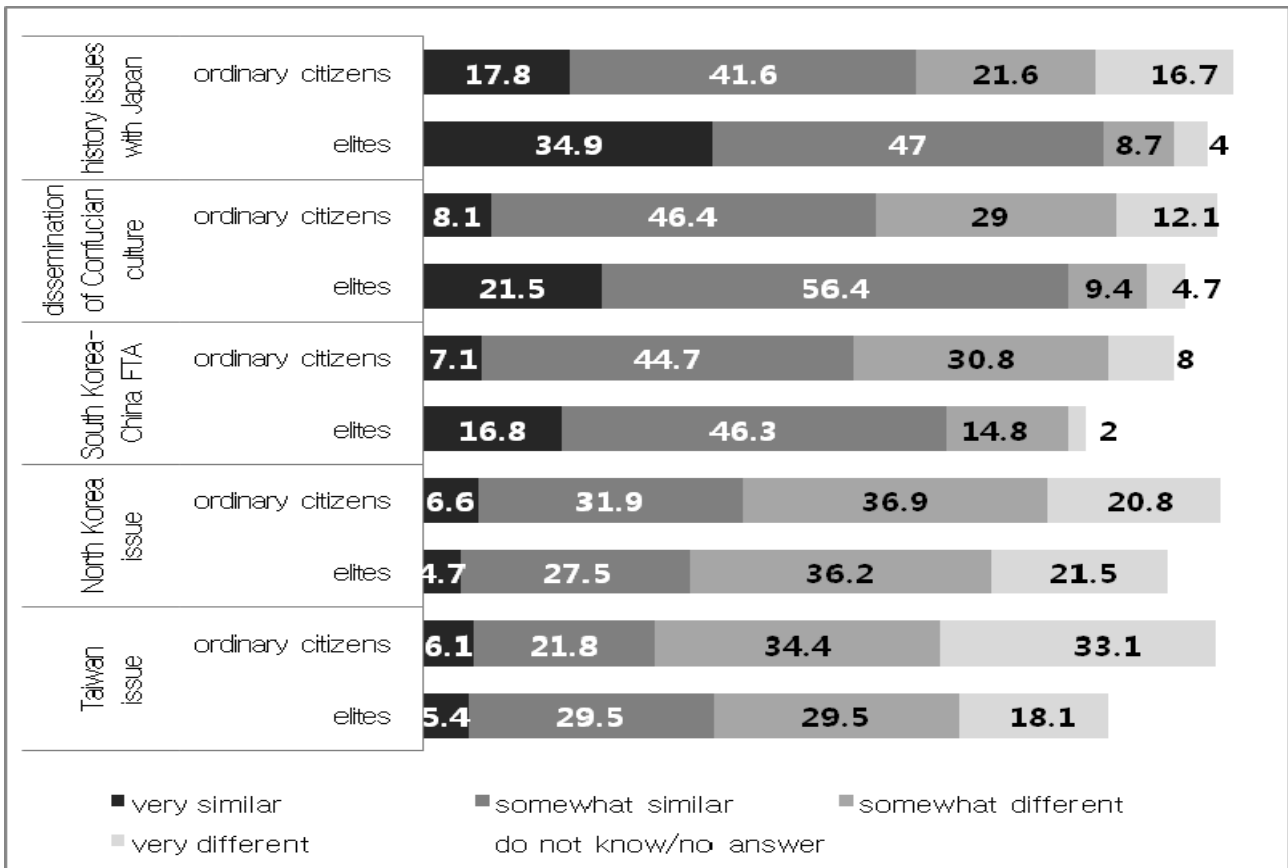
Most Chinese think South Korea is closer to the United States, and this tendency is stronger among Chinese elites than among ordinary citizens. On this question, 63.6% of ordinary citizens and 81.3% of elites think South Korea is closer to the United States while 20.8% of ordinary citizens and only 9.3% of elites think South Korea is closer to China. Chinese who answered that South Korea was pro-U.S. gave a 52.9 favorability score on average. On the other hand, Chinese who viewed South Korea as pro-China gave a 66.3 score. This 14.6% difference is not that big, so we can say that South Ko-



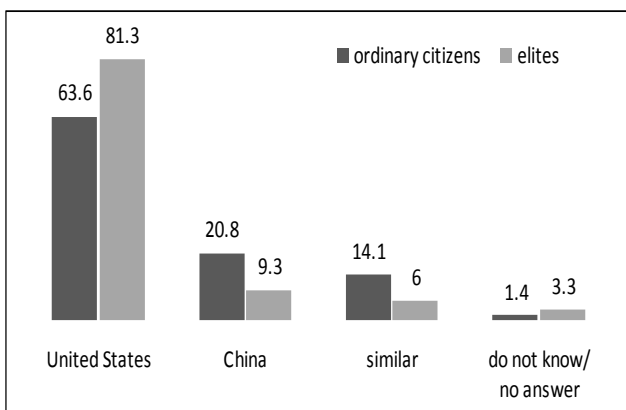
rea's security alliance with the United States is not a strong factor in determining Chinese favorability toward South Korea.

Elites view the possibility of military clashes as much less likely. Only 26.7% of them view military clashes as quite possible while 65.3% believed they are

**Figure 8 Chinese Perception of the Alignment of Interests with South Koreans**



**Figure 9 Chinese Perception of South Korea's Closeness to the U.S. and China**



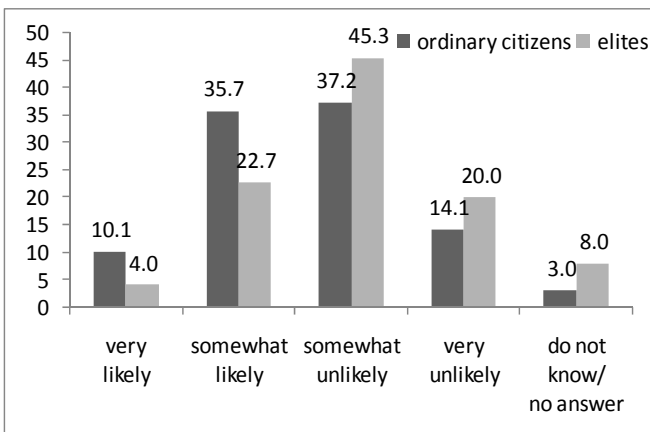
More Chinese view military clashes between South and North Korea as not likely to happen by a 5.5% margin (45.8% of “very likely” and “somewhat likely” vs. 51.3% of “somewhat unlikely” and “very unlikely”).

unlikely to occur. Nevertheless, elites believe that China should intervene in the Korean Peninsula in the event of a crisis although they are more cautious than ordinary citizens. In a crisis, 58% of elites and 67.8% of ordinary citizens believe that China should intervene. Although the poll did not specify what kind of crisis on the Korean Peninsula, it is likely for Chinese to assume the possible collapse of North Korea or physical conflicts between the two Koreas, and this reflects the Chinese understanding of the strategic importance of Korea. This pro-intervention opinion does not favor keeping the Korean Peninsula divided, however. Among elites, 62.4% and 72.4% of ordinary citizens support the reunification of the two Koreas while 15.5% of elites and 24.3% of ordinary citizens oppose it.<sup>9</sup>





**Figure 10 Possibility of Military Clashes between South and North Korea**



**Figure 11 Chinese intervention in the Korean Peninsula**



Among bilateral agenda items for cooperation, most of those listed on the agenda are regarded as important. Promotion of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula was viewed as the most important, with a 90% approval rate. If counting only “very important” answers, elites viewed the following agenda most important order: “establishment of a cooperative system like the East Asian Community,” “expansion of trade and investment,” “resolving the global challenges such as environment and terror,” and “promotion of cultural exchange.” “Expansion of military cooperation” was regarded as less important for both elites and ordinary citizens. This priority order of bilateral cooperation is quite consistent with the official diplomacy between South Korea and China, expanding economic and cultural ties, coordinating political dialogue on North Korea’s security threats, and engaging in very limited military cooperation.

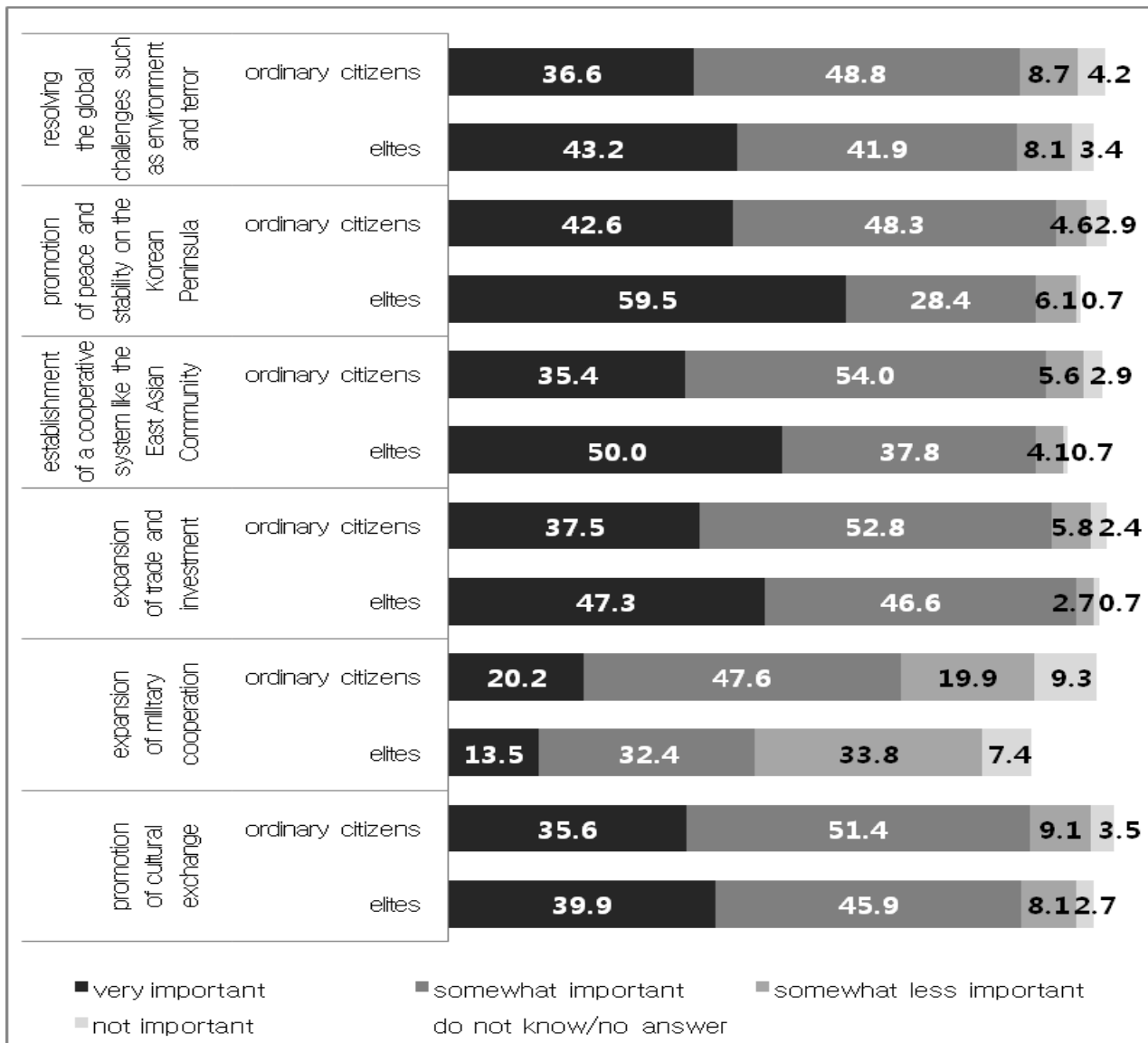
## Conclusions

Poll data analysis reviewed here reveals that the Chinese view their national interests as in sync with those of the South Koreans in preserving peace on the Korean Peninsula, building cooperative mechanisms in the East Asian region, and resolving global challenges such as environmental degradation and global terrorism. Finding interests aligned on these local, regional, and global levels is a good sign for both countries to expand bilateral cooperation with each other. Promoting trade and investment with South Korea is viewed as important, but military cooperation is regarded as less so for bilateral cooperation. This view of inappropriate military cooperation is natural, considering that six out of ten Chinese citizens and eight out of ten Chinese elites view South Korea as closer to the United States when compared with China.

It is notable to see Chinese concerns about possible military clashes between South and North Korea. Of ordinary Chinese citizens, 45.8% see the possibility as high and seven out of ten think China should intervene in the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, only a quarter of Chinese elites see the possibility of inter-Korean military clashes as high. Half of them would ask China to intervene actively in the Korean Peninsula while a quarter of them would favor caution. This poll was taken in the summer, after the sinking of *Cheonan* when the Chinese government responded cautiously, not wishing to blame North Korea for the attack. How the open shelling of South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island by North Korea would have affected Chinese elite views on the need to intervene is an interesting question to investigate. With reluctance to intervene and to take a clearer stance on both incidents, China has lost credit and confidence among South Koreans. If Beijing wants to play the role of honest broker between South and North Korea, it is better to intervene constructively to deter the aggressive behavior by Pyongyang toward Seoul. Although Chinese officials obviously see keeping peace and sta-



Figure 12 Bilateral Agenda for Cooperation between China and South Korea



bility in the Korean Peninsula as in line with passive or nonintervention, poll data here show that both Chinese citizens and elites favor more active intervention for the same purpose.

In the Chinese political imagination, South Korea is a somewhat strong country that shares similar personality characteristics and cultural traits with China. The stronger South Korea is perceived, and the more similar South Koreans are viewed, the Chinese will then tend to see the country more favorably. Therefore, it is important for South Korea to cultivate these traits to forge an improved national image. On the average

favorability rating on the 0-100 scale, South Korea receives the middle point, slightly skewed to the favorable side, from ordinary Chinese citizens. Elites' favorability score is higher than that of ordinary citizens, marking 67.8 points. Although South Korea's favorability is second to the United States, it is not that much favored vis-à-vis North Korea while being more favored than Japan. Other polls reveal that the Chinese favorable attitude toward South Korea has been weakening and that this is very important South Korea to regain. Many Chinese view South Korea through the benign cultural lens of South Korea as an affluent and





advanced country. At the same time, they find South Koreans very nationalistic and disrespectful. Only one out of three Chinese elites think South Koreans respect China, while six out of ten find South Koreans ignore China. In particular, Chinese feel South Korea contradicts history and ownership of Confucianism. Being proud of their national achievements and confident of China's future, the Chinese themselves are nationalistic and sensitive to how others treat them. Nationalism seems to demand a more cautious management in the bilateral South Korea–China relationship than security tangles coming from their respective security ties to the United States and North Korea.■

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The average soft power index South Korea received from China was 64.8 compared to 61.6 for Japan on the 0–100 scale. In Chinese thinking, the soft power of South Korea was stronger than that of Japan in the political, the diplomatic, and the cultural area. Japan scored higher points than South Korea in the economic and human capital area. See Chicago Council on Global Affairs. 2009. *Soft Power in Asia: Results of a 2008 Multinational Survey of Public Opinion*.

<sup>2</sup> One hundred Chinese were randomly sampled from ten cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Wuhan, Shenyang, Tianjin, Chongqing, Nanjing, Xi'an. The total responses were 1,012.

<sup>3</sup> More findings are available in Korean at Dongryull Lee and others, *Chinese Perceptions of South Korea and Ways to Strengthen South Korea's Public Diplomacy toward China* (Seoul, Korea: National Research Council for Economics, Humanities and Social

Sciences, 2010),

<sup>4</sup> Among elites, 24.7% rely on TV/radio and 10.7% of them rely on newspaper/magazines. Only 4% of elites said they rely on books/textbooks.

<sup>5</sup> For examples, the Chinese favorability score toward South Korea on the same 0–100 scale was 73.0 in the 2006 July survey and 64.5 in 2008 January–February survey, both by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs. In these two surveys, North Korea favorability also declined from 72.6 to 55.5.

<sup>6</sup> The World Factbook, CIA,

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html>.

South Korea ranked as the 45<sup>th</sup> with \$30,200, and China ranked as the 127<sup>th</sup> with \$7,400.

<sup>7</sup> Chinese military expenditure in 2009 in 2008 U.S. dollars was 98.8 billion U.S. dollars, and South Korean expenditure was 27.1 billion U.S. dollars. In the 2009 current prices, Chinese expenditure was 100.4 billion U.S. dollars while South Korean expenditure was 24.1 billion U.S. dollars. See the SIPRI's Military Expenditure Database,

<http://milexdata.sipri.org/files/?file=SIPRI+milex+data+1988-2009.xls>.

<sup>8</sup> It is not clear if Chinese assessed South Korea's national power more from the hard power perspective of economic wealth and military power rather than from the perspective of cultural soft power. Nevertheless, it is quite fair to assume that respondents have interpreted national power from the traditional concept of "rich nation and strong army."

<sup>9</sup> "Don't know" answer was 12.2% in the case of elites, which was much higher than the 3.3% of ordinary Chinese.

