



South Korean Public Perception of Nuclear Proliferation

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I. Introduction

1. Background

- Despite the recent developments in the U.S.'s nuclear deterrence, a majority of South Koreans showed the support for nuclear proliferation.

In April 2024, 70.9% and 63.8% supported developing independent nuclear weapons and deploying U.S. tactical nuclear weapons, respectively.

- Security threat from North Korea, *a de facto* nuclear power, has gradually increased.
- Having no nuclear weapons and no official plans to develop them, South Korea is heavily dependent on the U.S. security guarantee.
- Given North Korean capability to threaten the U.S. with nuclear weapons, South Koreans have become more concerned about the effectiveness of the U.S. extended deterrence.

I. Introduction

2. Empirical findings

- Perceived threat (Son & Yim, 2021), and changing security environment (Kim et al., 2022; 2023; Lee, 2023) have primarily been studied as independent variables.
- Role of nonproliferation information (Son & Park, 2023), public fear towards entrapment (Sukin, 2020), lifetime experience (Sukin & Seo, 2024), and extended deterrence (Ko, 2019) have also been investigated at the individual level.
- Foreign policy gap between experts and the general public has been reported. While a majority of South Koreans consistently support nuclear armaments, only 30% of South Korean security experts agreed with the same (Cha, 2024; Chung et al., 2022).

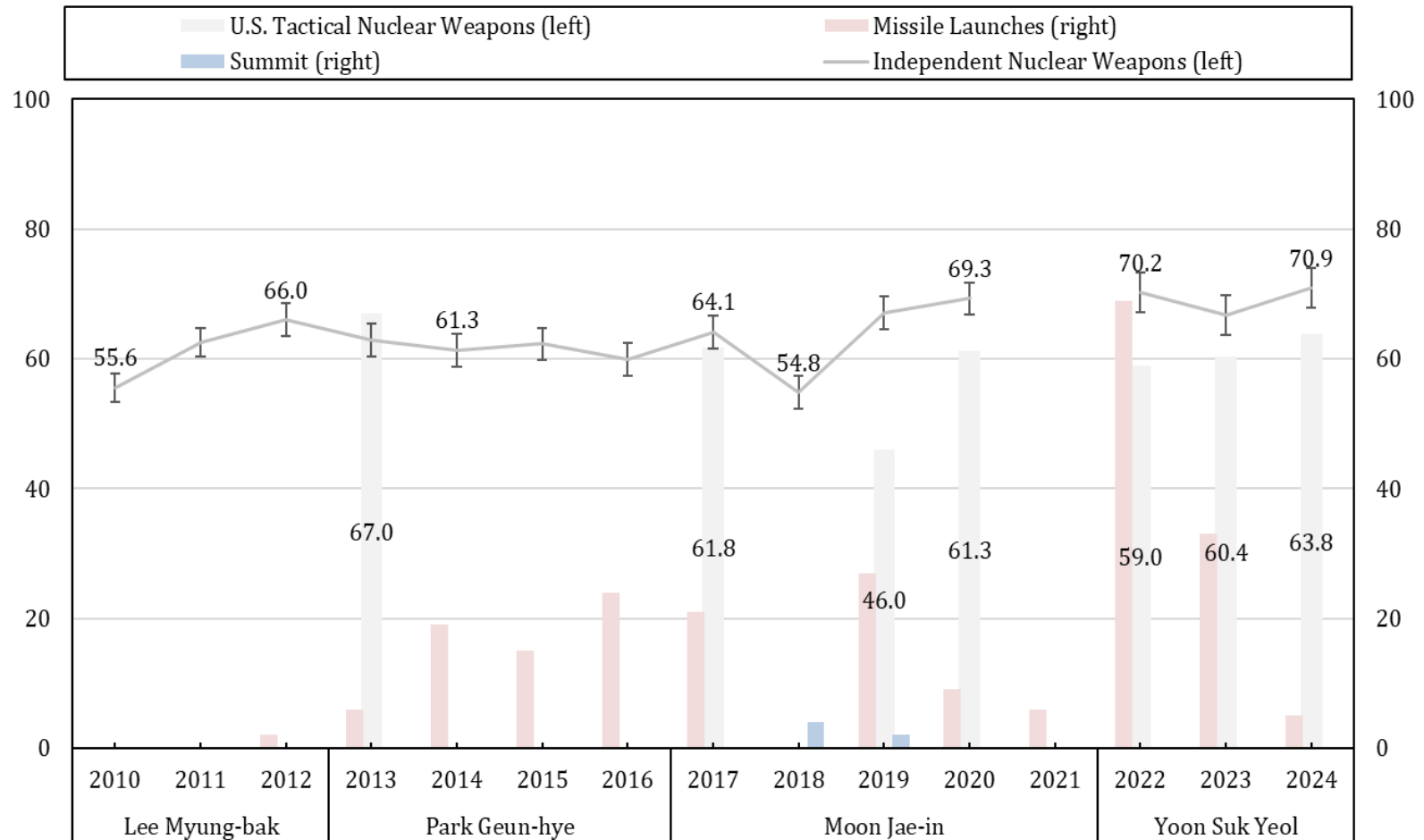
II. Methods

1. Data and analysis

- Data: Asan Institute's multiple cross-sectional survey data are mainly used.
 - *Asan Annual Survey (2010~2020)*,
 - Asan Poll on International Affairs (2016~2024)*.
- Each sample includes 1,000~2,000 respondents aged over 19 across the nation (*weighted*).
- *2024 Asan Poll* was conducted by RDD for mobile and landline phones (CATI interviews) from April 2nd to 3rd.
 - *Further information on data collection can be accessed upon request.
- Analysis: descriptive statistics, cross-tabulation, mean comparison

III-1. Support for Nuclear Proliferation: 2010~2024

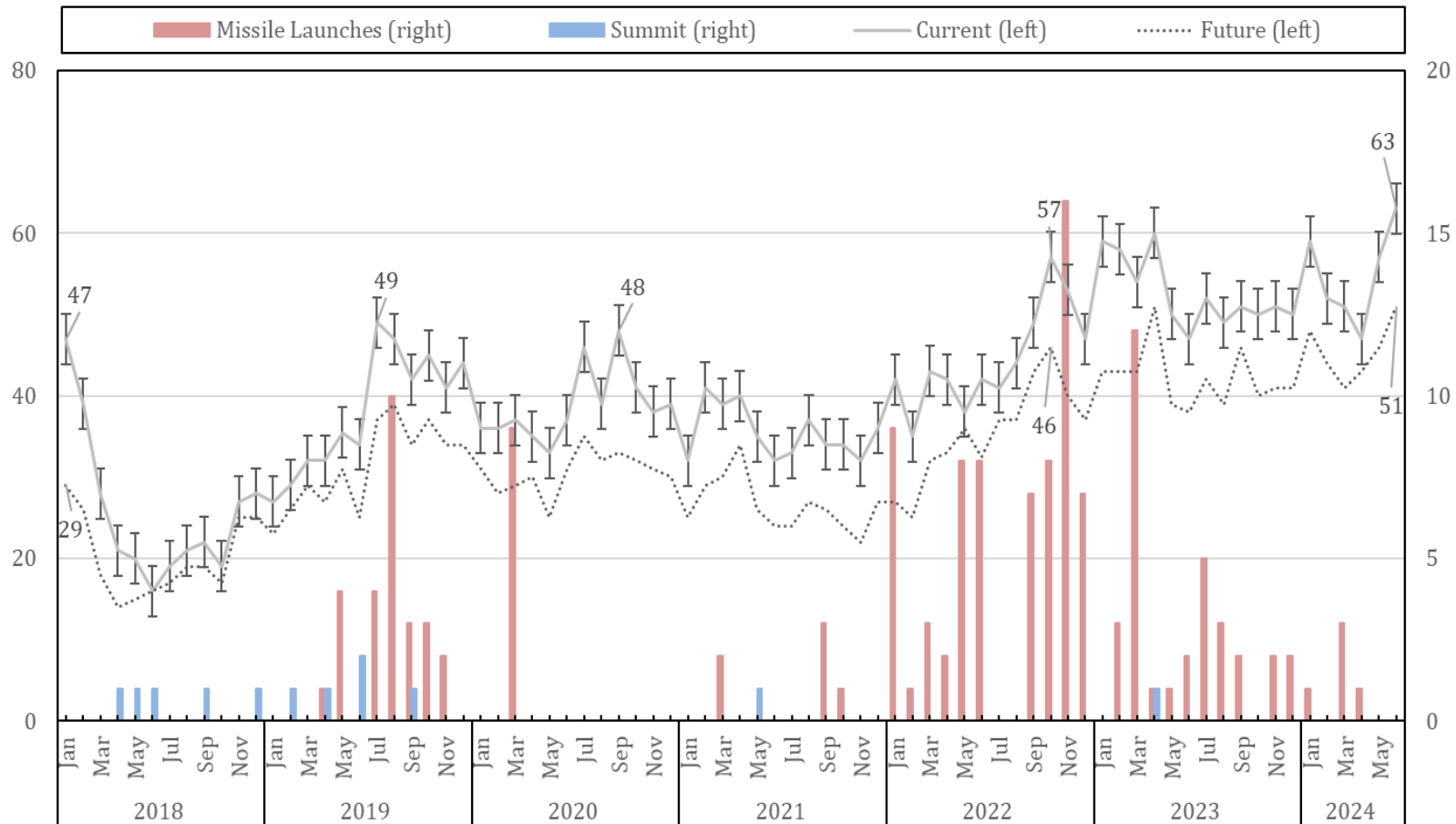
Figure 1. Support for Nuclear proliferation: 2010~2024 (left: %, right: number of times)



Source: Asan Annual Survey(2010~2020), Asan Poll(2022~2024)

III-2. Perceived Threat

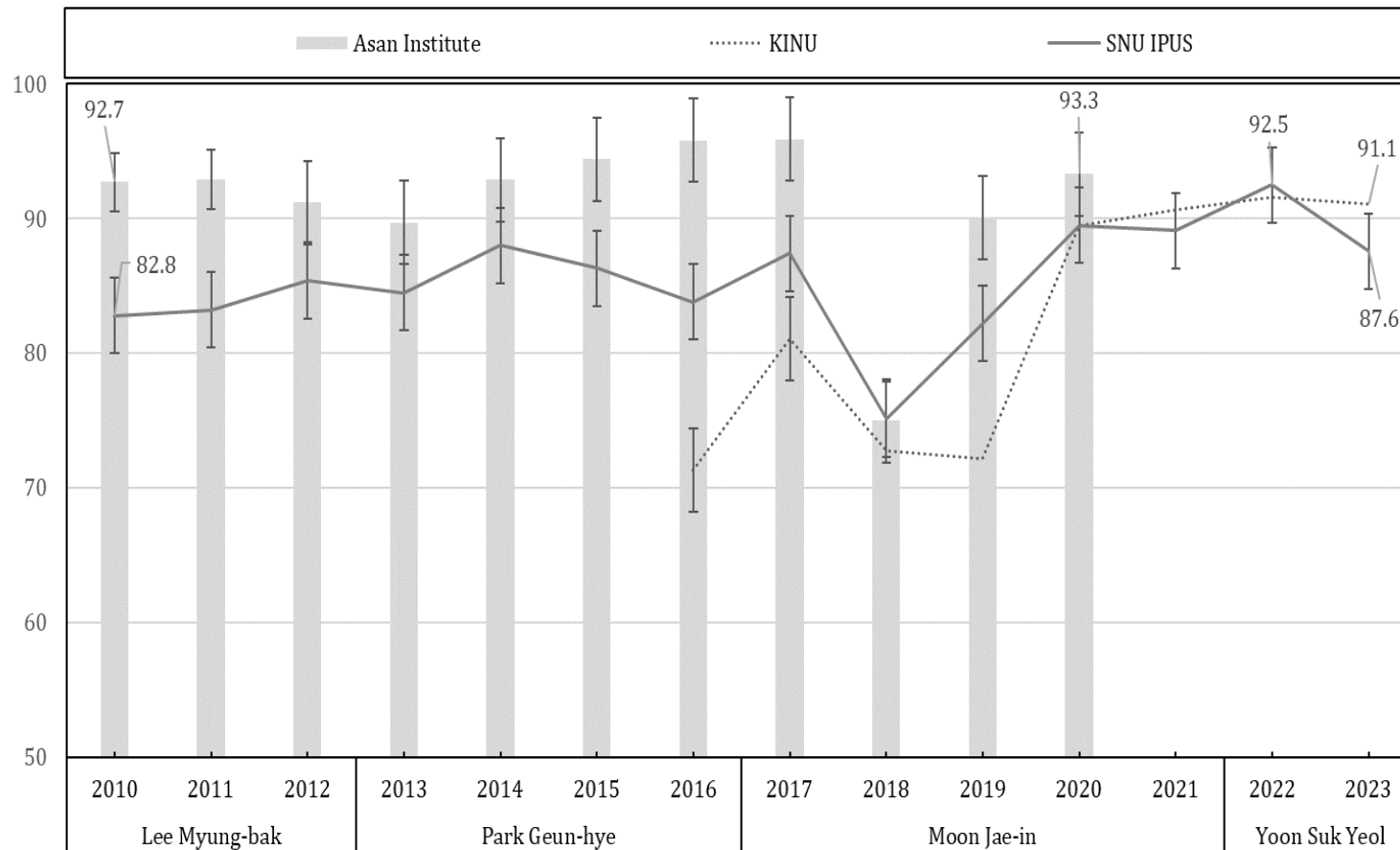
Figure 2. Negative views of National security (left: %, right: number of times)



Source: a) Views on National security: Hankook Research, b) Missiles launches: CNS North Korea Missile Test Database, c) Summit: Author created, based on media coverage.

III-3. North Korean denuclearization

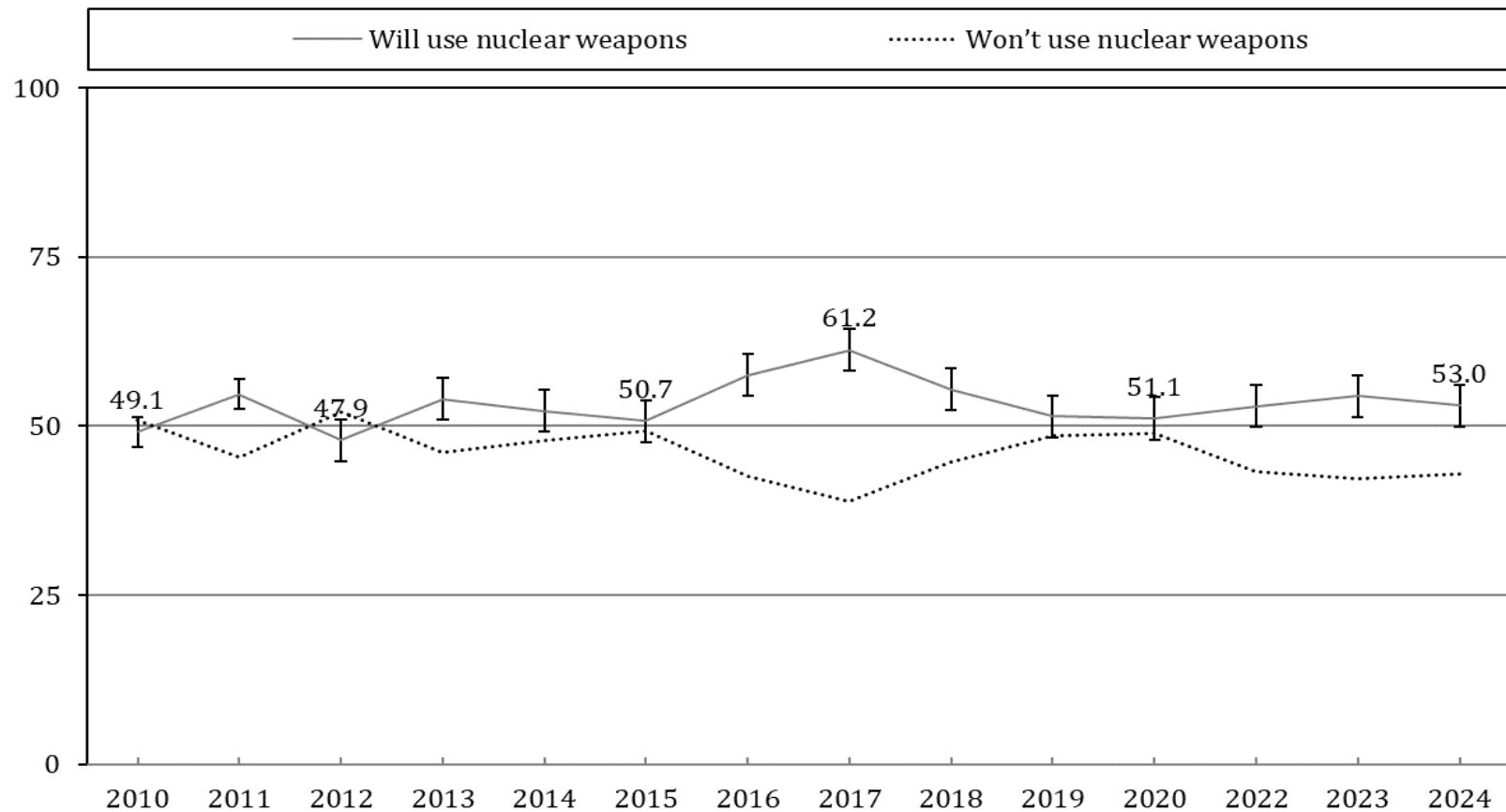
Figure 3. Prospects on North Korean denuclearization (% of Not likely)



Source: Asan Institute, Korea Institute for National Unification, SNU Institute for Peace & Unification Studies

III-4-1. Confidence in U.S. Extended Deterrence

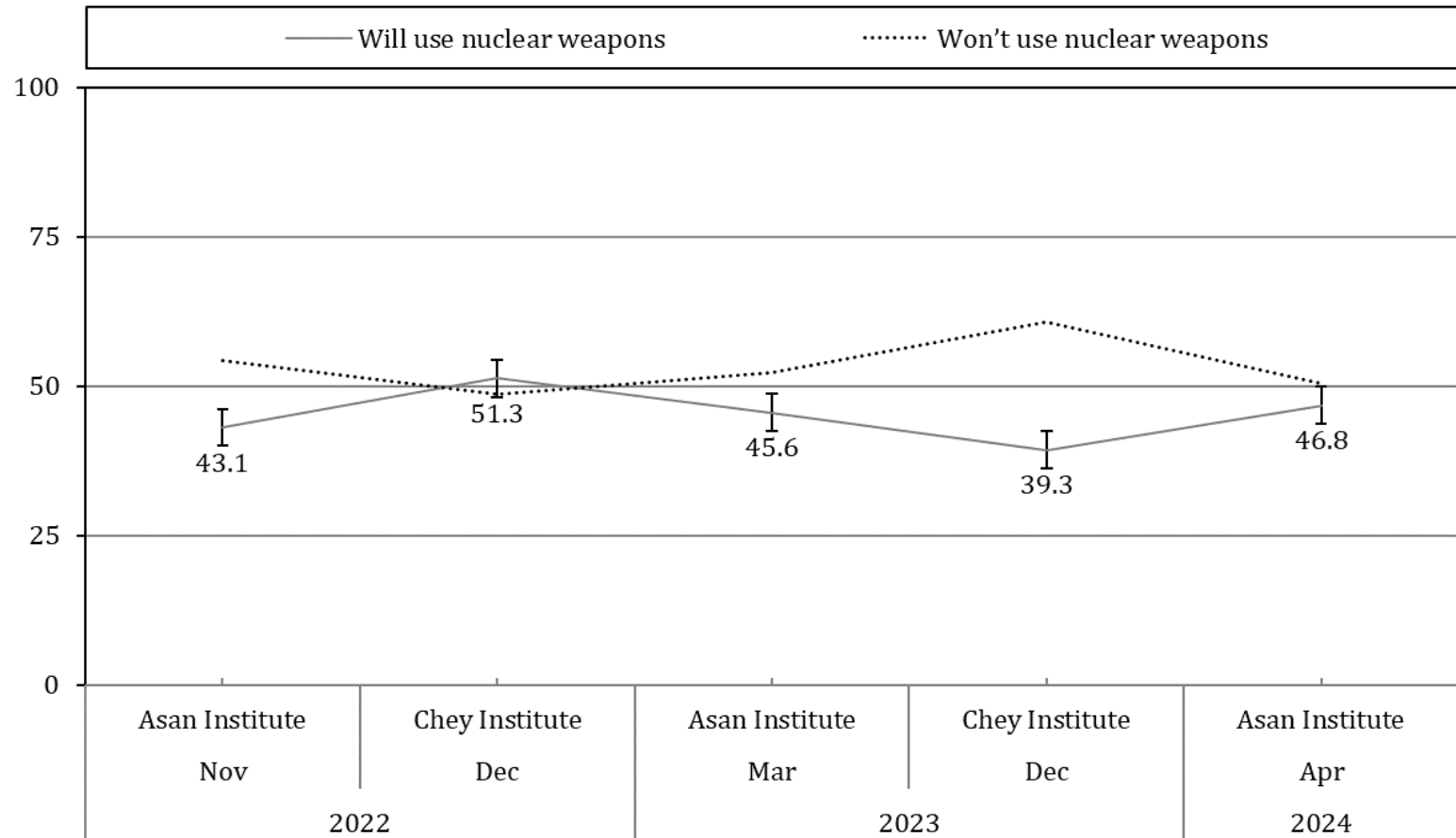
Figure 4. Expected U.S. Response to a North Korean Nuclear Attack (%)



Source: Asan Annual Survey(2010~2020), Asan Poll(2022~2024)

III-4-2. Confidence in U.S. Extended Deterrence with U.S.'s risk-taking

Figure 5. Expected U.S. Response to a North Korean Nuclear Attack with the U.S.'s risk-taking (%)



Source: Asan Poll(2022~2024), Chey Institute(2022~2023)

IV-1. Comparing public support for Nuclear options

Table 1. Bivariate correlations among the variables

		2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons	Pearson <i>r</i>	.531**	.307**	.162**	.388**	.128**	.163**	.485**	.253**
	N	962	925	973	944	971	938	905	862
2. Independent Nuclear Weapons	Pearson <i>r</i>	1	.144**	.253**	.331**	.147**	.146**	.315**	.332**
	N		932	983	954	981	947	908	867
3. Confidence in U.S. Extended Deterrence	Pearson <i>r</i>		1	.111**	.236**	0.054	.123**	0.300**	0.039
	N			943	920	943	916	883	833
4. Age	Pearson <i>r</i>			1	.234**	.411**	-0.034	.140**	.122**
	N				965	997	959	921	877
5. Ideology	Pearson <i>r</i>				1	.198**	.183**	.421**	.133**
	N					964	937	897	856
6. Interest in Security	Pearson <i>r</i>					1	.116**	.184**	.085*
	N						957	920	875
7. Perceived Threat	Pearson <i>r</i>						1	.108**	.107**
	N							892	847
8. ROK-U.S. Policy response	Pearson <i>r</i>							1	0.057
	N								815
9. Nuclear Proliferation	Pearson <i>r</i>								1
	N								

Note: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

IV-2. Comparing public support for Nuclear options

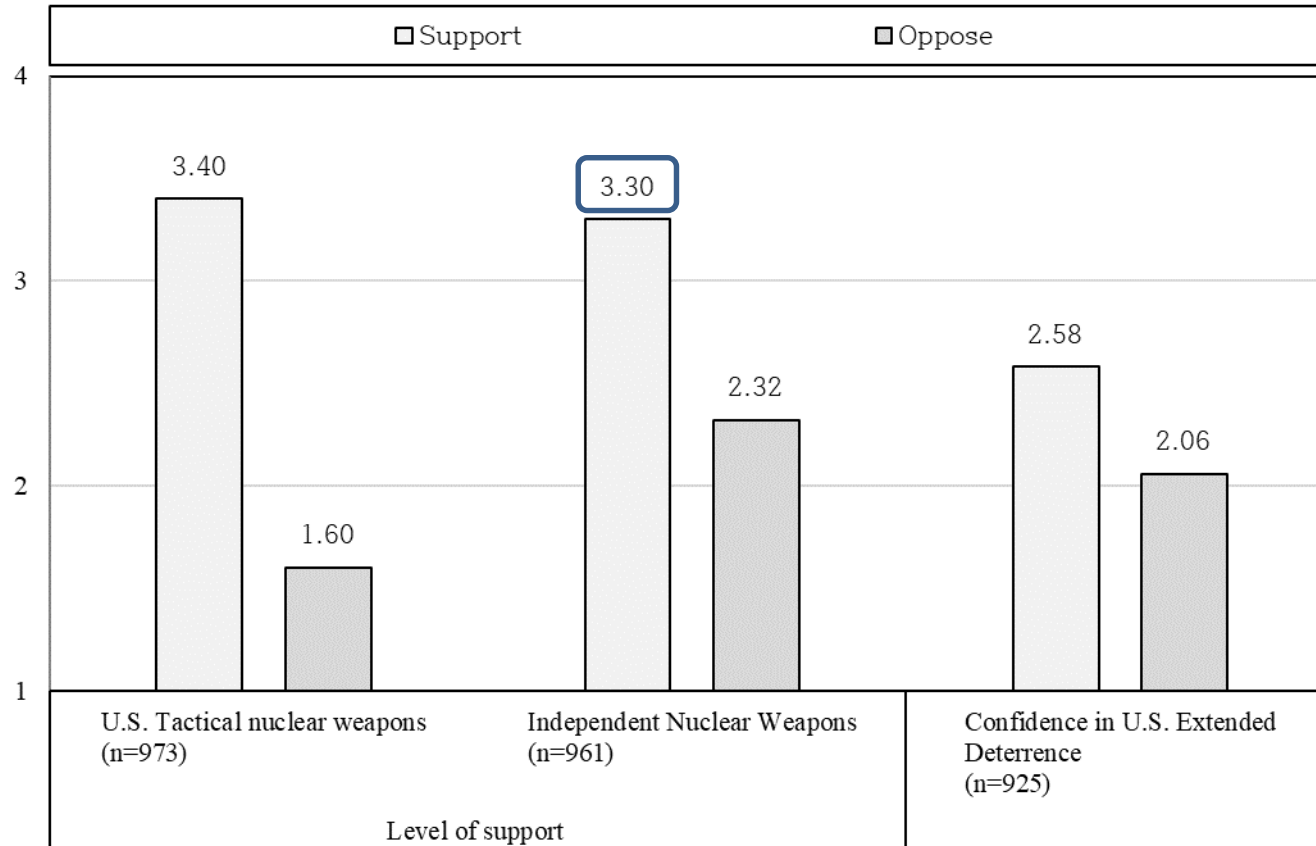
Table 2. Support for Independent Nuclear Weapons by Attitude towards U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons (%)

			Deploying the U.S. Tactical nuclear weapons		n-size
			Support	Oppose	
Developing independent nuclear weapons	Support	% of U.S. Tactical nuclear weapons	86.2	45.5	694
		% of Total	56.6	15.6	
	Oppose	% of U.S. Tactical nuclear weapons	13.8	54.5	267
		% of Total	9.1	18.7	
n-size			631	330	961

Note: $\chi^2 = 173.398$, $df = 1$, $**p < .001$

IV-3. Comparing public support for Nuclear options

Figure 6. Level of Support by the Attitudes towards U.S. Tactical Nuclear Weapons (1~4 point)



Note: $t = -54.294$, $df=971$, $p<.001$; $t = -15.972$, $df=531.380$, $p<.001$; $t = -9.450$, $df=923$, $p<.001$

V. Conclusion

- Perceived threat of South Koreans was volatile, which is found to be fluctuating under the rapidly changing security environments.
- Over the past decade, as South Koreans are exposed to North Korean nuclear threats, they became more supportive for nuclear proliferation.
- Due to the South Koreans' dissatisfaction on deterrence (Lee & Kang, 2024) and the cumulative effect of North Korean provocations, a majority of respondents consistently support nuclear proliferation.
- South Koreans tend to support two listed options for nuclear proliferation. And the level of support for two nuclear armaments are found to be *positively correlated*.

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Thank you for your attention!

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**Further data analysis is underway. Please do not cite or distribute without permission.*