

Three Characteristics of South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Armament

Online Series

2023. 02. 07. | CO 23-04

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This study discusses three characteristics of South Korean attitudes toward nuclear armament based on an analysis of survey results. These three characteristics differ considerably from the conventional wisdom on the South Korean public's views of nuclear armament. First, public opinion on nuclear armament is long-term, rather than short-term and influenced by events. More than 60% of the South Korean public has supported nuclear armament for an extended period of time. Second, there are various reasons why the public wants nuclear armament. The people of South Korea support nuclear armament not only because of the threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons but also due to concerns about the overall security environment facing the country and the desire to possess military power commensurate with the nation's global prestige. Third, people tend to be more supportive of nuclear armament the more confident they are in America's security commitments. Considering the multi-layered, complex, and uncertain nature of the public's attitude towards nuclear armament, premature conclusions must be avoided. Rather than focusing on the percentage of the public either for or against nuclear armament, public discourse should start by understanding the mindset of South Koreans that support nuclear armament. This requires a more careful analysis of the perceptions of South Koreans that support nuclear armament.

Introduction

The debate over whether South Korea should acquire its own nuclear arsenal is long-standing, dating as far back as the Park Chung-hee administration.¹⁾ The issue of South Korea's independent nuclear arsenal has generally been discussed by politicians and scholars while the public's views on the matter have received little attention. The domestic debate over an independent nuclear arsenal has been reignited since late 2022 due to the unprecedented level of North Korean provocations. Moreover, the South Korean public's views on an independent nuclear arsenal have received much attention both at home and abroad since public opinion surveys have shown that a large majority of the people want the country to develop and possess its own nuclear arsenal.²⁾

It is difficult to deny that when understanding public opinion on nuclear armament, the conventional wisdom is that the people of South Korea, confronted with provocations by North Korea, want to acquire nuclear weapons as a method of responding to North Korea's advancement of its nuclear capabilities. But the attitudes of the South Korean people revealed by public opinion surveys differ from this conventional interpretation. This study summarizes the views of the South Korean people regarding an independent nuclear arsenal revealed by public opinion surveys into three characteristics. This study focused on the following surveys; the 'KINU Unification Survey' conducted by the Korea Institute of National Unification (KINU), the 'Survey of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.' conducted by *Hankook Ilbo*,³⁾ and the 'Survey on South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons' conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA).⁴⁾

1) "Park Chung-hee began Development of Nuclear Weapons in 1972 ... abandoned Development in 1977, (in Korean)" *Hankyoreh*, May 12, 2011, https://www.hani.co.kr/arti/politics/politics_general/477753.html (accessed January 31, 2023).

2) "70% of South Koreans Approve Nuclear Armament ... Surprised by Survey Results (in Korean)," *Chosun Ilbo*, January 21, 2023, <https://www.chosun.com/international/us/2023/01/21/GB2RI6XSJZFOTB6OQXYP4AKP2M/> (accessed January 31, 2023).

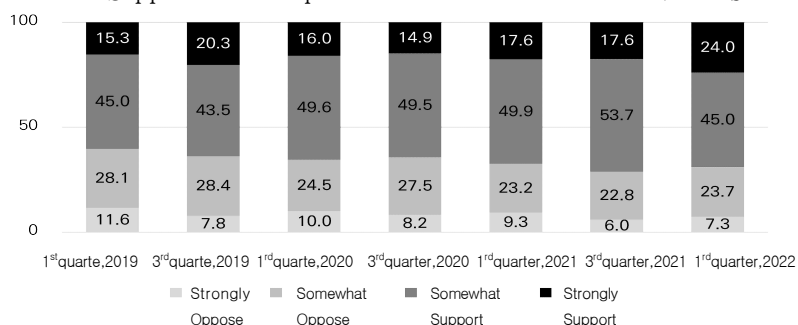
3) The survey was conducted December 12-14, 2022, by Hankook Research among a representative national sample of 1,000 adults 18 and older by telephone survey. For further details, visit the website of South Korea's National Election Survey Deliberation Commission.

4) The survey was conducted December 1-4, 2021 by Hankook Research among a representative national sample of 1,500 adults 18 and older by telephone survey. For further details, visit the website of South Korea's National Election Survey Deliberation Commission.

Nuclear Armament is a Long-standing Aspiration

The percentage of the South Korean public that wants to independently develop and possess nuclear weapons has consistently ranged between 60~70% for quite some time. According to the KINU survey, the number of people that support South Korea's nuclear armament has continued to gradually increase from 60% to 70% over the last four years, as seen in Figure 1 below.

<Figure 1> Public Support for Independent Nuclear Armament over last 4 Years (%)



The results from both the 'Survey of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.' conducted by *Hankook Ilbo* as well as the CCGA survey are similar to those found in the KINU survey. In the 'Survey of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.' conducted in December 2022, 66.8% of respondents replied that South Korea should possess its own nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, in the CCGA survey conducted in December 2021, 71% of respondents answered that South Korea should independently develop nuclear weapons.

What is interesting is how the percentage of the public that wants South Korea to possess nuclear weapons over the last four years is not that different from more than a decade ago. 17 years ago in 2006, 67% of the South Korean public believed that the country needed to possess nuclear weapons,⁵⁾ while 64% of the public believed that it was necessary to possess nuclear weapons 10 years ago in 2013.⁶⁾

⁵⁾ "67% of the Public Believes that We need 'Nuclear Bombs' also (in Korean)," *Newsis*, October 10, 2006, https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2006/10/11/2006101160429.html (accessed January 31, 2023).

⁶⁾ "Public Opinion Survey Regarding North Korea's Third Nuclear Test and inter-Korean Relations

It seems clear that politicians, academics, and members of the media have become interested in how the general public feels about nuclear armament in light of increased provocations by North Korea during the latter half of 2022. But interpreting the South Korean public's attitude towards nuclear armament solely based on North Korea's provocations during the latter half of 2022 risks failing to see the forest for the trees. Views of the South Korean people on nuclear armament should be understood as an attitude that has emerged over an extended period of time, rather than as an immediate reaction to North Korea's provocations. The correct interpretation is that North Korea's provocations during the latter half of 2022 did not have a decisive impact on the public's views on the matter when chronological trends in the South Korean public's attitude towards the acquisition of nuclear weapons are considered,

The Reasons why the Public Wants Nuclear Armament are Complex

While there are several surveys that ask the public about their preferences regarding nuclear armament, there are not that many studies and surveys that investigate why South Koreans want nuclear weapons. This may be due to the general expectation that the South Korean public wants nuclear armament in order to respond to North Korea's nuclear arsenal. But results from the CCGA survey that specifically examines why the South Korean public supports nuclear armament contradict this conventional wisdom, as shown in Figure 2 below.

According to the CCGA survey, only 23% of respondents chose the threat posed by North Korea as the reason why South Korea should pursue nuclear armament. On the other hand, 39% of respondents replied that South Korea should acquire nuclear weapons to prepare for other threats than North Korea, which was the most common response. This implies that changes to the international order, symbolized by the intensifying competition between the U.S. and China, as well as threat perceptions of countries in the region surrounding the Korean peninsula significantly influence

(in Korean)," *Gallup Korea*, February 15, 2013, [https://panel.gallup.co.kr/Contents/GallupReport/%ED%95%9C%EA%B5%AD%EA%B0%A4%EB%9F%BDGallupReport\(20130220\)_%EB%B6%81%ED%95%B5%EA%B3%BC%EB%8C%80%EB%B6%81%EA%B4%80%EA%B3%84.pdf](https://panel.gallup.co.kr/Contents/GallupReport/%ED%95%9C%EA%B5%AD%EA%B0%A4%EB%9F%BDGallupReport(20130220)_%EB%B6%81%ED%95%B5%EA%B3%BC%EB%8C%80%EB%B6%81%EA%B4%80%EA%B3%84.pdf) (accessed January 31, 2023).

attitudes toward nuclear armament. Meanwhile, the percentage of respondents that replied that nuclear armament is necessary to enhance South Korea's global prestige was 26%, which is higher, within the margin of error, than the percentage of respondents that chose the North Korean threat as the reason for nuclear armament. Aspirations for strong military power commensurate with South Korea's global prestige is another cause that explains why nuclear armament is thought to be needed.

<Figure 2> Reasons for Nuclear Armament (%)⁷⁾



The CCGA survey may be limited in sufficiently reflecting the South Korean public's current views on nuclear armament given that it was conducted in December 2021. But results from both the 'KINU Unification Survey' conducted in April 2022 and the *Hankook Ilbo* 'Survey of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.' conducted in December 2022 indirectly suggest that concern about North Korea's advancement of its nuclear capabilities may not be the dominant factor determining South Korean attitudes towards nuclear armament. In the 'KINU Unification Survey', 71.2% of respondents that believed South Korea to be stronger than North Korea replied that they wanted nuclear armament. In contrast, only 63.4% of respondents that thought South Korea was weaker militarily preferred acquiring nuclear weapons. In the 'Survey of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.', respondents that considered the security environment as stable (74.7%) were more likely to want nuclear weapons than those

⁷⁾ Toby Dalton, Karl Friedhoff, and Lami Kim, "Thinking Nuclear: South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons," The Chicago Council on Global Affairs (CCGA), February 2022, p. 14, <https://globalaffairs.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/Korea%20Nuclear%20Report%20PDF.pdf> (accessed January 31, 2023).

that believed the situation to be unstable (60.8%).

This does not mean that North Korea's advancement of its nuclear arsenal is unrelated to the South Korean public's views on nuclear armament. Survey results clearly illustrate how support for nuclear armaments is higher when concern about North Korea's nuclear weapons capabilities is more acute. A study by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University clearly shows that the perceived level of threat of North Korea's nuclear weapons is positively correlated with support for nuclear armament. For example, support for nuclear armament was at its lowest level in 2018 when North Korea announced a moratorium on nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests. But explaining the attitudes of the South Korean people toward nuclear armament based only on North Korea's advancement of its nuclear arsenal is likely to result in a misinterpretation of the public's views. The attitude of the South Korean people towards nuclear armament is more accurately assessed by comprehensively considering how the public perceives South Korea's overall security situation with regard to factors such as North Korea's nuclear weapons, South Korea's national power, and the international environment.

Public more Supportive of Nuclear Armament the more Confident they are of America's Security Commitments

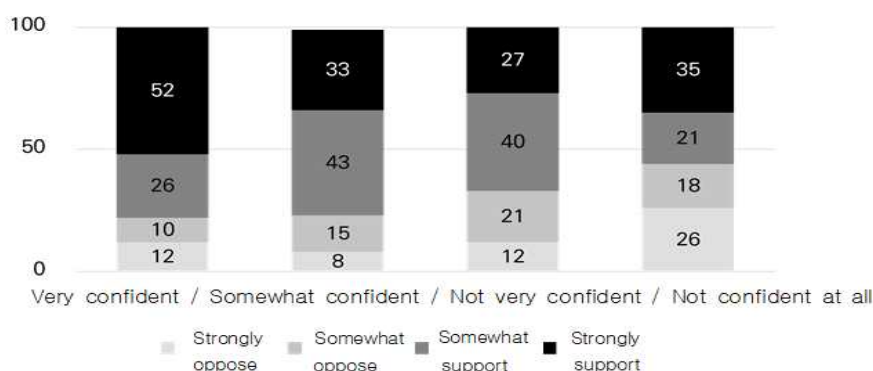
Politicians and academics generally believe that support for South Korea's independent nuclear armament will decline as confidence in America's security commitments to South Korea increases. The recommendation that strong commitments to extended deterrence by the U.S. will alleviate South Korea's security concerns commonly offered by experts reflect this belief.⁸⁾ However, studies and surveys that analyze the views of the South Korean public on nuclear armament have reported results that contradict this widespread belief that increased confidence in America's security commitments will reduce support for nuclear armament.

Professor Lauren Sukin at the London School of Economics and Political Science

⁸⁾ "Experts, "President Yoon's mention of Possessing Nuclear Weapons Reflect Public Opinion ... Need to Alleviate South Korea's Concerns through Firm Pledges for Extended Deterrence (in Korean)," *VOA*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.voakorea.com/a/6916589.html> (accessed January 31, 2023).

(LSE) conducted a social science experiment in which she measured how support for nuclear armament among the South Korean public varied in accordance to the level of confidence in America's security commitments. According to the study, participants that were provided information that trust in America's security commitments was high had a stronger preference for nuclear armament than participants that received information that trust was low.⁹⁾ Patterns that resemble the results from Professor Sukin's experiment were also observed in the CCGA survey when analyzing the responses to questions about the level of confidence in America's security commitments and support for nuclear armament. In the CCGA survey, 61% of respondents replied that they were confident in America's security commitment, with 49% very confident and 12% somewhat confident. What is interesting is that support for nuclear armament increases as confidence in America's security commitments increases, as seen in Figure 3. For example, 78% of respondents that replied that they were very confident in America's security commitments supported nuclear armament. In contrast, 56% of respondents that were not confident at all supported nuclear armament.

<Figure 3> Support for Nuclear Armament, Categorized by Confidence in America's Security Commitments (%)¹⁰⁾



⁹⁾ Lauren Sukin, "Credible Nuclear Security Commitments Can Backfire: Explaining Domestic Support for Nuclear Weapons Acquisition in South Korea," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 64, no. 6 (2020), pp. 1011-1042.

¹⁰⁾ Dalton, Friedhoff, and Kim, "Thinking Nuclear," (2022), p. 8.

A similar pattern regarding the relationship between America's security commitments and South Korea's nuclear armament found in the CCGA survey was also observed in the 'Survey of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.'. 74.7% of respondents that replied that the alliance needed to be strengthened when asked about future bilateral relations with the U.S. also replied that South Korea needed to possess nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, only 45.6% of respondents that urged for more independent diplomacy supported the possession of nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, the results from the 'KINU Unification Survey' were different from the CCGA survey. In the survey conducted by KINU, participants were asked whether they thought the U.S. would fight with South Korea against North Korea if a war occurred between the two Koreas. 32.0% of respondents replied that the U.S. would help South Korea unconditionally, whereas 66.4% replied that the U.S. would help only if it suited America's national interests. The former group of respondents can be considered more confident in America's security commitments than the latter. Support for nuclear armament among those that believe the U.S. would help South Korea unconditionally and those that believe the U.S. would help only if it benefited the U.S. were pretty similar, at 68.4% and 69.5% for each group, respectively. These results suggest that there might not be a substantive relationship between the level of confidence in America's security commitments and support for nuclear armament.

Considering the implications of these survey results, detailed explanations for the potentially positive correlation between confidence in America's security commitments and support for nuclear armament are needed. As of date, however, it does not seem that there are any sufficiently satisfying explanations. First of all, Professor Sukin explains this relationship through the 'unwanted use hypothesis.' According to this logic, a high degree of confidence in America's security commitments to South Korea also indicates that the possibility of a military conflict involving the U.S. is high. Under such conditions, South Korea may want to acquire nuclear weapons to prevent being entrapped in wars caused by the U.S. or, put differently, to enhance South Korea's autonomy.

Another possible explanation is that this positive relationship between confidence in the alliance and support for nuclear weapons is due to the public's desire for a multi-layered approach to South Korea's security in response to the increasing threat

of North Korea's nuclear weapons as well as the intensifying strategic competition between the U.S. and China. The 'unwanted use hypothesis' is unable to explain why support for nuclear weapons is low among respondents that call for independent and autonomous diplomacy. America's extended deterrence posture and South Korea's independent possession of nuclear weapons can coexist within the mindset of 'more being better'; in other words, as a method of preparing as many security measures as possible to defend against the threats facing the country.

It is currently difficult to conclude which of these hypotheses best describes the South Korean public's attitude towards nuclear armament. What is certain, however, is that both of these hypotheses imply that a strong commitment to extended deterrence by the U.S. alone will not be able to easily alter the South Korean public's perceptions and support regarding an independent nuclear arsenal.

Implications

Actions do not occur through hope and will alone. It is unclear how long the current level of expectations and desire for nuclear armament will persist given the domestic and foreign consequences that will be caused by South Korea's independent development of nuclear weapons. Based solely on the results of public opinion surveys that have centered on the prospect of nuclear armament, it is difficult to conclude that the public will behave in various ways that support nuclear development if the South Korean government indeed chooses to go down this path. Therefore, understanding the mindset of the public that supports nuclear armament will be a more constructive starting point, more so than merely focusing on the relative percentages of the public either for or against the acquisition of an independent nuclear arsenal.

The South Korean public has maintained a very high level of sensitivity to security as the nation has experienced division through war and has witnessed North Korea advance its nuclear capabilities. It seems clear that concern about security precipitated by the state of conflict between the two Koreas is the foundational basis of the perception among the South Korean people that believe the country needs to possess its own nuclear arsenal. But the current perception of nuclear armament among the South Korean people reflects not only fears of North Korea but also considerations

of South Korea's security and prosperity related to its global status as an advanced country as well as changes to the international environment. In other words, the public's views on nuclear weapons are more complex than the conventional interpretation that attitudes toward nuclear armament are short-term and influenced by events. Given this, the public's attitude towards nuclear armament needs to be interpreted carefully, requiring further research and analysis.

Using survey results that seven out of ten South Koreans support nuclear armament simply as evidence that South Korea needs to acquire an independent nuclear arsenal, or to disregard the public's nuclear aspirations as merely the manifestation of nationalism or extreme patriotism, can both result in the failure to appreciate the deeper sentiments of the people that exist beyond the numbers. Efforts need to be made to first understand the fear and anxiety of the people that want nuclear armament and then subsequently contemplate rational solutions that address these concerns.

To achieve these goals, more rigorous surveys and research must be conducted in order to accurately assess the views of the people regarding South Korea's nuclear armament. The three surveys that this study referred to used different questions for their respective surveys. The 'KINU Unification Survey' asked about the 'possession of nuclear weapons' and 'nuclear armament'. The 'Survey of South Korean Attitudes toward the U.S.' conducted by *Hankook Ilbo* asked about the 'possession of nuclear weapons.' Lastly, the 'Survey on South Korean Attitudes on Nuclear Weapons' by the CCGA asked about the 'independent development of nuclear weapons.' It is likely that the people of South Korea perceived 'possession of nuclear weapons' and 'nuclear armament' to basically mean obtaining control of nuclear weapons or, in other words, the independent development of nuclear weapons. But it is also possible that 'possession of nuclear weapons' and 'nuclear armament' was understood as umbrella terms that include not only the independent development of nuclear weapons but also the deployment of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. More detailed statements need to be used because slight differences in the wording of questions can cause different responses and result in different interpretations.

In addition, it is important to assess the South Korean public's perceptions of the numerous actual problems that arise when states independently develop nuclear weapons. This includes questions about the perceived feasibility of an independent

nuclear arsenal as well as whether the public is willing to endure the consequences of international sanctions that are likely to occur in the process of development. Moreover, it appears that further research into the black box of the relationship between confidence in U.S. extended deterrence and support for the possession of nuclear weapons is necessary. For example, it may be possible to observe whether the public's demand for possessing nuclear weapons changes when the public is informed of not only America's level of commitment to extended deterrence but also the specific measures deployed by the U.S. for this end.

Experts commonly share the outlook that North Korean provocations will continue for the foreseeable future. To have a controversy over how much of the public supports nuclear armament every time there is a provocation by North Korea, almost as a ritual, is counterproductive. Becoming increasingly necessary is a careful approach to the question of nuclear armament that considers public opinion on the matter in the context of the past, present, and future. ©KINU 2023

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