



## THE PENINSULA

### **America's Nuclear Red Line: Trust in Alliances, Not Proliferation**

Published November 7, 2025

**Author:** [Yujin Son](#)

**Category:** [U.S. Foreign Policy](#), [Indo-Pacific](#), [US-Korea alliance](#)

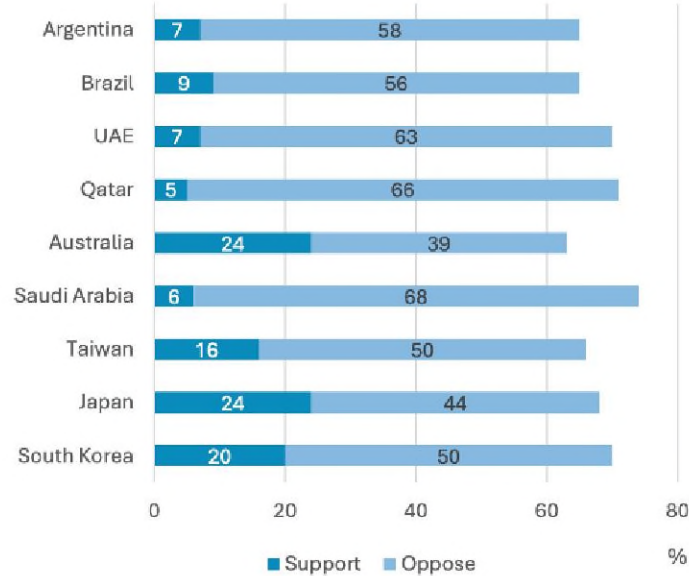


On many foreign policy questions, American voters are sharply divided. But on nuclear weapons, a bipartisan consensus still holds. New polling by the Korea Economic Institute of America (KEI) and YouGov shows broad public opposition to letting allies such as South Korea develop nuclear weapons, even as risks from North Korea, Russia, and other countries mount. In short, U.S. voters demonstrate a durable belief that extended deterrence and U.S. alliances remain the most effective tools for safeguarding international security.

The [survey shows](#) only 20 percent of Americans support South Korea developing its own nuclear weapons. Other long-standing U.S. allies fare only slightly better, with just 24 percent supporting nuclear development for Australia and Japan. In every case, opposition to allied nuclear proliferation far outweighs support. The data shows that most Americans [support alliances](#), not additional bombs.

**Figure 12. In general, Americans do not support nuclear proliferation even among allies.**

*Q: In your opinion, which of the following do you feel should be able to develop military nuclear capabilities?*



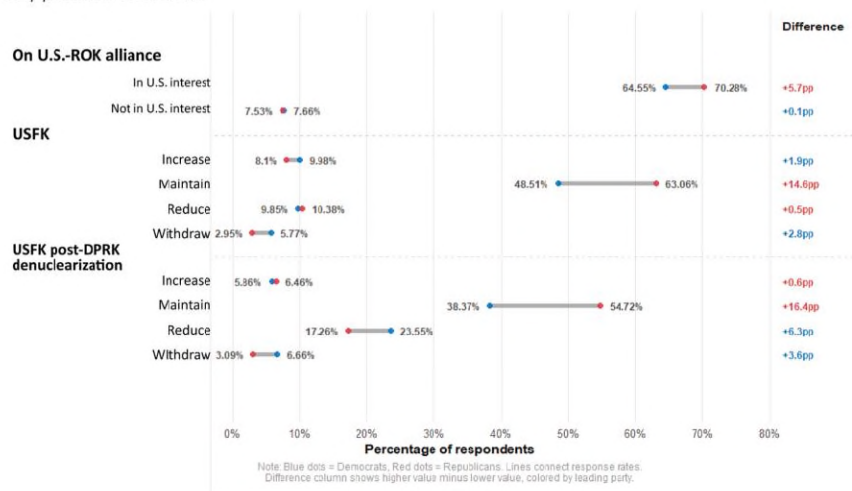
Aversion to nuclear proliferation does not stem from a lack of trust in U.S. partners. On the contrary, 66 percent of Americans hold a favorable view of South Korea. Nearly 63 percent believe the U.S.-South Korea alliance advances U.S. national security interests, and about 60 percent support maintaining or increasing current U.S. troop levels on the Korean Peninsula. Even if North Korea were to denuclearize, 46 percent still favor keeping U.S. forces there. Self-identified Republicans in the survey were even more supportive of the alliance than self-identified Democrats (70 percent in favor versus 65), even though Republicans less supportive of other alliances overall. U.S. voters do not see the alliance as a narrow hedge against North Korea, but as a broader linchpin of Indo-Pacific stability. According to the survey, the alliance itself is the security guarantee—and permitting allies to nuclearize would erode that foundation.

**Figure 11. Republicans appear to favor the U.S.-ROK alliance more so than Democrats. They are also more likely to support maintaining the current troop levels in the USFK even if North Korea denuclearizes**

Q: Do you believe the US military alliance with South Korea is in the national security interests of the US or do you not feel this way?

Q: The U.S. currently maintains 28,500 troops in South Korea. For context/comparison, the U.S. also has 54,000 troops in Japan and currently has 35,000 troops in Germany. In your opinion, should the United States increase, maintain, reduce, or withdraw its military forces from South Korea?

Q: If the United States were to reach an agreement with North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, should the U.S. change its troop presence in South Korea?



### A Divided View Across the Pacific

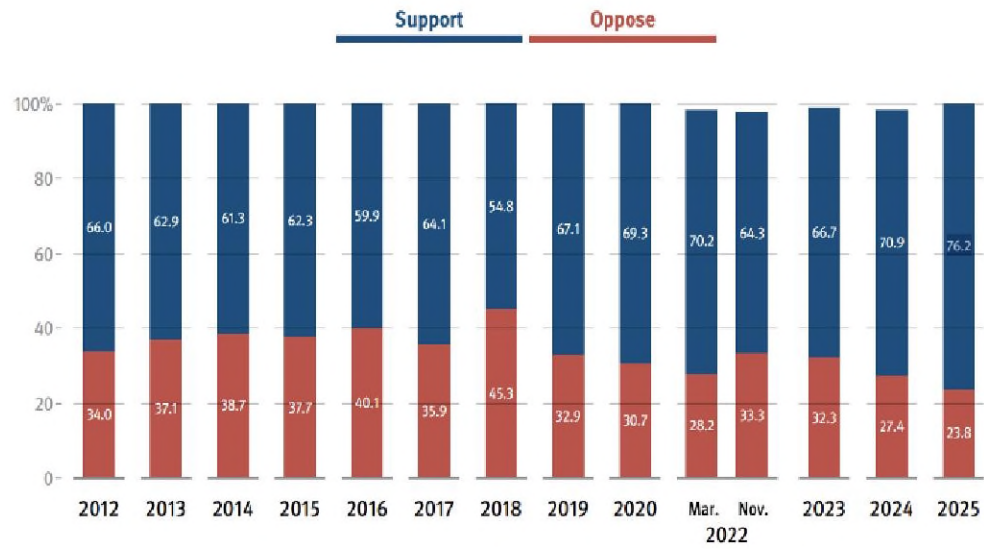
This contrasts sharply with opinion in South Korea, where public support for a domestic nuclear program has surpassed 70 percent in several polls. South Koreans cite the growing North Korean military threat and doubts about the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella. In contrast, Americans see proliferation, even among allies, as inherently destabilizing and unnecessary when U.S. security commitments remain in place.

This divergence reveals what could be described as a “trust gap.” While South Koreans fear abandonment, Americans fear escalation. One side sees nuclear weapons as insurance; the other sees them as destabilizing the existing order.

## ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEVELOPING INDIGENOUS NUCLEAR WEAPONS



**What is your opinion about the statement that South Korea should develop nuclear weapons?**



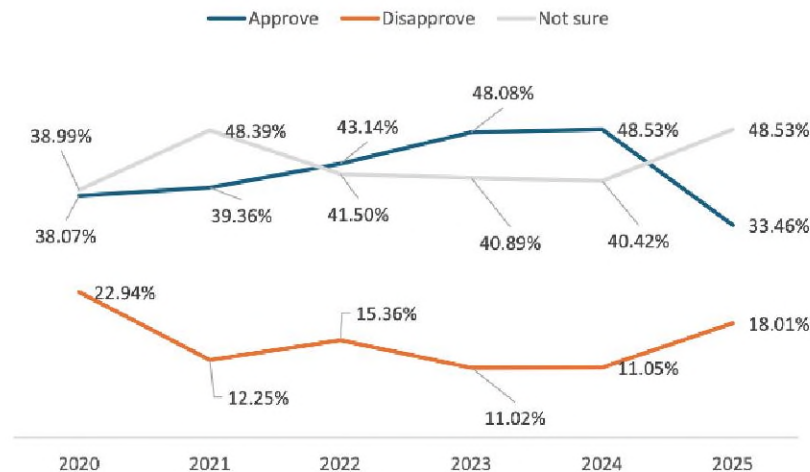
Source: Asan Poll from South Koreans and Their Neighbors 2025

### Bipartisan Agreement on Restraint

Nuclear issues stand out as a rare point of bipartisan consensus across the United States. Republicans are more likely than Democrats to favor reforming or reducing U.S. alliances, but both parties share skepticism toward global proliferation. In the 2025 survey, 54 percent of Republicans supported reforming or ending some alliances (compared to 36 percent of Democrats), but majorities in both parties opposed allowing South Korea to develop nuclear weapons. Americans may debate trade, tariffs, and troop deployments, but they agree that more nuclear weapons make the world less secure.

**Figure 21. American public approval of the current administration's handling of relations with South Korea is at an all-time low.**

Q: Now thinking about U.S. and South Korea relations, do you approve or disapprove of the current U.S. administration's handling of relations?



*Yujin Son is Communications Intern at KEI. All views presented are the author's alone.*

*Feature image from the [U.S. Air Force](#).*

*KEI is registered under the FARA as an agent of the Korea Institute for International Economic Policy, a public corporation established by the government of the Republic of Korea. Additional information is available at the [Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.](#)*

---

**Return to the Peninsula**