

March 8, 2013

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

North Korea: Like Father, Like Son

North Korea now faces tightened UN Security Council sanctions for carrying out a nuclear test in February 2013, leading Pyongyang to declare that the 1953 armistice that ended the Korean War will be canceled on March 11, 2013. The February test is the third North Korean nuclear test since 2006, and follows two attempts at long-range missile testing in 2012. If there were any doubts about Kim Jong-un's intentions, the recent test makes it clear that the North Korea's nuclear agenda remains the same as it was under his father.

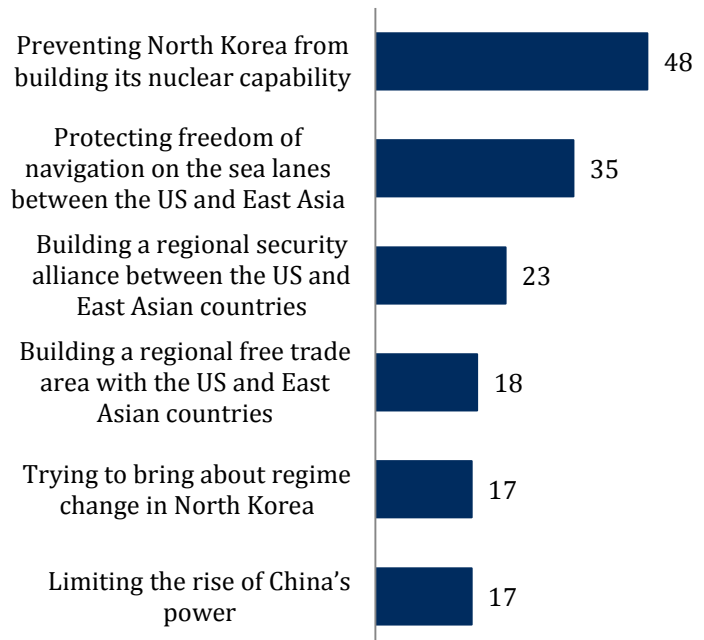
The 2012 Chicago Council Survey showed that majorities of Americans back interdiction of North Korean ships suspected of carrying nuclear-related material and continued diplomatic efforts to pressure North Korea to stop building its nuclear weapons program. But most Americans oppose the use of military force to curb North Korea's nuclear efforts. A February 2013 Asan Institute survey found that nonmilitary approaches are similarly favored by a majority in South Korea, though there are some signs of growing discomfort with the nuclear ambitions of its neighbor.

Preventing North Korea from Building Nuclear Capacity Is a Top Priority

Americans are anxious about the threat of rogue nations developing nuclear weapons. In the 2012 *Chicago Council Survey* Americans show clear concern about North Korea's nuclear capability and consider preventing the spread of nuclear weapons as a highly important US foreign policy goal.

Out of six possible strategic priorities in our relationships with South Korea and Japan, preventing North Korea from building its nuclear capability ranks the highest (Figure 1). Nearly half (48%) of Americans say this is a "very high" priority in the US relationship with South Korea (45% in relationship with Japan). By comparison, trying to bring about regime change in North Korea is a less urgent goal, with 17 percent considering this a very high priority.

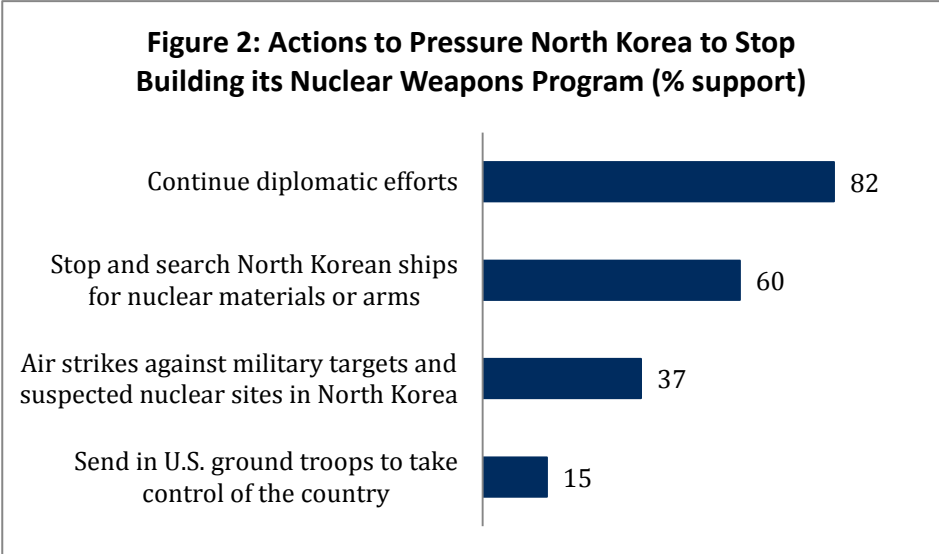
Figure 1: Priorities for US relationship with South Korea (% very high)



At a broader level, a large majority of Americans believe that preventing the spread of nuclear weapons is a very important US foreign policy goal (72%), just below reducing US dependence on foreign oil (77%) and protecting jobs (83%). Americans also name the possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers (63%) as a critical threat to US vital interests.

Few Support US Unilateral Military Action to Pressure North Korea

The US public supports continued diplomatic pressure on North Korea, but as of June 2012, they did not support taking military action. Despite the failure of negotiations in the past, approximately eight in ten support continuing diplomatic efforts (82%). In a separate question, seven in ten (69%) think US government leaders should be ready to meet and talk with North Korean leaders. While a smaller majority (60%) supports stopping and searching North Korean ships for nuclear materials or arms, there is only minority support for more coercive measures. Majorities oppose air strikes against military targets and suspected nuclear sites (58% oppose, 37% support) and sending US ground troops to take control of the country (80% oppose, 15% support) (see figure 2).



Americans Affirm Support for South Korea

Immediately after Pyongyang’s third nuclear test, President Obama spoke to outgoing South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to devise a common plan to take to the UN Security Council. The White House issued a statement that referred to the US “nuclear umbrella,” underscoring US defense commitments to South Korea.¹ The American public also supports the US commitment to South Korea. Of all the countries asked about in the 2012 *Chicago Council Survey*, maintaining long-term US military bases in South Korea received the highest level of support (60%), reflecting a long-term trend of support dating back to 2002. This compares to a near-even split in support for long-term military bases in Japan (51%, vs. 46% opposed).

If the threat were to escalate into a North Korean attack on South Korea, the 2012 *Chicago Council Survey* shows that two in three (64%) Americans would support US troop involvement in a UN-sponsored effort to reverse North Korean aggression, though this support falls to 41 percent if it is assumed to be a unilateral US action.

¹ Office of the White House Press Secretary, “President Obama’s call to the President Lee Myung-Bak,” Press Release, February 12, 2012, accessed February 12, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/readout-presidents-call-republic-korea-president-lee-myung-bak>.

South Korean Opinion Aligns with American Views

The South Korean public is even more supportive than Americans are of hosting US troops in their country (68%), according to a late 2012 Asan Institute survey.² As in the American survey, preventing North Korea from building its nuclear capability ranks as the highest priority in South Korea's bilateral relationship with the United States, with 49 percent of South Koreans considering this a very high priority. This is followed by building a regional security alliance (39% very high). South Korea's place greater emphasis than Americans in trying to bring about regime change in North Korea (30% very high), ahead of limiting the rise of China's power (21% very high) and building a regional free trade area with the United States and East Asian countries (17% very high).

When asked to choose the best way to solve the North Korea problem, South Koreans are also inclined to use nonmilitary approaches. The just-released February 2013 Asan survey found a majority prefers that South Korea either negotiate and cooperate with North Korea (38%) or continue economic sanctions (30%). Two in ten (22%) say they would *consider* a firm military response. Only 7 percent favor recognizing North Korea as a de facto nuclear state (7%). In a separate question, according to the Asan report, 59 percent oppose "a preemptive strike on North Korea's test site due to the threat of war."

At the same time, South Koreans may feel somewhat greater discomfort with North Korea's nuclear ambitions than in the past, as illustrated by increased support in Asan's opinion polls for an indigenous nuclear program. While there are no indications that South Korea would abandon its non-nuclear, nonproliferation status, the just-released February 2013 survey finds that two in three South Koreans think Seoul should develop its own nuclear weapons program (66%, up from 56% in 2010, but similar to 2011/12 readings). Moreover, in the wake of North Korea's most recent nuclear test, there has been a steady increase since 2011 in the percentage who "strongly support" a domestic nuclear weapons program.

About

Follow the www.runningnumbers.org blog featuring Chicago Council and other surveys on international affairs and foreign policy. The full report on the 2012 *Chicago Council Survey*, "Foreign Policy in the New Millennium," is available at www.thechicagocouncil.org.

For more information, please contact Dina Smeltz, fellow, Public Opinion and Global Affairs (dsmeltz@thechicagocouncil.org; 312.821.6860). Research assistance for this brief was provided by Shawn Janzen.

The 2012 *Chicago Council Survey* was made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the Korea Foundation, and the United States-Japan Foundation.

² The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, "Asan Public Opinion Report – January 2013," February 7, 2013, accessed February 12, 2013, http://asaninst.org/eng/03_publications/report_list.php?type=research_report.

A Note on Methods

This brief is based on the results of The Chicago Council's 2012 biennial survey of public opinion conducted from May 25 to June 8, 2012. The survey probes American attitudes on a wide range of US foreign policy issues. GFK Custom Research conducted the survey for The Chicago Council using a randomly selected sample of 1,877 adults age 18 and older from their large-scale, nationwide research panel. The margin of error for this survey is +/- 2.8 percentage points.

The Asan Institute Annual Survey 2012 was conducted in two parts. The panel survey portion was conducted from September 5 to 14, 2012, and the second portion was conducted from September 25 to November 1, 2012, employing RDD for mobile and landline phones. The sample size was 1,500 and the margin of error is +/- 2.5 percentage points. The survey was conducted by Media Research.

The February 2013 Asan surveys are part of their Daily Survey, which uses a three-day rolling average and employs RDD for mobile and landline phones. The sample size for each is 1,000, and the margin of error is +/- 3.1 percentage points. The surveys were conducted by Research & Research.