

APRIL 2024

Breaking Bad

South Korea's Nuclear Option

AUTHOR

Victor Cha

A Report of the CSIS Korea Program

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Executive Summary

In the face of an uncertain security environment—precipitated by wars in Europe and the Middle East, China’s assertive behavior, and North Korea’s campaign to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—South Korea has witnessed increasingly open discussion about the previously taboo topic of national nuclear weapons capability. Recent public opinion polling suggests that over 76 percent of South Koreans favor a nuclear path. Concerns heightened in January 2023, when the president of South Korea raised the possibility that the country could deploy nuclear weapons rapidly given its scientific and technological prowess.

CSIS distributed an opinion poll to over 1,000 strategic elites in South Korea between January 15 and March 17, 2024, on this question. This demographic was selected because the views of strategic elites—defined as academics, think tank experts, business elites, legislators, and officials (current and former)—is understood to better reflect both the state of national discussion and the views influential in decisionmaking on issues of national security. Key findings of this study run contrary to the public discussion of this issue:

- Two-thirds of South Korea’s strategic elites do not favor nuclearization of South Korea (66 percent opposed or uncertain), while only one-third support it (34 percent).
- The 34 percent of strategic elites who support nuclearization is a significantly lower number than the oft-cited 76 percent support of the general public and is a better indicator of the current attitudes of South Korea toward the nuclear option.
- The main reason South Korea’s strategic elites do not favor nuclearization is the consequences in terms of international condemnation, reputational costs, and sanctions,

highlighting the value that elites place on South Korea's global status in the rules-based international order.

- Strategic elite opposition to a nuclear South Korea, however, is not unconditional. Should abandonment fears regarding the U.S. security commitment come to fruition (such as the withdrawal of U.S. ground troops by a future U.S. administration), 51 percent of those opposed to nuclearization would become supportive of this path.
- Thirteen percent of elites remain uncertain about nuclearization, representing a substantial group whose opinions can be shaped by factors such as alliance assurances, adversary threats, and similar means.
- Strategic elites who support nuclearization favor the acquisition of autonomous nuclear capabilities by a two-to-one margin over a nuclear sharing option; those who do not support nuclearization, if pressed, most prefer nuclear sharing over indigenous capabilities by an almost five-to-one margin.

Introduction

South Korea faces an increasingly uncertain security environment. The way conflicts have erupted in Europe and the Middle East demonstrates that devastating war is more than a remote possibility in Asia. China's growing military assertiveness against Taiwan raises concerns about the possibility of simultaneous conflicts on the peninsula and across the Taiwan Strait that could stretch the defense capabilities of Seoul's primary security benefactor. On the peninsula, the security situation is far from tranquil. Since 2005, North Korea has conducted 180 ballistic missile tests and six nuclear tests.¹ It enshrined nuclear weapons status permanently into the constitution over a decade ago and stipulated its right to preemptive use of nuclear weapons in September 2022. It is seeking the second leg of the nuclear triad in a sea-based capability and tactical nuclear weapons to use in war. Kim Jong-un's legacy-seeking ambition is to become a nuclear weapons state on par with France or the United Kingdom by the end of the decade. All diplomatic efforts at negotiating away North Korea's nuclear weapons have failed, with the last actual dismantlement efforts and international inspections taking place during the Six Party talks almost two decades ago. International sanctions pressure on North Korea has significantly decreased with Chinese and Russian non-compliance, and the UN Security Council, once unanimous in its 10 previous resolutions on North Korea, has been stymied from action by Moscow and Beijing.

This dim picture has led to heightened speculation that South Korea will inevitably head down the nuclear path. Scholars and opinion leaders have forcefully argued the logic of why South



A man watches a television screen showing a news broadcast with a picture of North Korea's latest satellite-carrying rocket launch, at a railway station in Seoul on November 22, 2023.

Photo: JUNG YEON-JE/AFP via Getty Images

Suk Yeol broke taboo when he stated his belief that South Korea could easily and quickly develop nuclear weapons given its high levels of science and technology expertise.⁴

Is South Korea the next nuclear weapons state? The stakes of this question are exceedingly high. A nuclear South Korea could severely damage its alliance with the United States, as it would be tantamount to a statement of no-confidence in the U.S. security guarantee. A nuclear South Korea could also set off a “nuclear domino chain” among other states in the region, including Japan and Taiwan. It could create crisis instability on the peninsula, tempting North Korea to act preemptively. It could create insecurity spirals with Russia, China, and Japan, which would see new strategic threats from the peninsula.



President of the Republic of Korea Yoon Suk Yeol delivers remarks during the official state arrival ceremony in his honor, Wednesday, April 26, 2023, on the South Lawn of the White House.

Photo: Official White House Photo by Erin Scott via Flickr

Korea should pursue nuclearization.² Twice before, this critical U.S. ally has tried to develop nuclear weapons clandestinely, starting nearly a half-century ago.³ Moreover, recent South Korean opinion polling points to most of the public asserting that their country should acquire nuclear weapons—or, at a minimum, call for the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula.

South Korean president Yoon

Concerns about a nuclear South Korea are so high that they have been a driver of alliance politics. The subtext of the highly successful April 2023 state visit by President Yoon to the White House was a set of agreements designed to manage any nuclear aspirations by South Korea. The creation of the Washington Declaration and the Nuclear Consultative Group in 2023 had two purposes. One was to shore up allied deterrence

against the burgeoning WMD threat from North Korea, but the other was to assure South Korea of the credibility of the U.S. nuclear umbrella such that it did not contemplate its own nuclear path. Washington even sought in writing a commitment from Seoul to remain a non-nuclear state in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) as part of the Washington Declaration. These developments reinforce the impression that South Korea is on the verge of a nuclear breakout.

Based on new and original data, however, this report concludes that concerns about a nuclear South Korea are exaggerated. A minority of South Korean foreign policy thinkers—only 34 percent—believe that their government should consider the nuclear option, while upwards of 66 percent disagree or remain uncertain about such a proposition. Confidence in the United States as a security provider remains strong. But this policy judgment is far from unconditional and permanent. If security deficits emerge on the peninsula, and U.S. security commitments lose credibility, then South Korean support for going nuclear would increase dramatically. More specifically, if Donald Trump returns to the presidency with an “America First” policy that denigrates alliances and seeks the retrenchment of U.S. security commitments, then support for a nuclear capability by South Korea among non-nuclear advocates would grow exponentially.

A minority of South Korean foreign policy thinkers—only 34 percent—believe that their government should consider the nuclear option, while upwards of 66 percent disagree or remain uncertain about such a proposition.

This report’s conclusions differ from those of the oft-cited opinion polls in South Korea because they are gleaned from the views of strategic elites, not the general public. Strategic elites are defined here as academic scholars, think tank experts, legislators, business decisionmakers, and officials (both current and former).⁵ As scholars have argued, major decisions about a government’s national security reflect the views of elites rather than the public—even in a period of increasing populism and resentment of elites—because elites enjoy control of resources, have access to or are themselves top decisionmakers, often have domain-specific knowledge, and can define narratives on national security.⁶

Much of the speculation in Washington and Seoul about South Korea’s nuclear ambitions has been informed by a handful of recent public opinion polls.⁷ This has created an echo chamber effect where many pundits have accepted South Korean nuclear ambitions as a reality.⁸ Moreover, of the 55 public polls collected on this question, none have bothered to analyze the views of policy experts and elites. This is the first U.S. study, reaching out to over 1,000 South Korean elites, that

highlights how the vast majority of respondents in this group are far more cautious about, and resistant to, South Korea going nuclear.⁹

Is South Korea the next nuclear weapons state? The stakes of this question are exceedingly high . . . [polls have] created an echo chamber effect where many pundits have accepted South Korean nuclear ambitions as a reality.

In addition to the lack of enthusiasm for nuclear weapons among South Korean experts, this study offers several other novel findings. For one, there is approximately two times more support for remaining non-nuclear than going nuclear among policy elites. Two, reputational costs and international condemnation is a more important motivating factor in preserving South Korea's non-nuclear status than damage to the U.S. alliance. Three, those who are positive on nuclearization mostly prefer doing so through indigenous development of a South Korean capability, rather than other possible options (e.g., returning U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula or a nuclear sharing arrangement). Those who oppose nuclearization, if pressed, tend to prefer nuclear sharing arrangements with the United States over going it alone. Finally, more than half of those opposed to South Korean nuclearization would change their minds if the United States proved to be an unreliable security partner.

Public Opinion Polls on South Korean Nuclearization

There has been a plethora of opinion polls on South Korean nuclearization. A handful of recent polls have captured global attention because they report strong public support for a nuclear option in the face of North Korea’s unrelenting WMD ambitions.¹⁰ This has led some to speculate and even advocate for Seoul to take this path.¹¹ The rationale is that if North Korea acquires a survivable nuclear capability, there are few in the United States who would be willing to trade San Francisco for Seoul despite reassurances to the contrary.¹² This has led some to conclude that “Koreans are concerned that their country would meet the same fate as Ukraine—another non-nuclear state attacked by its nuclear-armed neighbor.”¹³ Such arguments operate from the logic that South Korean national security decisionmakers cannot count on U.S. intentions and commitment, and therefore the country would do well to develop its own deterrent.

As part of this project, researchers created a dataset of nuclear polls to understand better their overall significance, collecting 55 polls from 2010 to 2023. These were divided between polls taken of the public prior to and after September 2017, which was when North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test. The first observation is that the polls were uniformly brief in their questioning. The majority consisted of a question asking simply whether the respondent was in favor or against (or undecided) on the question of South Korea going nuclear. An oft-asked question was, “Should South Korea have its own nuclear weapons?” Another popular question was, “Do you think South Korea should develop nuclear weapons to counter North Korea’s nuclear weapon developments?”

But outside of this one query, there were usually no further questions for the respondent on the motivations or reasoning behind the expressed opinion.

Second, while a snapshot of the polls gives the impression of hearty South Korean support for nuclearization, a longitudinal look across the entire set of polls suggests otherwise. As Table 1 shows, the average positive response to a question about South Korea’s nuclearization from January 2010 to August 2017 was 59 percent. This increased by only two points on average across polls after September 2017, the year of North Korea’s sixth and latest nuclear test. While this is a net increase (and is not an insubstantial number in itself), it is not nearly as dramatic as a cross-sectional view that shows some 76 percent supporting nuclearization. None of the existing opinion polls noted this qualification in their findings, but it is an important one because it shows there has not been a dramatic spike in South Korean public enthusiasm for the nuclear option. Instead, there has been an incremental increase—which is understandable given the changing security environment and alliance uncertainties.

Table 1: South Korean Views of Nuclearization (2010–2023)

Years	Average Positive Response	Total # of Surveys
January 2010 to August 2017	59%	19
September 2017 to December 2023	61%	36
Net increase	2%	55

Source: CSIS Korea Chair.

Strategic Elite Polling Results

This is the first U.S. multi-question polling of strategic elites in South Korea on the nuclear question. Strategic elites identified for this online survey numbered 1,094; there was a 16 percent response rate, for a final sample size of 175 respondents. The sample included academics, think tank experts, business elites, legislators, and officials (current and former). The survey was conducted online as a Google Forms and sent to South Korean nationals who are strategic elites residing in South Korea, the United States, Japan, and Europe. The survey sample ranged from junior to senior professionals. Each respondent was asked an initial question about their supportiveness for South Korea going nuclear. Based on the initial answer, respondents were directed to a separate set of questions to gain greater fidelity on their reasoning and their preferences. The survey was in the field for two months (January to March 2024). The survey answers were anonymized.

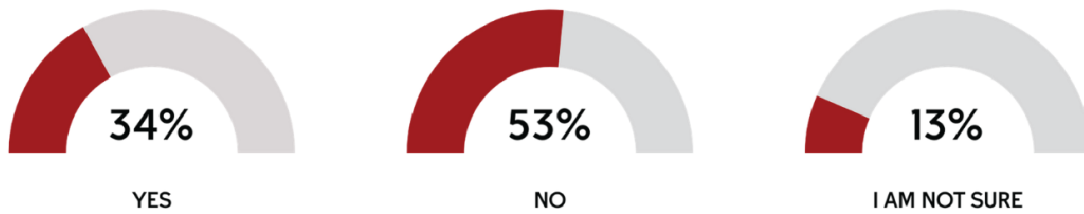
One would expect elites to have a different view of South Korea's security environment than the public. In general, they have a better understanding of the threat matrix, conventional South Korean military capabilities, and North Korean nuclear capabilities. This group is also more likely to understand the costs and benefits of South Korea crossing the nuclear weapons threshold. Finally, they should have a more nuanced understanding of the U.S. alliance and its extended deterrence guarantees to South Korea. These factors combine into the expectation that opinions among the strategic elite on nuclearization would be less enthusiastic than those of the public.

Finding 1: The vast majority of South Korean strategic elites do not favor nuclearization.

In response to the statement “South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons,” 34 percent of strategic elites answered positively, 53 percent answered negatively, and 13 percent answered, “I am not sure.”

Figure 1A

Do you agree with the following statement? "South Korea should have nuclear weapons."



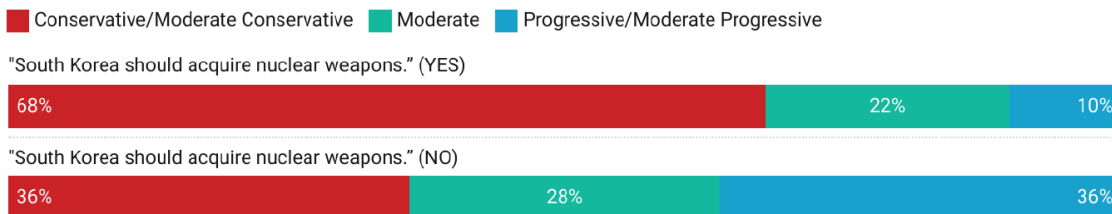
Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Thirty-four percent support represents a much lower level of elite support than that of the general public, which averages at 61 percent based on 36 public opinion polls since September 2017—and a substantially lower level of support than a recent public poll that puts support as high as 76.6 percent. Strategic elites, whose views matter most in national security decisionmaking, by a wide margin do not favor a nuclear South Korea.

Moreover, those who do not support nuclearization represent a broad bipartisan base, with 36 percent each self-identifying as either politically conservative/moderate conservative or progressive/moderate progressive and 28 percent identifying as politically moderate.¹⁴ By contrast, those who do support nuclearization predominantly self-identify as conservative (68 percent versus 10 percent identifying as progressive).

Figure 1B

Political Self-Identification of Nuclear and Non-nuclear Supporters



Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Moreover, those who do not support nuclearization represent a broad bipartisan base, with 36 percent each self-identifying as either politically conservative/moderate conservative or progressive/moderate progressive and 28 percent identifying as politically moderate.

Finding 2: South Korean strategic elites see high reputational and material costs to going nuclear.

When those who replied “no” to the previous question were asked why they do not support a nuclear South Korea, a plurality of respondents (43 percent) ranked the most important reason to be the international sanctions and reputational loss of status that would come with breaking away from the NPT regime. They ranked this reason higher than the potential damage done to the U.S.-South Korea alliance. They also ranked the costs associated with reputational loss and economic sanctions higher than inducing an arms race on the Korean Peninsula and higher than being targeted as strategic threats by other nuclear powers such as China and Russia.

Figure 2

Since you answered “No,” which of the following statements best explains your answer choice?

Answer	Percentage of Respondents
Targeted by economic sanctions and loss of prestige from violating international norms	43%
Damage to the U.S.-ROK alliance and possible fallout from the acquisition of nuclear weapons	26%
Initiating nuclear arms race on the Korean Peninsula	20%
Increased security threat from a neighboring country (or countries), especially China and Russia	10%
Other	1%

Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those strategic elites who do not support nuclearization believe that nuclear weapons will not provide South Korea with greater security. Nearly 71 percent of strategic elites disagreed with the statement that nuclear weaponization of South Korea would make it “secure and safe from outside threats.”¹⁵ This stands in contrast to ubiquitous North Korean rhetoric that justifies nuclear weapons as the ultimate security provider for the state.

Finding 3: The opposition to nuclear weaponization in South Korea changes dramatically if an “America First” policy returns to the White House.

The negative attitude held by South Korean strategic elites in regard to nuclearization is not unconditional. The CSIS poll asked a hypothetical question as to whether a wavering of the U.S. security commitment to South Korea would change the respondents’ views on the nuclear question.



U.S. president Donald J. Trump and South Korean president Moon Jae-in attend their first bilateral meeting at the Blue House on Sunday, June 30, 2019, in Seoul, South Korea.

Photo: Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead via Flickr

supported a nuclear South Korea, 90 percent said their support for nuclearization would increase even further. While the poll did not fully test alternative scenarios, this finding suggests that strategic elites' views on nuclearization are tied more to confidence in the alliance than to extant security threats. Moreover, it suggests that the return of Donald Trump to the White House and a renewal of decoupling rhetoric or actual policies to withdraw U.S. ground troops from the peninsula could significantly impact the nuclear debate in South Korea.

While it is notable that a substantial body of elite opinion among the “non-nuclear believers” (46 percent) would still assert non-nuclear principles in such a scenario, only 10 percent of those “nuclear believers” said their support for a nuclear South Korea would remain the same or decrease. This suggests strong support for nuclearization among the original “nuclear believer” minority would be supplemented by significantly new supportive voices from the previously “non-nuclear” community.¹⁶

Moreover, it [the finding] suggests that the return of Donald Trump to the White House and a renewal of decoupling rhetoric or actual policies to withdraw U.S. ground troops from the peninsula could significantly impact the nuclear debate in South Korea.

Specifically, respondents were asked if abandonment fears regarding the United States, attendant with policies that denigrate allies and call for troop withdrawals, would affect their perspective toward acquiring nuclear weapons.

Fifty-one percent of those who previously did not support a nuclear South Korea said that they would change their minds in such a scenario. In addition, of those respondents who initially

Figure 3

If an “America First” policy returns to the White House in November 2024 that denigrates allies and seeks retrenchment, your support for a nuclear South Korea would:

Elites who are not supportive of nuclearization

Answer	Percentage of Respondents
Increase	51%
Stay the same	46%
Decrease	3%

Elites who are supportive of nuclearization

Answer	Percentage of Respondents
Increase	90%
Stay the same	5%
Decrease	5%

Elites who are not sure of nuclearization

Answer	Percentage of Respondents
Increase	83%
Stay the same	17%
Decrease	0%

Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

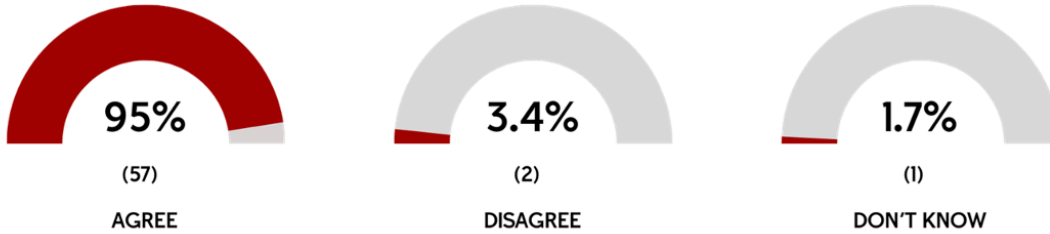
Finding 4: South Koreans who support nuclearization focus on the threat posed by North Korea, and most prefer an independent nuclear capability over other alternatives.

Of those strategic elites who agree that South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons, the majority of these (54 percent) prefer an autonomous and independent capability over any nuclear sharing arrangements or the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula. Ninety-five percent of these nuclear advocates see the weapons as enhancing South Korea’s external security, and 65 percent of advocates believe the primary purpose of such weapons is to counter North Korea as opposed to China or Russia.¹⁷ A small fraction of respondents (no more than 2 percent) see nuclear weapons acquisition as important for status or prestige.¹⁸

Figure 4A

Views of elites **supportive** of nuclearization

Acquiring nuclear weapons will make South Korea more secure and safe from outside threats.



Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Figure 4B

Please rate your preference for how South Korea should “go nuclear.”

Preference	Percentage of Respondents		
	1 - most preferred	2	3 - least preferred
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	54%	21%	30%
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea*	27%	58%	17%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	19%	21%	53%

*with South Korea's conventional delivery vehicles and dual control by South Korea and the United States.

Weighted Averages: Indigenous nuclear weapons program = 40.63% Nuclear sharing = 35.00% Re-deployment = 24.38%

Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Figure 4C

Views of elites **supportive** of nuclearization

Since you answered “Yes,” which of the following statements best explains your answer choice?

Reason	Percentage of Respondents
Independent defense capability against North Korea	65%
Lack of U.S. security commitment to South Korea in the long run	17%
Independent defense capability against China and Russia	15%
Status or prestige from acquiring nuclear weapons	0%
All of the above	2%
Did not answer	2%

Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Finding 5: South Korea’s pro- and anti-nuclear weapons advocates disagree on how South Korea should/would go nuclear.

While supporters of a nuclear South Korea most prefer achieving this goal through an independent capability, most non-supporters, if pressed to choose, prefer a nuclear sharing arrangement within the U.S.-ROK alliance. When asked about the hypothetical question of South Korean nuclearization, the vast majority (71 percent) of non-nuclear strategic elites ranked an independent capability as the least preferred option, while only 1 percent ranked a nuclear sharing arrangement as their least preferred option.¹⁹ A simple majority (61 percent) ranked nuclear sharing as their most preferable choice. In addition, most elites (57 percent) in the noncommittal category of nuclearization (“I am not sure”) also ranked nuclear sharing as preferable to other modes of South Korean nuclearization.²⁰ This suggests that the majority of South Korean strategic elites, even if forced to rescind their non-nuclear beliefs because of U.S. decoupling, would still seek nuclearization within the context of the alliance and would still potentially see the alliance as a resilient institution from which they could derive security benefits.

Figure 5A

Although you disagree with the following statement, “South Korea should develop nuclear weapons,” what would be your preferred way for South Korea to “go nuclear,” if necessary?

Elites who **are not supportive** of nuclearization

Preferred Way	Percentage of Respondents (not weighted)
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea*	61%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	26%
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	13%

*with South Korea’s conventional delivery vehicles and dual control by South Korea and the United States.

Weighted Averages: Nuclear sharing = 43.66% Re-deployment = 33.60% Indigenous nuclear weapons program = 22.74%

Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Figure 5B

Since you agree with the following statement, “South Korea should develop nuclear weapons,” what would be your preferred way for South Korea to “go nuclear”?

Elites who **are supportive** of nuclearization

Preferred Way	Percentage of Respondents (not weighted)
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea*	27%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	19%
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	54%

*with South Korea’s conventional delivery vehicles and dual control by South Korea and the United States.

Weighted Averages: Nuclear sharing = 35.00% Re-deployment = 24.38% Indigenous nuclear weapons program = 40.63%

Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Figure 5C

Although you are not certain about the following statement, “South Korea should develop nuclear weapons,” what would be your preferred way for South Korea to “go nuclear,” if necessary?

Elites who **are not sure** of nuclearization

Preferred Way	Percentage of Respondents (not weighted)
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea*	57%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	30%
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	13%

**with South Korea's conventional delivery vehicles and dual control by South Korea and the United States.*

Weighted Averages: Nuclear sharing = 43.18% Re-deployment = 33.33% Indigenous nuclear weapons program = 23.48%

Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024.

Analysis

There are several possible explanations for why strategic elites hold such different views on nuclearization compared with the general public. First, elites value their country's global status as a supporter of the rules-based international system, particularly Seoul's championing of the nonproliferation regime. South Korea is an upstanding member of the NPT and has wholly condemned North Korea's withdrawal from the treaty. Its 123 Civil Nuclear Agreement with the United States maintains gold-standard nonproliferation safeguards. The 2023 Washington Declaration on the occasion of President Yoon's state visit reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to nonproliferation. Elites understand better than the public the consequences that going nuclear would have in terms of tarnishing the nation's reputation, labeling it a rule breaker, and costing them years of reputational risk and economic sanctions—not unlike North Korea.

Second, elites have a better understanding than the public of the deterrence value of the U.S. alliance for South Korean national security. This applies to both strategic capabilities and will. Elites understand the full range of U.S. strategic capabilities that support the defense of the peninsula as a treaty ally. They also give greater weight to the physical manifestations of those capabilities in the nuclear submarine port calls and strategic bomber visits to the peninsula. Strategic elites also certainly have better insights than the public into nuclear planning by the United States, be this in the context of the alliance or in NATO. In terms of intentions, elites recognize the importance of words as policy, particularly at the summit level, and better appreciate recent U.S. efforts to bolster deterrence by reiterating U.S. nuclear guarantees in Biden's speeches and in official



US National Security Council Coordinator for Indo-Pacific Affairs Kurt Campbell (R) speaks as South Korea's Principal Deputy National Security Adviser Kim Tae-hyo looks on during a news conference at the South Korean Presidential Office in Seoul on July 18, 2023.

Photo: KIM HONG-JI/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

approval of nuclearization would increase in response to U.S. retrenchment represent the full political spectrum in Korea. Thirty-six percent of this group self-identified as conservative/moderate conservative, 28 percent as moderate, and 36 percent as progressive/moderate progressive. The upshot is that the groundswell of support for nuclearization would not be a polarizing political issue in South Korea.

The public discussion of nuclear options for South Korea has revolved around whether to consider autonomous nuclear capabilities, or if the country should instead encourage the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean Peninsula. The option of nuclear sharing has usually been at the margins of discussion. But the present survey shows that when the majority of elites choose nuclearization, the debate will be between whether to pursue an autonomous capability (the preferred choice of “nuclear believers”) or nuclear sharing arrangements (the preferred choice of “non-nuclear believers”). The survey shows that the least preferred option for a nuclear path is the return of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons.²¹

In terms of intentions, elites recognize the importance of words as policy, . . . better appreciate recent U.S. efforts to bolster deterrence by reiterating U.S. nuclear guarantees in Biden's speeches and in official documents such as the Washington Declaration.

documents such as the Washington Declaration.

But South Korean elite confidence in the alliance's security guarantees is not gifted to Washington, it is earned. If decoupling actions are undertaken by future U.S. administrations, these elites have the capacity to adjust their views and take alternative actions as needed, even if these actions might impinge on core values and beliefs. It is noteworthy that the non-nuclear believers who responded that their

There will still be a demand signal from a nuclear South Korea for the alliance with the United States. The fact that a majority of respondents (both nuclear believers and non-nuclear believers) prefer nuclear sharing as South Korea's nuclear option suggests that South Koreans, even if forced to go nuclear in response to fears of U.S. abandonment, would want to do this through the alliance with a sharing arrangement (rather than acquiring autonomous capabilities).

The survey results show that the primary rationale for a nuclear option is security, not status, and that the security threat is defined exclusively as North Korea. This suggests two positive implications. First, South Korean strategic elites do not see nuclear weapons as necessary to counter China, Russia, or Japan. Second, absent a North Korean nuclear threat, South Korean need for nuclear weapons would be minimized, at least in the minds of strategic elites (all else held equal).

Finally, the survey results show a degree of partisanship on the nuclear issue. The vast majority of those respondents who support nuclearization self-identified as conservative or moderately conservative (68 percent), while only a small minority self-identified as progressive or moderately progressive (10 percent). However, it is notable that the 66 percent who do not agree with South Korea's nuclearization tend to be bipartisan.

Recommendations for Policy

Don't press the panic button yet.

Policymakers and alliance managers do not have to be concerned that South Korea is on the verge of a nuclear breakout. The bottom line is that South Korean elites do not want to go nuclear and still have confidence in the alliance.

Continue to reassure.

At least for the time being, the continued development of extended deterrence mechanisms such as the Nuclear Consultative Group, integrated early-warning systems, strategic asset visits to the Korean Peninsula, streamlined intelligence sharing, and other measures serve the alliance well. Trilateralizing extended deterrence discussions with Tokyo offers another venue for reassurance. Reassurance can sometimes be a bottomless pit, but this is a small price to pay to avoid nuclearization.

Avoid retrenchment and decoupling rhetoric.

Confidence in the alliance is the key determinant of South Korean nuclear attitudes, even more so than external threats posed by North Korea, China, or Russia. If preventing further proliferation on the peninsula is a U.S. policy goal, this would be well served by avoiding rhetoric and action that suggest U.S. decoupling from its ally, even as trade disputes or cost-sharing disputes might negatively impact relations.

Be mindful of the undecided views.

Messaging about the alliance should consider not only the nuclear believers and non-nuclear believers but also the undecided population. This is a not-insignificant group, according to the present survey (13 percent), that could tip the balance in any national debate on going nuclear. Moreover, there remains almost 50 percent of non-nuclear believers who responded that they would still not seek nuclearization if the United States disengaged from the Korean Peninsula. This core non-nuclear respondent group also represents a broad political base, with about one-third each self-identifying as conservative, moderate, or progressive. For nonproliferation purposes, this group's voice should be amplified.

Public opinion still matters.

Elites, while influential, do not always get what they want in foreign policy, especially in today's environment of hyper-politicization of issues and misinformed narratives. Careful alliance messaging should avoid decoupling talk and bolster the persuasiveness of the "non-nuclear" camp. Otherwise, once these elites are forced to opt for nuclearization, the public will support them.

Invest in South Korea's nonproliferation bona fides.

The United States should help facilitate a larger global role for South Korea in nuclear security and safety, including a role in a second generation of nuclear security summits; a Korean director-general for the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA); bilateral cooperation in civil nuclear energy and gold-standard safety and security; and a South Korean convening role in a Seoul-based Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) secretariat.

About the Author

Victor Cha is senior vice president for Asia and Korea Chair at CSIS. He is also the distinguished university professor and professor of government at Georgetown University. He was appointed in 2021 by the Biden administration to serve on the Defense Policy Board in an advisory role to the secretary of defense. From 2004 to 2007, he served on the National Security Council (NSC) and was responsible for Japan, Korea, Australia/New Zealand, and Pacific Island nations. Dr. Cha was U.S. deputy head of delegation at the Six Party Talks and received two outstanding service commendations during his tenure at the NSC. He is the author of seven books, including the award-winning *Alignment Despite Antagonism: The United States-Korea-Japan Security Triangle* (Stanford, 1999) (winner of the 2000 Ohira Book Prize), *The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future* (Ecco, 2012) selected by Foreign Affairs as a “Best Book on the Asia-Pacific for 2012,” *Powerplay: Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton, 2018), and *Korea: A New History of South and North* (Yale, 2023). Dr. Cha is a two-time Fulbright scholar, former Olin fellow at Harvard, and former Hoover, CISAC, and Koret fellow at Stanford. He currently serves on 10 editorial boards of academic journals and is coeditor of the Contemporary Asia book series at Columbia University Press. He serves on the board of the National Endowment for Democracy and is a senior fellow at the George W. Bush Institute. He is also a foreign affairs contributor for MSNBC and NBC News. Dr. Cha received his PhD, MIA, and BA degree from Columbia University and a BA Honors from Oxford University.

Appendix

CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024

Polling sample: 1,094

Poll results: 16% (175)

Date of poll: January 15–March 17, 2024

Definition of strategic elites: Academic scholars, think tank experts, legislators, business decisionmakers, and officials (current and former).²²

LEGEND

Pro-nuclear: Group of respondents who answered “yes” and agree with nuclearization

Anti-nuclear: Group of respondents who answered “no” and disagree with nuclearization

Not certain: Group of respondents who answered “I am not sure” and are not certain about nuclearization

WA: Weighted average

1. Do you agree with the following statement?

“South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons.”

Answer	Percentage	Number
Yes	34%	60
No	53%	92
I am not sure	13%	23
	Total	175

Questions to “Pro-Nuclear” Respondents

2. Since you answered “Yes,” which of the following statements best explains your answer choice? (Choose one)

Pro-nuclear	Percentage	Number
Lack of U.S. security commitment to South Korea in the long run	17%	10
Independent defense capability against North Korea	65%	39
Independent defense capability against China and Russia	15%	9
Status or prestige from acquiring nuclear weapons	0%	0
All of the above	2%	1
Did not answer	2%	1

3. Rank your preference based on the previous question.

What are your reasons for supporting South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons? From 1 to 4, please rank your reasons (1 - most important, 4 - least important)

Pro-nuclear	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	1 (#)	2 (#)	3 (#)	4 (#)	WA
Independent defense capability against North Korea	64%	24%	7%	5%	37	12	3	2	37%
Lack of U.S. security commitment to South Korea in the long run	21%	43%	33%	7%	12	22	14	3	28%
Independent defense capability against China and Russia	12%	27%	47%	12%	7	14	20	5	22%
Status or prestige from acquiring nuclear weapons	3%	6%	14%	76%	2	3	6	32	12%

WA = Weighted Average

4. How should South Korea “go nuclear”?

From 1 to 3, please rate your preference for how South Korea should “go nuclear.” (1 - most preferred, 3 - least preferred)

Pro-nuclear	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	1 (#)	2 (#)	3 (#)	WA
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	54%	21%	30%	32	10	14	41%
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea with South Korea’s conventional delivery vehicles and dual control by South Korea and the United States	27%	58%	17%	16	28	8	35%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	19%	21%	53%	11	10	25	24%

WA = Weighted Average

5. From a range of 1 to 5, to what degree do you agree with the following statement?

*“Acquiring nuclear weapons will make South Korea more secure and safe from outside threats.”
(1 - strongly agree, 5 - strongly disagree)*

Pro-nuclear	Percentage	Number
1 – strongly agree	63%	38
2	32%	19
3	2%	1
4	2%	1
5 – strongly disagree	2%	1

6. If an “America First” policy returns to the White House in November 2024 that denigrates allies and seeks retrenchment, your support for a nuclear South Korea would:

Pro-nuclear	Percentage	Number
Increase	90%	54
Decrease	5%	3
Stay the same	5%	3

Questions to “Anti-nuclear” Respondents

7. From a range of 1 to 5, to what degree do you agree with the following statement?
“Acquiring nuclear weapons will make South Korea more secure and safe from outside threats.”
(1 - strongly agree, 5 - strongly disagree)

Anti-nuclear	Percentage	Number
1 – strongly agree	5%	5
2	9%	8
3	15%	14
4	45%	41
5 – strongly disagree	26%	24

8. Since you answered “No,” which of the following statements best explains your answer choice? (Choose one)

Anti-nuclear	Percentage	Number
Damage to the U.S.-ROK alliance and possible fallout from the acquisition of nuclear weapons	26%	24
Increased security threat from a neighboring country (or countries), especially China and Russia	10%	9
Targeted by economic sanctions and loss of prestige from violating international norms	43%	40
Initiating nuclear arms race on the Korean Peninsula	20%	18
Other	1%	1

9. Rank your preference based on the previous question.

What are your reasons for NOT supporting South Korea to acquire nuclear weapons? From 1 to 4, please rank your reasons. (1 - most important, 4 - least important)

Anti-nuclear	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	1 (#)	2 (#)	3 (#)	4 (#)	WA
Damage to the U.S.-ROK alliance and possible fallout from the acquisition of nuclear weapons	28%	43%	19%	10%	25	37	15	8	29%
Increased security threat from a neighboring country (or countries), especially China and Russia	10%	13%	51%	24%	9	11	41	19	20%
Targeted by economic sanctions and loss of prestige from violating international norms	40%	29%	13%	19%	36	25	10	15	30%
Initiating nuclear arms race on the Korean Peninsula	21%	15%	18%	46%	19	13	14	36	21%

10. Although you disagree with the following statement, “South Korea should develop nuclear weapons,” what would be your preferred way for South Korea to “go nuclear,” if necessary? (1 - most preferred, 3 - least preferred)

Anti-nuclear	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	1 (#)	2 (#)	3 (#)	WA
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	13%	16%	71%	11	12	56	23%
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea with South Korea's conventional delivery vehicles and dual control by South Korea and the United States.	61%	35%	1%	54	27	1	44%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	26%	49%	28%	23	38	22	34%

WA = Weighted Average

11. If an “America First” policy returns to the White House in November 2024 that denigrates allies and seeks retrenchment, your support for a nuclear South Korea would:

Anti-nuclear	Percentage	Number
Increase	51%	47
Decrease	3%	3
Stay the same	46%	42

Questions to “Not Certain” Group of Respondents

12. Although you are not certain about the following statement, “South Korea should develop nuclear weapons,” what would be your preferred way for South Korea to “go nuclear,” if necessary? (1 - most preferred, 3 - least preferred)

Not certain	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	1 (#)	2 (#)	3 (#)	WA
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea with South Korea's conventional delivery vehicles and dual control by South Korea and the United States.	57%	38%	10%	13	8	2	43%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	30%	43%	24%	7	9	5	33%
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	13%	19%	67%	3	4	14	23%

WA = Weighted Average

13. If an “America First” policy returns to the White House in November 2024 that denigrates allies and seeks retrenchment, your support for a nuclear South Korea would:

Not certain	Percentage	Number
Increase	83%	19
Decrease	0%	0
Stay the same	17%	4

Endnotes

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- 13 Boot, “Should South Korea Go Nuclear?”
- 14 In the “I am not sure” group, 57 percent self-identified as conservative/moderate conservative, 30 percent as moderate, and 13 percent as progressive/moderate progressive.
- 15 “Disagree” is a score of 4 or 5 on an ascending scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). See Appendix, question 7.
- 16 The new number of elites who would support nuclearization from each group is 57 (“nuclear believers”), 47 (“non-nuclear believers”), and 19 (“noncommittal”). These numbers add up to 123 people, which represents a 105 percent increase from the original 60 “nuclear believers.” See Appendix, questions 6, 11, and 13.
- 17 “Agree” is a score of 1 or 2 on a descending scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). See Appendix, questions 2 and 5.
- 18 See question 2.
- 19 See Appendix, question 10.
- 20 Only 10 percent in the noncommittal category of nuclearization ranked nuclear sharing as least preferable, while 67 percent ranked an indigenous capability as least preferable.
- 21 See question 4.
- 22 Our survey sample encompasses Elizabeth Saunders’ definition of general and foreign policy elites. See Saunders, “Elites in the Making and Breaking of Foreign Policy.”

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