

With Tensions Receding, Americans Lose Fear of North Korea

Karl Friedhoff, Fellow, Public Opinion and Asia Policy

February 2020

North Korea's promise to deliver an end-of-year "Christmas gift" went unfulfilled amid signs that the United States wanted to continue diplomacy with the Kim regime. This has led to a continued lull in tensions between the two countries, although actual progress in negotiations remains elusive. With that lack of progress, President Donald Trump has reportedly told his advisers that he does not want another summit with Kim Jong Un before the US presidential election in November.

In a survey conducted from January 10-12, 2020, the American public is now less concerned about the threat posed by North Korea, but little else has changed in terms of Americans' policy preferences to deal with North Korea's nuclear program. Majorities still oppose airstrikes against North Korea and support long-term military bases in South Korea.

Key Findings

- Half (52%) of the American public says North Korea's nuclear program is a critical threat. That is the lowest mark since the question was first asked in 2015.
- Just 26 percent say a confrontation between South and North Korea is a critical threat. This is also a new low.
- One in ten (13%) cites North Korea as the country that poses the greatest threat to the United States. That is down from 59 percent in 2017.
- A clear majority (69%) says the United States should maintain its long-term military bases in South Korea.
- A majority (57%) oppose airstrikes against North Korea's nuclear production facilities if no deal on denuclearization can be reached. Nearly seven in ten (67%) oppose sending US troops to destroy those nuclear production facilities.

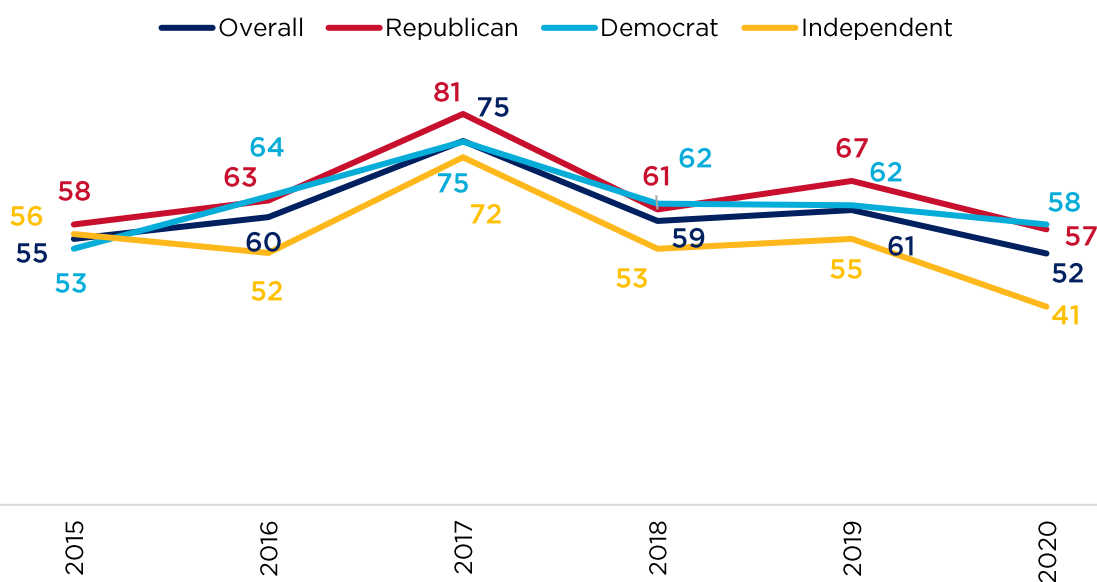
Perceived Threat of North Korea's Nuclear Program Reaches New Low

US-North Korea relations were largely quiet through the end of 2019. While there were several short-range missile launches—in violation of UN Security Council resolutions—these were dismissed as nonprovocative by the Trump administration, and the door to diplomacy remained open. Even though little progress was made on the diplomatic front, the prolonged absence of notable tensions seems to have led to a decreased sense that North Korea poses a threat to the United States.

In the most recent Chicago Council survey, 52 percent of Americans say North Korea's nuclear program is a critical threat, the lowest mark since the question was first asked in 2015 (55%).¹ This number is down 23 percentage points from 2017—the height of “fire and fury”—when North Korea's nuclear program was viewed as the most critical threat facing the United States. These results have been largely consistent between Democrats and Republicans over time, with few partisan gaps developing on this issue. Independents have consistently been the least likely to see the nuclear program as a critical threat, but attitudes among political affiliations have moved together.

North Korea's Nuclear Program as a Threat

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: **North Korea's nuclear program** (% critical threat)



January 2020 | n= 1,019

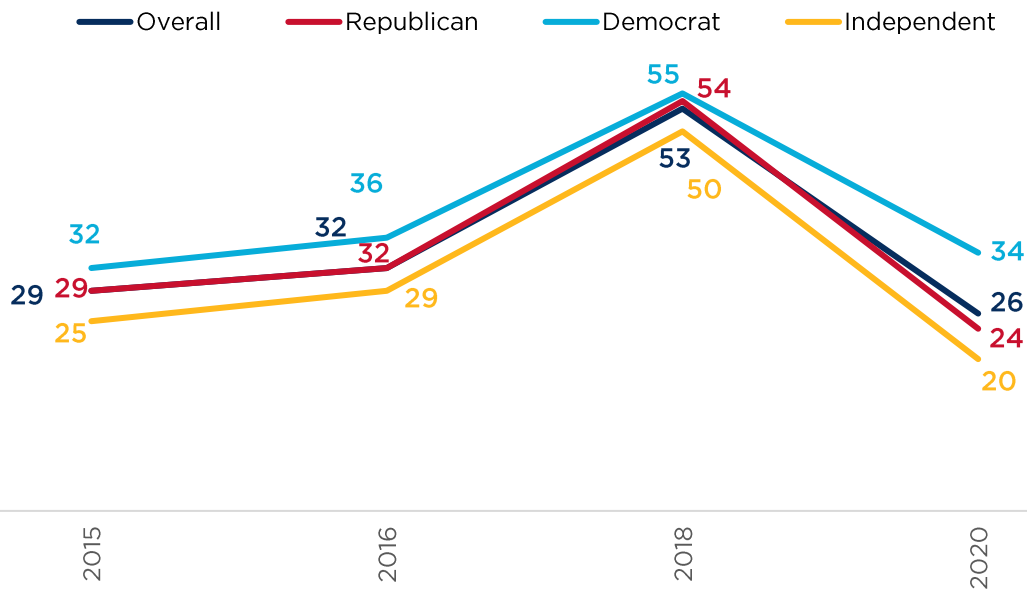
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

¹ For a full list of threats in the 2020 survey, see the appendix.

At the same time, Americans are less concerned about the potential threat posed to the United States by a confrontation between South Korea and North Korea. In 2018, a majority of Americans (53%) said such a confrontation was a critical threat facing the United States—the first time a majority said so since the question was first asked in 2015. But now just 26 percent say such a confrontation is a critical threat, a new low. Again, perceptions among partisan affiliations largely move together.

Threat of Confrontation between North Korea and South Korea

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all: A confrontation between North Korea and South Korea (% critical threat)



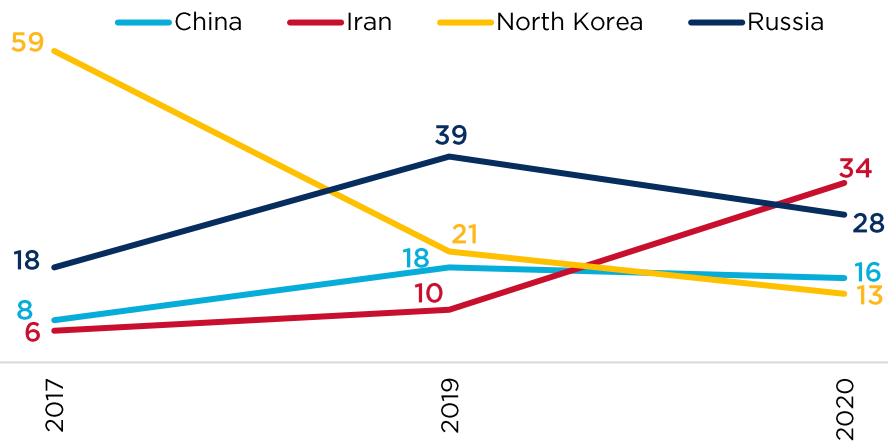
January 2020 | n= 1,019

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Of course, the context of these declines is important. The survey took place just days after tensions with Iran spiked following the US assassination of Iran's top military leader. Six in ten (61%) Americans say Iran's nuclear program is a critical threat facing the United States. Moreover, a plurality (34%) now see Iran as the country that poses the greatest threat to US security versus 13 percent who say North Korea.

Threat to US Security

Which one of the following countries poses the greatest threat to US security? (%)



January 2020 | n = 1,019

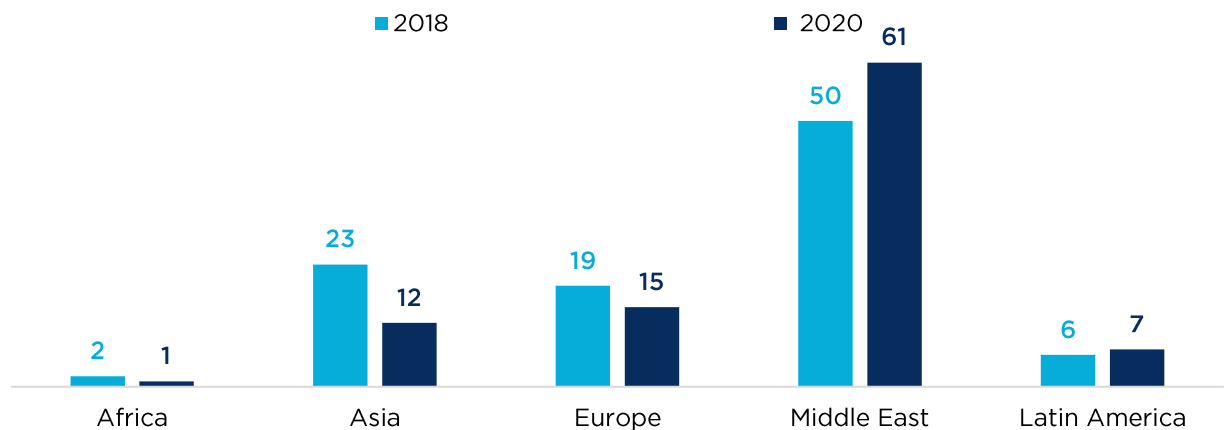
CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Stable Views on Military Bases in South Korea

Along with declines in the perceptions of potential threats to the United States emanating from Asia, fewer Americans now see Asia as the most important region for the security interests of the United States. In 2018, one-quarter (23%) said Asia was the region most important to security interests of the United States versus 50 percent who said the Middle East was and 19 percent who cited Europe. Now, one in ten (12%) says Asia is the most important versus 61 percent who say the Middle East is and 15 percent who cite Europe. These results were consistent among parties.

US Security Interests

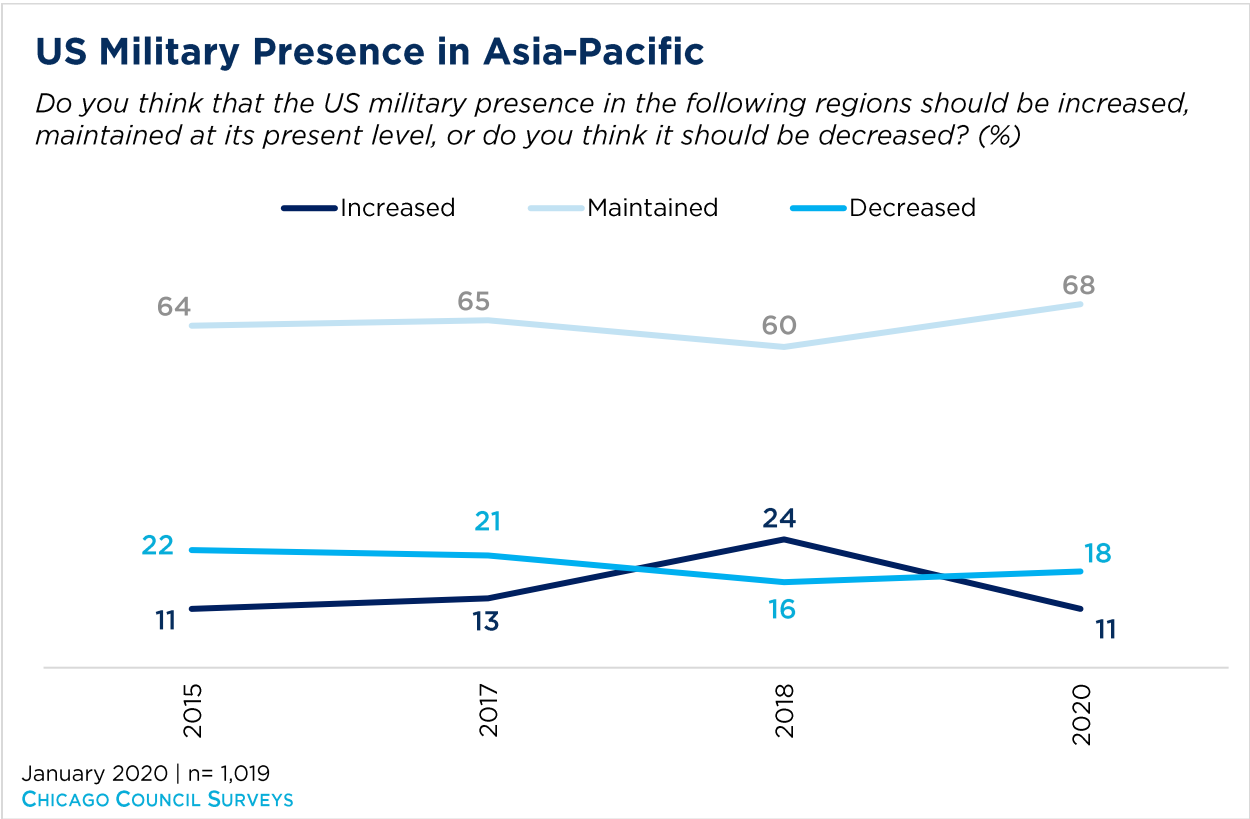
Thinking about US national security, which one of the following regions is currently the most important to the security interests of the United States? (%)



January 2020 | n = 1,019

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

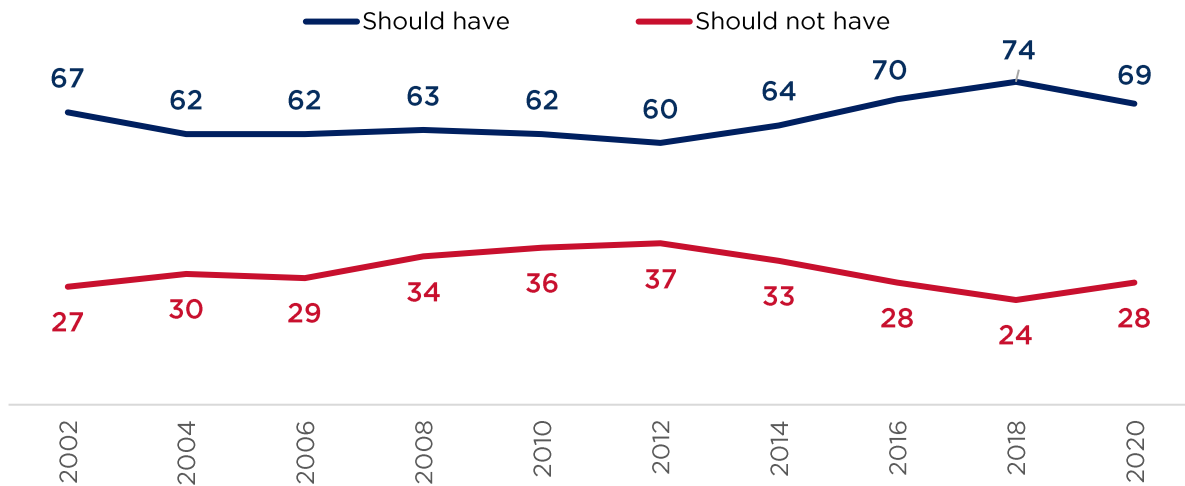
But the decline in Asia as a primary theater of concern and declining views of North Korea as a critical threat have done little to affect views on the benefits of alliances in East Asia. Half (48%) of Americans say alliances in the Asia-Pacific benefit both the United States and the allied countries equally. While that is down 5 percentage points from 2019, there is a corresponding increase in the view that such alliances primarily benefit the United States, growing from 7 percent in 2019 to 13 percent now. Overall, views of the benefits of alliances in the Asia-Pacific are steady. Moreover, two-thirds of Americans (68%) continue to favor maintaining the current US military presence in the Asia-Pacific versus 11 percent who want it to increase and 18 percent who want it to decrease.



There has also been little change about views on long-term military bases in South Korea, specifically. Seven in ten (69%) Americans say the United States should have long-term military bases in South Korea. Republicans (80%) are more likely to say the United States should have bases in South Korea, but two-thirds of both Democrats (65%) and Independents (65%) agree, making this a difference in intensity rather than an outright partisan gap.

US Long-term Military Bases

Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places? South Korea (%)



January 2020 | n= 1,019

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

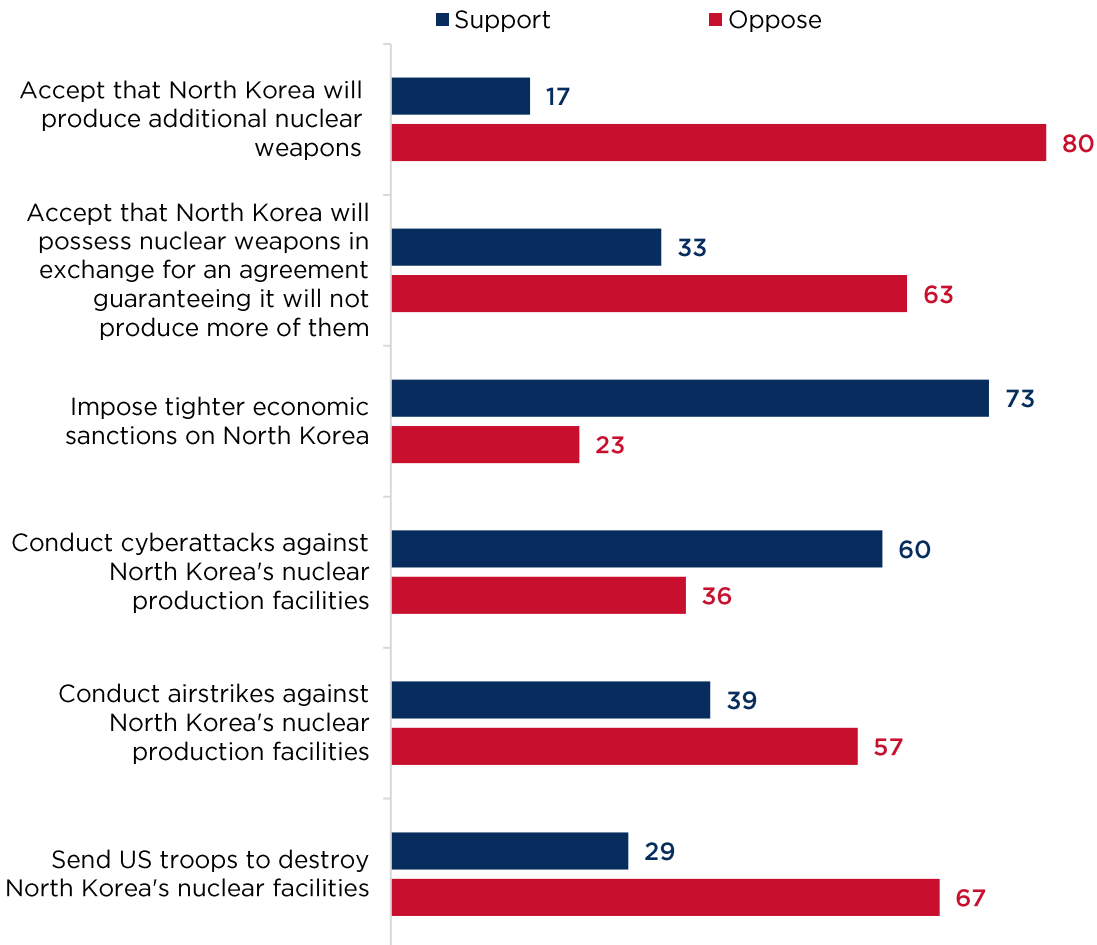
Policy on North Korea

The future of US policy toward North Korea is uncertain. While the United States has continued to call for diplomacy, a return of tensions between the two countries remains a likely outcome. Of course, there are no easy solutions to a nuclear North Korea, but the least acceptable option to the American public is that North Korea will produce additional nuclear weapons (80% oppose). The most-supported options are imposing tighter sanctions (73% support) and conducting cyberattacks against North Korean computer systems (60% support). Majorities continue to oppose the use of force against North Korea. Fifty-seven percent oppose airstrikes against North Korea's nuclear facilities, and 67 percent oppose sending US troops to destroy those facilities.

Here, there are important partisan differences. Minorities among Democrats (29%) and Independents (36%) support conducting airstrikes against North Korea's nuclear production facilities if no diplomatic solution can be reached. However, that number is 57 percent among Republicans. Yet this partisan gap does not carry over into sending US troops to destroy those facilities: only minorities of all parties support such action.

US Action to Stop North Korea

Please tell me whether you would support or oppose each of the following kinds of US action to pressure North Korea to stop building its nuclear weapons program: (%)



January 2020 | n = 1,019

CHICAGO COUNCIL SURVEYS

Overall, attitudes toward these options have remained relatively stable since 2015. However, there are two notable shifts. First, there is growing support for conducting cyberattacks against North Korean computer systems. In 2015, half (50%) of Americans supported such measures, and that number now stands at 60 percent. Second, and perhaps more importantly, there is growing support to accept that North Korea will possess nuclear weapons in exchange for an agreement guaranteeing it will not produce more of them. In 2017, support for this option stood at 21 percent, but it has grown to 33 percent. While 63 percent remain opposed to this outcome in 2020, this data point deserves to be closely monitored.

Diplomacy with North Korea has thus far yielded little, but the Trump administration has continued to call on the Kim regime to return to the negotiating table. If the two countries were able to reach an agreement in which North Korea gave up its nuclear

weapons, the United States would likely need to make significant concessions. The American public is largely supportive of a range of concessions. Six in ten (62%) support providing humanitarian and economic aid, 81 percent favor establishing official diplomatic relations, and 60 percent support a partial withdrawal of US troops from South Korea. The only response option included in the question that a majority opposed was a complete withdrawal of US forces from South Korea. On this, 72 percent opposed such a concession, with only 24 percent in favor. (See appendix for full results.)

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on data from a 2020 Chicago Council survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy. This omnibus survey was conducted January 10-12, 2020, by Ipsos using its large-scale online research panel, KnowledgePanel, among a weighted national sample of 1,019 adults 18 or older living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error for the full sample is ± 3 . The margin of error is higher for partisan subgroups.

Partisan identification is based on respondents' answer to a standard partisan self-identification question: "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?"

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 and follow [@ChicagoCouncil](https://twitter.com/ChicagoCouncil).

Appendix

Q1: Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all:

(N=1019)					
Threat	Critical (%)	Important but not critical (%)	Not important (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
The possibility of violent Islamic extremist groups carrying out a major terrorist attack in the United States	64	30	4	1	100
Iran's nuclear program	61	33	5	1	100
North Korea's nuclear program	52	42	5	1	100
Climate change	51	28	20	1	100
Iran's influence in the Middle East	50	42	6	1	100
Russian Influence in American elections	44	37	18	2	100
The development of China as a world power	38	51	10	1	100
A confrontation between North Korea and South Korea	26	61	11	1	100

Q1. Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interest of the United States in the next 10 years. For each one, please select whether you see this as a critical threat, an important but not critical threat, or not an important threat at all:

Q1/1. A confrontation between North Korea and South Korea

Year	Top 2 Box (%)	Critical (%)	Important but not critical (%)	Not important (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
2015	85	29	56	15	1	100
2016	87	32	55	13	0	100
2018	93	53	40	7	--	100
2020	87	26	61	11	1	100

Q1/2. North Korea's nuclear program

	Top 2 Box (%)	Critical (%)	Important but not critical (%)	Not important (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>						
2015	94	55	39	6	1	100
2016	94	60	35	6	0	100
2017	98	75	23	2	0	100
2018	92	59	33	8	0	100
2019	95	61	34	6	0	100
2020	94	52	42	5	1	100

Q2. Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places?

Q2/1. South Korea

	Should have (%)	Should not have (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2002	67	27	6	100
2004	62	30	8	100
2006	62	29	9	100
2008	63	34	3	100
2010	62	36	3	100
2012	60	37	3	100
2014	64	33	3	100
2016	70	28	2	100
2018	74	24	3	100
2020	69	28	3	100

Q3. Please tell me whether you would support or oppose each of the following kinds of US action to pressure North Korea to stop building its nuclear weapons program:

Q3/1. Accept that North Korea will produce additional nuclear weapons

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2015	16	79	5	100
2016	11	85	4	100
2017	11	85	4	100
2018	14	86	--	100
2020	17	80	4	100

Q3/2. Accept that North Korea will possess nuclear weapons in exchange for an agreement guaranteeing it will not produce more of them

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2017	21	74	4	100
2018	28	71	--	100
2020	33	63	4	100

Q3/3. Impose tighter economic sanctions on North Korea

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2015	70	25	6	100
2016	80	17	4	100
2017	76	20	4	100
2018	77	22	--	100
2020	73	23	4	100

Q3/4. Conduct cyberattacks against North Korea's nuclear production facilities

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2015	50	45	6	100
2016	53	42	5	100
2018	53	46	--	100
2020	60	36	4	100

Q3/5. Conduct airstrikes against North Korea's nuclear production facilities

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2015	36	58	6	100
2016	35	60	5	100
2017	40	55	5	100
2018	39	60	-	100
2020	39	57	4	100

Q3/6. Send US troops to destroy North Korea's nuclear facilities

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>	25	69	6	100
2015	25	70	5	100
2016	28	68	4	100
2017	39	60	--	100
2018	30	69	--	100
2020	29	67	4	100

**Summary of Q3: Actions against North Korea to stop its nuclear weapons program—
2020 data only**

	(N=1019)			
	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Action:</u>				
Impose tighter economic sanctions	73	23	4	100
Conduct cyberattacks against nuclear facilities	60	36	4	100
Conduct airstrikes against nuclear facilities	39	57	4	100
Accept that North Korea will produce nuclear weapons in exchange for an agreement guaranteeing it will not produce more	33	63	4	100
Send troops to destroy nuclear facilities	29	67	4	100
Accept that North Korea will produce nuclear weapons	17	80	4	100

Q4. If the United States and North Korea reach an agreement in which North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons, would you support or oppose the following US actions:

Q4/1. US providing economic and humanitarian aid to North Korea

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2018	54	41	5	100
2020	62	34	4	100

Q4/2. Establishing official diplomatic relations with North Korea

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2018	77	18	5	100
2020	81	16	3	100

Q4/3. Partial withdrawal of US forces from South Korea

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2018	54	41	5	100
2020	60	36	4	100

Q4/4. Complete withdrawal of US forces from South Korea

	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Year</u>				
2018	18	77	5	100
2020	24	72	4	100

Summary of Q4: Actions if North Korea gives up its nuclear weapons—2020 data only

	(N=1019)			
	Support (%)	Oppose (%)	Refused (%)	Total (%)
<u>Action:</u>				
Establish official diplomatic relations	81	16	3	100
Provide economic and humanitarian aid	62	34	4	100
Partial withdrawal of US forces from South Korea	60	36	4	100
Complete withdrawal of US forces from South Korea	24	72	4	100