

East Asia Institute (EAI) reports on
「The 10th Survey on Mutual Perceptions of South Korea and Japan」
September 1, 2022

The 10th Korea–Japan Joint Public Opinion Poll was conducted jointly by the East Asia Institute (President Yul Sohn) and Genron NPO (President Yasushi Kudo). The ten years of the two institutes’ continuous efforts to examine the mutual public perception of South Korea and Japan coincide with the period of the “lost decade” of bilateral relations where the two countries have been locked in mutual distrust. In 2012, major tensions occurred over history, national security, and economic issues, including the controversies over the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), former President Lee Myung Bak’s landmark visit to Korea’s easternmost islets of Dokdo in 2012, suspended deal of the Korea–Japan Currency Swap, and the withdrawal from the talks on the Japanese Military Sexual Slavery problem. The soured bilateral relationship has lasted for a decade.

However, this year’s survey data clearly shows upwards curves in numerous aspects of Seoul–Tokyo ties. In the areas of (1) mutual perceptions towards the other country, (2) the importance of making efforts to improve bilateral relations, and (3) the expectations for the future state of the relationship, all numbers are approaching their highest level in ten years. In addition, between South Korea and Japan, the public perceptions converge over economic, security and foreign policy issues. The public perceptions of the two countries converge on the threat of China, the North Korea nuclear problem, the ROK–U.S.–Japan trilateral cooperation, and economic security issues.

South Korea and Japanese attitudes bifurcate regarding the historical problem, the biggest obstacle preventing the restoration of the bilateral relations, such as wartime forced labor and comfort women issues. While the public in South Korea perceive it as an issue of historical interpretation, the Japanese recognize it as a matter of trust, whether agreements between countries should be kept or not. Yet, it is noteworthy that a growing public opinion supports the

necessity of managing historical issues, not to spark a diplomatic tussle, and to address them in future-oriented ways.

The shifting trends in public opinion create a favorable environment for the political communities in Seoul and Tokyo to mend the bilateral ties and promote mutual cooperation. The public expects a broader perspective in addressing historical disputes and sees eye to eye on the importance of practical cooperation in trade, supply chain management, high-tech, ecological environment, and military security.

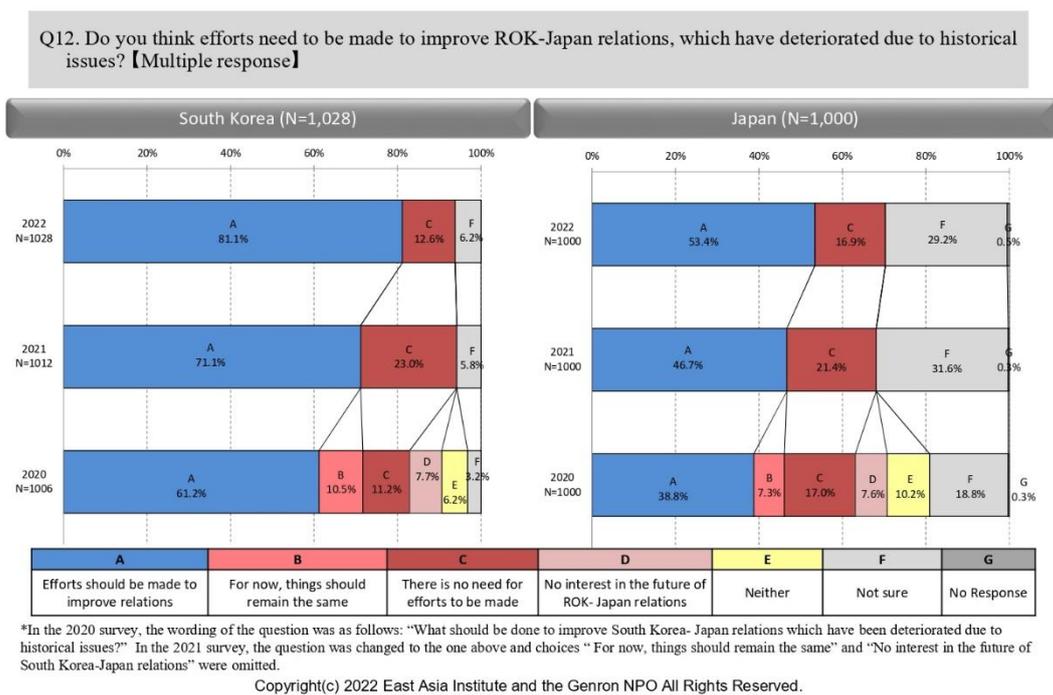
There are SIX key takeaways from the 10th Survey.

1. Strong popular demands for improving bilateral relations

The most notable change in this year's survey is that there have been stronger public demands to break the persistent deadlock between South Korea and Japan. An overwhelming majority of Koreans at 81% of the respondents, and a majority of the Japanese respondents at 53.4%, supported improving bilateral relations (Figure 1). This atmosphere is shown to be reflected in polls for prospects of the bilateral ties and perceptions towards each other.

South Korea's favorable perception of Japan stands at 30.6%, while negative perceptions stand at 52.8% (Figure 2). Compared to the previous year, this is a 10.1% point increase in favorable perception and an 8.6% point decrease in negative perception. Meanwhile, Japan's favorable perception of South Korea showed improvement by a 5% point increase from 25.4% to 30.4%, while unfavorable perceptions towards South Korea decreased by 8.3% points, from 48.6% to 40.3%.

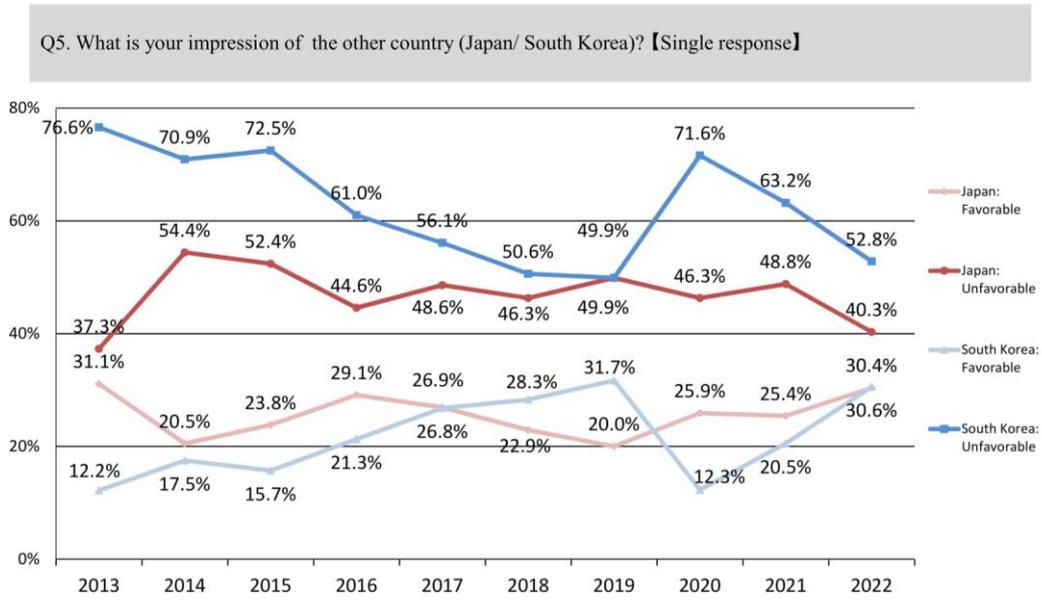
[Figure 1] Efforts to Improve ROK–Japan Relations



Within the past decade, favorable perceptions towards each other in 2022 come close to an all-time high, while unfavorable perceptions in 2022 are close to the lowest. Positive perceptions towards each other hit the lowest point during the conflict between the Abe and Park administration from 2013 to 2014, followed by a steady improvement in the following years until polls plummeted when the South Korean Supreme Court’s decision in favor of the victims of Japan’s forced labor triggered a series of diplomatic confrontations including the Korea–Japan trade war and the dispute over GSOMIA. Since then, we witness a successful recovery in favorable perceptions, with South Korea showing an 18.3% point increase in the positive perception towards Japan, while Japan’s positive perception of South Korea has risen by 10.4% points.

This figure is almost three times higher than the increase in positive perceptions towards China (12% in 2022), but it is still low, resulting in mutual mistrust. South Korean favorable perceptions towards Japan have remained stagnant over the past decade, with favorable responses fluctuating within the 10% to 30% range, while unfavorable responses have fluctuated from the 50% to 70% range.

[Figure 2] Perception of the Other Country: 2013–22



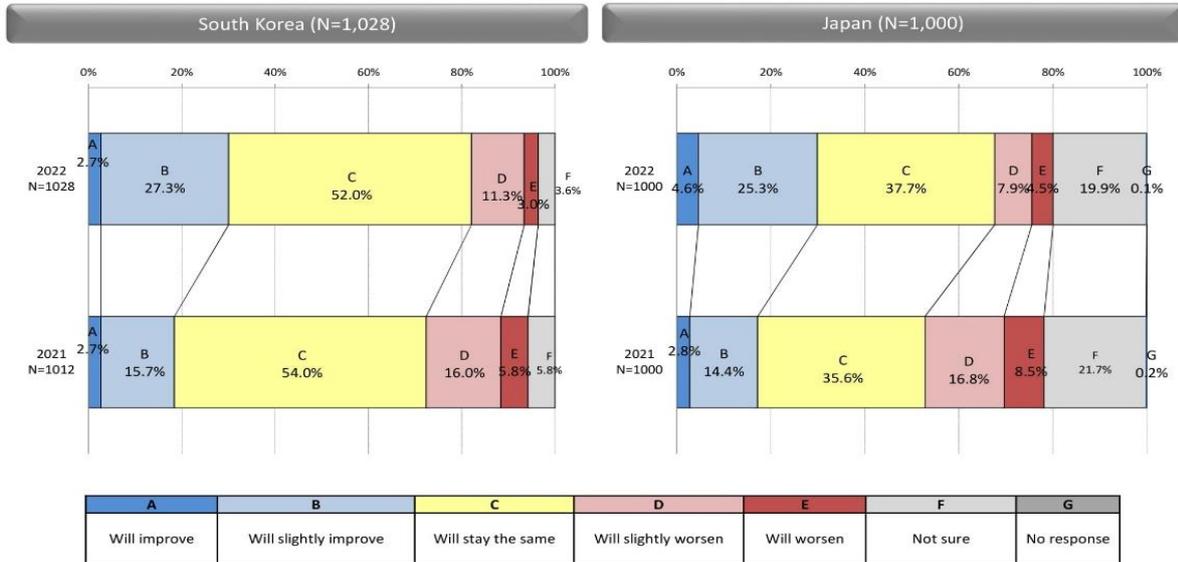
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Optimistic perceptions about the future of Korean–Japanese relations have also shown a marked improvement, with South Koreans and Japanese showing a 12% point, 11% point increase, respectively (Figure 3). The citizens of the two countries gave a positive outlook on the possibility of improved bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan under the Yoon and Kishida administrations.

[Figure 3] Future of ROK–Japan Relations

Q11. What is your assessment of the future state of bilateral relations between South Korea and Japan?

【Single response】



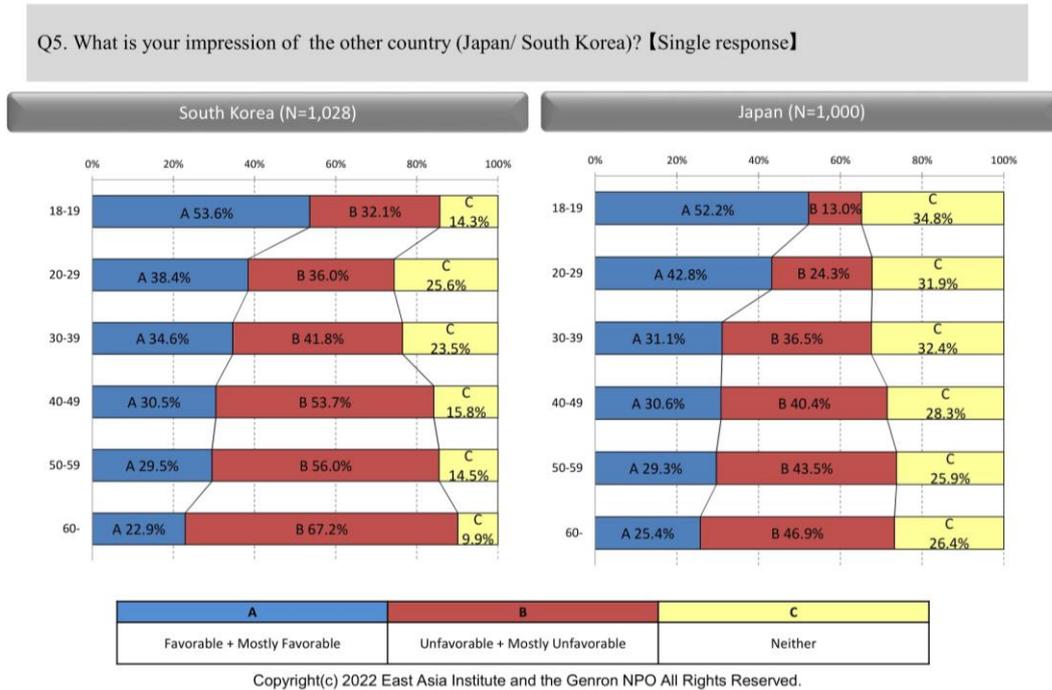
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2. The groups with a high affinity for each other’s country are (1) younger generations (Age 18–39), (2) those who have visited the other country, (3) and consumers of the other country’s pop culture.

The younger generations between the ages of 18 and 39 have the highest favorability ratings within all demographic groups (Figure 4). In particular, more than a majority of teenage respondents have a favorable impression of each other, while the majority of respondents over their 60s displayed negative sentiments towards each other. In South Korea, 53.5% of teenage respondents have a good impression of Japan. Also in Japan, 52.2% of teenage respondents have a good impression of South Korea. Conversely, only 32.1% and 13% of teenage respondents, respectively, have a negative impression of each other, the lowest across demographic groups.

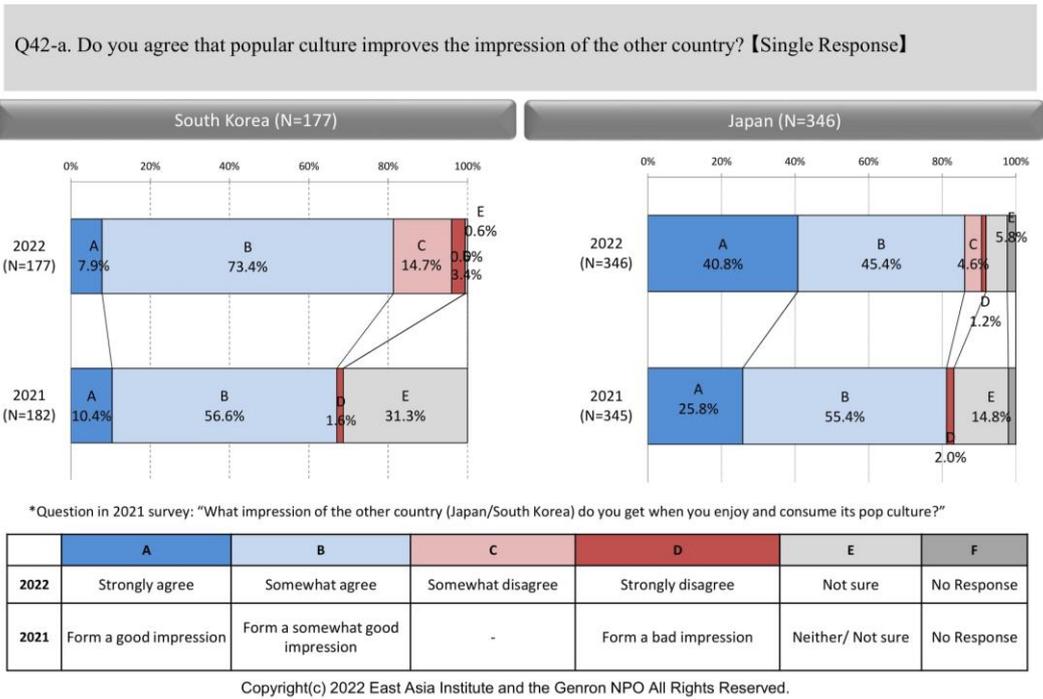
On the other hand, 22.9% of the Korean respondents and 25.4% of the Japanese respondents over their 60s express a good impression of others. Similarly, 67.2% and 46.9% of the respondents in this age group have a negative impression of each other which is the highest among demographic groups.

[Figure 4] Perception of the Other Country: by Ages



Next, there is a strong, positive correlation between exposure to popular culture and a favorable impression of the other country. With 81.3% of South Korean respondents who regularly consume Japanese pop culture saying they would have a favorable impression towards Japan, and 86.2% of Japanese respondents who regularly consume Korean pop culture saying they are likely to have a favorable impression of South Korea, indicating the strong influence of popular culture in ameliorating mutual perceptions between the two countries (Figure 5).

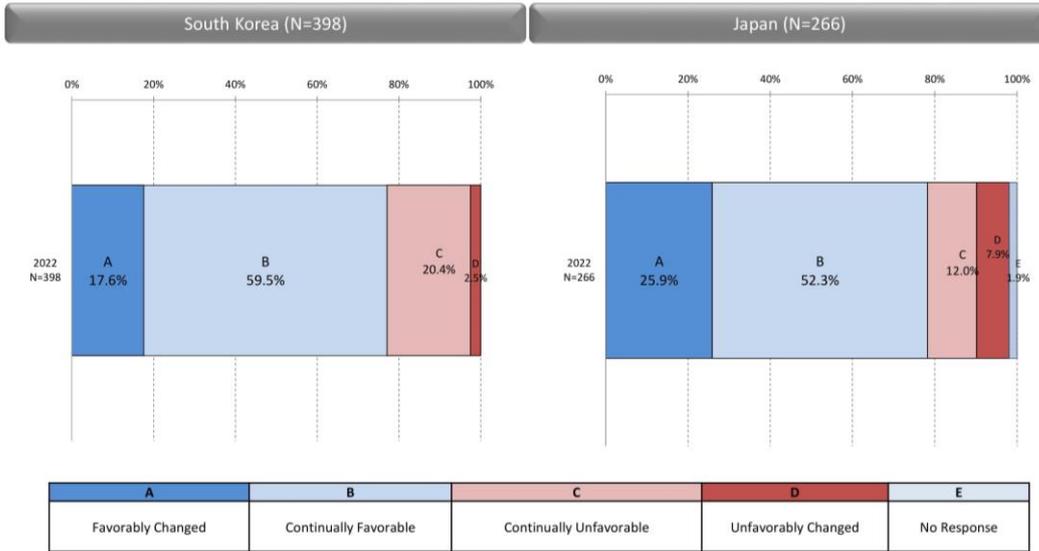
[Figure 5] Impression of the Other Country through Popular Culture



Finally, when asked how the respondents' perception toward the other country changes after visiting the country, 77% of the respondents of both countries responded that their perceptions were favorably improved (Figure 6).

[Figure 6] Perception Change after Visiting the Other Country

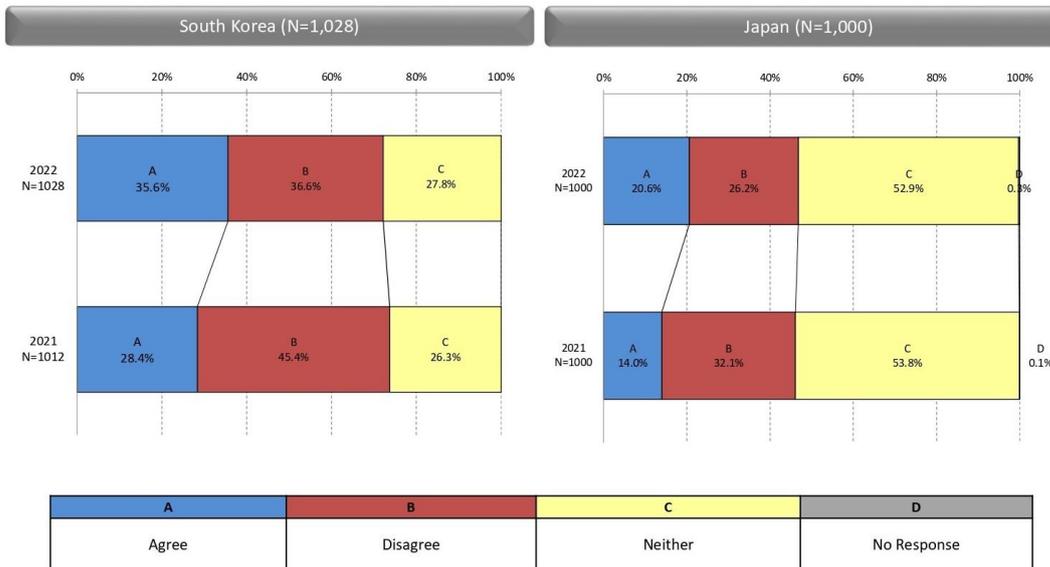
Q1-d (Only those who answered that they have visited the other country in Q1-3) Has your impression of the other country (Japan / South Korea) changed after visiting the other country? [Single response]



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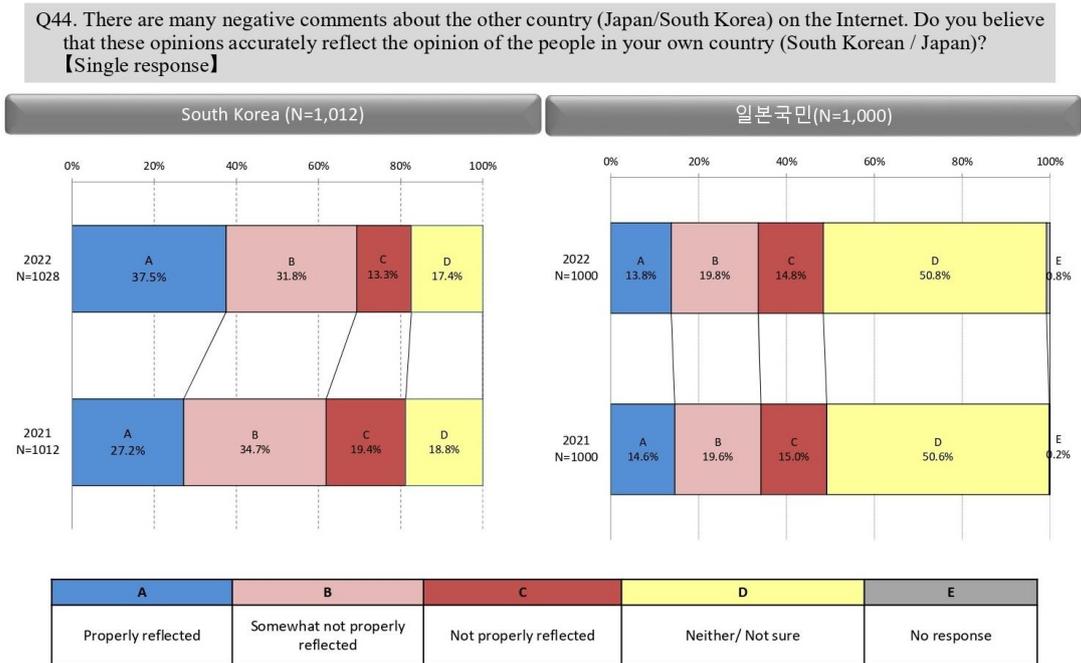
[Figure 7] Evaluation of the Fairness of Respective Media Reports

Q43. Do you think newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts of your own country (South Korea/ Japan) release objective and fair reports on ROK-Japan relations? [Single response]



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[Figure 8] Public Opinion on the Internet



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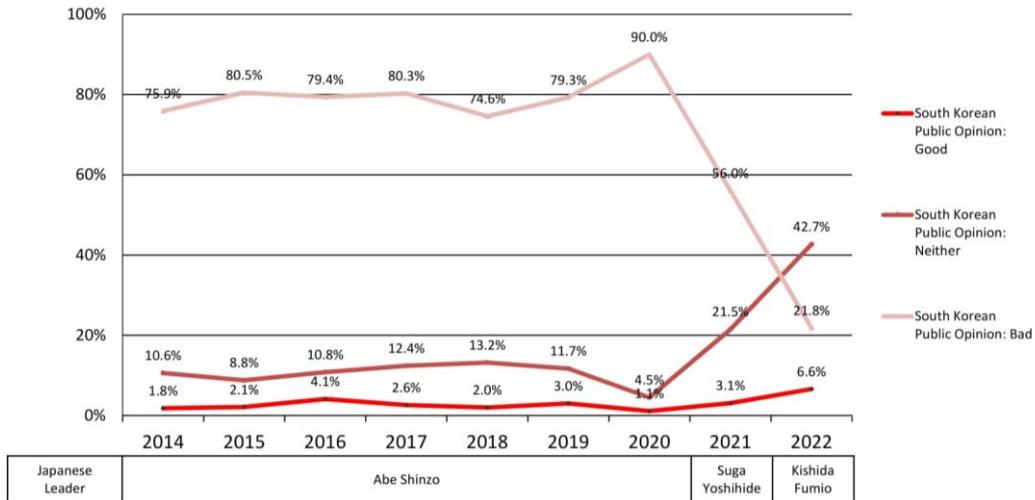
65

3. The image of the other country is affected by the image of the country's leaders

In both South Korea and Japan, a strong correlation is displayed between the perception of their counterpart's leaders and that of the country. Negative image toward the leader of the other country leads to negative view of the entire country. On the other hand, public opinion toward the other country tends to improve with the resignation of a disliked leader. In Japan, the negative impression of Korea plummeted after President Moon Jae-in left his office (Figure 7). Likewise, Prime Minister Abe's resignation has become a turning point in the Korean citizens' sentiment towards Japan. Ever since former Prime Minister Abe's resignation in 2020, the negative impression of Japan's leaders, such as Prime Ministers Suga and Kishida has decreased (Figure 9).

[Figure 9] South Korean Impression on Japan's Leader: 2014-22

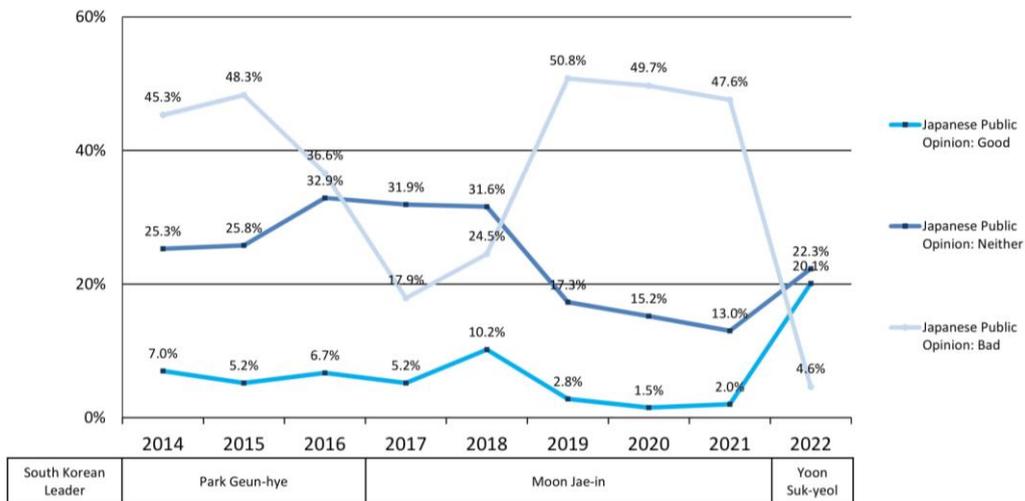
Q17. What is your impression on the other country's (Japan/South Korea) leader? – South Korea [Single response]



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[Figure 10] Japanese Impression on South Korea's Leader: 2014-22

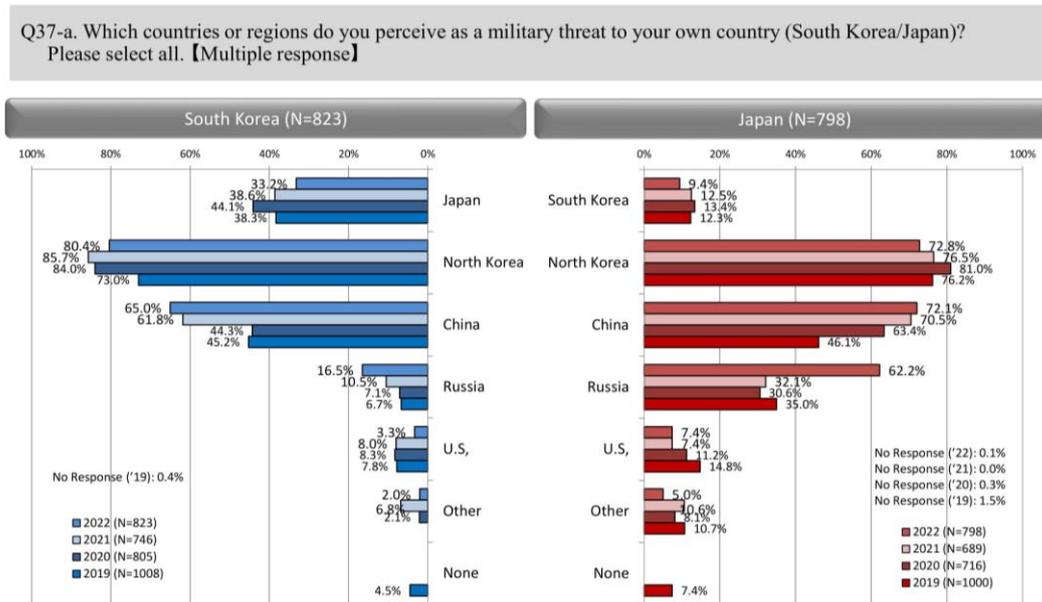
Q17. What is your impression on the other country's (Japan/South Korea) leader? – Japan [Single response]



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4. Increased threat perception toward China by Japan and South Korea and decreased mutual threat perception between Japan and South Korea

[Figure 11] Perceived Military Threat by Country and Region



* Other: EU, Vietnam, India, Middle East, Etc.
 * All respondents answered in 2019 survey; Respondents only who answered "Yes" on Q37 answered from 2020 survey.
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For South Korean respondents, 80.4% of the Korean respondents who replied that they feel threatened militarily pointed out North Korea as a military threat, followed by China at 65.0%. It is worth noting that the percentage of respondents considering China a military threat has continuously increased since the surge in 2020. On the other hand, 33.2% of the respondents consider Japan a military threat, which is a 5.4% point decrease compared to 2021 (38.6%) (Figure 11).

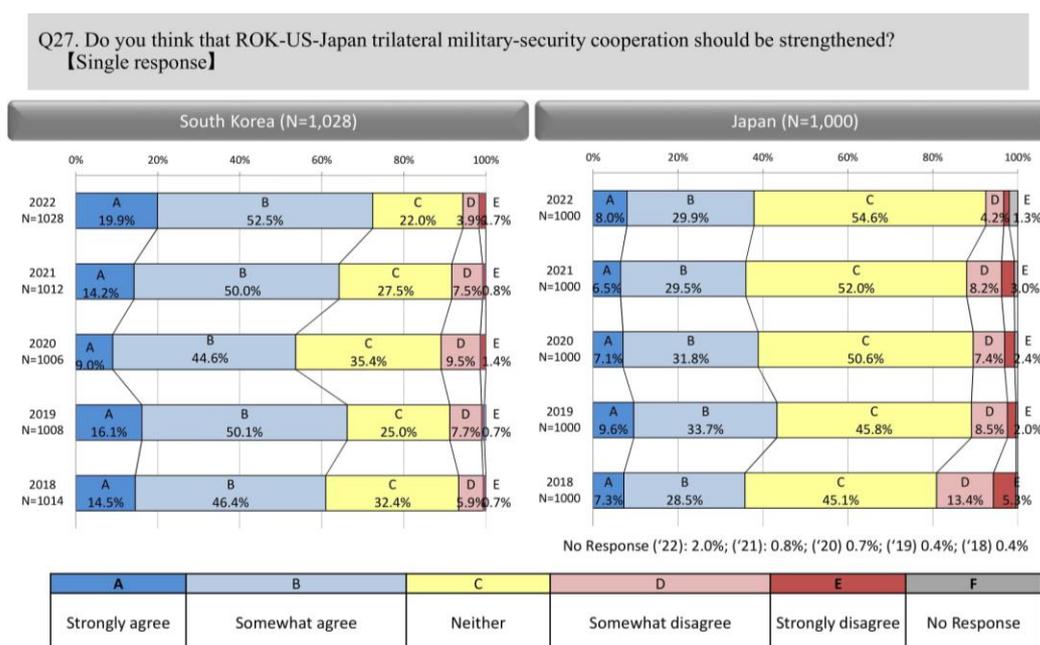
The military threats perceived by Japanese citizens were similar to those of Koreans. A relatively large number of respondents considered North Korea (72.8%) and China (72.1%) as military threats. Japan's threat perception toward China continuously increased: 46.1% in 2019 and 63.4% in 2020. It is also noteworthy that 62.2% considered Russia a military threat, a figure that has doubled since 2021 due to the influence of the Russian invasion to Ukraine.

Only 9.4% of the respondents considered Korea as a military threat, a decrease of 3.1% points

from last year's mark of 12.5%. It appears that South Korea and Japan both displayed an increase in perceived threat from China and a decrease in perceived threat from each other.

5. Increase support of the trilateral security cooperation among ROK–United States–Japan

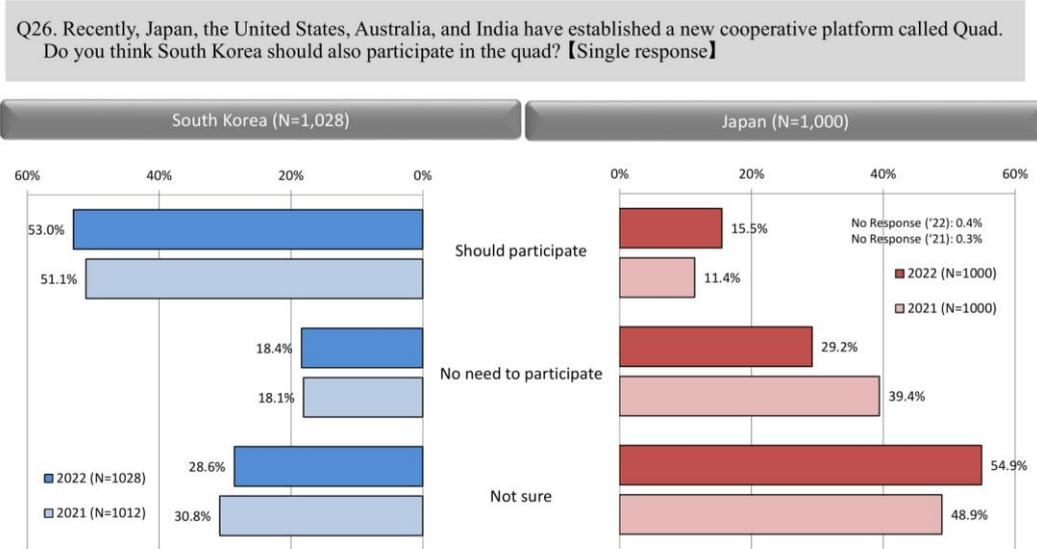
[Figure 12] Views on Strengthening the ROK–US–Japan Trilateral Security Alliance



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The increased threat perception toward China and the decreased mutual threat perception in both South Korea and Japan have led to a change in attitude toward security cooperation (Figure 12). The opinion that South Korea should strengthen the ROK–U.S.–Japan trilateral security cooperation rose from 64.2% in 2021 to 72.4% in 2022, an increase of 8.2% points. On the other hand, there was a 2.7% point decrease in the percentage of respondents that displayed negative opinions toward the trilateral security cooperation, from 8.3% to 5.6%. In Japan, although 54.6% of the respondents expressed reservations about the trilateral cooperation, responding as “neither in favor nor against,” there was a 1.9% point increase in positive opinion toward strengthening the three-way security cooperation (37.9%) and a 5.5% point decrease in negative opinion (5.5%).

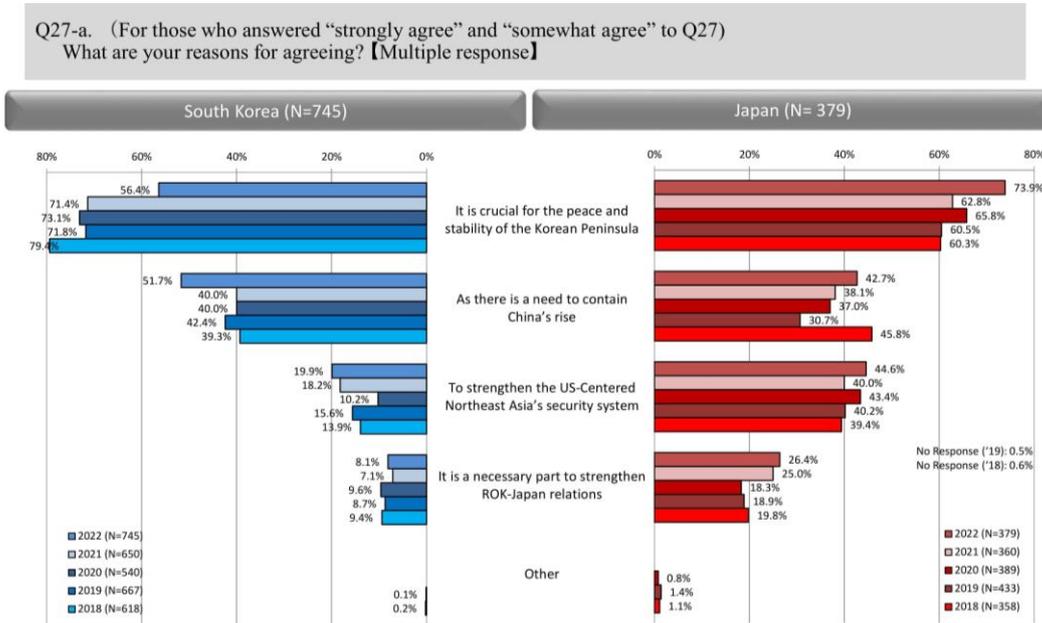
[Figure 13] Possibility of Joining the Quad



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53% of South Koreans responded that South Korea should participate in QUAD, a quadrilateral strategic forum comprising Japan, the United States, Australia, and India. In Japan, over half of the respondents replied that they “do not know” (54.9%), whereas negative responses (29.2%) towards South Korea’s participation in QUAD exceeded positive responses (15.5%). However, the positive responses have gradually increased, as indicated by the 10.2% point decrease in the negative opinion from 39.4% to 29.2% and a 4.1% point increase in the positive opinion from 11.4% to 15.5% (Figure 13).

[Figure 14] Reasons why the ROK–US–Japan
Trilateral Security Alliance Should be Strengthened



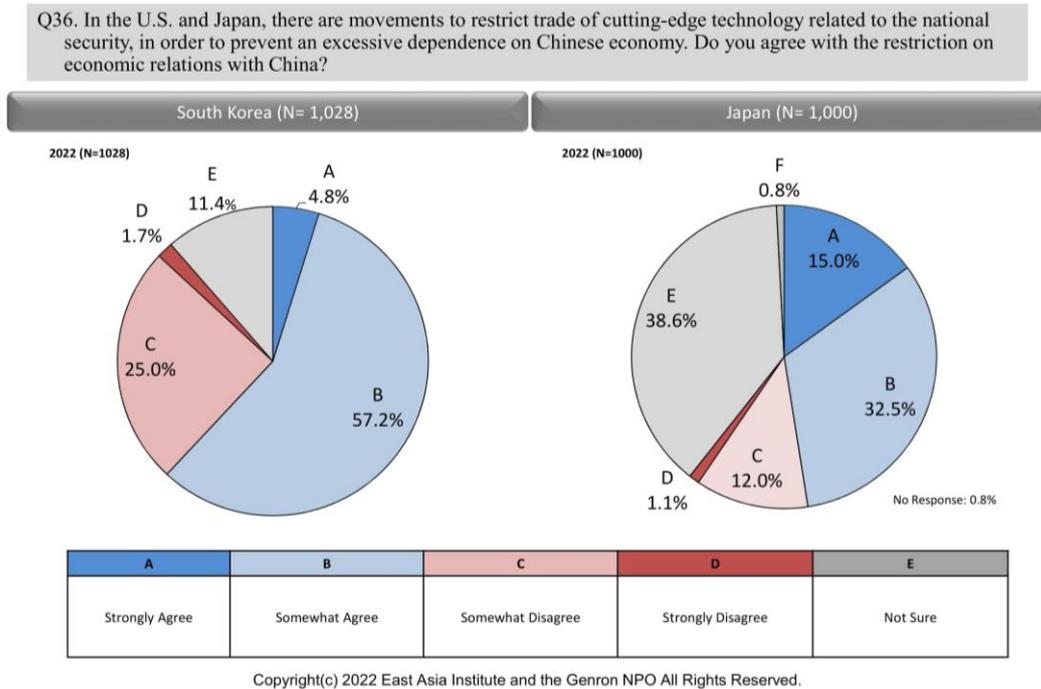
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When asked for the reason behind supporting the trilateral security cooperation in both countries, most respondents replied that they supported it for “the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula” (Korea 56.4% and Japan 73.9%). This response was followed by “the need to counterbalance China’s rise”(51.7%) in Korea, which was comparable to the support for a hawkish approach to contain North Korea. In particular, there was a 15.0% point decrease of respondents who supported containing North Korea compared to 2021 (71.4%). On the other hand, threat perceptions toward China increased by 11.7% points compared to 2021 (40.0%), which indicates a noticeable increase in the negative perception of Koreans towards China.

Meanwhile, the second-most answered response by the Japanese was “to strengthen the U.S–centered regional security cooperation system” (44.6%), which surpassed the number of respondents who supported counterbalancing China as the reason to support the trilateral security cooperation (42.7%).

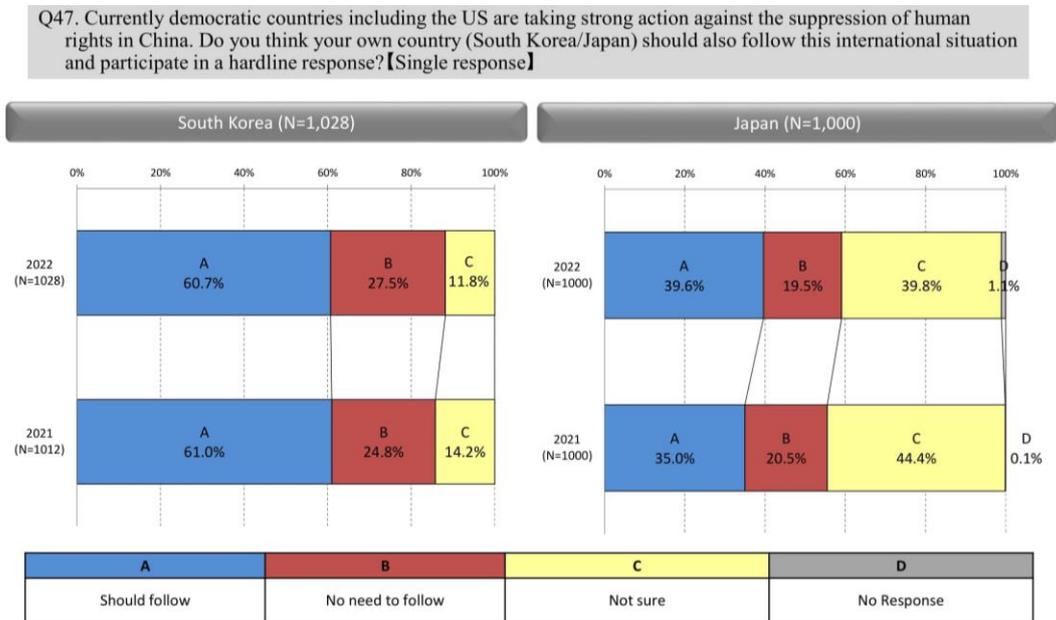
6. Converged opinions for South Korean–Japanese policies against China

[Figure 15] For or Against the Restriction on Economic Relations with China by the U.S. and Japan



Public opinion of South Korea and Japan displayed a similar pattern in major international political issues related to China. Regarding the American and Japanese trade regulations toward China in advanced technology areas, positive opinions towards restricting the economic relations with China (62.0% in Korea, 47.5% in Japan) overshadowed the negative views (26.7%, 13.1%) (Figure 15).

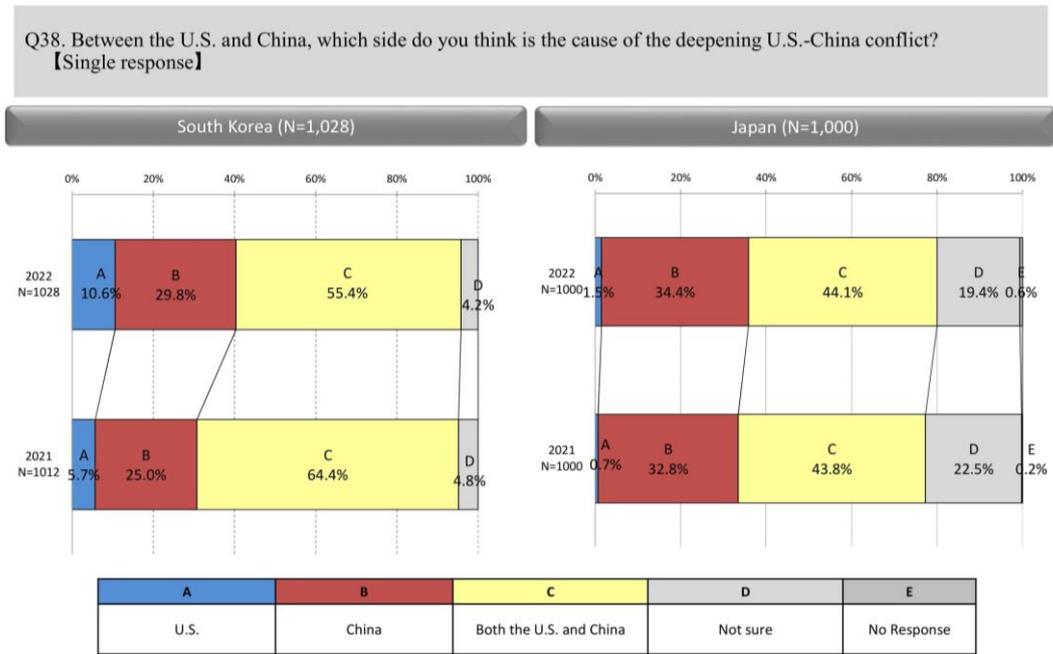
[Figure 16] The need for Tough Response
on the Suppression of Human Rights in China



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On the question of whether one’s country should join other democratic countries spearheaded by the United States in maintaining the strict stance against Chinese human rights violations, Korean public views largely remain the same, with 60.7% supporting the idea of “joining” the democratic countries and confronting China while 27.5% opposing it (compared to 61.0% in for and 24.8% against last year). On the other hand, 39.6% of the Japanese respondents agreed with the idea, whereas 19.5% disagreed with it. Although the percentage of the negative response toward confronting China remained similar to that of the previous year (20.5%), it is noteworthy that the reserved position who answered they “do not know” fell to 39.8% by 4.6% points compared to 2021 (44.4%). Those in favor increased to 39.6% by 4.6% points% compared to 2021 (35.0%). This implies that some of the Japanese who previously chose a reserved stance shifted their position and chose in favor of a hardline approach. Considering that Japan has a relatively high portion of respondents who hold a neutral position, this implies that the public opinion of the two countries has also converged in terms of responding to Chinese human rights issues (Figure 16).

[Figure 17] Reason for the Deepening U.S.–China Conflict



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When asked about attributing blame to which side for the worsening the U.S.–China relations, both South Korea and Japan answered that “both the U.S. and China are to blame” (55.4% of South Koreans and 44.1% of Japanese). 29.8% of the South Korean respondents chose China solely to be responsible for the tensions, which was a 4.8% point increase compared to the previous year (25.0%). A similar pattern appeared in Japan, with a 1.6% point increase in the respondents choosing China to be responsible for compared to the previous year (32.8%). This reveals that both sides share similar perspectives towards the U.S.–China conflict (Figure 17).

The convergence of public opinion illustrated by the perception toward China and policy preferences of Korean and Japanese citizens reflect the demands by the public that the political leaders of both countries should work closely together on major issues in East Asia, such as democracy, cutting-edge technologies, and trade, while responding jointly to attempts to violate universal values.