

# PRESS RELEASE

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## KINU'S ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE RESULT OF THE 2023 KINU UNIFICATION SURVEY: Public Opinion on South Korea's Nuclear Armament

- The Korea Institute for National Unification (President, Yu-hwan Koh) released the 2023 KINU Unification survey: Public Opinion on South Korea's Nuclear Armament Report.
- Face-to-Face interview with structured questionnaire were conducted on 1,001 men and women aged over 18, with sampling error is  $\pm 3.1\%$  at the 95% confidence level.
- Support for nuclear armament was highest in 2021 (71.3%), but has already begun to decline 69% in 2022 and 60.2% in 2023.
- Most South Koreans trust the nuclear umbrella policy and 90% of respondents believe that the US Forces Korea is needed now. However, 54.3% believe that the U.S. Forces Korea will be needed after unification.
- South Koreans believe that South Korea's military power is superior to North Korea's, excluding nuclear weapons. Based on conventional military power, the majority believe that North Korea is weaker than South Korea.

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- Despite the slight improvement in favorability toward China in this survey, there was an increase of nearly 13% in the number of respondents who said the ROK-China relationship as having gotten worse over the past year.
  - Japan has the right to develop nuclear weapons for its own security if it is threatened with nuclear weapons and Japan is likely to develop nuclear weapons
  - Favorability toward the US, Japan, and Russia increased after the ROK-US summit (4/27), while favorability toward China and North Korea did not change significantly. In particular, perceptions of the US improved overall after the summit.

1. KINU (President: Koh Yu-hwan) announces the findings of the 2023 KINU Unification Survey on June 5, 2023 (Mon). This annual KINU Unification Survey has been recognized as the most prolonged and reliable survey on unification and North Korea.

- This survey aims to research the public perception of unification, North Korea, policy on unification and North Korea, North Korean defectors, inter-Korean integration, security orientation, the public perception toward neighboring countries, and changes. It also aims to identify various impacting factors and contribute to establishing and democratic policy on unification and North Korea that receives the public support and consent.

2. Face-to-face interviews were conducted on 1,001 men and women aged 18 and over from April 15 to May 10, 2023. Assuming random sampling, the sampling error was  $\pm 3.1\%P$  at the 95% confidence level.

3. Major findings of the 2023 KINU Unification Survey: Public Opinion on South Korea's Nuclear Armament are as follows.

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☐ **Public Opinion on South Korea's Nuclear Armament**

☐ The KINU Unification Survey, which has consistently asked the same question, shows that public opinion on the need for nuclear weapons has declined significantly in recent years, contrary to media reports.

☐ Support for nuclear armament was highest in 2021 (71.3%), but has already begun to decline in 2022.

- 69% in 22, 60.2% in 23

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○ Considering that North Korea's missile provocations became more frequent from 2021 to 2023, and relations with China deteriorated, the decline in support for the nuclear armament was likely influenced by domestic political factors and the fact that the issue of Korea's own nuclear armament began to be discussed in the public arena.

○ The Russian-Ukrainian war did not have a significant impact on South Korean public opinion on nuclear weapons.

○ Similar to the weakening of public opinion in favor of South Korea having its own nuclear weapons, public opinion calling for US nuclear weapons to be redeployed to the South has also declined since 2021.

- 61.8% in 21, 60.4% in 22, 53.6% in 23

○ When asked, "If you had to choose between the presence of US forces in Korea and the possession of nuclear weapons for our national defense, which one would you choose?" in 2023, 49.5% chose US forces. Only 33.8% would choose to have nuclear weapons.

- What this suggests is that South Koreans are more likely to trust the traditional security system of the ROK-US alliance and the US Forces Korea.

○ The South Korean public understands that South Korea could face a number of serious crises if it actually attempted to develop nuclear weapons. They also clearly recognize that the US would oppose South Korean nuclear development.

○ When presented with six different possibilities of risks and asked whether nuclear weapons would be necessary in the face of those possibilities, public opinion in favor of continuing nuclear development dropped dramatically. Across all six items, only 36% to 37% agree with nuclear development. This is in stark contrast to other surveys' findings of over 70% support for nuclear weapons.

○ When asked, "If a candidate or party in an election promised to develop South Korea's own nuclear weapons, would you vote for that candidate or party?"

- 48.7% of respondents said that "Developing nuclear weapons is not an important factor in my vote". Only 17.7% said they would support a political party or candidate with a nuclear weapons program, while 33.7% said they would not support such a candidate or party.

- Younger generations were more likely to say they would not vote for a candidate who pledged to develop nuclear weapons, and support for nuclear weapons pledges was higher among the War Generation and the Industrialization Generation.

○ High support for the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime was found. 68.2% of all respondents agreed with the current system, which prohibits non-nuclear states from developing nuclear weapons. Among Democrats, 74.9% agreed, compared to 65.3% of PPP supporters.

## **□ ROK-US Relations and South Korea's Nuclear Armament**

○ Most South Koreans trust the nuclear umbrella policy and believe it protects them from the North Korean nuclear threat.

- 72.1% of all respondents and 85.3% of PPP supporters said they trust the US nuclear umbrella

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policy.

- 68.5% of all respondents and 75.6% of PPP supporters said the nuclear umbrella policy has prevented North Korea from attacking South Korea with a nuclear weapon.

- 90% of respondents believe that the US Forces Korea is needed now. However, 54.3% believe that the U.S. Forces Korea will be needed after unification, down from 60.0% in the 2022 survey.

- The escalation of the US-China conflict may have affected attitudes toward the long-term role of US forces in Korea.

- The need for the ROK-US alliance in the future has remained above 90%, peaking at 95.1% in 2022. This year, however, it dropped to 87.2%.

- This change may be due to polarization in South Korean domestic politics, meaning that the current administration's efforts to strengthen ROK-US relations may have lowered the perceived need for the alliance among opposition supporters who are critical of the government.

- Among all respondents, 27.7% believe that ROK-US relations have gotten better over the past year, the highest percentage since the survey began. In contrast, 10.4% said it had gotten worse, and 61.9% said it hadn't changed much.

- 70.8% of all respondents supported the OPCON transfer. 65.3% from the PPP and 78.3% from the Democratic Party. While there are differences across political parties, there is a general consensus on the need of OPCON transfer.

- Regardless of the need for a ROK-US alliance or positive attitudes for the US, there is a public consensus that the ROK government should retain wartime operational control, which is an important part of sovereignty.

#### ☐ **North Korea's Nuclear Threat and South Korea's Nuclear Armament**

- South Koreans believe that South Korea's military power is superior to North Korea's, excluding nuclear weapons.

- Based on conventional military power, the majority (57.2%) believe that North Korea is either slightly weaker (28.1%) or much weaker (29.1%) than South Korea.

- Economic sanctions and inter-Korean dialogue are both perceived to be ineffective in denuclearizing North Korea.

- 72.9% believe economic sanctions are ineffective in denuclearizing North Korea; 66.2% believe inter-Korean dialogue is ineffective in denuclearizing North Korea

- 51.3% of all respondents were in favor of allowing access to North Korean broadcasting when asked, "Recently, there have been discussions about allowing access to North Korean newspapers and broadcasts in South Korea. Do you support or oppose allowing North Korean broadcasting?"

- 45.1% of respondents say they are worried about the North Korean nuclear threat.

- However, only 34.9% said they were interested in the North Korean nuclear threat.

- Fewer said the North Korean nuclear threat affects their lives. Similarly low levels of

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concern among supporters of the PPP (19.1%), supporters of the Democratic Party (19.7%), and those with no party affiliation (15.9%).

○ The likelihood of a nuclear war with North Korea within 10 years rose slightly in the 2023 survey.

#### ☐ **Public Opinion on the International Relations in Northeast Asia**

○ Despite the slight improvement in favorability toward China in this survey, there was an increase of nearly 13% in the number of respondents who said the ROK-China relationship as having gotten worse over the past year.

○ About 6% decrease in the number of respondents who want the United States to have an advantage over China in the US-China power competition, and a 3.7% increase in the number of respondents who want China to have an advantage, compared to the 2021 survey.

- 53.4% favor US dominance; 9.9% favor China dominance

○ When asked, "Do you think China could overtake the United States to become the new superpower?" 61.4% say China can overtake the United States, about 23% higher than the 38.6% who say it cannot.

- The IMF generation expects China to overtake the U.S. at a higher rate (70.4%) than other generations.

○ 38.6% think it is likely that China will attack Taiwan in the near future. 39.6% think it is unlikely.

○ 52.8% say South Korea should actively participate in important issues in the international community.

○ 52.4% agree with a military alliance between South Korea and Japan to counter the threat from North Korea, 4.8% higher than the 47.7% who disagree.

- 55.5% of respondents support a ROK-Japan military alliance to counter the threat from China, about 3% more than support for a ROK-Japan military alliance to counter the threat from North Korea.

- This high level of support for the ROK-Japan military alliance suggests that the majority of South Koreans view and understand military cooperation in terms of regional security as the US-China rivalry intensifies, creating a neo-Cold War structure in the region.

- Millennials have the most negative attitudes toward the ROK-Japan military alliance.

○ 52.6% of all respondents believe that Japan has the right to develop nuclear weapons for its own security if it is threatened with nuclear weapons.

○ 74% believe Japan is likely to develop nuclear weapons, about 22% higher than the percentage of respondents who agree with Japan's right for developing nuclear weapons (52.6%).

#### ☐ **The Impact of the ROK-US summit on Public Opinion**

○ This year's KINU Unification Survey sample was split roughly in half before and after the

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Washington Declaration (504 before, 497 after). This creates a kind of natural experiment condition. If the change in public opinion before and after April 27 is statistically significant, it can be considered an impact of the Washington Declaration.

○ Favorability toward the US, Japan, and Russia increased after the summit, while favorability toward China and North Korea did not change significantly. In particular, perceptions of the US improved overall after the summit.

○ The large increase in favorability toward Japan is likely due to Prime Minister Kishida's visit (scheduled at the time of the survey), as well as the idea that the outcome of the ROK-US summit will have a positive impact on Japan's relationship with South Korea.

○ Not only did perceptions of Japan as a current military threat decrease, but there was a clear improvement in perceptions of Japan as a future military threat before and after the summit.

○ Support for South Korea's nuclear arsenal increased from 59.9% to 60.6% after the summit, although this difference is not statistically significant. This suggests that the Washington Declaration, which called for expanded deterrence in exchange for South Korea's giving up of its own nuclear armament, did not change South Korean public opinion in favor of nuclear armament.

- On the other hand, trust in the US nuclear umbrella policy increased from 68.7% to 75.6% after the summit.

- Positive evaluations of the effectiveness of the U.S. nuclear umbrella policy increased slightly after the summit.

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4. KINU will continue to establish the consensus-driven policy on unification and North Korea for years to come.

※ For more information or coverage regarding this press release, please contact the person in charge and contact number at the top of the press release.

# ATTACHED: *KINU Unification Survey 2023: Public Opinion on South Korea's Nuclear Armament*. PDF