

ASAN REPORT

Transitioning Attitudes on North Korea: Perceived Threat and Preferred Response

J. JAMES KIM, KANG CHUNGKU, HAM GEON HEE

APRIL 2023



Asan Report

Transitioning Attitudes on North Korea:
Perceived Threat and Preferred Response

J. JAMES KIM, KANG CHUNGKU, HAM GEON HEE

APRIL 2023

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

About

The Asan Institute for Policy Studies is an independent, non-partisan think tank with the mandate to undertake policy-relevant research to foster domestic, regional, and international environments conducive to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula, East Asia, and the world-at-large.

The Public Opinion Studies Program at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies conducts some of the most widely cited public surveys in international relations and political science. Its regular polls produce reliable data for political leaders and the general public, creating more informed policy debates and decisions. The Program also publishes survey reports dealing with both international and domestic issues in Korea.

Disclaimer

The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

Authors

J. James Kim

Dr. J. James KIM is a senior fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. He is also a lecturer in the Executive Master of Public Administration program at Columbia University. Previously, Dr. Kim was an assistant professor of political science at the California State Polytechnic University (Pomona). He also served as a summer research associate at the RAND Corporation and as a statistical consultant for the Institute for Social and Economic Research and Planning at the School of International and Public Affairs in Columbia University. His primary research interests include political economy, energy, security, public opinion, and methodology. Dr. Kim received a B.S. and M.S. in industrial and labor relations from Cornell University and an M.Phil. and Ph.D. in political science from Columbia University.

Kang Chungku

Mr. Kang Chungku is a principal associate at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Prior to joining the Asan Institute, he was a research assistant at the Korea Dialogue Academy in Seoul. His research interests include quantitative research methods, survey design, and statistical data analysis. Mr. Kang received his B.A. in English and M.A. in Sociology at Korea University.

Ham Geon Hee

Mr. Ham Geon Hee is a senior research associate at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Prior to joining the Asan Institute, he worked at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA) and the Research Institute of Applied Statistics at Sungkyunkwan University. He received a B.S. in Information and Mathematics from Korea University and a M.S. in Statistics from Sungkyunkwan University. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Statistics at Sungkyunkwan University. His research interests include mixture models, incomplete data analysis, and methodology.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction	06
II. Context Matters	07
III. Views on North Korea	08
1. Image of North Korea	08
2. North Korea as a Security Risk	11
IV. Threat Perception	16
1. Perceptions about the North Korean Nuclear Threat	17
V. Responding to the North Korean Nuclear Threat	22
1. U.S. Extended Deterrence	22
2. Addressing the North Korea Security Challenge	26
3. Nuclear Options and THAAD	28
VI. Conclusion	35
Survey Methodology	38
Appendix I: Asan Poll Questionnaire (November 2022)	41
Appendix II: Survey on Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Development	47

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Image of North Korea	09
Figure 2.	Security Threats	13
Figure 3.	Perception of the North Korean Nuclear Problem	14
Figure 4.	North Korean Military Provocations, 2010-2022	16
Figure 5.	Negative View on National Security	18
Figure 6.	Negative Views on National Security: Assessment & Outlook	19
Figure 7.	Expectations About U.S. Nuclear Response Against North Korean Nuclear Attack	23

List of Tables

Table 1.	Image of North Korea by Demographics	11
Table 2.	North Korean Nuclear Threat and Interest in North Korean Nuclear Problem	15
Table 3.	Views on National Security by Demographics	21
Table 4.	Expectations About U.S. Nuclear Response Against North Korean Nuclear Attack by Demographics	25
Table 5.	Effectiveness of Deterrence Against North Korean Provocation	28
Table 6.	Response to North Korean Nuclear Threats	31
Table 7.	Attitudes on Nuclear Armament by Demographics	33

I. Introduction

There is no shortage of analysis about the evolving threat posed by the insufferable regime in North Korea; however, our understanding of the morphology of South Korean public attitudes on this subject still needs improvement. Most accounts of public opinion on the growing North Korean threat are episodic and limited in scope when the reality is more complex. Our review of the latest data on South Korean public opinion suggests many layers to the on-the-ground perspectives about North Korea.¹

Some South Koreans support closer relations with Pyongyang while others see it as a growing threat. On some issues, South Korean public opinion looks quite robust and not prone to much change. Still, on other issues, we see wide swings and variations across time and demographic characteristics. In short, our findings show South Korean public opinion on North Korea is both sophisticated and complex. This report attempts to clarify and explain the intricacies of this reality.

While public opinion need not necessarily drive policy, established literature suggests political exigency influenced by popular sentiments can shape policy.² To gather the most current South Korean public opinion on North Korea and deterrence, we conducted a survey in November 2022. Some questions in our survey are novel, but most of them are similar to the ones we have asked in the past. While the former will shed light on recent developments, the latter will prove helpful in tracking changes in sentiments over time.

-
1. J. James Kim, Kang Chungku, and Ham Geon Hee. Fundamentals of South Korean Public Opinion on Foreign Policy and National Security. *Asan Report*. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. September 13, 2021; South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2022. *Asan Poll*. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies.
 2. James A. Stimson, Michael B. MacKuen, and Robert S. Erikson. 1995. "Dynamic Representation." *American Political Science Review*, 89: 543-65; Paul Burstein. 2003. "The Impact of Public Opinion on Public Policy: A Review and an Agenda." *Political Research Quarterly*. 56(1): 29-40; Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1993. "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy." *American Political Science Review*. 77: 175-90.

II. Context Matters

Compared to the Trump administration, the Biden administration has proved to be a steadier hand on foreign policy; however, the global security environment looks as precarious as ever. Over the past year, we have seen the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the intensification of strategic competition between China and the U.S. Neither Russia nor the NATO-backed Ukraine looks intent on concluding the year-long conflict, just as Beijing and Washington have yet to find an exit ramp after the Biden-Xi meeting on the sidelines of G-20 with the discovery of Chinese reconnaissance balloons over the continental U.S. Perhaps even more troublesome is that Russia pulled out of its commitment to the START treaty in February, and a new nuclear deal with Iran has failed to materialize.

Closer to home, North Korea enacted a new Nuclear Forces Policy Law in 2022 which expands the scope of nuclear use from strict deterrence to nuclear warfighting. Although the Yoon administration has moved swiftly to strengthen the ROK-U.S. alliance after his summit with President Biden in May 2022 and announced the new “audacious initiative,” North Korea has only grown bolder and more aggressive. Pyongyang’s defiant response has, in turn, pushed Seoul to strengthen its defense posture further and even signal the contemplation of deploying its own nuclear deterrent. How does the South Korean public perceive these recent developments? What policy implications can be derived from the changing geopolitical conditions ahead of the general election scheduled for 2024?

III. Views on North Korea

While general South Korean perception of North Korea leans negative, past data suggests two opposing trends. One trend is a tendency among some South Koreans to perceive North Korea as a country with shared history and identity. In opposition to this, others in South Korea see North Korea as an adversary and a threat to national security. Our past research suggests older males and conservatives are more likely to be in the latter camp, while the younger females and progressives tend to be in the former group.

We also found in past research that developing events can play a role in accentuating one of these two emotions. For instance, there was a slight improvement in opinion towards North Korea in 2018 when diplomatic engagements and heightened economic cooperation lightened the overall South Korean mood towards North Korea. But, conversely, the recent spike in provocations also quickly changed the overall South Korean sentiment toward North Korea to be more negative.

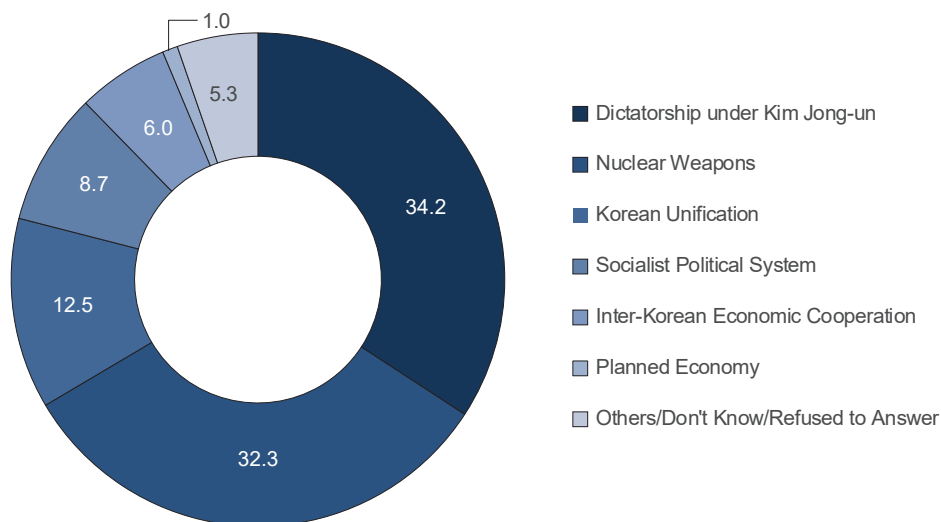
1. Image of North Korea

To understand the general South Korean perception of North Korea, we asked the survey respondents think about the words that come to mind when they hear the words “North Korea.” The question is useful in that it could be a primer to gauge and control individual biases coming into the survey if we are to have this question be the first one. The response choices included “planned economy,” “socialist political system,” “dictatorship under Kim Jong-un,” “nuclear weapons (nuclear testing, etc.),” “Korean unification,” and “inter-Korean economic cooperation (e.g., Kaesong Industrial Complex).”

Note that we made some effort to reduce bias in the response choice by having as many “positive” options (i.e., ① Korean unification and ② inter-Korean economic cooperation) as “neutral” (i.e., ③ planned economy and ④ socialist political system) and “negative” (i.e., ⑤ dictatorship under Kim Jong-un and ⑥ nuclear weapons) ones. We also tried to be as inclusive as possible by including response choices that touched on the political, economic, and social aspects of North Korea. Finally, we rotated the response choices during data collection to reduce biases that may come from the ordering of our response.

Our findings show that more than half of the respondents associated North Korea with “dictatorship under Kim Jong-un” (34.2%) and “nuclear weapons” (32.3%). This result is not all that surprising given that these statements are broadly accepted as facts, and these distinguishing characteristics are often highlighted in media reporting³. 12.5% of respondents associated North Korea with “Korean unification,” which may seem high if we account for the increased risk in and around the Korean Peninsula due to heightened military tensions. Past data, however, suggests that this group of individuals may not be so sensitive to external stimuli. In a 2020 survey, 12.7% of respondents associated North Korea with “compatriots or people of the same ethnicity.” One possible extrapolated guess is that approximately 12~13% of the South Korean population will support unification because they identify with the North Korean people.⁴

Figure 1. Image of North Korea⁵ (%)



3. KBS. Public Attitudes on Unification. July 27-August 1, 2022. An analysis of Public Attitudes on Unification conducted by Korean Broadcasting System in 2022 revealed that Koreans generally regarded North Korea negatively. 40.3% were “weary” of North Korea while 32.7% stated that they thought North Korea was “hostile.”

4. This is an extrapolation but we have found similar results in Asan Poll (October 2020). This study included a question which asked: “What image comes to mind when you hear ‘North Korea?’” Responses included “dictatorship” (43.9%), “hostile nation” (21.8%), “companies or ethnic groups other than a state” (12.7%), “possible partner” (8.1%), “savage nation” (7.3%), and “an inferior nation” (6.1%).

Responses such as “socialist political system” (8.7%), “inter-Korean economic cooperation” (6%), and “planned economy” (1%) were all below 10%. Overall, responses that associated North Korea with negative (⑤+⑥) images were the highest at 66.5%. Positive (①+②) and neutral (③+④) images were significantly lower at 18.5% and 9.7%, respectively. North Korea’s military activities may be driving this finding. But the persistence of negativity in North Korea’s imagery suggests that the situation was not helpful either.

Negative imagery was consistently more dominant even after controlling for age, ideology, and perception about the expected probability of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Still there were some notable differences.⁶ For instance, negative perceptions about North Korea were highest among those over 60 years old (77%), followed by those in their 30s (76%), 50s (71.4%), and 20s (66.4%). Individuals in their 40s associated North Korea with negative imagery by only 56.3%. Additionally, those in their 40s were significantly more likely to associate North Korea with positive imagery than other age groups at a rate of 30.5%.

As far as ideological orientation is concerned, respondents who associated North Korea with negative images most were conservatives (83.5%), followed by moderates (68.4%) and progressives (58.7%). On the other hand, the proportion of progressive respondents who associated positive images with North Korea (26.8%) was more than twice as high as that of conservative respondents (10.4%). This finding is hardly surprising given that they are consistent with past studies that have reported similar results.

We also found some association between perceived expectations about a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula with negative images of North Korea. Namely, there was about a 12%p difference among those who thought the likelihood of conflict was high (75.1%) compared to those who perceived the probability to be low (63.2%).

5. Source: Asan Poll (November 2022).

6. We also accounted for the possibility of armed conflict, which was measured by asking the respondent to rate “How they see the likelihood of armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula in the next 10 years.” The score ranged from 0 “not at all likely” to 5 “neutral” and 10 “highly likely.” The mean (3.85) was used as a basis to divide the group into those who considered the probability of collision to be low (42.1%) and high (57.9%). Respondents who did not respond or answered “don’t know” (2.1%) were excluded from the analysis.

This suggests that respondents who perceived a higher likelihood of conflict tended to associate North Korea with negative images. Notably, 24.7% of respondents who perceived a low likelihood of military conflict associated positive images with North Korea.

Table 1. Image of North Korea by Demographics (%)

		Positive	Neutral	Negative
Total		18.5	9.7	66.5
Gender	Male	21.4	11.3	67.3
	Female	17.9	9.2	72.9
Test Statistics		<i>n.s.</i>		
Age	20s	12.5	21.1	<u>66.4</u>
	30s	12.3	11.6	<u>76.0</u>
	40s	<u>30.5</u>	13.2	<u>56.3</u>
	50s	21.6	7.0	<u>71.4</u>
	60+	19.2	3.8	<u>77.0</u>
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=59.642, df=8, p<.05$		
Ideology	Conservative	10.4	6.1	<u>83.5</u>
	Moderate	20.7	10.9	<u>68.4</u>
	Progressive	<u>26.8</u>	14.4	<u>58.7</u>
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=45.558, df=4, p<.05$		
Chances of Military Conflict	Low	<u>24.7</u>	12.1	<u>63.2</u>
	High	16.0	8.9	<u>75.1</u>
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=15.904, df=2, p<.05$		

2. North Korea as a Security Risk

U.S. Secretary of State Tony Blinken stated during his February 2021 interview that North Korea is a “problem that has gotten worse over time.”⁷ While there is much

7. “Blinken says U.S. plans full review of approach to North Korea.” *Reuters*, January 20, 2021.

debate about North Korea's intentions, the official statements coming out of the country is that it seeks to develop this capability to ensure the regime's survival. Kim Jong-un, for instance, stated in January 2017 that North Korea is developing this capability "to cope with the imperialists' nuclear war threats..." A more recent announcement, as revealed in the new Nuclear Forces Policy Law, is that North Korea also intends to use nuclear weapons to fight and win wars. Given these developments, we should expect a rise in threat perception among South Koreans.

To gauge the South Korean propensity for perceiving North Korea as a credible security threat, we asked the respondents to prioritize the following threats: "North Korea's nuclear threat," "China's rise," "new Cold War paradigm," "spread of terrorism," "infectious diseases, such as COVID-19," "climate change," and "supply chain insecurity." Figure 2 shows the results of our findings by combining the first and second-priority responses.

We see three notable results from this question. One is that a large majority of respondents prioritized traditional security threats (i.e., North Korea, China, and the new Cold War). That is, the percentage of respondents who saw traditional security problems as the most significant challenge was 72.3%, while those who saw it as the second most significant challenge was 61.3%. Only about 30% of the respondents thought that non-traditional newly emerging threats, such as climate change, supply chain insecurity, infectious diseases, and terrorism, were the most significant challenge for South Korea.

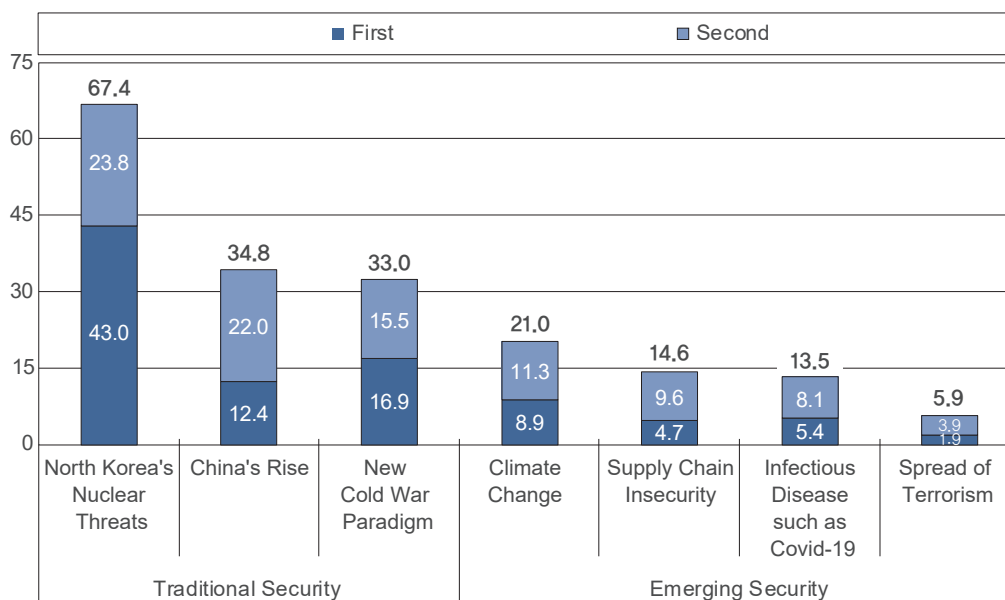
Secondly, it is noteworthy that the respondents' focus on China and North Korea may indicate that the South Korean public is more concerned about geopolitical risks unique to South Korea rather than problems of more global concern, such as COVID-19, supply chain security, and terrorism.

Finally, the results also show that North Korea was the most critical security concern among South Koreans. The percentage of those who placed North Korea's nuclear threat as the most critical problem was 43%. 23.8% ranked North Korea as the second most important security concern. North Korea was either one of the two most important security concerns for 67.4% of South Koreans. China and the new Cold War were voted by 34.8% and 33%, respectively, as essential security concerns. Note that the combined percentage for China and the new Cold War is roughly equivalent to that

of North Korea’s. Looking only at the 1st ranked response, the gap between concerns about North Korea and other issues is much larger.

These findings show that South Korean threat perception is higher for factors linked to traditional geopolitical security risks rather than emerging non-traditional ones. The fact that the potential for a large-scale military conflict is higher in the former than in the latter may be one of the reasons for this trend. One policy implication is that there are political constraints to prioritizing global security concerns, such as infectious diseases, environment, and terrorism if there is a perceived deficit in national defense about concerns linked to North Korea and China.

Figure 2. Security Threats⁸ (%)



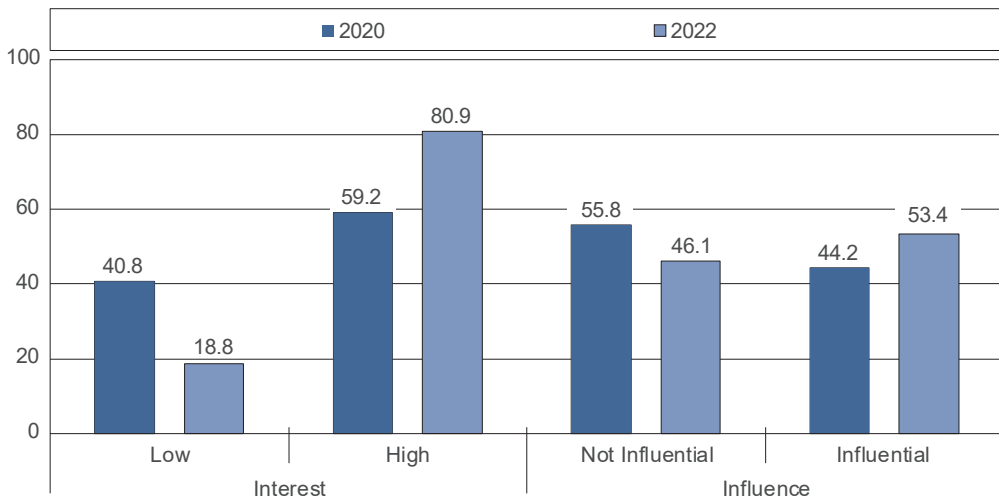
As a follow-up, we also examined the South Korean public’s interest in North Korea’s nuclear weapons and its impact on the daily lives of South Koreans (See Figure 3). In

8. Source: Asan Poll (November 2022). In Figure 2, the numbers at the top of bars represent multiple responses to the question. Note that since the respondent can give multiple answers to the same question, the total number of responses is larger than the sample. If we add the top two responses together: $n=1,797$; Top 1, $n=933$; Top 2, $n=846$.

particular, we began our analysis by comparing any noticeable change in the public interest in North Korean nuclear weapons over time.

In 2022, 80.9% of South Koreans were interested in the North Korean nuclear issue, while 18.8% said they were not. We see two noticeable countervailing trends in the data. One is the spike in interest in North Korea when we compare our recent findings to past data. In November 2020, our data shows that only about 6 out of 10 South Korean public expressed interest in North Korea. Although this data is qualitatively different from our most recent data, given the fact that one mentions the “North Korean nuclear problem” while the other does not, the 20%p gap is meaningful given the rise in North Korean provocations and promulgation of a new Nuclear Forces Policy Law in 2022, which both would have worked to pique public interest. There was also a lot of media buzz about a possible 7th nuclear test, which would have added more fuel to the fire.

Figure 3. Perception of the North Korean Nuclear Problem⁹ (%)



In contrast, however, the above result is tempered by the level of interest. When we take the cover off and look under the hood of that 80.9% interest, we see that 30% stated “extremely interested” and 50.9% “somewhat interested.” The finding suggests there

9. Source: Asan Poll (October 2020, November 2022).

is evidence of some fatigue in the level of anxiety associated with the North Korean nuclear threat. The data on the perceived impact of the North Korean nuclear issue on the day-to-day lives of South Koreans support this reasoning. The percentage of respondents who said that the North Korean nuclear threat affects their lives increased from 44.2% in 2020 to 53.4% in 2022, an increase of 9.2%p. This shift may appear modest; however, the inverted ratio of those who perceive the significance of the North Korean nuclear threat to those who do not during 2020 (55.8:44.2) and 2022 (46.1:53.4) is meaningful when we account for the calculus of major political parties looking ahead into the general election next year.

Table 2. North Korean Nuclear Threat and Interest in North Korean Nuclear Problem (1~4 Point)

		Impact of the North Korean Nuclear Threat	
		N-size	Mean (SD)
Interest in North Korean Nuclear	Total	995	2.59 (.944)
	Low	188	2.19 (.949)
	High	804	2.68 (.921)
Test Statistics		<i>t</i> =.265, <i>df</i> =990, <i>p</i> <.05	

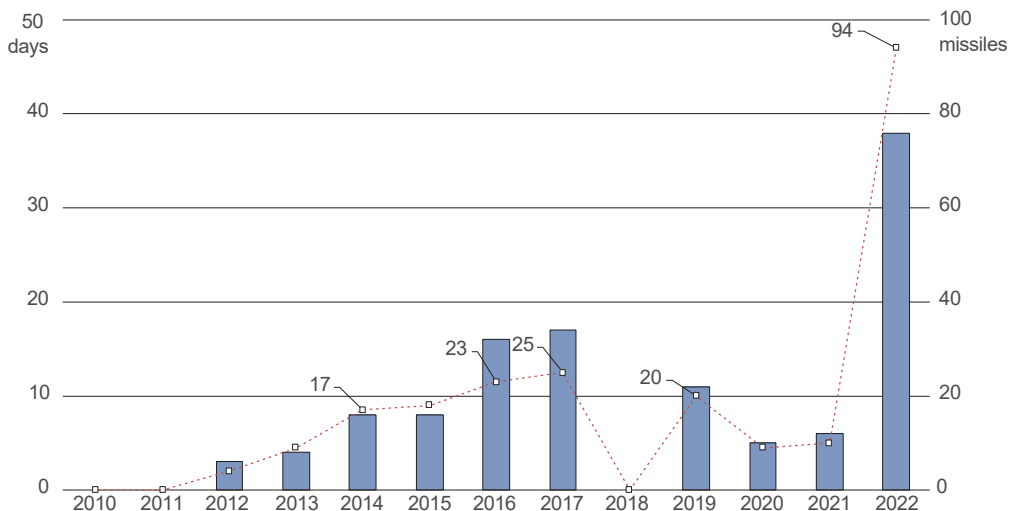
**Dependent Variable: 1=Not influential at all, 4=Very influential*

Finally, our analysis of the relationship between the public interest in the North Korean nuclear issue and its perceived impact on daily lives shows that the respondents who were more interested in the North Korean nuclear issue were more likely to state that this issue had a significant impact on their daily lives than those that did not. More specifically, the group with a high level of interest in the nuclear issue had an average score of 2.68 on the impact of this threat on daily life which is higher than the overall average (2.59) and significantly higher than the group with a low interest in North Korea (2.19).

IV. Threat Perception

As previously mentioned, last year marked a significant turning point in the overall mood of the security environment on the Korean Peninsula due to a sudden spike in North Korean provocations. In 2022, for instance, North Korea engaged in provocative military action for a record 38 days. When calculated as an annual average, this amounts to one day of provocation every ten days, which is a new high. Even during the period 2016–2017, when the overall security situation on the Korean Peninsula looked uncertain, the number of provocations amounted to only 16 and 17. Recent trend is alarming when compared to three or four days of provocation in 2012–2013 and eight days in 2014–2015.

Figure 4. North Korean Military Provocations, 2010–2022¹⁰



10. Source: CSIS Missile Defense Project (<https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>). Accessed December 19, 2022. Figure 4 includes North Korea's armed provocations by type, including nuclear tests, ICBMs, SLBMs, IRBMs, and MRBMs. For convenience, this figure presents only aggregate figures since 2010 (regardless of type of weapon). The number of provocations was based on the provocation day - meaning that if multiple missiles or weapons were used in a single day, that event was counted as one.

The qualitative differences in the type of provocation may matter. In 2016, for instance, North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test. In 2017, Pyongyang tested its intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). There was a noticeable pause in 2018 when summit diplomacy and the Winter Olympics opened the door to a possible nuclear deal between Pyongyang and Washington. With the failure of negotiations in Hanoi in 2019, we are now back to a cycle of provocation, which took a dramatic turn in 2022 with the inauguration of a conservative administration in Seoul.

The sheer incidents of testing and provocation suggest a rapidly deteriorating situation on the Korean Peninsula. The number of missiles launched by North Korea was zero in 2010–2011, 13 in 2012–2013, and 17 in 2014. While we saw some moderation in 2020 and 2021, the 94 incidents recorded in 2022 are at an all-time high. So far, the signals from Pyongyang do not suggest that the observed trend will reverse soon.

1. Perceptions about the North Korean Nuclear Threat

Increased provocation and testing will likely confirm the South Korean public's concern about a growing North Korean threat and military capability. The data suggests that the South Korean perception of the North Korean threat is correlated with the overall mood of the South Korean national security environment. A study conducted from July 2012 to June 2016 revealed that during periods of no provocation, 30~50% of survey respondents evaluated the national security condition as poor.¹¹ Following North Korean military provocations, such as those involving nuclear weapons or missiles, pessimism about the state of South Korea's national security increase to around 60%. From February 2013 to January 2016, for instance, we see a noticeable increase in negativity about the overall security situation on the Korean Peninsula. In 2016, when North Korea became more belligerent against the U.S., 50~60% of South Koreans perceived the national security situation negatively. At that time, negative sentiment did not exceed 70% and reached its peak of 60% after North Korea's military provocations. The results indicate security fatigue in which the proportion of people with a negative assessment of the overall national security situation temporarily increased only during

11. Source: Asan Poll (November 2022). Figure 5 is an update of Figure 1 in *Issue Brief*, "South Korean Perceptions of Security through Response toward North Korean Nuclear Weapons (북핵 대응을 통해서 본 한국인의 안보인식)." Figure 5 shows the percentage of individuals who answered "poor" or "very poor." A "Neutral" response was not given as a choice in the survey.

North Korean military provocations.

Figure 5. Negative View on National Security (%)

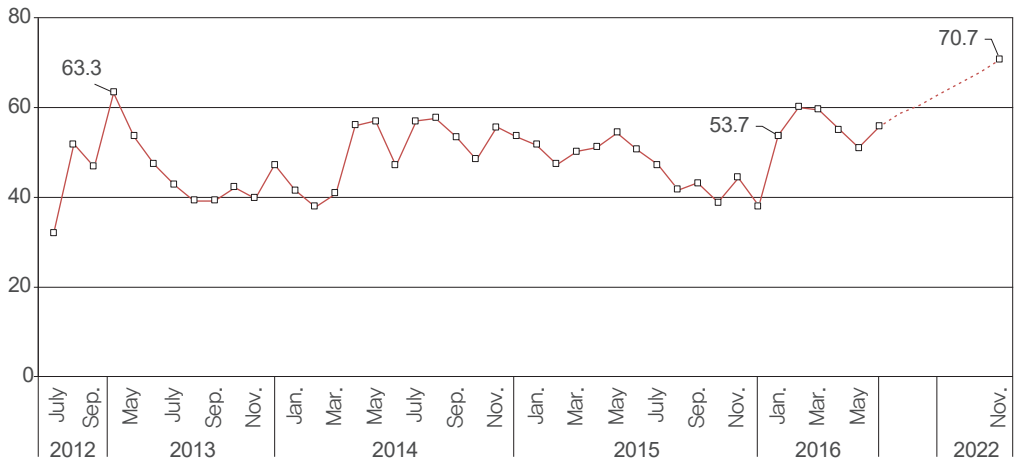
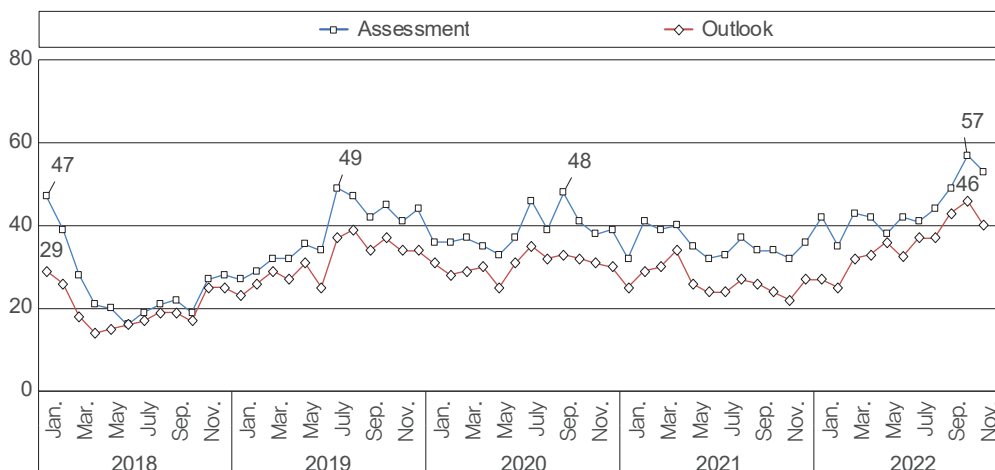


Figure 5 shows trends in evaluations of South Korea's national security. It is worth noting that the proportion of people with negative sentiments about South Korea's national security exceeded 70% (70.7%) for the first time in November 2022.¹² Notice that there is a time gap in the data since we did not have a survey question like this since June 2016. To fill some of this gap, we augmented the data from Hankook Research, which shows that the negative assessment of South Korea's overall security turned significantly negative as of late 2022 (See Figure 6). According to the data in Figure 5, however, the previous peaks in South Korea's perceived insecurity were in January 2016 (53.7%) and February 2013 (63.3%). Both peaks coincided with the third and fourth nuclear tests.¹³

12. Gallup Korea Daily Opinion, No. 275, September 2017. Public assessment of national defense after the nuclear test varied. Gallup Korea conducted several surveys after the 3rd (February 2013), 4th (January 2016), 5th (September 2016), and 6th (September 2017) nuclear tests. The survey question read as follows: "North Korea recently conducted its ○th test. Do you think North Korea's recent nuclear test is or is not a threat to peace on the Korean Peninsula?" Chronologically, 76%, 61%, 75%, and 76% of surveyed respondents thought North Korea's nuclear test was a threat. Although the wording in our survey was different, the result is similar to past findings.

Figure 6. Negative Views on National Security: Assessment & Outlook¹⁴ (%)



There were some noticeable variations across different age categories in the data from November 2022. For instance, the negative sentiment was higher among those aged 40 and above (80.7% for the 40s, 79.3% for 50s and 60s). The younger generation looked relatively more optimistic even though they were still generally leaning negative with approximately 64.5% of the 20s expressing pessimism about the overall security

13. Public Opinion Within Public Opinion. Hankook Research (Assessment and Outlook for Economy and National Security). Hankook Research has announced its survey results last week of every month since January 2018. Figure 6 was constructed by using the data as reported by Hankook Research. One key difference between the data presented by Hankook Research and the Asan Institute is that the former includes an explicit “neutral” option for the respondent. However, the data is helpful to the extent that it can be used to examine cross-temporal trends in the variable of interest. The first question that Hankook Research uses for the data, as reported in Figure 6, is: “What is your view of our nation’s national security?” The response choices are: “very good,” “somewhat good,” “neither good nor poor,” “somewhat poor,” and “poor.” The second question reads: “What do you think will happen to our nation’s national security in the future?” The responses are: “will become much better,” “will become a little better,” “will not change,” “will become a little worse,” and “will become a lot worse.” We aggregated the response to make each five-point scale into a three-point scale. One key difference with the questions used in the Asan Poll is that the neutral option is called out.

14. Source: Hankook Research (<https://hrcopinon.co.kr/archives/25047>).

situation on the Korean Peninsula. Ideological disposition did not matter since we did not see any noticeable variations along this cross-section.

Our findings on public perception of South Korea's national security in November 2022 is a significant departure from the past. Similar data collected in February 2016 after the fourth nuclear test, for instance, shows noticeable differences across age and ideology. Unlike in November 2022, individuals in their 30s (73.3%) and 60 or above (65.7%) recorded the highest negative outlook on the overall security condition on the Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, individuals in their 40s and 50s were relatively less pessimistic (60.6% for the 40s and 60.8% for the 50s).¹⁵ This result is different from our most recent data, which showed that the individuals in their 30s were less negative than individuals in their 40s and 50s. For ideology, progressives were also wearier (73.5%) than conservatives (62%) in 2016. The conservatives were more negative than progressives in 2022.

Together, the above data suggests that the South Korean public sentiment about the security environment on the Korean Peninsula has gradually turned more negative in recent years. The distribution of this sentiment across the population also took on greater breadth as individuals in their 40s and 50s became more concerned in 2022 than before. While moderate and conservative respondents also expressed more concern about the deteriorating security environment, the differences across ideologies were less pronounced in 2022 than in the past.

15. This result can be attributed to a heightened concern for North Korea's nuclear development after its fourth nuclear test. Progressives and individuals in their 30s may have projected more negativity about South Korea's national security in 2016 than other individuals because this group was exceptionally dissatisfied with the performance of Park Geun-hye administration. This result resonates with another survey conducted by Gallup Korea in September 2017, which showed that the South Korean public assessment of the North Korean threat differed according to the respondents' assessment of government performance. In particular, 85% of those who disapproved President Moon saw the North Korean nuclear test as a threat to Korean Peninsula. On the other hand, 72% of those who approved President Moon viewed it as a threat. Threat perception was highest among conservatives (84%), followed by moderates (79%) and progressives (71%).

Table 3. Views on National Security by Demographics¹⁶ (%)

	Feb. 2016		Nov. 2022		
	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	
Total	32.1	<u>53.7</u>	22.0	<u>70.7</u>	
Age	20s	47.6	52.4	35.5	64.5
	30s	26.7	<u>73.3</u>	26.7	73.3
	40s	39.4	60.6	19.3	<u>80.7</u>
	50s	39.2	60.8	20.7	<u>79.3</u>
	60+	34.3	<u>65.7</u>	20.7	<u>79.3</u>
Test Statistics	$\chi^2=16.524, df=4, p<.05$		$\chi^2=16.591, df=4, p<.05$		
Ideology	Conservative	38.0	<u>62.0</u>	23.0	77.0
	Moderate	41.5	58.5	20.8	79.2
	Progressive	26.5	<u>73.5</u>	28.5	71.5
Test Statistics	$\chi^2=10.963, df=2, p<.05$		<i>n.s.</i>		

16. Source: Asan Poll (February 2016, November 2022). Table 3 excludes “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer.”

V. Responding to the North Korean Nuclear Threat

South Koreans have traditionally valued the role of the United States in the security of the Korean Peninsula. The prevailing view is that the alliance is an effective deterrent against the North Korean threat. Many believe that the presence of U.S. Forces in Korea is necessary for the foreseeable future. According to a report by the Asan Institute titled “South Korean Public Opinion on ROK-U.S. Bilateral Ties” published in June 2022, South Koreans believe that the U.S. plays a vital role in maintaining stability on the Korean Peninsula, and the majority expect the U.S. to intervene on Korea’s behalf.¹⁷ But how robust is this trust?

1. U.S. Extended Deterrence

There is no questioning the role of U.S. extended deterrence in maintaining peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula since the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty in October 1953.¹⁸ However, countervailing trends in the broader global geopolitical arena and U.S. domestic politics have raised questions about U.S. security commitments in Northeast Asia. Namely, the election of Donald Trump as president in 2016 ushered in a period of uncertainty where the U.S. appeared to abandon its fundamental approach to international order and foreign policy in the postwar era. The renewed great power competition in the Post-Cold War era has also introduced a new challenge to the relationship between the U.S. and its allies. Meanwhile, North Korea has never looked more threatening with its newly revised nuclear doctrine and accelerated testing of its new capabilities. While past data suggests that the South Korean public has generally maintained a positive view of the alliance and U.S. security commitments, the rapidly changing context warrants another look into this attitudinal disposition.

One proxy for measuring how South Korean attitudes about the U.S. security guarantee is a question that asks whether the respondent thinks the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea in the event of a hypothetical nuclear attack by North

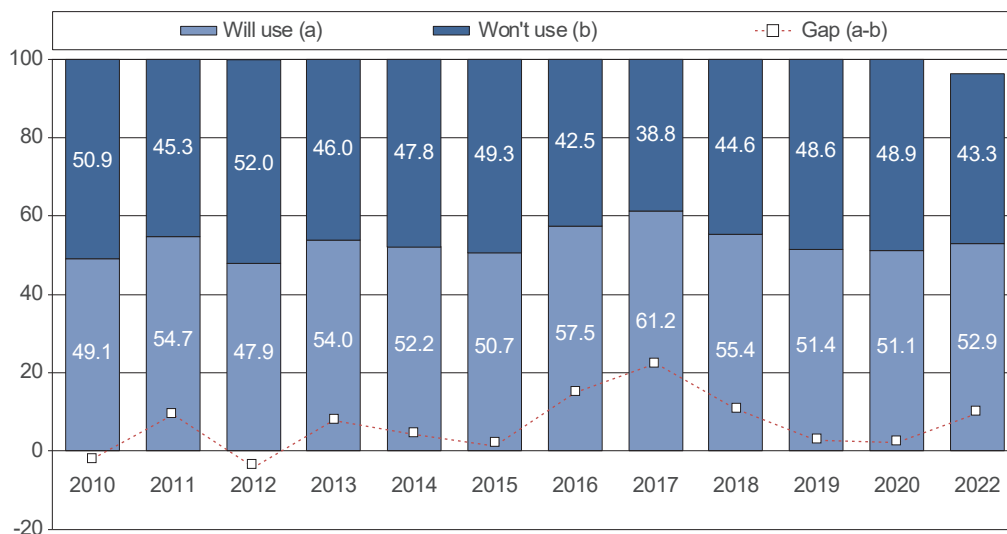
17. J. James Kim, Kang Chungku, and Ham Geon Hee. South Korean Public Opinion on ROK-U.S. Bilateral Ties. *Asan Report*. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies. May 31, 2022.

18. Wade L. Huntley. 2014. “Nuclear Weapons and Extended Deterrence in the US-ROK Alliance.” *Strategy 21*. 17(2): 236-61.

Korea. The Asan Institute has tracked this question since 2010 (See Figure 7). The longitudinal data shows that, on average, a little over 50% of South Koreans think the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea in the event of an attack by North Korea, but this data is range-bound between 47.9% and 61.2%. In particular, the trust in the U.S. willingness to defend South Korea using a nuclear deterrent was at its apex in 2016–2017 when relations between South Korea and the U.S. looked strong under Obama, and nuclear brinkmanship appeared to be the new normal under Trump.

This finding jibes with other results, which looked at how South Koreans think about the presence of U.S. Forces in Korea and the ROK-U.S. alliance. A study looking at the longitudinal data about the ROK-U.S. alliance shows that 80~90% of South Koreans saw the presence of U.S. Forces in Korea and the ROK-U.S. alliance as “necessary” for maintaining South Korea’s national security. If we use a broader definition of deterrence by asking whether the respondent thought the U.S. will intervene militarily to defend South Korea in the event of a war on the Korean Peninsula, approximately 90% answered in the affirmative.¹⁹

Figure 7. Expectations About U.S. Nuclear Response Against North Korean Nuclear Attack²⁰ (%)



One classical dilemma associated with extended deterrence is the fear of abandonment. As Charles de Gaulle asked John F. Kennedy in 1961, will Washington “be ready to trade New York for Paris?”²¹ This concern could affect how South Koreans think about U.S. extended deterrence. To examine this issue more closely, we asked whether the respondent thought the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea even if it meant risking its security. Given that North Korea is developing a long-range strike capability, this question is worth weighing when considering assurance to the South Korean public. Unsurprisingly, only 43.1% of the respondents thought the United States would risk its safety to defend South Korea. Furthermore, 54.2% stated that the U.S. would not take such risks. In short, we see a 9.8%p reduction in South Korean belief that the U.S. would defend South Korea with nuclear weapons if it means risking the security of the U.S.

There are three points to consider. First, the question wording needed to be sufficiently broad enough as not to be clear about what the U.S. would be risking, meaning that a majority of the South Koreans may think that the U.S. would take no such risk. If the question is posed more specifically as to whether the U.S. would risk a nuclear attack on San Francisco or Los Angeles in defending South Korea, this percentage may be even lower. The second point to note is that there is a significant reduction in each affirmative category that the U.S. would defend South Korea when the risk component is added to the question (Agree strongly: 14.3%→11.9%; Somewhat agree: 38.7%→28.1%). The reduction was offset by a significant increase in each negative category (Somewhat disagree: 25.1→31.2%; Strongly disagree: 18.2→26.1%). Finally, we see a reduction in the “don’t know/refused to answer” category from 3.8% to 2.7%. In short, this result suggests that the South Korean public feels less confident about the robustness of U.S. security guarantees if doing so implies risks to its security.

The prospects for the U.S. to use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea varied according to age and ideology. For instance, the response that the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea was highest among those aged 60 and over

19. Kim, Kang, and Ham (2022).

20. Source: Asan Annual Survey (2010-2020). Asan Poll (November 2022). “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer” in 2022 survey were only 3.8%.

21. *Memorandum of Conversation*. President’s Visit. Paris, May 31-June 2, 1961. (<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d30>).

(66.3%) and those in their 20s (55.8%). Conservatives (63.3%) were also more likely than moderates (51%) or progressives (47.8%) to think that the U.S. would defend South Korea with nuclear weapons.

Table 4. Expectations About U.S. Nuclear Response Against North Korean Nuclear Attack by Demographics²² (%)

		Without Any Condition		With the U.S.'s Risk-taking	
		Will use	Won't use	Will use	Won't use
Total		52.9	43.3	43.1	54.2
Age	20s	<u>55.8</u>	44.2	<u>45.6</u>	54.4
	30s	50.3	49.7	38.8	61.2
	40s	43.6	56.4	32.8	67.2
	50s	51.3	48.7	41.6	58.4
	60+	<u>66.3</u>	33.7	<u>55.5</u>	44.5
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=26.874, df=4, p<.05$		$\chi^2=27.267, df=4, p<.05$	
Ideology	Conservative	<u>63.3</u>	36.7	<u>50.5</u>	49.5
	Moderate	51.0	49.0	42.3	57.7
	Progressive	47.8	52.2	40.2	59.8
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=16.514, df=2, p<.05$		$\chi^2=7.479, df=2, p<.05$	
Chances of Military Conflict	Low	47.7	52.3	38.9	61.1
	High	<u>60.4</u>	39.6	<u>48.3</u>	51.7
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=15.392, df=1, p<.05$		$\chi^2=8.538, df=1, p<.05$	
Image of North Korea	Positive	39.7	60.3	27.6	72.4
	Neutral	43.0	57.0	36.5	63.5
	Negative	<u>61.6</u>	38.4	<u>50.9</u>	49.1
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=33.890, df=2, p<.05$		$\chi^2=34.135, df=2, p<.05$	

22. Source: Asan Poll (November 2022). Table 4 excludes "Don't Know/Refused to Answer."

We also found some interesting correlations between expectations about conflict on the Korean Peninsula and perception of North Korea. For instance, 60.4% of those who thought that the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea were individuals who perceived the probability of military conflict to be high. Conversely, 61.6% of those who thought the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea also had negative perceptions of North Korea.

Similar patterns were observed regarding whether the U.S. would use nuclear weapons even if its security were at risk. The respondents aged 60 and over (55.5%) and in their 20s (45.6%) thought that the likelihood was high. Conservatives (50.5%) more so than moderates (42.3%) and progressives (40.2%) also believed that the U.S. would be willing to risk its security to defend South Korea with nuclear weapons. 48.3% of individuals who thought the U.S. would risk its security to defend South Korea were most weary of a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula. 50.9% of those who believed the U.S. would risk its safety to defend South Korea also held negative perceptions of North Korea.

Our findings suggest that the South Korean public has genuine concerns about the robustness of U.S. extended deterrence. While most South Koreans do not question the sincerity of U.S. commitment to South Korea's national security, their confidence in U.S. commitment could erode if the U.S. interest was at stake. This suggests that signals can further strengthen the South Korean public perception of U.S. commitments. For instance, defense cooperation with the U.S. and other allies in the region can enhance South Korean public confidence in extended deterrence. More frequent and longer basing of strategic assets in South Korea can be an important signal to the South Korean public. How the U.S. manages international crises, such as the Ukraine conflict, can also be an important signal.²³

2. Addressing the North Korea Security Challenge

The security architecture in and around the Korean Peninsula has changed little since the Korean War. However, the regional security environment is becoming more

23. "Widespread Support for a U.S. Role in the War Between Russia and Ukraine." *AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research*. May 24, 2022.

uncertain due to the U.S.-China rivalry and North Korea's continued development of its nuclear capability. There is little reason to believe that the current trajectory towards increased escalation and tension will change. The Yoon administration's response has been to strengthen South Korea's defense cooperation with the U.S. and Japan and shore up its defense posture. In this regard, Seoul and Washington have worked to increase the deployment of U.S. strategic assets to the Korean Peninsula and resume joint military exercises. Secretary Lloyd Austin's January 2023 visit to South Korea to emphasize the collective preparedness of combined forces is indicative of this effort.²⁴

President Yoon, however, has been unable to avoid criticism for his inability to deter North Korea's provocation. His critics point out that his aggressive approach towards North Korea only further encourages the regime in Pyongyang to double down on defiant impulse.

Our survey explored what the public thought about the effectiveness of South Korea's military readiness, the Yoon government's defense policy, and the U.S. security guarantee. Keep in mind that the timing of the survey followed Seoul's announcement that South Korea would resume joint military exercises and that it also had the option of launching preemptive strikes if there were clear and imminent danger of a North Korean nuclear attack.

We posed the questions regarding these issues using a four-point scale from 1="not effective at all" to 4="very effective." The findings suggest that the respondents were cautious in evaluating South Korea's options for North Korea's provocation. For example, in their evaluation of South Korea's military readiness and preemption measures, the average scores were 2.45 and 2.37, respectively (median=2.5 points).

Considering the amount of time and energy that the Yoon administration has spent on national security, the South Korean public evaluation of the government's policy response is somewhat underwhelming. The data shows no reason to believe the presence of structural bias in the questionnaire design. Nevertheless, it is difficult to ignore the increased frequency and intensity of North Korean military provocations at the time of

24. "Austin Looks to Build on Strengths of Alliances with South Korea, the Philippines." *DOD News*. January 29, 2023.

the survey, which would have impacted the result.

Table 5. Effectiveness of Deterrence Against North Korean Provocation (1~4 Point)

	N-size	Mean (SD)
Military System in Response	962	2.45 (0.913)
Declaration of Preemptive Strike	972	2.37 (1.128)

**Dependent Variable: 1=Not effective at all, 4=Very effective*

One explanation for the above finding is that we do not see a clear national consensus on what to do about North Korea's belligerent behavior. When asked about the best response to North Korean provocation, the most preferred answers included (preemptive) military strike (37.5%), diplomacy (30.9%), and strengthened military defense (30.1%). Even though preemption was 6~7%-point higher than the next best option, it was not the kind of overwhelming support in favor of the hardline approach that the Yoon administration may have hoped. There is also the argument that the Yoon administration's hardline policy encourages the regime in Pyongyang to be more aggressive.

According to a survey conducted by KBS in July–August 2022, the percentage of South Koreans who favored the Yoon administration's policy towards North Korea was 44.2%; 55.8% opposed the government policy (difference=11.6%p).²⁵ It is worth noting that the evaluation of the Moon administration's policy towards North Korea was slightly better if not about the same. Respective surveys from 2020 and 2021, for instance, showed that 48.5% and 46.9% supported Moon's North Korean policy, while 51.5% and 53.1% opposed the same. This suggests that the South Korean people are split on the question of proper policy response vis-à-vis North Korea.

3. Nuclear Options and THAAD

There is no sign that North Korea wants to give up on its ambition to be recognized

25. Source: KBS. Public Attitudes on Unification. July 27-August 1, 2022.

as a nuclear power. Recent provocations also indicate that Pyongyang intends to possess a menu of delivery options for its warheads, including a full range of ballistic, submarine-launchable, and cruise capabilities. Although the U.S. security guarantee has contributed to keeping the peace on the Korean Peninsula since the signing of the Mutual Defense Treaty in 1953, the above discussion suggests that the South Korean public is less sure that the U.S. would risk its territory to defend South Korea.

The reason for this doubt stems from a broadly acknowledged fact that certain political tendencies in the U.S., such as President Trump and his supporters, question the value of the ROK-U.S. alliance and U.S. Forces in Korea. President Trump is on the record for stating that he wants to “blow up” the ROK-U.S. alliance during his second term in office. Experts also question the efficacy of South Korea’s traditional conventional military superiority as North Korea has made significant strides in developing its nuclear capabilities.

Against this backdrop, several politicians, including President Yoon and Seoul Mayor Oh have publicly contemplated the possibility of nuclear armament or deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea.²⁶ The consensus, however, is that nuclear armament would only beget more proliferation in Northeast Asia and beyond. Numerous officials, including President Biden, have publicly stated that there is no plan to discuss or contemplate nuclear-sharing arrangements with South Korea. Most importantly, the official policy of the South Korean government is not to pursue any of these options.²⁷

Domestic public opinion, however, is a different matter. According to our data, which we have accumulated since 2010, more than half of the South Korean public supports either indigenous nuclear development or the redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea.²⁸ One explanation is that there is a psychological dimension to deterrence which affects public views about its efficacy. The Korean public seems to think simply that the best response to the North Korean nuclear threat is a nuclear

26. “Seoul mayor says nuclear armament option should be left open to deal with N. Korea.” *Yonhap News Agency*. February 23, 2023; “Yoon’s comment on nuclear armament indication of will to defend nation: official.” *Yonhap News Agency*. January 12, 2023.

27. “Yoon reaffirms commitment to nuclear treaty in Davos.” *Yonhap News Agency*. January 20, 2023.

28. Kim, Kang, and Ham (2022). See Appendix II, Table 1.

deterrent. Most certainly, we can add to this concern additional risks, such as trepidation about Russia and China and skepticism about U.S. extended deterrence.²⁹

It is also worth noting that support for nuclear armament has been increasing unusually rapidly over the past year. While this can be explained, in part, by the security concerns mentioned above, there is also the possibility that the South Korean public lacks awareness about the cost of nuclear armament or redeployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. For instance, exit from the non-proliferation regime would have grave consequences for the South Korean economy due to the possibility of sanctions. The South Korean public may also have differing views about managing the costs associated with housing enrichment, reprocessing, and waste storage facilities. Even if these issues are somehow settled, which communities will agree to deploy nuclear warheads in their “backyard?” Given the lack of public discourse on these potentially sensitive matters, we have also included this dimension in our survey.

On the question of indigenous nuclear weapons, for instance, we designed two separate questions in our survey. The first question did not mention the possibility of sanctions, while the second did. The aim was to gauge whether the respondents would change their minds on nuclear armament if they are cued about one possible cost of embarking on this option.

Initially, 64.3% of respondents expressed support for developing indigenous nuclear weapons. 33.3% were opposed. When the possibility of sanction is mentioned, support for independent nuclear armament drops to 54.7%, and opposition grows to 42.3%. Roughly speaking, this is a 10%p shift. The change in support is shown to be statistically significant. It is also worth mentioning that the change in opinion is considerably more dramatic than the survey conducted in March 2022.

On the issue of deploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, 61.1% were favorable. 36.2% were opposed. While we saw some measurable differences in support for the two nuclear options in March 2022, we did not see this distinction in November. We found that the difference is not statistically significant. The second thing to note is that

29. “Terror of War and Fascism inciting Nuclear Armament (핵무장 선동하는 전쟁공포와 파시즘),” *Korea JoongAng Daily*. January 30, 2023.

we also see relatively stable support for U.S. tactical nuclear weapons in March and November 2022.³⁰ Together, this suggests that the South Korean public attitudes about these issues can be influenced by context and conditions.

Table 6. Response to North Korean Nuclear Threats (%)

		Support (a)	Oppose (b)	Gap (a-b)
Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Development	Without Sanctions	64.3 ^a	33.3	31.0p
	With Sanctions	54.7 ^{ab}	42.3	12.4p
Reintroducing Tactical Nuclear Weapon		61.1 ^b	36.2	24.9p
Deployment of Additional THAAD Batteries		58.7	38.3	20.4p

**Difference that shares the same superscripts are statistically significant.*

Another issue gaining attention in South Korean national discourse for addressing the North Korean security challenge is the deployment of additional missile defense batteries in South Korea. President Yoon, for instance, mentioned the possibility of placing additional THAAD batteries in South Korea during the presidential election last year. However, the critics argue that the missile defense system is ineffective and will only provoke Beijing.

We followed up on this issue by asking whether the respondent would support additional THAAD batteries in South Korea, 58.7% were supportive, and 38.3% were opposed. The support for THAAD resonates in some ways with the two nuclear options discussed previously in that we did not see a statistically significant difference in these results. This suggests the public does not distinguish between offensive and defensive capabilities when managing the North Korean security challenge (See Table 6). We did find, however, that there was a significant difference in how the public thinks about the indigenous nuclear option if the cost becomes more apparent.

30. Support for deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons was 67% in 2013, 46% in 2020, 61.3% in 2020 and 59% in March 2022.

A comparison of the net support ratio also lends support to the above analysis. For instance, if we take the difference in percentages of support and opposition for each question to compare the strength of relative support, we see that the net support ratio for indigenous nuclear weapons is highest (31%p), followed by support for U.S. tactical nuclear weapons (24.9%p) and additional THAAD batteries (20.4%p). We also see net support for an indigenous nuclear option falling to 12.4%p when sanction is mentioned.

To see if we can attribute any structural factors to our results, we examined the data along different sociodemographic subcategories. Findings suggest a notable difference along age groups. For instance, individuals in their 50s (67.9%) and 60s+ (80.3%) were most supportive of indigenous nuclear weapons. Support was lowest among individuals in their 20s (53.1%) and 40s (55.9%). Support for the tactical nuclear weapon was highest among individuals in their 20s (67.1%), 30s (63.8%), and 60s+ (79.7%). It was lowest among individuals in their 40s (36.1%). Past studies suggest that younger South Koreans tend to place a greater emphasis on the economic significance of national security than other generations; therefore, one explanation for our finding is that the 20s tend to internalize the costs of the indigenous nuclear option. Prior evidence also suggests that individuals in their 40s tend to be less pro-U.S. than other generations.³¹

Ideology also appears to be a significant factor, as more conservatives expressed more support for the two nuclear options than moderates and progressives. For instance, 72.6% of conservatives supported indigenous nuclear weapons, and 75.2% endorsed the deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. In contrast, only 54.6% of progressives supported indigenous nuclear weapons, and 49.3% supported tactical nuclear weapons. This suggests a 20%p gap between the two groups, implying that ideological tendencies or political leanings can shape South Korean views on the nuclear issue.

31. See Kim, Kang, and Ham (2022). Individuals in their 20s changed their views on nuclear armament when asked to consider the possibility of sanctions. Their support for indigenous nuclear armament was 50.9% when the question mentioned sanctions. Their support for nuclear armament was 59.3% when the question did *not* mention sanctions. This was a much larger support change compared to other age categories. Also, the favorability of President Biden was lower for individuals in their 40s than for different age categories in our March 2022 survey.

Table 7. Attitudes on Nuclear Armament by Demographics³² (%)

		Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Development		Reintroducing Tactical Nuclear Weapon	
		Support	Oppose	Support	Oppose
Total		64.3	33.3	61.1	36.2
Age	20s	53.1	46.9	67.1	32.9
	30s	59.9	40.1	63.8	36.2
	40s	55.9	44.1	36.1	63.9
	50s	67.9	32.1	57.9	42.1
	60+	80.3	19.7	79.7	20.3
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=50.157, df=4, p<.05$		$\chi^2=94.102, df=4, p<.05$	
Ideology	Conservative	72.6	27.4	75.2	24.8
	Moderate	68.8	31.2	62.2	37.8
	Progressive	54.6	45.4	49.3	50.7
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=24.259, df=2, p<.05$		$\chi^2=44.234, df=2, p<.05$	
Chances of Military Conflict	Low	58.3	41.7	53.4	46.6
	High	71.3	28.7	69.7	30.3
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=17.768, df=1, p<.05$		$\chi^2=27.011, df=1, p<.05$	
Image of North Korea	Positive	48.0	52.0	34.8	65.2
	Neutral	57.3	42.7	58.6	41.5
	Negative	71.5	28.5	72.0	28.0
Test Statistics		$\chi^2=37.244, df=2, p<.05$		$\chi^2=85.131, df=2, p<.05$	

Finally, we found a meaningful correlation between those who perceived a higher probability of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula and support the two nuclear options. 71.3% of individuals who supported indigenous nuclear weapons also

32. Source: Asan Poll (November 2022). Table 7 excludes “Don’t Know/Refused to Answer.”

thought that the likelihood of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula was high. In comparison, 69.7% of those who supported tactical nuclear weapons also perceived a high probability of conflict. In addition, 71.5% of respondents who supported indigenous nuclear weapons maintained a negative image of North Korea, and 72% of those who supported tactical nuclear weapons also had a negative impression of North Korea.

VI. Conclusion

It is important to recognize the context under which the survey described in this report was conducted. North Korea was engaged in frequent provocations, and the newly inaugurated Yoon Seok-yul government appeared to be taking a more hardline stance against Pyongyang. Nevertheless, the allies were hardly discouraged from conducting live-fire exercises, and tension on the peninsula was running high.

The data showed no change in South Korean attitudes about the ROK-U.S. alliance and extended deterrence. But it also suggested that South Korean public opinion about the North Korean nuclear threat and regional security challenge is evolving. Some evidence suggests that the South Korean public's views about extended deterrence can change depending on how this issue is managed and framed. Finally, we noted some minor shifts in the South Korean perception of North Korea, which appeared negative. We summarize our main findings as follows:

First, South Korean perception of North Korea was generally negative in that a large cross-section of the public associated North Korea with “dictatorship” and “nuclear weapons.” However, we noted that a minority still saw North Korea through the “unification” lens, even during times of tension and crisis.

Although the image of North Korea was negatively skewed, we found that the respondents' views varied according to their ideological orientation. Progressives, for instance, were more likely to associate North Korea with positive images than conservatives. This is consistent with past surveys, which found that public perception of North Korea was divided along ideological lines. We reason from this that the apparent partisan differences on North Korea are linked to ideological differences.

Second, South Koreans named North Korea the most pressing security concern, followed by China. This finding is hardly surprising given that North Korea openly threatens South Korea with vitriol while China often resorts to diplomatic pressure and coercion, which may appear less threatening to the South Korean public. It is important to recognize that other types of risks, such as those linked to climate change, supply chain, and public health, were less of a concern for the South Koreans. This has meaningful policy implications as we look ahead to closer relations and cooperation

between South Korea and the U.S. That is, President Yoon would be hard-pressed to prioritize the new frontier issues in the alliance agenda without adequately addressing the more pressing security challenge linked to North Korea and China.

Third, South Koreans' pessimism about national security was over 70% in November 2022 for the first time since 2010. This is likely associated with a dramatic rise in North Korean provocation and increased tension. The duration of public pessimism about South Korea's security outlook is uncertain, given that it has always ebbed and flowed according to context. If North Korea continues to keep pace with last year's provocation, tension, and public pessimism will likely remain high.

Fourth, South Koreans maintained a relatively high confidence in the U.S. security guarantee on the Korean Peninsula. According to our survey, more than half of South Koreans believed the U.S. would use nuclear weapons to defend South Korea during a North Korean nuclear attack. However, the data suggests that this can change depending on context and perception. Namely, South Korean attitudes toward U.S. extended deterrence may change depending on what the U.S. does or does not do.

This brings us to our fifth finding, which is that South Koreans supported the development of indigenous nuclear weapons and deploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons.³³ More than half also supported the deployment of additional THAAD missile defense batteries. We noted that attitudes on these issues would likely be influenced by the latest events, such as North Korean provocations, advancements in North Korea's nuclear program, and growing geopolitical risks associated with China. In addition, cost considerations can also impact the South Korean public support for these options. For instance, support for indigenous nuclear weapons declined significantly when the possibility of sanctions is mentioned. Finally, we also have reasons to believe that South Korean perception of U.S. extended deterrence shapes their views about these defensive countermeasures against the North Korean threat. Given that the Yoon administration will likely maintain a firm policy towards North Korea in 2023, we expect Pyongyang to not let up on its provocation for the foreseeable future. We also

33. It is important to point out that there is a significant gap between the South Korean public and elites on the question of nuclear armament. The Korea Institute for National Unification reported in 2022 that 45 out of 67 (67.2%) national security experts were opposed to indigenous nuclear armament.

do not have any reason to believe that we will see a significant improvement in inter-Korean relations. With South Korean sentiments being negative toward North Korea, the South Korean public will likely support a strengthened deterrence posture. If the policymakers are serious about non-proliferation, they must keep the public informed about the costs of nuclear armament while working to rebuild trust in extended deterrence. In this regard, the leaders should embrace more public debate on these issues and strengthen bilateral and trilateral security cooperation in and around the Korean Peninsula.

Survey Methodology

Asan Poll

2020

Sample size: 1,000 respondents over the age of 19
Margin of error: $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level
Survey method: Computer Assisted Web Interview (CAWI)
Period: October 21–25, 2020
Organization: Research & Research

2022

Sample size: 1,000 respondents over the age of 19
Margin of error: $\pm 3.1\%$ at the 95% confidence level
Survey method: Computer Assisted Telephone Interview (CATI) with Random Digit Dialing for mobile and landline phones
Period: November 10–12, 2022
Organization: Research & Research

Asan Annual Survey

2010

Sample size: 2,000 respondents over the age of 19
Margin of error: $\pm 2.2\%$ at the 95% confidence level
Survey method: Personal Interview Survey (Face-to-face Method)
Period: August 16–September 17, 2010
Organization: Media Research

2011

Sample size: 2,000 respondents over the age of 19
Margin of error: $\pm 2.2\%$ at the 95% confidence level
Survey method: Mixed-Mode Online Survey employing RDD for mobile and landline telephones
Period: August 26–October 4, 2011
Organization: EmBrain

2012

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: September 24–November 1, 2014

Organization: Media Research

2013

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: September 4–27, 2013

Organization: Media Research

2014

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: September 1–17, 2014

Organization: Media Research

2015

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: September 2–30, 2015

Organization: Media Research

2016

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: September 9–October 14, 2016

Organization: Media Research

2017

Sample size: 1,200 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.8\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: October 19–November 14, 2017

Organization: Kantar Public

2018

Sample size: 1,200 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.8\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: November 8–December 5, 2018

Organization: K-Stat Research

2019

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: December 5–24, 2019

Organization: K-Stat Research

2020

Sample size: 1,500 respondents over the age of 19

Margin of error: $\pm 2.5\%$ p at the 95% confidence level

Survey method: RDD for mobile and landline telephones and online survey

Period: December 3–17, 2020

Organization: EmBrain Public

Appendix I: Asan Poll Questionnaire (November 2022)³⁴

Q1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you think of North Korea?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Dictatorship under Kim Jong-un	34.2
Nuclear Weapons	32.3
Korean Unification	12.5
Socialist Political System	8.7
Inter-Korean Economic Cooperation	6.0
Planned Economy	1.0
Others/Don't Know/Refused to Answer	5.3

Q2. How do you see the current National Security?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Positive	2.3
Positive on the Whole	19.7
Neither Positive nor Negative	5.7
Negative on the Whole	47.9
Very Negative	22.8
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	1.6

34. Here suggests the survey result that were cited in this report.

Q3. What is the biggest threat to South Korea? Please pick two things in order of importance. (%)

Response Options	First	Second
North Korea's Nuclear Threats	43.0	23.8
New Cold War Paradigm	16.9	15.5
China's Rise	12.4	22.0
Climate Change	8.9	11.3
Infectious Disease such as COVID-19	5.4	8.1
Supply Chain Insecurity	4.7	9.6
Spread of Terrorism	1.9	3.9
Others/Don't Know/Refused to Answer	6.7	5.8

Q4. How much interest do you have in North Korean nuclear weapons?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Interested	30.0
Slightly Interested	50.9
Not Interested	15.6
Not Interested at All	3.1
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	0.3

Q5. How do you rate the influence of North Korean nuclear threats on your life?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Influential	18.6
Slightly Influential	34.8
Not Influential	32.4
Not Influential at All	13.7
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	0.5

Q6. If North Korea attacks South Korea with nuclear weapons, do you think the U.S. will use nuclear weapons in response?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Likely	14.3
Likely on the Whole	38.7
Not Likely	25.1
Not Likely at All	18.2
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	3.8

Q7. If North Korea attacks South Korea with nuclear weapons, do you think the U.S. will take the risk to use nuclear weapons in response?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Very Likely	11.9
Likely on the Whole	31.2
Not Likely	28.1
Not Likely at All	26.1
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	2.7

Q8. If North Korea had a military provocation, which of the following response should be taken?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Should take a military response to North Korea	37.5
Should take diplomatic measures	30.9
Should take defensive military action against North Korea	30.1
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	1.5

Q9. Do you think the South Korean military response to deter North Korean nuclear provocations is effective?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Agree	11.0
Agree	38.8
Disagree	29.3
Strongly Disagree	17.2
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	3.8

Q10. Do you think that South Korea should develop its own nuclear weapons?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	28.4
Support	35.9
Oppose	18.9
Strongly Oppose	14.5
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	2.3

Q11. If there are international sanctions on a country developing its own nuclear weapons, do you think South Korea should still develop nuclear weapons?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	15.3
Support	39.4
Oppose	26.3
Strongly Oppose	16.0
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	3.0

Q12. Do you think that U.S. tactical nuclear weapons should be deployed in South Korea?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	21.1
Support	40.0
Oppose	20.2
Strongly Oppose	16.0
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	2.8

Q13. What do you think about South Korea deploying an additional THAAD system?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Support	26.8
Support	31.8
Oppose	21.2
Strongly Oppose	17.1
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	3.0

Q14. If there is a clear sign of a North Korean nuclear attack, the current government insists we should take a preemptive attack on North Korea. Do you think this measure to deter North Korean nuclear provocations is effective?

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Strongly Agree	18.6
Agree	30.7
Disagree	16.1
Strongly Disagree	31.8
Don't Know/Refused to Answer	2.8

Q15. How do you rate the likelihood of military conflict on the Korean Peninsula within the next ten years? Please rate your view on a scale of zero to ten, respectively, representing “Not Likely at all” and “Very Likely” with five being “Normal.”

Response Options	Percentages (%)
Not Likely	47.7
Normal	27.7
Likely	22.5
Don't know/Refused to Answer	2.1

Appendix II: Survey on Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Development

Table 1. Attitudes on Indigenous Nuclear Weapons Development

Survey Period		Support	Oppose	Institutions
2010	Aug. to Sep.	55.6	44.5	Media Research
2011	Aug. to Oct.	62.6	37.4	EmBrain
2012	Sep. to Nov.	66.0	34.0	Media Research
2013	Feb.	64	28	Gallup Korea
	Sep.	62.9	37.1	Media Research
2014	Sep.	61.3	38.7	Media Research
2015	Sep.	62.3	37.7	Media Research
2016	Jan.	54	38	Gallup Korea
	Feb.	67.7	30.5	JoongAng Daily
	Sep.	65.1	29.3	Research & Research
		58	34	Gallup Korea
	Sep. to Oct.	59.9	40.1	Media Research
2017	Sep.	60	35	Gallup Korea
	Oct. to Nov.	64.1	35.9	Kantar Public
2018	Nov. to Dec.	54.8	45.3	K-Stat Research
2019	Dec.	67.1	32.9	K-Stat Research
2020	Dec.	69.3	30.7	EmBrain Public
2022	Mar.	70.2	28.2	Research & Research
	Nov.	64.3	33.3	Research & Research
	Dec.	66.8	31.8	Hankook Research

The shaded rows in Table 1 are the survey commissioned by the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

A S A N
R E P O R T

Transitioning Attitudes on North Korea: Perceived Threat and Preferred Response

J. James Kim, Kang Chungku, Ham Geon Hee

First edition April 2023

Published by The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

Registration number 300-2010-122

Registration date September 27, 2010

Address 11, Gyeonghuigung 1ga-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 03176, Korea

Telephone +82-2-730-5842

Fax +82-2-730-5876

Website www.asaninst.org

E-mail info@asaninst.org

Book design EGISHOLDINGS

ISBN 979-11-5570-268-0 95340 (PDF)

Copyright © 2023 by The Asan Institute for Policy Studies

All Rights reserved, including the rights of reproduction in whole or in part in any form.

Printed in the Republic of Korea



ISBN 979-11-5570-268-0