



## A Perspective On South Korean Cost Sensitivity and Support for Nuclear Weapons

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### Description

Since Kim Jung Un took power, North Korea has significantly advanced its nuclear and missile capabilities. In 2022, North Korea passed a law declaring itself as a non-official nuclear-armed state. Furthermore, based on the 2022, Nuclear Forces Policy Law, North Korea lowered the threshold of nuclear use. Under five specific conditions, North Korea is likely to use atomic weapons in assertive ways against its adversaries, including South Korea, USA and Japan. In response to mounting security threats from Pyongyang, in January, 2023, the South Korean president Yoon Suk Yeol publicly stated for the first time that Seoul could develop an independent nuclear arsenal. Given the likelihood of South Korea's nuclear weapons development, scholars have focused on the costs of nuclearization. It is widely known that various types of costs are associated with independent nuclear armament. While various costs could arise if South Korea decided to pursue nuclear armament, this paper focuses on economic costs and human casualties, as these are more salient to the public than other types of costs.

First, if South Korea initiated nuclear weapons development, the international community and major countries would impose economic sanctions. This paper hypothesizes that external economic shocks that lead to devastating economic hardships decrease public support for building nuclear weapons. Second, previous studies demonstrate rival states carry out military attacks to curb nuclear weaponization. Similarly, North Korea may launch a preventive strike aimed at disabling South Korea's nuclear facilities to prevent further nuclear weaponization. This paper postulates that human casualties arising from a military attack lower South Korean public support for nuclear armament. However, hostile international responses could instead generate a rally around the flag effect among South Korean citizens.

Therefore, the rally effect could offset the negative cost effects or inflate South Korean public support for building nuclear weapons.

To test the hypotheses, this paper conducted a novel survey experiment by recruiting a nationally representative South Korean sample. Empirical results demonstrate that economic and human costs arising from economic sanctions and preventive strikes dampen South Koreans preferences for nuclear armament. If no costs were involved, 73.4% of the South Korean public supported nuclear armament. Yet, in light of economic costs, levels of support dropped by 25.1% points, and human costs reduced the support levels by 19.4% points. The combined costs even further dampened the support levels by 29.6% points. What is noteworthy, though, is that public support remained high at around 50% even after the exposure to the costs of nuclearization. This indicates that the rally effect may partially offset the impact of proliferation costs. In addition, empirical results show that individual military experience and political ideology moderate the levels of cost sensitivity. Given human costs, the non-veterans and liberal-leaning citizens have higher cost sensitivity, meaning lower support levels for nuclearization than the non-veterans and conservative-leaning populace.

### Conclusion

If South Korean pro-armament elites decided to go nuclear, the main task would be minimizing the associated costs of nuclear weapons development. In this respect, first, South Korean pro-armament elites may adopt a sheltered proliferation strategy. South Korea seeks to monitor nuclear capabilities under the protection of the USA, thereby reducing the costs associated with proliferation. Under the endorsement of Washington, Seoul can avoid the most devastating scenario gigantic economic crisis. Furthermore, the USA can offer military and diplomatic shelter to South Korea to lower the holistic costs of nuclearization. However, the protection of Washington does not guarantee the complete absence of the costs of proliferation. Under the shelter of the USA Washington can dissuade other major powers such as the EU from levying sanctions. However, China and Russia are likely to impose unilateral economic sanctions to curb Seoul's nuclear weaponization. Thus, it is unavoidable that public support for nuclearization would diminish as the economy deteriorated. If South Korean pro-armament elites attempt to maintain high domestic support, they are likely to appeal to the public's nationalism. As this article demonstrates, the rally effect could be an important factor cancelling out the negative cost effects.

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