



Eyes Wide Open: Strategic Elite Views of South Korea's Nuclear Options

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On January 11, 2023, President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea offered this assessment: “Of course, if problems become more serious, the Republic of Korea (ROK) could deploy tactical nuclear weapons here, or we could acquire our own nuke as well. If that happens, it would not take long to [develop] one for ourselves in a short period of time using our science and technology in the future.”¹ These words were the first ever public remarks by a South Korean head of state on nuclear weaponization, breaking longstanding taboos in the US-ROK alliance against discussing this security option. Nearly half a century ago, South Korea pursued a covert nuclear program, which the United States shut down.² This time, Yoon’s remarks came amid rampant speculation that history might repeat itself.

The wars in Ukraine and Gaza, China’s revisionist behavior in the South China Sea as well as across the Taiwan Strait, and North Korea’s growing arsenal of nuclear weapons and missiles have precipitated a gravely uncertain security environment, and with it, more open debates in South Korea about

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going nuclear. Recent public opinion polls have found the vast majority of South Koreans—in one study, over 76 percent—in favor of a nuclear path.³ Experts have written with a degree of fatalism about how the “assurance gap” in the US extended deterrence commitments portends a bleak future.⁴ As historian Max Boot argues, “South Koreans ... wonder if they can still count on the United States to defend them if, by doing so, it would put U.S. cities at risk of nuclear annihilation.”⁵ Most Americans, if given the choice, would not be willing to trade San Francisco for Seoul in a nuclear fight with North Korea.

Indeed, in the pages of this journal, a chorus of authors have voiced their concerns about how not only the nuclear-leaning public opinion in South Korea, but also the hopelessness of denuclearizing North Korea and the uncertainties of US domestic politics (and thereby US commitments to allies in Asia) all point to only one possible path—nuclearization—for this longtime US ally. Andrew Yeo points to distrust created in the alliance over discriminatory measures in the Inflation Reduction Act and the uncertainty of future US reliability to warn of “Seoul’s growing frustration at its own limited nuclear ability to take greater action toward self-defense.”⁶ He cites other experts’ observation that there will be “no definitive end to the South Korean nuclear armament debate because its root causes ... were not fully addressed.”⁷ Min-hyung Kim points to the growing trendlines in public support for an independent nuclear capability as eventually giving the government “no choice but to go nuclear on its own.”⁸ And Eric Brewer, Toby Dalton and Kylie Jones conclude, “South Korean consideration of nuclear acquisition won’t be dissipating anytime soon.”⁹

The implications of this question are profound. A nuclear South Korea could permanently undermine the US-ROK alliance, as it would reflect a core lack of faith in the US security guarantee. A nuclear South Korea could set off a domino effect with other powers in the region including Japan and Taiwan and perhaps others. It could undermine mutual deterrence and crisis stability on the peninsula, tempting North Korea to act preemptively. It could also create insecurity spirals with Russia, China and Japan, which would perceive new strategic threats emanating from the peninsula.

Presumptions about South Korea’s slide down the nuclear path have been a critical driver of alliance policies. As Brewer, Dalton and Jones observe, President Yoon’s April 2023 state visit to the White House featured a set of deliverables provided by the United States as an explicit quid pro quo for public reassurances that the ROK would respect its “longstanding commitment to its obligations under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.”¹⁰ There were two goals behind the summit’s creation of the Washington Declaration and the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG).¹¹ One was to shore up allied deterrence against burgeoning WMD threats from North Korea. But the other—arguably more urgent—purpose was to assure that South Korea did not contemplate its independent deterrent

outside of the US nuclear umbrella. The Washington echo chamber rings with concerns that South Korea sits on the precipice of a nuclear breakout. This has created an undertone of tension amid the positive narrative of the Yoon-Biden relationship. A senior Biden administration official was anonymously quoted as saying that South Korea's renewed nuclear interest "is very profoundly troubling for us."¹² In response, ROK officials decry as "insufficient and hollow" their reliance on the United States for nuclear protection as the only answer to North Korea's determination to become a nuclear weapons state the size of France or the United Kingdom.¹³

An echo chamber rings with concerns that South Korea sits on the precipice of a nuclear breakout

Does South Korea sit on the nuclear precipice? Aggregating new and original polling data, I find that concerns about a nuclear South Korea are exaggerated. Only 34 percent of South Korean foreign policy thinkers agree with the statement that their government should consider the nuclear option, while 66 percent do not agree or express uncertainty about such a proposition. Confidence in the US extended deterrence commitment remains strong. But the polling finds that such a policy judgement is not unconditional. If abandonment fears regarding US security commitments emerge, then elite 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 allies and seeks retrenchment of US security commitments, then support for a nuclear capability by South Korea among the 66 percent of non-nuclear supporters would grow exponentially.

These findings run contrary to those of the oft-cited South Korean opinion surveys because these are gleaned from the views of strategic elites rather than the general public. Strategic elites are defined as academic scholars, think tank experts, legislators, business decisionmakers, and officials (current and former).¹⁴ As scholars have argued, major decisions about a government's national security reflect the view of elites rather than the public—even in periods of increasing populism and resentment toward elites—because elites control resources, have access to top decisionmakers, often have domain-specific knowledge, and can define narratives on national security.¹⁵

There is an echo chamber effect in Washington and Seoul about South Korea's nuclear ambitions, informed by a handful of recent public opinion polls, which have not sought to analyze the views of policy experts and elites.¹⁶ This is the first US 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.¹⁷

This article begins with a critical review of public opinion polling to date on South Korean nuclear ambitions. I then present the results of the strategic elite survey. This is followed by an analysis of the conditions under which ROK strategic elites would contemplate the nuclear option. I then turn to what my findings mean for the existing literature on this topic, offer some explanations for why a nuclear South Korea is not in the immediate offing, and conclude with policy recommendations for the United States.

The Public's Views on South Korean Nuclearization

Recent opinion polls in South Korea have captured global attention because they report strong public support for going nuclear in the face of North Korea's unrelenting nuclear weapons and ballistic missile threats.¹⁸ This has led some public officials and opinion leaders to advocate that Seoul take the nuclear path.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ As Max Boot has argued, "Koreans are concerned that their country could meet the same fate as Ukraine—another non-nuclear state attacked by a nuclear-armed neighbor."²¹

To better understand their overall significance, I collected all South Korean public polls from 2010 to 2023. Of the 55 polls in the dataset, I divided them between polls taken prior to and taken after September 2017, when North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test. The first observation is that the majority of the polls are not terribly detailed. Many of them asked only a single question: whether the respondent supported, opposed, or remained undecided on South Korea's nuclearization. A typical question was "should South Korea have its own nuclear weapons?" Another was "do you think South Korea should develop nuclear weapons to counter North Korea's nuclear weapon developments?" Aside from this one question, most polls did not follow up with questions to the respondent on the motivations or reasoning behind the initial answer.

Second, while one or two polls have attracted attention in the media for showing strong South Korean support for nuclearization, a longitudinal analysis of the dataset of all polls suggests otherwise. As [Table 1](#) shows, the average support for South Korea's nuclearization from January 2010 to August 2017 was 59 percent. This increased by only two points on average across polls conducted after September 2017, the date of North Korea's sixth and latest, most advanced nuclear test. While this is a net increase, it is not nearly as dramatic as the oft-cited 76 percent public support for nuclearization.²² None of the existing opinion polls noted this qualification in their findings, but it is an important one because it shows that there has not been a dramatic spike in South Korean public enthusiasm for the nuclear option. Instead, there has been only an

Table I. 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 Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024. Created with Datawrapper, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>.

incremental increase, which is understandable given the changing security environment and alliance uncertainties. The focus on public opinion polls has dominated the discussion of South Korea’s nuclear options. But what do South Korean strategic elites think?

The Views of Strategic Elites

This is the first American multi-question polling of strategic elites in South Korea on the nuclear question. Strategic elites identified for this online survey numbered 1094, with a 16 percent response rate and a total sample size of 175 respondents. The sample included academics, think tank experts, business elites, legislators, and officials (current and former), and was built from publicly available websites, the CSIS mailing list of 32,500, and the author’s network. The survey was conducted online via Google Forms from January to March 2024, and sent to South Korean strategic elites residing in Korea, the United States, Japan and Europe. The survey sample ranged from junior to senior professionals, and 82 percent of respondents were male (143) and 18 percent female (32), reflecting the gender imbalance in the national security field in Korea. Over 79 percent of the respondents have a Ph.D. degree, and out of 138 respondents with a Ph.D., 48 percent self-identified as conservative/moderate conservative, 28 percent as moderate, and 24 percent as progressive/moderate progressive. Each respondent was asked an initial question about their support for South Korea going nuclear. Depending on the answer, respondents were directed to a separate set of questions to gain a greater understanding of the reasoning behind their preferences. The survey answers were anonymized.

This is the first US study to reach out to South Korean policy experts and elites on the nuclear question

I expected elites to hold a different view of South Korea’s security environment than the general public. Elites usually have a better understanding of the

threat matrix, national military capabilities, and North Korean nuclear capabilities. I expected this group also to better understand the costs and benefits for South Korea of crossing the nuclear weapons threshold. Finally, I expected this group to have a more nuanced understanding of the US alliance and its extended deterrence guarantees to Korea. These factors led me to believe that strategic elite opinions on nuclearization would be less enthusiastic than those of the public.

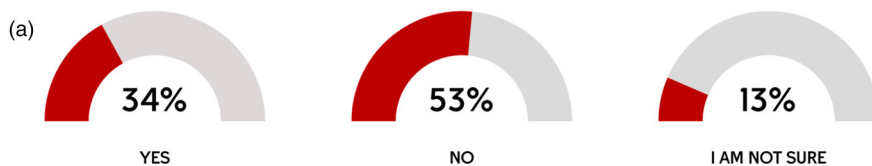
The majority of South Korean elites do not support the prospect of South Korean nuclearization

The first finding from the strategic elite poll is that the majority of South Korean elites do not support the prospect of South Korean nuclearization, which runs counter to the results of public opinion polls. Asked for their opinion on the statement “South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons,” about one-third of strategic elites answered positively, with just over half answering negatively.

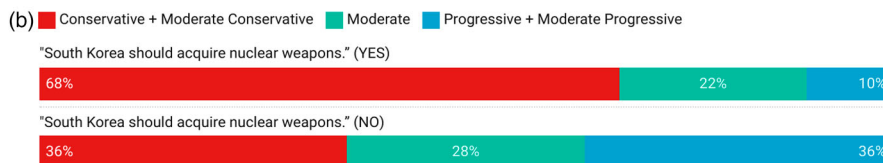
Thirty-four percent support represents a far lower level of elite support than that of the general public, which averages at 61 percent

based on 36 public opinion polls conducted since September 2017, and a substantially lower level of support than a recent public poll, which puts support as high as 76.6 percent. Strategic elites, whose views matter most in national security decision-making, do not favor a nuclear South Korea by a wide margin.

Figure I. (A) Do you agree with the following statement? “South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons?” (B) Political Self-Identification of Nuclear and Non-Nuclear Supporters



Source: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>.



Source: CSIS Nuclear Survey of South Korean Strategic Elites 2024. Created with Datawrapper, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>.

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. Created with Datawrapper, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>.

Moreover, as Figure 1B shows, 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.²³ By contrast, those who support nuclearization predominantly self-identify as conservative (68 percent versus 10 percent progressive self-identification).

What motivates those who do not support South Korean nuclearization? Respondents were asked to choose one of five reasons. A plurality of respondents (43 percent) selected the international sanctions and reputational loss of status that would come with breaking away from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime as their top reason (See Figure 2). More respondents selected this reason over the potential damage done to the US-Korea alliance. More people selected the costs of going nuclear associated with reputational loss and economic sanctions over the risk of inducing an arms race on the Korean peninsula, and even fewer selected being targeted as strategic threats by other nuclear powers (China and Russia) as their top concern.

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.”²⁴ This contrasts with the ubiquitous North Korean rhetoric, which justifies nuclear weapons as the ultimate security provider for the state.

The negative attitude of strategic elites toward nuclearization is not unconditional. The opposition to nuclear weaponization in South Korea changes dramatically if an “America First” policy returns to the White House. Our poll asked the hypothetical question of whether a wavering of the US security commitment to South Korea would change the respondents’

The opposition to nuclear weaponization changes dramatically if an “America First” policy returns

initial views on the nuclear question. Specifically, respondents were asked if abandonment fears regarding the United States, attendant with “America First” policies that denigrate allies and call for troop withdrawals, would affect their negative attitude toward acquiring nuclear weapons.

More than 50 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 supported a nuclear South Korea, 90 percent said their support for nuclearization would increase even further in such a scenario. 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 US ground troops from the peninsula could significantly impact the nuclear debates in South Korea.

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, and only 10 percent of those “nuclear believers” said their support for a nuclear South Korea would remain the same or decrease (See [Figure 3](#)). But this still suggests that strong support for nuclearization among the original “nuclear believer” minority would be supplemented by significantly new supportive voices from the previously “non-nuclear” community. Thus, the nuclear pendulum could swing quite rapidly for a political leader in South Korea if strategic elites change their opinion, as this move would be wholly supported by the general public.

How Would South Korea “Go Nuclear”?

The next set of questions delved into how South Korean elites would operationalize the decision to “go nuclear.” Many of the public opinion polls skirted this question, focusing only on the binary question of support or non-support, which does not tell us nearly enough about South Korean preferences.

Strategic elites were offered three choices for nuclearization: independent capabilities, a nuclear-sharing arrangement (with the United States), or the return of US tactical nuclear weapons to Korea. For those respondents who agreed that South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons, the majority (54 percent) prefer an autonomous and independent capability over any nuclear-sharing arrangements or the return of US nuclear weapons to the peninsula. Ninety-five percent of these nuclear advocates see the weapons as enhancing Korea’s external security,²⁵ and 65 percent of advocates believe the primary purpose of such weapons is to counter North Korea as opposed to China or

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. Created with Datawrapper, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>.

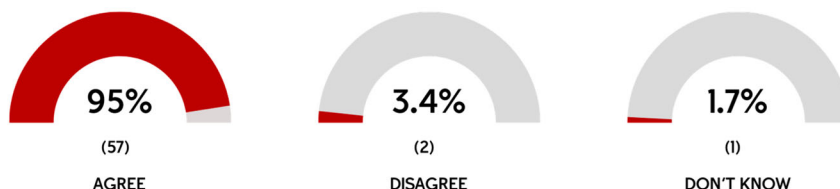
Russia (See Figures 4A, 4B and 4C). Interestingly, only 2 percent see nuclear weapons acquisition as important for status or prestige (the implications of these latter two points are discussed below).

Nuclear supporters and non-supporters among strategic elites disagree on how South Korea should go nuclear. Non-supporters, when given the hypothetical question, responded that they most prefer a nuclear-sharing arrangement within the US-ROK alliance (61 percent). 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. In addition, most elites (57 percent) in the noncommittal category of nuclearization (“I am not sure”) also ranked nuclear sharing as the most preferable to other modes of nuclearizing South Korea.²⁶ This suggests that the majority of South Korean strategic elites, if forced to rescind their non-nuclear beliefs, 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 4. (A) (Views of elites supportive of nuclearization) “Acquiring nuclear weapons will make South Korea more secure and safe from outside threats.” (B) “Please rate your preferences for how South Korea should ‘go nuclear.’” (C) Since you answered “yes,” which of the following statements best explains your answer choice?

A

1-5 SCALE (1 = STRONGLY AGREE, 5 = STRONG DISAGREE)

**B**

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%
Re-deployment 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 U.S.

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

C

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. Created with Datawrapper, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>.

Implications of Strategic Elite Views

First, this study disconfirms several assertions prevalent in the literature. The survey's core finding of strategic elite ambivalence about South Korea going nuclear undercuts the assertion by some that “in recent years supportive statements from elites have grown more frequent and urgent.”²⁷ In addition, some experts have argued that voices for South Korean nuclearization draw from a broad cross-section of society, thereby giving the argument more resonance

Figure 5. (A) 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 (B) 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

A

Preference	Percentage of Respondents		
	1 - most preferred	2	3 - least preferred
Indigenous nuclear weapons program	13%	16%	71%
Nuclear sharing – U.S. nuclear weapons deployed in South Korea*	61%	35%	1%
Redeployment of U.S. nuclear weapons in South Korea	26%	49%	28%

*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%

B

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. Created with Datawrapper, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/breaking-bad-south-koreas-nuclear-option>.

domestically, but I find that at least among strategic elites, nuclear supporters largely draw from a narrower base of older demographic (85 percent of elite nuclear supporters come from the age group of 41 and above) and self-identified conservatives and moderate conservatives (68 percent).²⁸ Indeed, it is not the nuclear supporters, but the nuclear dissenters, who hail from a broader cross-section of society, thus suggesting that this is the prevailing view.

The survey furthermore confirms the view cited by Min-hyung Kim that a reason for South Korean opposition to going nuclear is concern about international condemnation and sanctions; however, it does not confirm some of the other stated reasons. Strategic elites did not cite, for example, concerns about sparking a nuclear arms race or legitimizing North Korea's nuclear possession as important reasons. Additionally, the survey disconfirms the assertion by Brewer, Dalton and Jones that South Koreans desire nuclear weapons as “a matter of national identity.”²⁹ Only 2 percent of respondents cited prestige as

the motivating factor. Finally, it is interesting that strategic elites supportive of nuclearization did not rank the China threat highly as a motivating factor. This too disconfirms assertions in the literature that South Koreans want nuclear weapons as a long-term hedge against China.³⁰

Second and unsurprisingly, there is a core disagreement between supporters and non-supporters about the value added of nuclearization to national security. Supporters nearly unanimously believe nuclear weapons would make South Korea more secure (95 percent choose “strongly agree” or “agree”); while non-supporters believe they would make South Korea fundamentally more insecure (71 percent). Moreover, how these two groups define security is different. For nuclear supporters, as noted above, security is defined primarily in terms of countering the North Korean threat, rather than concerns about China or Russia. For nuclear non-supporters, however, insecurity is defined in terms of international sanctions and loss of prestige rather than in terms of inciting insecurity spirals with China or Russia. In the case of both groups, this suggests two positive implications. One, South Korean strategic elites do not see nuclear weapons as necessary to counter China, Russia or Japan. And two, absent a North Korean nuclear threat, the South Korean need for nuclear weapons would be minimized, at least in the minds of strategic elites (all else held equal).

Those South Korean elites who are not supportive of nuclearization tend to be bipartisan

Third, 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, the 66 percent who do not agree with South Korea’s nuclearization tend to be bipartisan, with 72 percent identifying as conservative or progressive. This

suggests that the non-nuclear bias among strategic elites is politically sustainable absent any external shocks.

Why Are Elites Different?

There are several possible explanations for why strategic elites hold such different views on nuclearization compared to the general public. Elites appreciate their country’s status as an abider of the rules-based international order, and especially Seoul’s championing of the non-proliferation regime. South Korea is a longtime member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It sides with the free nations in condemning North

Korea's withdrawal from the NPT. Its 123 civil nuclear energy cooperation agreement with the United States maintains high standard non-proliferation safeguards, and the 2023 Washington Declaration reaffirmed South Korea's commitment to non-proliferation. Elites understand better than the public the consequences that going nuclear would have for South Korea vis-à-vis the international community and the patron ally: marking it with an identity as a rule-breaker and costing it years of reputational risk and economic sanctions, not unlike the North.

Elites also have a better understanding than the public of the deterrence value of the US alliance for Korean national security. This translates into both capabilities and will. Elites understand the full range of US 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: 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 US efforts to bolster deterrence by reiterating US nuclear guarantees in Biden's speeches and in official documents like 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 US administrations, these elites have the capacity to adjust their views and take alternative actions as needed, even if those actions might impinge on core values and beliefs. It should be stressed again that the non-nuclear believers who responded that they would shift to support nuclearization in response to US retrenchment represent the full political spectrum in Korea. Thirty-six percent of this group self-identified as conservative/moderate conservative; and 36 percent as progressive/moderate progressive. That's a strong bipartisan base upon which to build a policy.

The public discussion of nuclear options for South Korea has revolved around whether to consider autonomous nuclear capabilities, or the return of US tactical nuclear weapons to the Korean peninsula. The option of nuclear sharing has usually been at the margins of public discussion. But this study shows that when the majority of elites choose nuclearization, the debate will actually be between whether to pursue an autonomous capability, which is the preferred choice of "nuclear believers," or nuclear sharing arrangements, which is the preferred choice of "non-nuclear believers." The survey shows that the least preferred option for a nuclear path is the return of US tactical nuclear weapons.

The least preferred nuclear path by elites is the return of US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea

There will still be a demand signal from a nuclear South Korea for the alliance with the United States. The fact that 44 percent (weighted average) of non-nuclear supporters prefer nuclear-sharing arrangements and 35 percent (weighted average) of pro-nuclear supporters consider it the second-best choice for nuclearization (behind autonomous capabilities) suggests that South Koreans, if forced to go nuclear, would consider doing this through the alliance with a sharing arrangement. There is, of course, no guarantee that this would be the case, but the numbers suggest that there would at least be a serious discussion about this choice versus an autonomous capability.

Finally, this analysis begs the question of whether there is any scenario in which nuclearization by South Korea would not bear the international condemnation and reputational damage assumed by South Korean elites. Could the United States conceivably support a nuclear South Korea? This would be highly unlikely in a second Biden administration, but it is not inconceivable in a second Trump administration. The survey shows that an America First policy that shifted security burdens from the United States to South Korea—either by withdrawing troops or by cutting a deal with Kim Jong-un—could move a bipartisan consensus of elites in South Korea toward nuclearization. Such a policy would already have widespread support from the public based on public opinion surveys. It might be supported by Americans supportive of South Korean nuclearization who take positions in a second Trump administration. The ultimate question would not be whether Trump would support this policy, but whether he would even care. When I asked a former Trump official this very question, the answer, after some thought, came back that the former president would neither proactively oppose nor support South Korea's nuclearization, but that he probably would not care one way or the other.³¹

Implications for Policy

For those who do not want to see further proliferation on the Korean peninsula, this analysis suggests several basic policy implications. First, policymakers do not need to listen too closely to the Washington echo chamber and should certainly not take any rash actions. South Korea is not on the verge of a nuclear breakout; elites do not want to go nuclear and they still have confidence in the alliance.

Second, continued reassurance to the ally remains important. At least for the time being, the institutionalization of extended deterrence mechanisms like the NCG, 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 offer another venue

for reassurance. Reassurance can sometimes be a bottomless pit, but this is a small price to pay to avoid nuclearization.

Third, the United States should 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 US policy goal, this would be well served by avoiding rhetoric and action that suggested US decoupling from its ally, even as trade disputes or cost-sharing disputes might mar relations.

**The US should
avoid retrenchment
and decoupling
rhetoric**

Fourth, the US government must remain mindful of the “undecided” view in South Korea. This means that 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 our survey (13 percent of elites) that could tip the balance in any national debate on going nuclear. Moreover, almost 50 percent of non-nuclear proponents state that they would still not seek nuclearization even if the US disengaged from Korea. This core non-nuclear respondent group also represented a broad political base, with about one-third each self-identifying as conservative or progressive. For non-proliferation purposes, this group's voice should be amplified.

Fifth, 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 and misinformed narrative. Careful alliance messaging should avoid decoupling talk and should bolster the persuasiveness of the “non-nuclear” camp.

Sixth, the US government needs to continue to invest in South Korea's non-proliferation bona fides. Washington needs to help facilitate a larger global role for South Korea in nuclear security and safety. Seoul hosted one of the nuclear security summits (2012) during the Obama administration and could help to organize a second generation of nuclear security summits. The US-ROK civil nuclear cooperation agreement could be held up as a gold standard safety and security example. Washington could support a Korean leadership position in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). And South Korea could play a convening role in a Seoul-based Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) secretariat.³²

After President Yoon's successful April 2023 summit in Washington, a conservative daily newspaper in South Korea normally supportive of the president decried the summit as keeping South Korea “shackled” by relying on the

United States for nuclear protection.³³ While this view might have reflected the opinions of some of the public, they do not reflect those of strategic elites. For them, the Washington Declaration and NCG constitute the most innovative upgrading of the alliance since its inception. For the time being, they seem to have done the job of maintaining elite confidence in the alliance. But this should not be taken for granted by any means. The same broad-based ambivalence toward a nuclear option among South Korean strategic elites could shift dramatically to support if confidence in the patron ally wanes. While this is unlikely to happen in a second Biden presidency, it is far from a remote possibility in a second Trump presidency. And if that day comes, a willing majority of the South Korean public already stands prepared to propel their policymakers down that path.

Notes

1. See entire speech text, Office of the President Republic of Korea, “尹 대통령, 외교부·국방부 업무보고 마무리 발언 관련 서면 브리핑 [Written Briefing on President Yoon’s Concluding Remarks on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense Work Report],” January 11, 2023, <https://www.president.go.kr/newsroom/briefing/GvCftpuP>.
2. Committee on International Relations, *Investigation of Korean-American Relations: Report of the Subcommittee on International Organizations of the Committee on International Relations*, U.S. House of Representatives (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 74-83, <https://archive.org/details/investigationofk00unit/mode/2up>; Jungmin Kang et al., “South Korea’s Nuclear Surprise,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 61, no. 1 (2005): 40-49, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.2968/061001011>; William Burr, “Stopping Korea from Going Nuclear, Part I,” National Security Archive, March 22, 2017, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/henry-kissinger-nuclear-vault/2017-03-22/stopping-korea-going-nuclear-part-i>.
3. Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, *Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons* (Chicago: The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, February 2022), <https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/thinking-nuclear-south-korean-attitudes-nuclear-weapons>; and “Korean Perceptions toward the North Korean Nuclear Crisis and the Security Environment,” Chey Institute, January 30, 2023, <https://www.chey.org/Eng/Issues/IssuesContentsView.aspx?seq=695>.
4. Andrew Yeo, “Can South Korea Trust the United States,” *Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2023): 110.
5. Max Boot, “Should South Korea Go Nuclear? That’s a Decision for Seoul, Not Washington,” *Washington Post*, April 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/04/24/south-korea-ponders-nuclear-weapons-program/>.
6. Cited in Yeo, “Can South Korea Trust the United States,” 110 and 118.
7. Ibid, 119; For other experts’ observation, see Frank Aum and Adam Gallagher, “Will the ‘Washington Declaration’ Deter North Korea?,” *Analysis and Commentary*, United

- States Institute for Peace, April 27, 2023, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/04/will-washington-declaration-deter-north-korea>.
18. Min-hyung Kim, "Is Non-Nuclearization Sustainable? Explaining South Korea's Strategic Choices," *Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2023): 128.
19. Eric Brewer, Toby Dalton and Kylie Jones, "Mind the Gaps: Reading South Korea's Emergent Proliferation Strategy," *Washington Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (2023): 142.
10. Ibid, 141.
11. The White House, "Washington Declaration," April 26, 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2023/04/26/washington-declaration-2/>.
12. Cited in Boot, "Should South Korea Go Nuclear? That's a Decision for Seoul, Not Washington."
13. Cited in Yeo, "Can South Korea Trust the United States," 118.
14. The survey sample encompasses Elizabeth Saunders' definition of general and foreign policy elites; see Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Elites in the Making and Breaking of Foreign Policy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 25 (2022): 219-240, <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-041719-103330>.
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17. The Korean Association of International Studies (KAIS) conducted an elite survey of South Korean academics on nuclearization and released the results in March 2023; See Tae-wha Kang, "전문가 55% '30년내 북핵 해결 불가능' ... 자체 핵보유 62% 반대" [55% of Experts Say, 'It Is Impossible to Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Issue within 30 Years' ... 62% Oppose Own Nuclear Weapons], *JoongAng Ilbo*, March 24, 2023, <https://www.joongang.co.kr/article/25149788>.
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 21. Boot, “Should South Korea Go Nuclear? That’s a Decision for Seoul, not Washington.”
 22. “Korean Perceptions toward the North Korean Nuclear Crisis and the Security Environment,” Chey Institute.
 23. 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.
 24. “Disagree” is a score of 4 or 5 on an ascending scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).
 25. “Agree” is a score of 1 or 2 on a descending scale of 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree).
 26. Only 10 percent in the noncommittal category of nuclearization ranked nuclear sharing as least preferable while 67 percent ranked an indigenous capability as least preferred.
 27. Adam Mount, “The US and South Korea: The Trouble with Nuclear Assurance,” *Survival* 65, no. 2 (2023): 124.
 28. Kim, “Is Non-Nuclearization Sustainable? Explaining South Korea’s Strategic Choices,” 134.
 29. Brewer, Dalton, and Jones, “Mind the Gaps: Reading South Korea’s Emergent Proliferation Strategy,” 142.
 30. Yang Uk, “Is South Korea Going Nuclear?” Asan Institute and 38 North, February 7, 2023, <https://www.38north.org/2023/02/is-south-korea-going-nuclear/>.
 31. Personal interview, March 6, 2024.
 32. ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Proliferation Security Initiative High-Level Meeting and Eastern Endeavor 23 on the 20th Anniversary of the PSI,” Press Release, May 24, 2023, https://overseas.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=322200&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm=.
 33. “Nuclear Deal with U.S. Tightens Korea’s Shackles,” *Chosun Ilbo*, April 27, 2023, <https://www.chosun.com/english/opinion-en/2023/04/27/TTC4ZWUYMhGN2JUEPKTOZYAD5Q/>.