



LESTER  
**CROWN CENTER**  
ON US FOREIGN POLICY

## American and South Korean Publics Doubtful about Success of Talks with North Korea

**Karl Friedhoff**, Fellow, Public Opinion and Asia Policy

**Lily Wojtowicz**, Research Associate, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

**Dina Smeltz**, Senior Fellow, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

**February 2019**

At the end of this month, US and North Korean leaders Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un are due to meet in Hanoi for a second round of discussions on denuclearizing North Korea. This follows a year of diplomatic activity on the Korean Peninsula as the United States, South Korea, and North Korea engaged in talks aimed at denuclearizing the North. As a result of these ongoing negotiations, two new Council surveys find that both the American and South Korean publics see an improvement in the security situation. But publics in both countries remain skeptical that this change in regional dynamics will result in a denuclearized North Korea.

### Key Findings:

- Three-quarters of Americans (73%) lack confidence that negotiations between the United States and North Korea will lead to North Korea's denuclearization.
- South Koreans feel similarly—though by slimmer majorities—having little or no confidence that either President Moon's (52%) or President Trump's (53%) negotiating abilities will result in the denuclearization of North Korea.
- In the event that North Korea does denuclearize, Americans would prefer to maintain the alliance and to keep US troops stationed in South Korea (51%).
- While half of South Koreans (54%) support a domestic nuclear weapons program, Americans are unlikely to support a nuclear South Korea as 64 percent think no country should be allowed to possess nuclear weapons.

### Americans Doubtful that North Korea will Denuclearize

In June 2018, President Trump and Kim Jong UN met in Singapore for the first meeting between leaders of the two countries. The Joint Statement the meeting produced lacked specificity for next steps, but it did lead to ongoing discussions between the two countries. These discussions do not appear to have convinced

Americans that North Korea is serious about giving up its nuclear weapons program. According to a January 11-13 Chicago Council Survey among the US public, three-quarters of Americans are not very (39%) or not at all (35%) confident North Korea will denuclearize. Only one-quarter are very (3%) or somewhat (21%) confident that North Korea will give up its nuclear weapons as a result of the current negotiations with the United States.

This corresponds to American sentiment immediately after Trump's meeting with Kim last June. [A CNN poll conducted June 14-17, 2018](#)—two days after the Singapore Summit—found that 70 percent of Americans think it is somewhat (21%) or very (49%) unlikely that North Korea would eventually give up all of its nuclear weapons. Instead, the greater impact of the meeting appears to have been easing the tension between the two countries. That same CNN poll found that only one-quarter of Americans view North Korea as an immediate threat to the United States (25%), down from 50 percent in August 2017, one month after Donald Trump's "fire and fury" tweet.

The series of regional summits appear to have had a similar impact on the South Korean public. While a December 26-27, 2018 Chicago Council survey found a plurality of South Koreans saying<sup>1</sup> that their country's national security situation has improved over the past four years (42%), roughly half lack confidence in the abilities of both Moon (52%) and Trump (53%) to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear program.

### **Publics Want the US-ROK Alliance to Remain the Same**

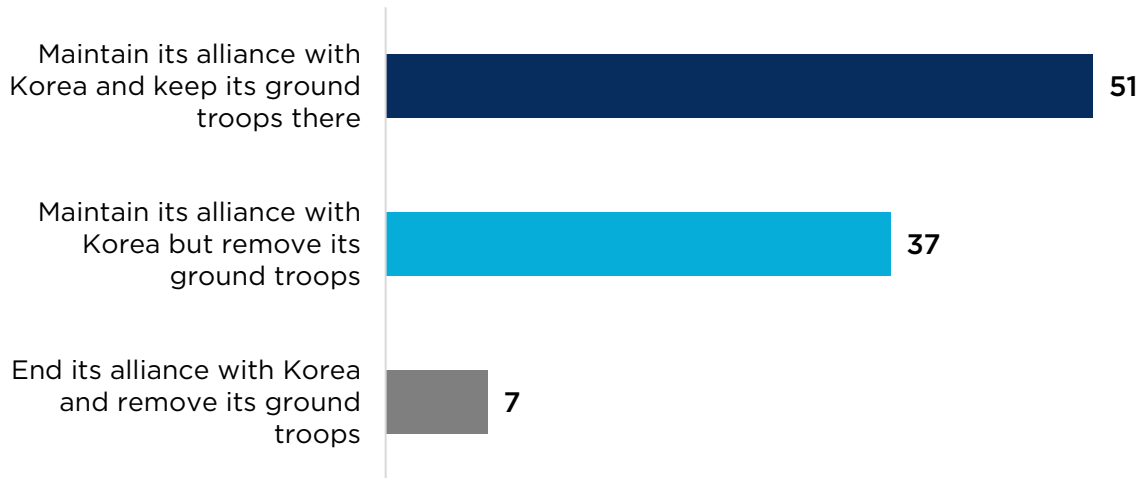
A slim majority of Americans (51%) think that if North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons, the US should maintain its alliance with South Korea and keep its ground troops there. Fewer prefer maintaining the alliance but removing US ground troops (37%). Only 7 percent want to end the alliance and remove all troops in the event of North Korean nuclear denuclearization. Past surveys reaching back decades show that Americans have been largely supportive of US bases in South Korea. In Chicago Council Survey conducted [between 2002 and 2016, American public](#) support for these bases has remained between 60 and 70 percent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Three in ten (30%) believe the security situation has remained the same, and 23 percent say it has worsened.

## The US-ROK Alliance

*If North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons, should the United States: (%)*



January 11-13, 2019 n=1,019

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

For their part, six in ten South Koreans believe that South Korea will still need to continue military exercises with the United States should North Korea denuclearize (60%). Koreans are split on whether they would need to remain under the protection of the US nuclear umbrella (51% no, 45% yes).

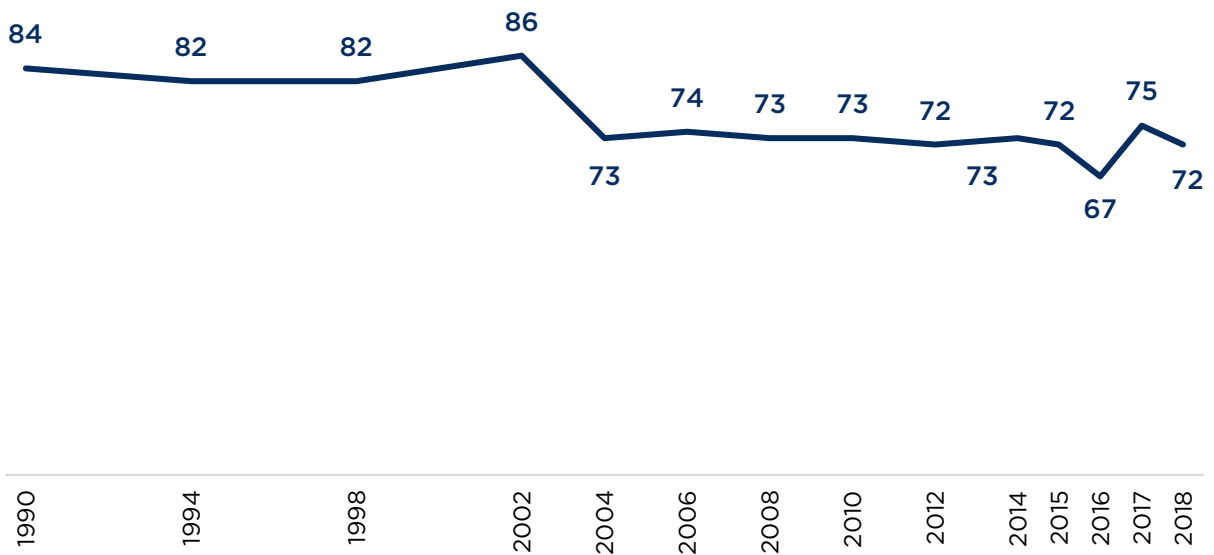
## Americans Think No Country should have Nuclear Weapons

As a candidate, Trump publicly mused that countries like South Korea and Japan should acquire their own nuclear weapons to take responsibility for their own defense. Just over half of South Koreans agree. A slim majority (54%) support a domestic nuclear weapons program and 61 percent think that one of the benefits would be that it would reduce South Korea's dependence on the United States.

Americans do not agree, in fact, a majority think that no country should be allowed to have nuclear weapons (64%). American opinions on proliferation are particularly stable. Not only has this opinion remained [unchanged since 2005](#) (62% in 2010, 66% in 2005) but the Council has consistently found Americans prioritize preventing the spread of nuclear weapons since 1990.

## Preventing the Spread of Nuclear Weapons

Below is a list of possible foreign policy goals that the United States might have. For each one please select whether you think that it should be a very important foreign policy goal of the United States, a somewhat important foreign policy goal, or not an important goal at all: **Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons (% very important goal)**



July 12-31, 2018 | n=2,046

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

*This survey is a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy and is made possible by the generous support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.*

### About the Survey

The data for South Korea is the result of a survey conducted in South Korea from December 26 – 27, 2018 by Hankook Research. The sample size was 1,000 aged 19 and older and it employed RDD for mobile and landline phones. The margin of error is  $\pm 3.1\%$  at the 95% confidence level.

The data for the United States contained in this report are based on interviews conducted from January 11 - January 13, 2019, by Ipsos Public Affairs using their large-scale, nationwide online probability panel, the KnowledgePanel OmniWeb. A total of 1,019 interviews were completed among a weighted national sample of adults 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The margin of error on weighted data is  $\pm 3$  percentage points for the full sample.

## About the Chicago Council on Global Affairs

The Chicago Council on Global Affairs is an independent, nonpartisan membership organization that provides insight—and influences the public discourse—on critical global issues. We convene leading global voices, conduct independent research, and engage the public to explore ideas that will shape our global future. The Council is committed to bringing clarity and offering solutions to issues that transcend borders and transform how people, business, and governments engage the world. Learn more at [thechicagocouncil.org](https://thechicagocouncil.org) and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

## Appendix

The following questions were asked in the United States, of 1,019 adults between January 11-13, 2019. The full findings of the survey of South Koreans referenced in this brief can be found [here](#).

### Q2: How confident are you that negotiations between the United States and North Korea will lead to North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons?

	Very confident (%)	Somewhat confident (%)	Not very confident (%)	Not at all confident (%)	Don't know/Refused (%)
Overall	3	21	39	35	3

### Q3: If North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons, should the United States:

	Maintain its alliance with Korea and keep its ground troops there (%)	Maintain its alliance with Korea but remove its ground troops (%)	End its alliance with Korea and remove its ground troops (%)	Don't know/Refused (%)
Overall	51	37	7	5

### Q4: Which statement is closest to your view?

	No countries should be allowed to have nuclear weapons (%)	Only the United States and its allies should be allowed to have nuclear weapons (%)	Only countries that already have nuclear weapons should be allowed to have them (%)	Any country that is able to develop nuclear weapons should be allowed to have them (%)	Don't know/Refused (%)
Overall	64	13	13	5	5