



LESTER
CROWN CENTER
ON US FOREIGN POLICY



Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons

Toby Dalton, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Karl Friedhoff, Chicago Council on Global Affairs
Lami Kim, US Army War College

February 2022

Introduction

Once a topic for the political fringe, acquisition of nuclear weapons has become a mainstream feature of South Korea's national security discourse. Public opinion polling over the last decade shows consistent majority support for nuclear possession. Leading political figures publicly discuss the idea of either developing a South Korean domestic nuclear weapons program or seeking the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. In recent national elections, the conservative party included the return of US nuclear weapons in its policy platform. However, public attitudes around the distinctions between an independent nuclear arsenal and US deployment, as well as the potential implications of pursuing either option, are not well explored. Even though the nuclear issue is not prominent in campaigns ahead of South Korea's March 2022 presidential election, the growing threats in the region and doubts about the security alliance with the United States make the nuclear question increasingly relevant.

This report investigates public attitudes on these issues and finds robust majority support for a domestic nuclear weapons program and smaller majority support for the stationing of US nuclear weapons in South Korea. When asked to choose between the two, the public overwhelmingly prefers a domestic weapons program to deployment of US nuclear weapons. Public support for both options appears to be insensitive to potential negative repercussions for South Korea's relations with China, South Korea's economic security, the alliance with the United States, or hopes for North Korea's denuclearization.

Key Findings

- Support for nuclear weapons is robust, with 71 percent in favor of South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons, while 56 percent support a deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea. However, when asked to choose between these two options, the public overwhelmingly prefer an independent arsenal (67%) over US deployment (9%). Interestingly, 40 percent oppose US deployment, while just 26 percent oppose a domestic nuclear arsenal.
- Public attitudes on nuclear weapons do not strongly align with rationales for armament offered by some South Korean politicians and analysts.
 - Six in ten (61%) remain confident the United States will defend South Korea in a conflict with North Korea.
 - Confidence that the United States will carry through on alliance commitments is positively associated with support for nuclear weapons, contrary to beliefs that alliance commitment concerns are a main driver of public views on nuclear acquisition.
 - Some politicians argue that nuclear acquisition would increase the likelihood that North Korea will disarm, yet 82 percent of South Koreans believe it is unlikely North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons, and they are the most likely to support a domestic weapons program.
- “Threats other than North Korea” are a main driver of support for a domestic nuclear arsenal, and a majority (55%) say China will be the biggest threat to South Korea in ten years.
 - But the prestige offered by being a nuclear weapons state is a strong secondary factor. One in four South Koreans (26%) ranked increasing South Korea’s prestige in the international community as the main reason for their support of nuclear weapons, similar in number to countering the North Korean threat (23%).
- Among the majority that supports nuclear weapons acquisition, potential consequences—such as pressure from China, international economic sanctions, or US troop withdrawal—do not strongly diminish support. Only 11 percent of supporters changed their view when faced with these hypothetical consequences.

South Koreans Overwhelmingly Prefer Domestic Nuclear Weapons Program to US Deployment of Nuclear Weapons When Asked to Choose

Under the South Korea-US alliance, South Korea relies on the United States’ nuclear arsenal as the ultimate guarantor of South Korean security. As North Korea’s nuclear arsenal expanded and improved in recent decades, the US nuclear guarantee grew in perceived importance in discussions on South Korea’s security. Over the same period, South Koreans also began to debate whether to continue to rely on US extended nuclear deterrence, or whether South Korea should acquire its own nuclear weapons, with support for nuclear acquisition typically

ranging from 50 to 70 percent across different polling firms; the results of our poll (71% support) clearly fit this trend.

There are two primary policy options when it comes to nuclear weapons in South Korea: US deployment of nuclear weapons or an independent South Korean nuclear weapons program. Past polling has not differentiated between these options, but as our research finds, South Koreans have a clear preference between the two.

In recent years, some South Korea politicians and security experts argued for the return of US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. These weapons were stationed in South Korea from 1958 to 1991, when they were removed by President George H. W. Bush as part of a global drawdown of deployed US nuclear weapons. Proponents of US nuclear deployment to South Korea argue such a move would strengthen deterrence of North Korea and address concerns about the credibility of US extended nuclear deterrence guarantees to South Korea. Some South Koreans worry that North Korea's ability to target the United States with nuclear missiles during a conflict will deter Washington from following through on defense commitments to South Korea, thus decoupling the alliance. Reportedly, in 2016, South Korea's then-deputy national security adviser during the conservative Park Geun-hye administration made [an informal request](#) for redeployment of these weapons. A year later, in the midst of increasing tensions on the Korean Peninsula, South Korea's defense minister under the progressive Moon Jae-in administration [stated publicly](#) that redeployment is "worth a full review."

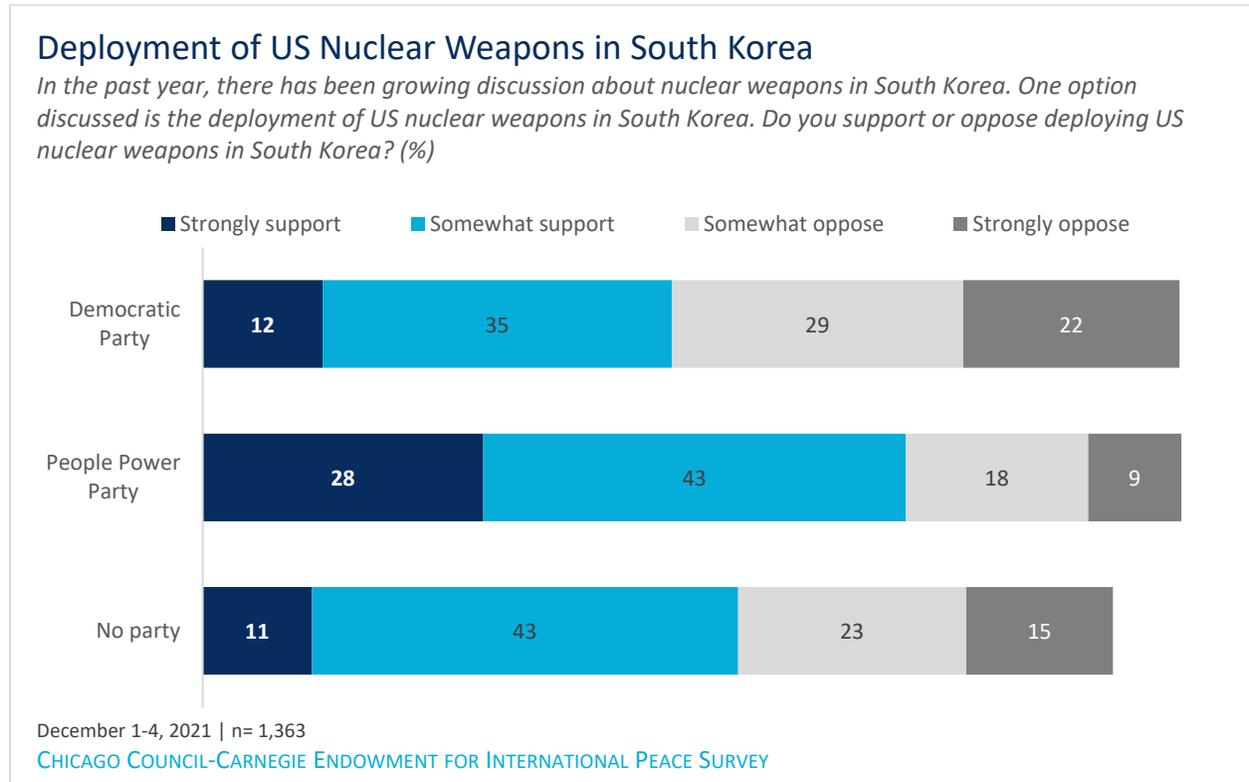
In our polling, 57 percent of respondents favored the deployment of US nuclear weapons in South Korea.¹ US administrations have been noncommittal about how they might respond to a formal request for deployment, though in September 2021, a State Department official [stated unequivocally](#) that "US policy would not support that."

Despite majority support for a US nuclear deployment, such a move could prove highly contentious. Protests over the US THAAD missile defense deployment in South Korea in 2016, which continue today, suggest that local communities around military bases at which US nuclear weapons would be stationed could react strongly, even violently. A US deployment would also heighten tensions on the Korean Peninsula, raise the chances of an unwanted nuclear escalation, and likely cause vehement protests from China.

There appears to be a political split between conservatives and progressives on this option. While a majority (71%) of the conservative People Power Party (PPP) supporters in our poll favor US deployment of nuclear weapons, fewer among the Democratic Party (DP) say the

¹ This report uses the term "deployment" rather than "redemption" or "restationing" to refer to the option of placing US tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea. Although the stationing of US nuclear weapons in South Korea technically would constitute a redeployment, the survey used the term "deployment" in order to reduce the potential to bias respondents toward support if it was clear US nuclear weapons had been present in South Korea in the past. The survey also referred to "nuclear weapons" rather than "tactical nuclear weapons," as the general public is unlikely to differentiate between the two.

same. But DP supporters themselves are split—with 47 percent in favor and 51 percent opposed to US nuclear deployment.

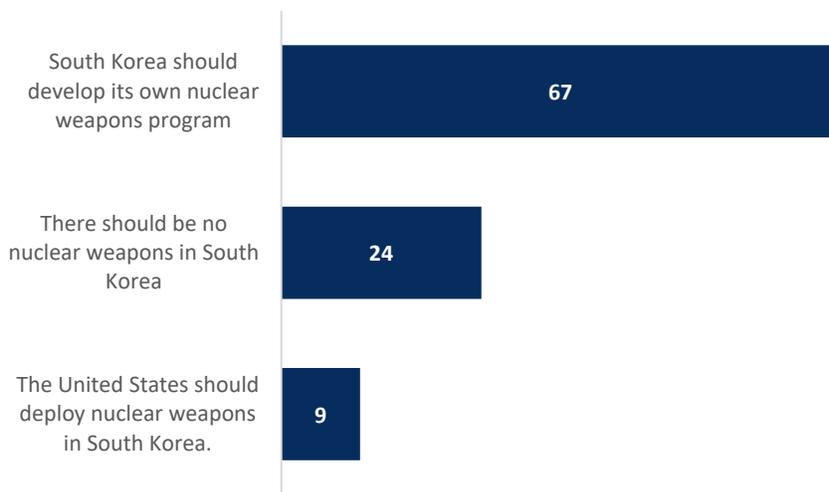


These political splits stand in contrast to more-uniform support for South Korea to pursue a domestic nuclear weapons program. Majorities of supporters of both mainline parties favor a domestic program, although with some variation in intensity. Among the supporters of the progressive DP, 66 percent either strongly (29%) or somewhat support (37%) such a program. And among supporters of the conservative People Power Party, 81 percent either strongly (45%) or somewhat (36%) support it. Majorities of all age cohorts are also in support.

When asked to choose between US deployment and a domestic nuclear weapons program, the South Korean public overwhelmingly prefers a domestic program. Only 9 percent would opt for US deployment, while 67 percent say South Korea should develop its own program. One-quarter (24%) think there should be no nuclear weapons in South Korea at all.

Nuclear Weapon Preferences

Which of the following best describe your preference regarding nuclear weapons in South Korea? (%)



December 1-4, 2021 | n= 1,500

CHICAGO COUNCIL-CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE SURVEY

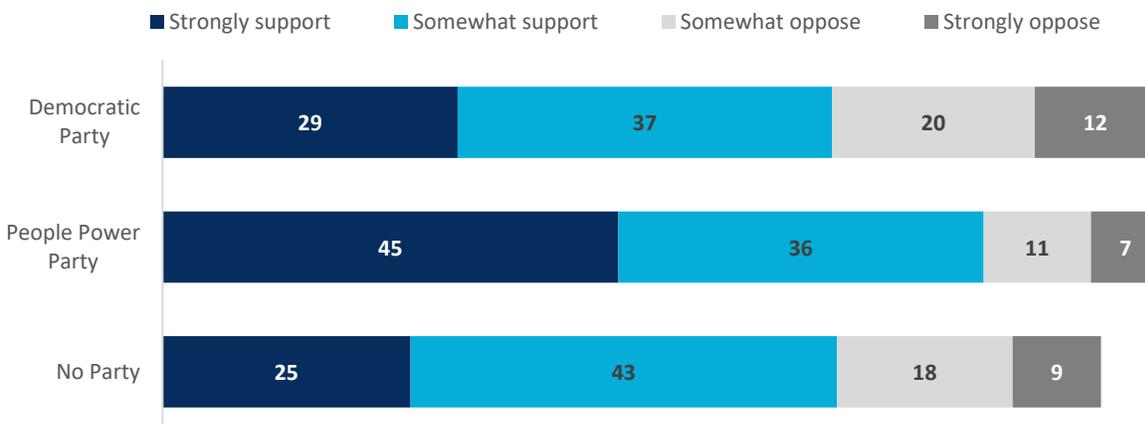
Support for a Domestic Nuclear Weapons Program Remains Strong

South Korea initiated a [nuclear weapons program](#) in the 1970s but ended the effort under pressure from the United States. Thereafter, open discussion of acquiring nuclear weapons became a political taboo, a topic that only a few conservative politicians and commentators dared to broach. However, over the past decade, the discussion around a nuclear South Korea has gone mainstream. [Major political figures](#) have publicly discussed the idea of either a South Korean domestic nuclear weapons program or the introduction of US nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. Conservative [defense analysts](#) and [editorial writers](#) periodically argue for a nuclear option. Amid stalled diplomacy with North Korea and concerns about a weakening alliance with the United States, the issue was expected to feature prominently in the [2022 presidential campaign](#). As recently as September 2021, Yoon Suk-[yeol](#), the People Power Party's candidate in the March 2022 presidential election, said he would request not only redeployment of US nuclear weapons but also nuclear sharing. However, he later appeared to walk back this position. Neither of the final candidates engaged the nuclear question in a significant way, and it is not contained in either party's policy platform, pushing the debate into the background once again.

Even though the nuclear issue receded from the campaign, that has not dampened topline public support for nuclear weapons: seven in ten (71%) support a South Korean domestic nuclear weapons program. This finding was largely consistent across age cohorts and political party support.

South Korean Nuclear Weapons Program

Another option is for South Korea to develop its own nuclear weapons. Do you support or oppose South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons program? (%)



December 1-4, 2021 | n= 1,363

CHICAGO COUNCIL-CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE SURVEY

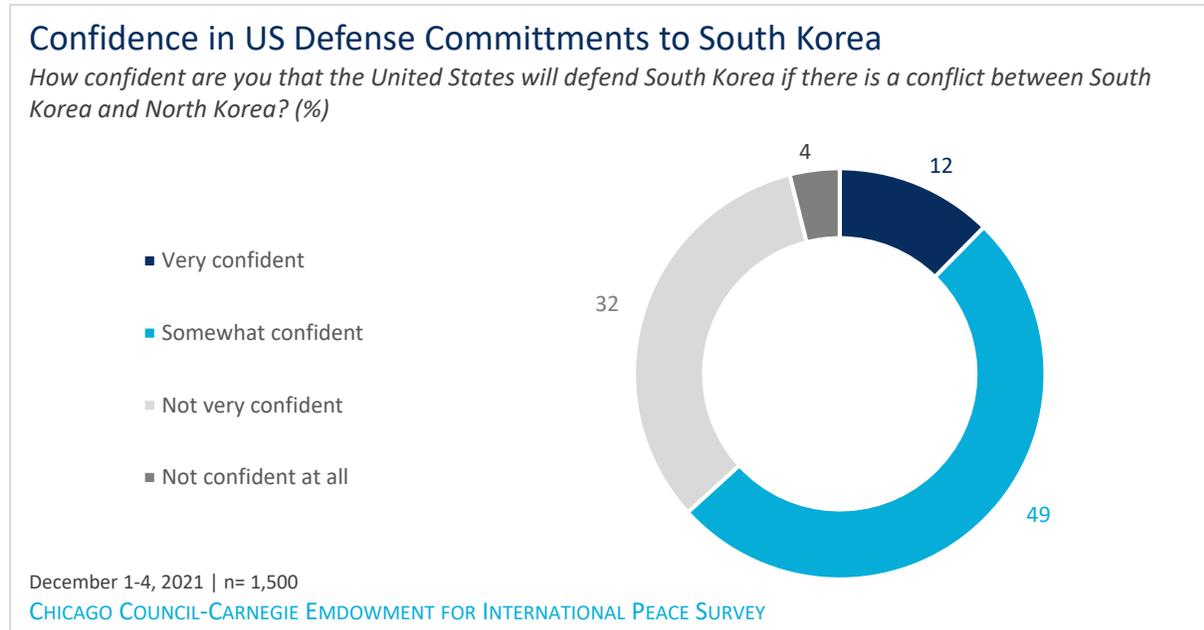
While opinion polling over the last decade consistently showed around 60 percent public support for a domestic nuclear weapons program, the [reasons for this support](#) are rarely interrogated. Analysts tend to assume that support is tied to concerns about diminishing confidence in US alliance commitments to South Korea, a growing belief that North Korea will not denuclearize, or that North Korea's military is stronger than South Korea's, hence requiring the latter to go nuclear to increase its security. Indeed, prominent politicians who have voiced support for nuclear options have made exactly these arguments. Yet our polling data shows some surprising deviation from this conventional wisdom, including rationales that security professionals and politicians tend to ignore.

Confidence in the US alliance correlates with support for a domestic weapons program

South Korean confidence in US willingness to uphold alliance defense commitments during a conflict with North Korea has waxed and waned over time. The common question is whether Washington would be willing to trade Seoul for Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, or any number of other American cities. That list of American cities has grown as North Korea demonstrated ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear weapon anywhere in US territory. Among South Korean security professionals, there is an abiding concern that during a crisis on the Korean Peninsula, the United States would be unwilling to risk damage to the US homeland in order to protect South Korea. These concerns persist, even though [a majority](#) of Americans now favor defending South Korea. Doubts about the credibility of US alliance commitments are presumed to be a major driver for South Korea to take its own defense much more seriously through acquisition of nuclear weapons.

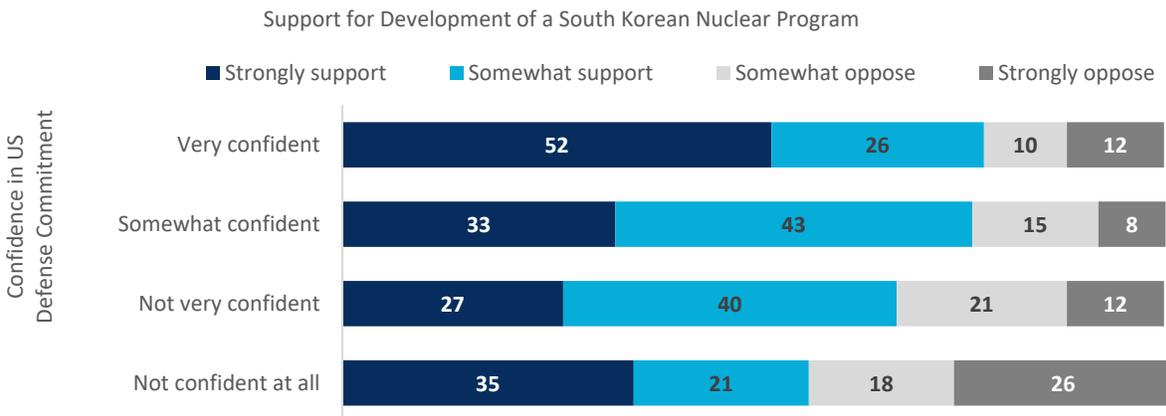
Interestingly, though doubts about the American commitment may be prominent among South Korean security circles, they are not fully shared by the Korean public. Six in ten (61%) South

Koreans say they are either *very confident* (12%) or *somewhat confident* (49%) that the United States will defend South Korea if there is a conflict with North Korea. Thirty-six percent say they are either not *very confident* (32%) or *not confident at all* (4%). These findings vary little across age group and political affiliation.



The data do reflect some relationship between support for nuclear weapons and confidence in US alliance commitments. Counterintuitively, however, the data do not show that decreasing alliance credibility is associated with an increase in support for a South Korean nuclear weapons program. Instead, higher confidence in the US commitment to defend South Korea is associated with higher levels of support for a domestic nuclear weapons program. Among those who are *very confident* in the US commitment to defend South Korea, a majority (78%) either strongly support (52%) or somewhat support (26%) a domestic nuclear weapons program. Of those who are *somewhat confident* in the US commitment, 76 percent support a domestic program. Majorities of those who are *not very confident* (67%) or *not confident at all* (56%) in the US commitment still support a domestic weapons program, but comparatively less than those with greater confidence in the alliance. There may be several plausible explanations for this phenomenon. For instance, some scholars theorize that this positive association between alliance credibility and support for nuclear acquisition may result from a [nuclear “backfire” effect](#), in which fears that the United States might miscalculate in a nuclear crisis with North Korea drive South Koreans to seek more autonomy so as to avoid entrapment in a conflict escalated by the United States.

Alliance Confidence and Weapon Development Preferences



December 1-4, 2021 | n= 1,500

CHICAGO COUNCIL-CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE SURVEY

US Deployment of Nuclear Weapons and Alliance Confidence

There is a strong positive association between support for US deployment and confidence in the US commitment to defend South Korea. This may be counterintuitive. Analysts tend to assume that the placement of US nuclear weapons in South Korea would help to shore up eroding public confidence in US extended nuclear deterrence guarantees and in the credibility of alliance commitments. And that erosion of confidence may be showing up [in polling data](#). In 2019, 78 percent said they had confidence in the United States to defend South Korea, and 82 percent said the same in 2020. In this survey, 61 percent said they are confident in the US commitment versus 36 percent who are not confident. That said, some of the apparent decline in confidence may be a consequence of variation in the question framing. The 2019 and 2020 question asked about the United States defending South Korea in the event of a North Korean attack, whereas this survey asked about the United States defending South Korea during a conflict between the two Koreas.

However, US deployment of nuclear weapons is not a salve for those who are not confident in the US commitment to defend South Korea. The data suggests that majorities who are either not very confident (53%) or not confident at all (55%) in the US commitment actually oppose US nuclear deployment. It is those who are already confident in the US commitment that show higher levels of support. Among those who are very confident, 68 percent support US deployment, and for those who are somewhat confident that number is 63 percent.

Slim prospects for North Korea's denuclearization boost support for a domestic weapons program

Fifteen years after Pyongyang first conducted a nuclear explosive test, the prospects of North Korea's complete denuclearization are increasingly dim. Even though South Korea and the United States continue to call for North Korea to denuclearize, there is growing recognition among expert communities and the public that such an outcome is unlikely and [more-realistic policy options](#) are needed.

Unsurprisingly, our poll shows that South Koreans have very low expectations for North Korea to denuclearize. Just 12 percent say North Korea is likely to give up its nuclear weapons versus 82 percent who say it is unlikely. There is little variation in these views by age, although there is some variation by political affiliation. Half (50%) of DP supporters say it is *very unlikely* North Korea will denuclearize, while 69 percent of PPP supporters say the same. Twenty-nine percent

and 20 percent, respectively, say it is somewhat unlikely. This variation according to political affiliation tends to be one of intensity, rather than divergence of beliefs.

As expected, a belief that North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear weapons is associated with support for a domestic nuclear weapons program. Among those who think North Korea is *somewhat unlikely* or *very unlikely* to give up its nuclear weapons, 70 percent and 76 percent, respectively, support a South Korean domestic weapons program. For the 11 percent who think North Korea is *somewhat likely* to give up its weapons, a majority (60%) support a domestic nuclear weapons program. One caveat, though, is that the overwhelmingly strong belief that North Korea will not disarm makes it difficult to fully assess the strength of that relationship. (Less than 2 percent of the polling sample—just 22 respondents—say that North Korea is *very likely* to give up its weapons.) Nonetheless, there is evidence to indicate that the stronger the belief that North Korea will not denuclearize, the stronger the support for a domestic nuclear weapon capability.

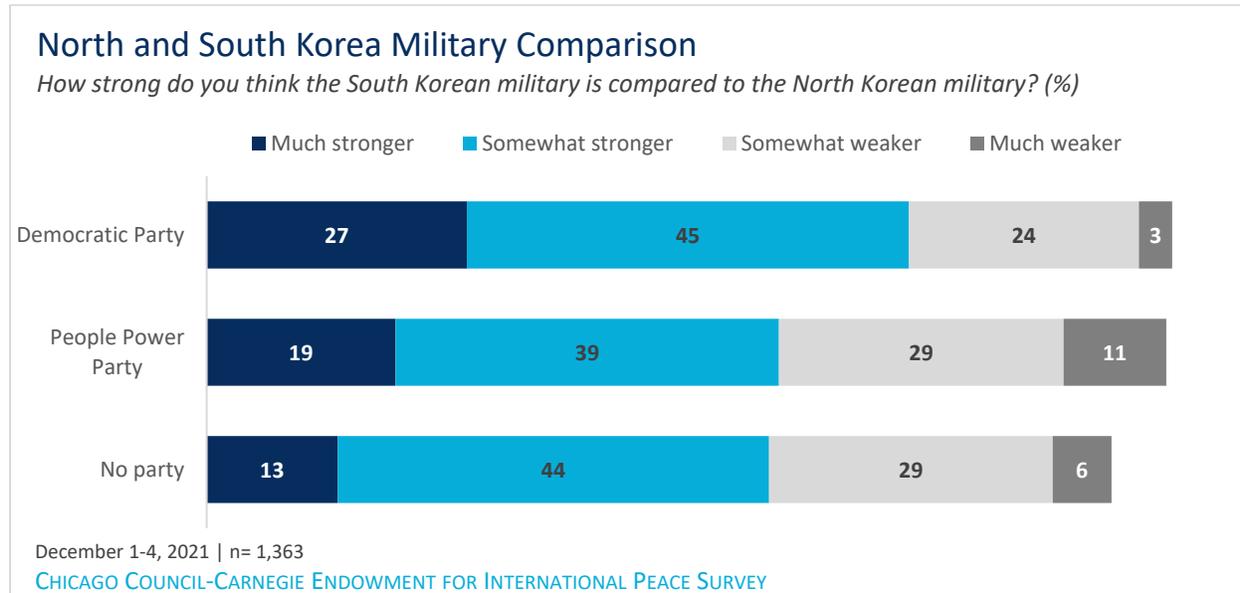
This result seems to cast doubt on a rationale offered by some advocates of a South Korean nuclear weapons program: that Seoul's pursuit of nuclear weapons would serve as a [bargaining chip](#) that would motivate North Korea to denuclearize. Among those who prefer a domestic nuclear weapons program compared to US deployment or no nuclear weapons, 53 percent think nuclear acquisition will make North Korea less likely to denuclearize. Thus, their support for a domestic nuclear weapons program seems to acknowledge that nuclear weapons would not be a bargaining chip in negotiations with North Korea and that both countries would retain their weapons over the longer term.

Comparative military strength not a factor in nuclear views

South Korean administrations and the public at large have long been concerned about the military balance on the Korean Peninsula, given not only the nuclear disparity between the two Koreas but also the large standing army maintained by North Korea and its heavy investments in conventional and unconventional weaponry. Perceptions that North Korea's military is stronger than South Korea's and that a nuclear program would help to even that military strength could be an important driver of support for nuclear acquisition.

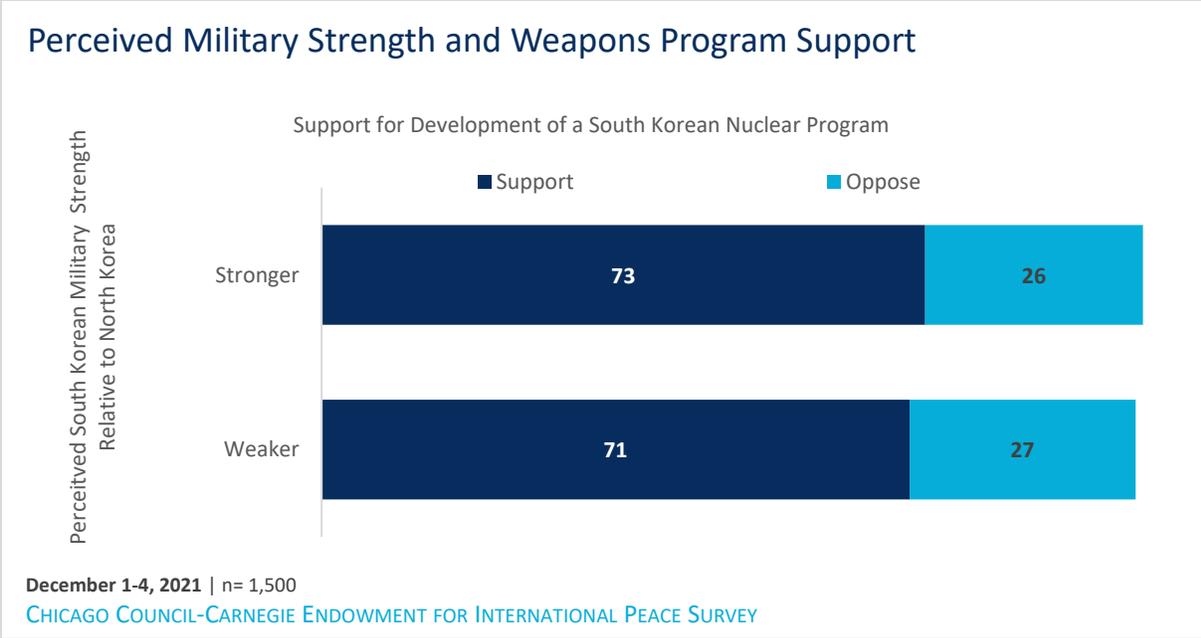
Interestingly, despite the news headlines generated by frequent North Korean missile tests over the last four years, nearly two-thirds (64%) of South Koreans say the South Korean military is either much stronger (21%) or somewhat stronger (43%) than North Korea's military. Just 34 percent say the South Korean military is weaker. Majorities of all age cohorts agree. Although there is a significant gap in perception based on political affiliation, that gap is in intensity

rather than in direction of views. Seven in ten (72%) DP supporters say South Korea’s military is stronger, compared to 58 percent of PPP supporters.²



However, our poll finds no clear relationship between perceptions of military strength and support for a domestic nuclear weapons program: it is nearly identical between those who say South Korea is stronger and those who say it is weaker than North Korea. Among those who view the South Korean military as stronger, 73 percent support a nuclear program. Among those who say South Korea’s military is weaker, 71 percent support a nuclear program. Thus, concerns about a worsening military balance do not appear to be an important factor driving support for nuclear weapons.

² This difference may be related to negative views of the current president, Moon Jae-in, among PPP supporters. For example, [Gallup Korea polling](#) since the beginning of 2021 finds support for him among PPP supporters to be roughly 5 percent, which may affect perceptions of military strength as well.



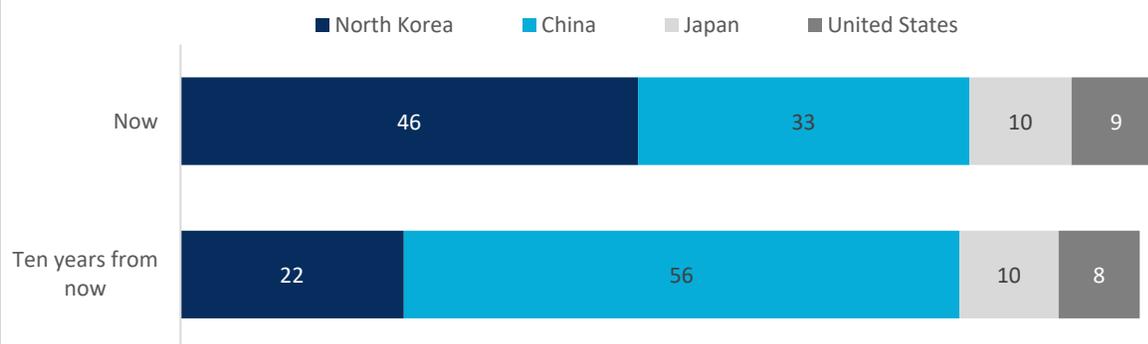
Threat perceptions: North Korea today, China tomorrow

Perception of external threats to South Korean security, especially by North Korea, is presumed to be among the most important drivers of support for nuclear weapons. Some security experts—mainly South Korean but a few [Americans as well](#)—argue that nuclear weapons are necessary for South Korea to deter North Korea from using its nuclear arsenal for coercion. Yet there is also growing recognition among South Koreans that China may pose a greater threat than North Korea in the near future.

Our polling affirms this conventional wisdom about the order of contemporary threat perceptions in South Korea. A plurality of South Koreans (46%) cite North Korea as the biggest current threat to South Korea, and 33 percent say the same about China. Just 10 percent cite Japan and 9 percent say that threat is the United States. Yet when asked to assess the threat landscape ten years from now, there is a marked shift. A majority (56%) say China will pose the biggest threat to South Korea, while just 22 percent say it will be North Korea, 10 percent cite Japan, and 8 percent say it will be the United States.

Perceived National Security Threats

Which country do you think poses the biggest threat to South Korea's national security? (%)



December 1-4, 2021 | n= 1,500

CHICAGO COUNCIL-CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE SURVEY

Variation in threat perception—current or ten years from now—appears to have little influence on support for or opposition to a domestic nuclear weapons program, however. Regardless of the country cited as the biggest current threat, support for a nuclear weapons program ranged from 65 percent to 76 percent. And regardless of which country is cited as the biggest future threat, support for a nuclear program ranged from 69 percent to 76 percent. It is plausible that a reason why concerns about North Korea denuclearization and alliance credibility are not strongly correlated to support for nuclear weapons is that the overall threat perception remains high.

That said, we find somewhat contradictory evidence about the relationship between specific country threats and support for a domestic nuclear program. Although a plurality of those polled identified North Korea as the most salient threat, when we asked supporters of a domestic nuclear weapons program about their reasoning, just 23 percent said it is to counter the threat from North Korea, while 39 percent said it is to defend South Korea from threats other than North Korea.

What If Japan Goes Nuclear?

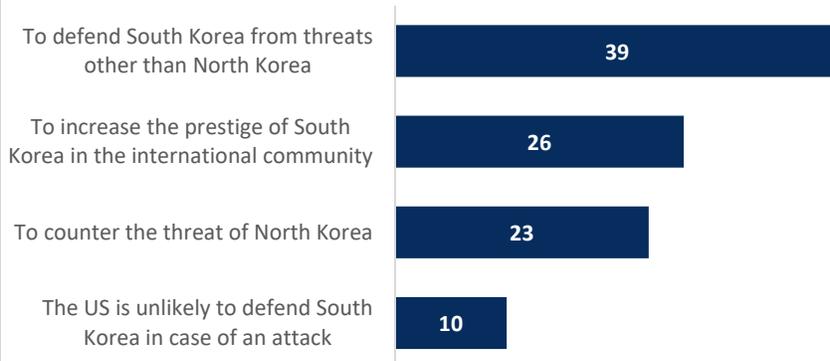
Whether Japan might be a driver of South Korean nuclear acquisition warrants special mention here. Japanese proliferation is one of the scenarios most often thought likely to push South Korea toward a nuclear weapons program. Indeed, 62 percent say if Japan acquired nuclear weapons, they would be either *much more likely* (23%) or *somewhat more likely* (39%) to support a South Korean program. Of course, those who already support a South Korean nuclear program will likely continue to do so regardless of a Japanese decision to nuclearize. The effect of Japan's nuclearization on the 26 percent of South Koreans opposed to a South Korean nuclear program would be more important to consider. Yet the polling data shows that South Koreans who oppose a domestic nuclear weapons program are not heavily swayed by a prospective Japanese bomb and continue to oppose nuclear weapons in principle.

Nuclear Weapons Seen as Boosting South Korea's Global Prestige

Analysts tend to consider security and threat perception as the most important potential drivers of nuclear weapons acquisition, and our polling demonstrates that those are important factors in the South Korean case. However, a surprising finding in our survey is the relevance of prestige as a motivator for supporters of nuclear weapons. Among the 67 percent who favor a South Korean domestic nuclear weapons program over US deployment or no weapons, prestige was the second most important rationale (26%), behind defending South Korea from threats other than North Korea (39%) but ahead of countering the North Korean threat (23%). In other words, the data suggest that the two most important reasons for supporters of a domestic nuclear program are not related to North Korea.

Reasons for a South Korean Nuclear Program

You said that you support a South Korean nuclear weapons program. Among the following, which best represents your view of why South Korea should develop a nuclear weapons program? (%)



December 1-4, 2021 | n= 1,000

CHICAGO COUNCIL-CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE SURVEY

Prestige also seems to be relatively more important to progressives (34%) than to conservatives (22%). This aligns with perceptions that [progressives](#) are more nationalistic in their orientation and seek greater independence from the US alliance, whereas conservatives are widely believed to focus more on deterring North Korea. Notably, for supporters of US nuclear deployments to South Korea, reputational factors appear not to be as important; just 14 percent prefer a US deployment in order to avoid causing damage to South Korea's reputation.

Plausibly, South Koreans might question whether nuclear weapons contribute to prestige on the world stage. North Korea remains an international pariah as a result of its nuclear weapons; its nuclear weapons may convey some power status, but Pyongyang has not translated that status into economic or diplomatic gain. Of course, South Koreans might also look to India, whose nuclear weapons the United States eventually accepted when Washington decided it wanted closer defense and economic ties with New Delhi in the global competition with China.³

The international relations literature on nuclear proliferation prioritizes security drivers or, secondarily, domestic political explanations for decisions to seek the bomb. Prestige—that nuclear weapons are a symbol of modernity and convey status in the international system—tends to be viewed [by scholars](#) as a lesser or subsidiary motivation. Along with controlling the spread of nuclear technology and materials, the United States and Soviet Union utilized alliances, which are aimed at decreasing demand for nuclear weapons, as a key nonproliferation tool. The United States convinced its security partners in Europe and East Asia during the 1970s to forego nuclear weapons and instead rely on US extended nuclear deterrence guarantees. However, it is much harder to convince an ally not to proliferate if such

³ Most South Koreans are probably unaware of South Korea's commitment not to acquire nuclear weapons under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. This is an important difference from India, which never joined the treaty and thus did not break nonproliferation vows.

a move would be seen to address domestic political compulsions or other normative factors, such as prestige. This has significant policy implications for states seeking to prevent future proliferation, namely that more efforts are needed to stigmatize nuclear weapons as a symbol of power and legitimacy and, conversely, to reward states that adhere to the highest nonproliferation standards.

Support for Nuclear Weapons Remains Robust Despite Potential Consequences

Although majorities of South Koreans consistently support a domestic nuclear weapons program or deployment of US nuclear weapons, polling of public attitudes rarely assesses the strength of these views in the context of plausible consequences of a decision to acquire nuclear weapons.⁴ Potential consequences could include international economic sanctions, a US troop withdrawal, decreased chances that North Korea will denuclearize, and sanctions levied by China against South Korea. Those consequences are hypothetical, but if they materialized, it seems logical they could have significant effects on public support for nuclear decisions by the Korean government. However, our polling finds support for a nuclear option to be robust even when respondents are asked to consider potential negative repercussions.

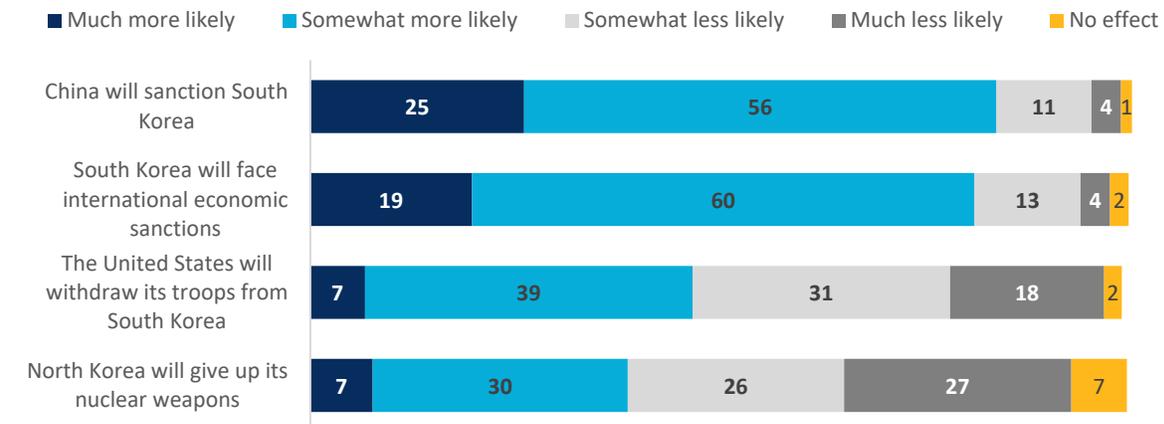
As noted already, respondents show a high preference (67%) for a domestic nuclear program rather than US deployment (9%). Those who prefer a domestic program—1,000 respondents in total—were then asked to consider if a nuclear program made specific repercussions more or less likely.

There is broad agreement among the public that a South Korean nuclear weapons program would expose South Korea to sanctions. Eight in ten (79%) say such a pursuit makes it more likely South Korea will face international economic sanctions, and 81percent expect it will lead to sanctions from China. There was less agreement on how a South Korean decision to build nuclear weapons would affect the US troop presence in South Korea: 45 percent expect it to make a US troop withdrawal more likely, but 49 percent said it would make a withdrawal less likely.

⁴ To investigate this, respondents were asked if they preferred South Korea to pursue its own nuclear weapons program, for the US to station nuclear weapons in South Korea, or if there should be no nuclear weapons in South Korea. This preference was then used to divide the sample, and each group was asked follow-up questions pertaining to rationale and the likelihood of potential outcomes that could result if South Korea pursued their preferred option.

Responses if South Korea Develops Nuclear Weapons

If South Korea develops its own nuclear weapons, do you think it is more or less likely that the following actions will occur: (%)



December 1-4, 2021 | n= 1,000

CHICAGO COUNCIL-CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE SURVEY

Despite the high expectation of being subject to economic sanctions and uncertainty about potential US troop withdrawal, 89 percent of those who favor a South Korean nuclear program continue to support one, meaning just 11 percent were sufficiently concerned about the consequences to change their minds about acquiring nuclear weapons. This stands in noted contrast to one of the few prior polls that did assess the strength of opinion in a similar fashion. In a 2014 poll, South Korean polling expert Jiyeon Kim found support for nuclear weapons to be more sensitive to hypothetical repercussions, with declines in support ranging from 14 to 31 percent across similar potential consequences.⁵

Some of the differences in results may be methodological, due to variation in how the potential consequences were framed in the poll questions. A second factor is that South Korean attitudes have likely evolved over the eight years between polls. In particular, the South Korean public more keenly appreciates the perceived threat from China, as well as the economic impacts following China's use of informal sanctions to punish Korea for hosting the US THAAD missile defense system. Having experienced those sanctions and survived them, the public may now have less fear of Chinese penalties. Furthermore, over ten years of living next to a nuclear armed North Korea and associated views on the low probability that North Korea will disarm suggest South Koreans are somewhat inured to how North Korea might react. Even uncertainty about impacts on the US security alliance seems to have relatively little overall impact on

⁵ An overview of the poll results provided by Dr. Kim shows initial support for a domestic nuclear weapons program at 53 percent. Those in support were then asked if they would continue to support nuclear acquisition even if it resulted in certain consequences to South Korea. The given consequences, along with the negative effect on nuclear weapons support in percent in parentheses, are: (1) Even if it damaged the ROK-US alliance (-14%), (2) Even if it reduced domestic nuclear energy production (-21%), (3) Even if it constrained Korea's nuclear energy exports (-22%), (4) Even if it damaged economic growth (-26%), and (5) Even if it increased the security threats to South Korea (-31%).

support for nuclear weapons. Perhaps this is because South Koreans believe that the United States would choose to accommodate a South Korean nuclear capability rather than risk alliance rupture at a time when Washington is looking to build security partnerships in Asia to address a rising China.

Conclusion

Majority support for a domestic nuclear weapons program in South Korea is long standing, and our findings are in line with past results. But our findings challenge several key assumptions about the robustness of that support.

While sharp declines in support were anticipated when respondents were asked to consider potential consequences, in fact those declines were relatively minor. And support was largely insensitive to current or future threats. While threats other than North Korea are cited as an important reason for support, there was no clear relationship between support for a nuclear program and the country that respondents identify as a current or future threat.

This suggests that other factors outside of security perceptions are important in shaping attitudes on nuclear weapons. One such perception is the global prestige a nuclear weapons program conveys, which may be a contributor to the overwhelming preference of South Koreans for a domestic program instead of US nuclear deployment. This issue deserves additional study, and future polling on nuclear issues might explore how South Koreans perceive their country's role in the international system and how this relates to support for nuclear weapons.

If threats other than North Korea and international prestige are important drivers—as our findings suggest—it may become harder for the United States to use nuclear deterrence through the alliance as a mechanism to forestall South Korean proliferation.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

About the Survey

The survey was conducted December 1-4, 2021, in South Korea by Hankook Research among a representative national sample of 1,500 adults 18 and older. The sample was constructed using RDD for mobile and landline phones, and the margin of error is $\pm 2.5\%$ at the 95 percent confidence interval. The survey was made possible through funding from the Korea Foundation.

About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan organization that provides insight on critical global issues, advances policy solutions, and fosters dialogue about what is

happening in the world and why it matters to people in Chicago, the United States, and around the globe. As the premier, nonpartisan global affairs organization in America's heartland, we believe an informed, engaged public with access to fact-based and balanced views on global issues helps to ensure effective US engagement and supports a more inclusive, equitable, and secure world. Learn more at thechicagocouncil.org and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

About the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is a unique global network of policy research centers in Russia, China, Europe, the Middle East, India, and the United States. Our mission, dating back more than a century, is to advance peace through analysis and development of fresh policy ideas and direct engagement and collaboration with decision makers in government, business, and civil society. Working together, our centers bring the inestimable benefit of multiple national viewpoints to bilateral, regional, and global issues.