

Americans Ready to Engage North Korea, Continue to Support US-South Korea Ties

The public is open to resuming talks with Pyongyang under certain conditions and sees benefits from trade with Seoul.

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The US-South Korea alliance remains one of the most important US alliances in the Indo-Pacific, but it is entering choppy political waters. The [first summit](#) between South Korean President Lee Jae-myung and US President Donald Trump was a success on the surface. However, in the weeks that followed, an [immigration raid](#) at a Hyundai plant in Georgia led to the arrest and deportation of nearly 400 South Korean nationals, setting off alarms in Seoul. Ongoing negotiations on trade and investment are also creating friction on both sides.

But the Trump administration is not only focused on reorienting relations with allies. President Trump has said he is ready to meet with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. They met three times in his first presidency, raising speculation that a fourth meeting could take place when Trump travels to South Korea in late October.

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey, fielded July 18-30, finds the American public is open to diplomacy with North Korea, but remains steadfast in its commitment to South Korea. This includes views that trade with South Korea does more to strengthen US national security than weaken it.

Key Findings

- A combined three-quarters (75%) of Americans support US President Donald Trump meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. This exact percentage shifts slightly depending on the scenario.

- Scenario A: One-third (33%) support a meeting without any preconditions. Forty-five percent say he should meet Kim only if North Korea agrees to first halt missile tests.
- Scenario B: While 38 percent favor a meeting without any preconditions, a further 38 percent support a meeting only if North Korea first agrees to give up its nuclear weapons.
- Just 49 percent of Americans say North Korea's nuclear program is a critical threat to the United States. This is the first time this has fallen below 50 percent since the question was first asked in 2015.
- Three-quarters of Americans (76%) support focusing on other pressing problems facing the United States besides North Korea.
- Seven in 10 Americans (70%) say trade with South Korea does more to strengthen national security than weaken it.
- Two-thirds (67%) support long-term military bases in South Korea.

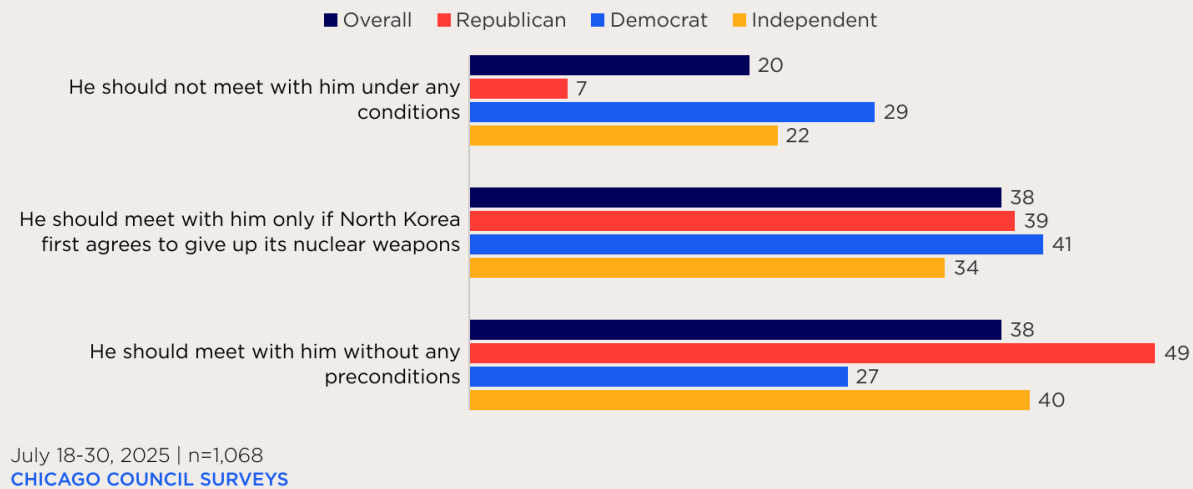
Majority Support for Trump-Kim Summit

During his first term, Trump met three times with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, creating some of the biggest spectacles of his presidency. Taking place in Singapore, Vietnam, and at the demilitarized zone (DMZ) that separates North and South Korea, the meetings produced little in the way of solid results, but did open direct talks between leaders of both countries for the first time. With Trump back in office, speculation has grown on whether he will once again meet Kim. Trump's bromance with Kim has been well covered, and Kim himself said he had a "[good memory](#)" of Trump. The timing of such a meeting is uncertain, but Trump will be traveling to South Korea for APEC meetings at the end of October. A side trip to the DMZ to meet Kim cannot be ruled out.

There is some public support for such a summit. The survey posed two variants on a question about whether Americans thought this would be a good idea. Among half of the survey sample (1,068 respondents), 20 percent say Trump should not meet Kim under any circumstances, and 38 percent favor a meeting without any preconditions. Another 38 percent support such a meeting only if North Korea first agrees to give up its nuclear weapons. That might be a dealbreaker. North Korea [recently said](#) it is only open to potential meetings if the United States gives up its calls for denuclearization.

Trump-Kim Summit: Denuclearization

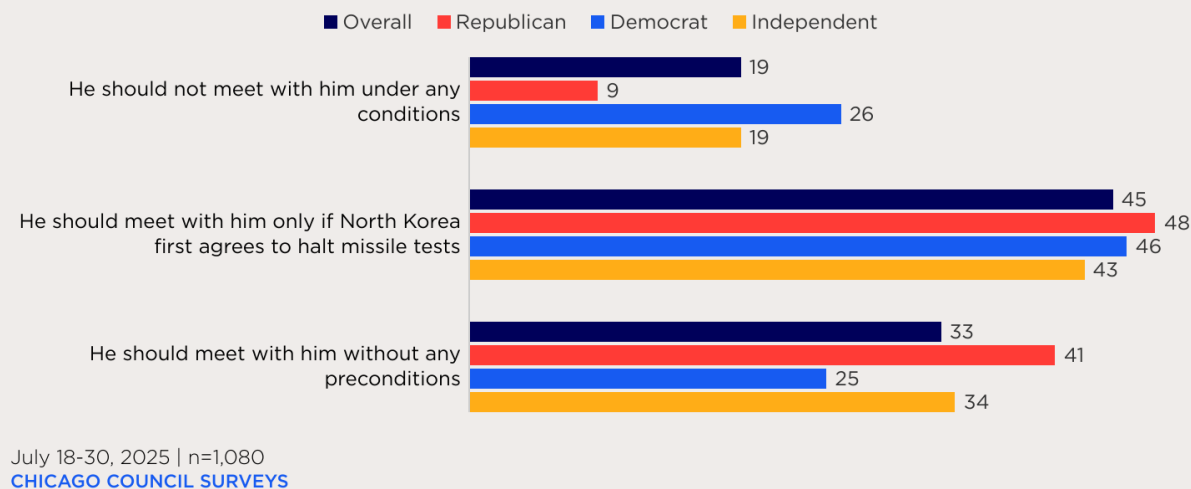
Under what conditions should Donald Trump meet with North Korea's Kim Jong Un? (%)



However, the pre-conditions of such a meeting matter when it comes to American public opinion. To test how conditions may change support for a summit, the other half of the sample (1,080 respondents) was asked a question that replaced an agreement to denuclearize with a North Korean pledge to halt missile tests. This would likely be viewed as a softening of the long-standing US demand for denuclearization—although it is unclear how North Korea would respond. In any case, this lower conditional threshold increased support for a summit over the denuclearization pre-condition among the American public overall (45%, +7 percentage points), Republicans (48%, +9 percentage points), Democrats (46%, +5 percentage points), and Independents (43%, +9 percentage points). But that shift came almost exclusively from those that prefer a meeting without preconditions in the denuclearization scenario. The percentage of those that say there should not be a meeting under any circumstances remains virtually unchanged.

Trump-Kim Summit: Missile Test Halt

Under what conditions should Donald Trump meet with North Korea's Kim Jong Un? (%)



Taken together, these findings suggest there is unlikely to be any real discontent from the American public if a meeting with Kim Jong Un materializes in the near future. Not only do Americans [generally favor](#) talking to adversaries, but a summit with Kim Jong Un likely ranks very low on a list of priorities and complaints across the bitterly divided US political spectrum. But precedent also likely plays a role, as does eroding perceptions of North Korea's nuclear program as a critical threat.

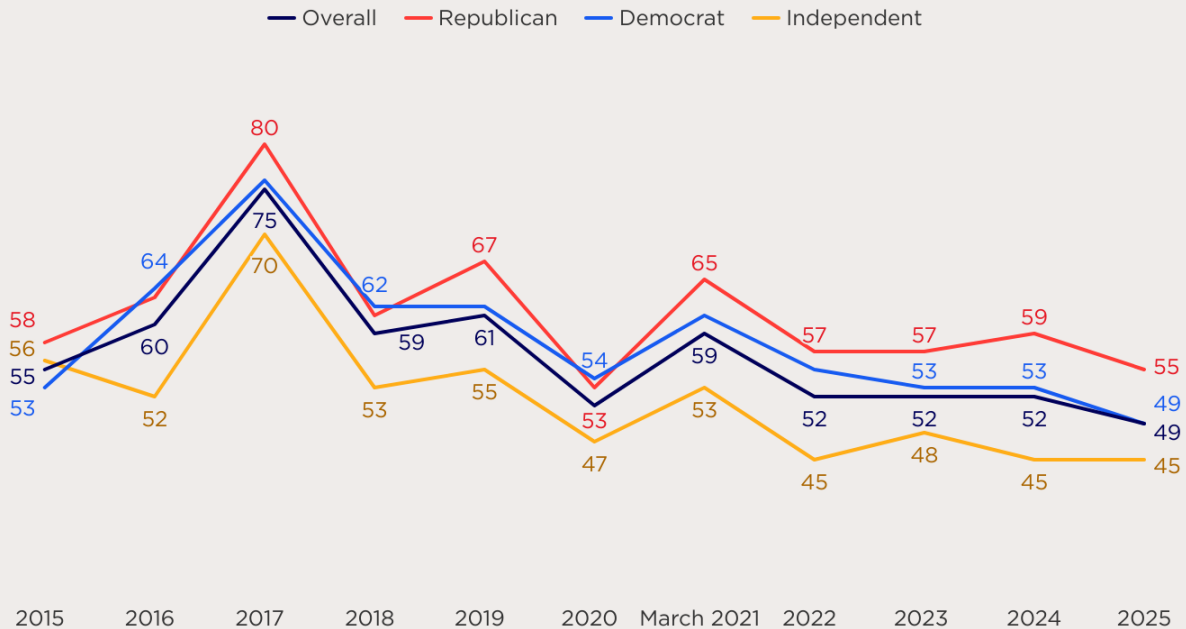
Perception of North Korea's Nuclear Program as Critical Threat Hits New Low

Over the past four years, US-North Korea relations have been relatively dormant. Trump's flurry of diplomacy with North Korea in his first term was followed by relative inaction under President Joe Biden. Throughout, North Korea has continued to advance both its missile and nuclear programs. However, the American public is now less likely than at any time in the past to say that North Korea's nuclear program is a critical threat facing the United States. In 2025, just 49 percent say that North Korea's nuclear program is a critical threat, the first time it has fallen below 50 percent since the Council began asking the question in 2015. This decline may be due in part to ongoing coverage of conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine and deepening US domestic turmoil.

This decline in the perceived threat posed by North Korea's nuclear program has been bipartisan, with Republicans now at 55 percent, down 10 percentage points from 2021. Democrats (-12 percentage points) and Independents (-8 percentage points) have experienced similar declines in that same time.

Critical Threat: North Korea's Nuclear Program

Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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)



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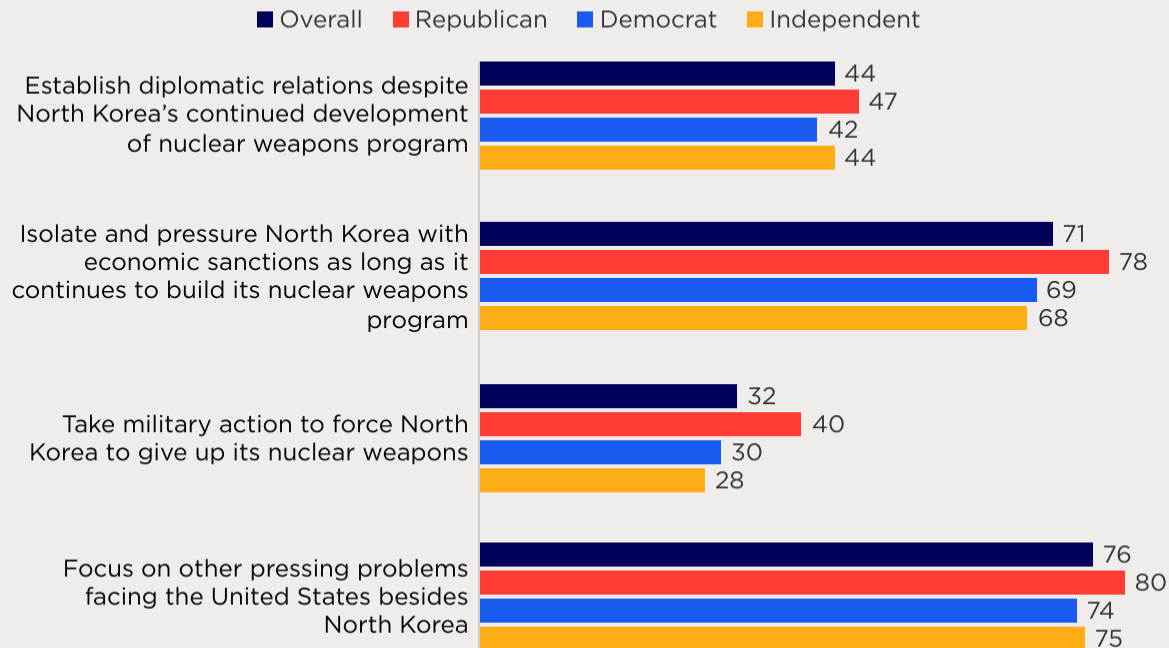


The range of policy options in tackling the North Korea challenge are limited. Diplomatic options are constrained due to historical mistrust, wide gulfs in preferred and acceptable diplomatic outcomes, and the very real dangers of military confrontation should tensions escalate.

Perhaps in recognition of these challenges and the lack of progress over the last 30 years, the majority of the American public prefers to deal with North Korea by simply ignoring it. Three-quarters (76%) of Americans favor focusing on “other pressing problems facing the United States besides North Korea” and 71 percent favor isolating and pressuring North Korea with economic sanctions. Forty-four percent support establishing diplomatic relations with North Korea despite their continued development of nuclear weapons. The least favored option—although still substantial—among the American public (32%) is to take military action to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons.

Policy Options on North Korea

Please tell me whether you would support or oppose each of the following kinds of US actions in its relations with North Korea: (% support)



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These results are notable for their relative consistency across partisanship. However, the most significant gap between Republicans and Democrats comes on willingness to take military action to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons. While a minority, 40 percent of Republicans support such military action versus 30 percent of Democrats. This gap is not unusual. In 2021, 51 percent of Republicans favored military action versus 29 percent of Democrats. And in previous versions of this question fielded from 2015 to 2020, Republicans were consistently more likely to favor conducting airstrikes against North Korea's nuclear production (roughly 20 percentage points more in favor on average) and to favor sending US troops to destroy North Korea's nuclear facilities (about 11 percentage points more supportive on average).¹

Americans Continue to Favor Defending South Korea

¹ For full results of these questions, please see the tables in the Appendix.

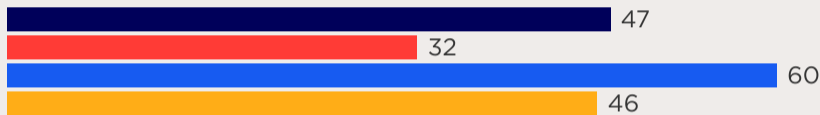
Like other countries, South Korea has undertaken a set of contentious trade negotiations with the Trump administration. Trump has long identified South Korea as an unfair trading partner and has made correcting that trade imbalance a center piece of his trade and foreign policies. However, the American public does not see trade with South Korea as a zero-sum game. Instead, Americans see a close connection between trade and security, with 70 percent saying trade with South Korea does more to strengthen US national security than it does to weaken US national security (24%).

Trade and National Security

Does trade between the US and the following countries do more to strengthen US national security or weaken US national security? (% more to strengthen)

■ Overall ■ Republican ■ Democrat ■ Independent

China



Saudi Arabia



South Korea



Taiwan



Mexico



The countries of the European Union



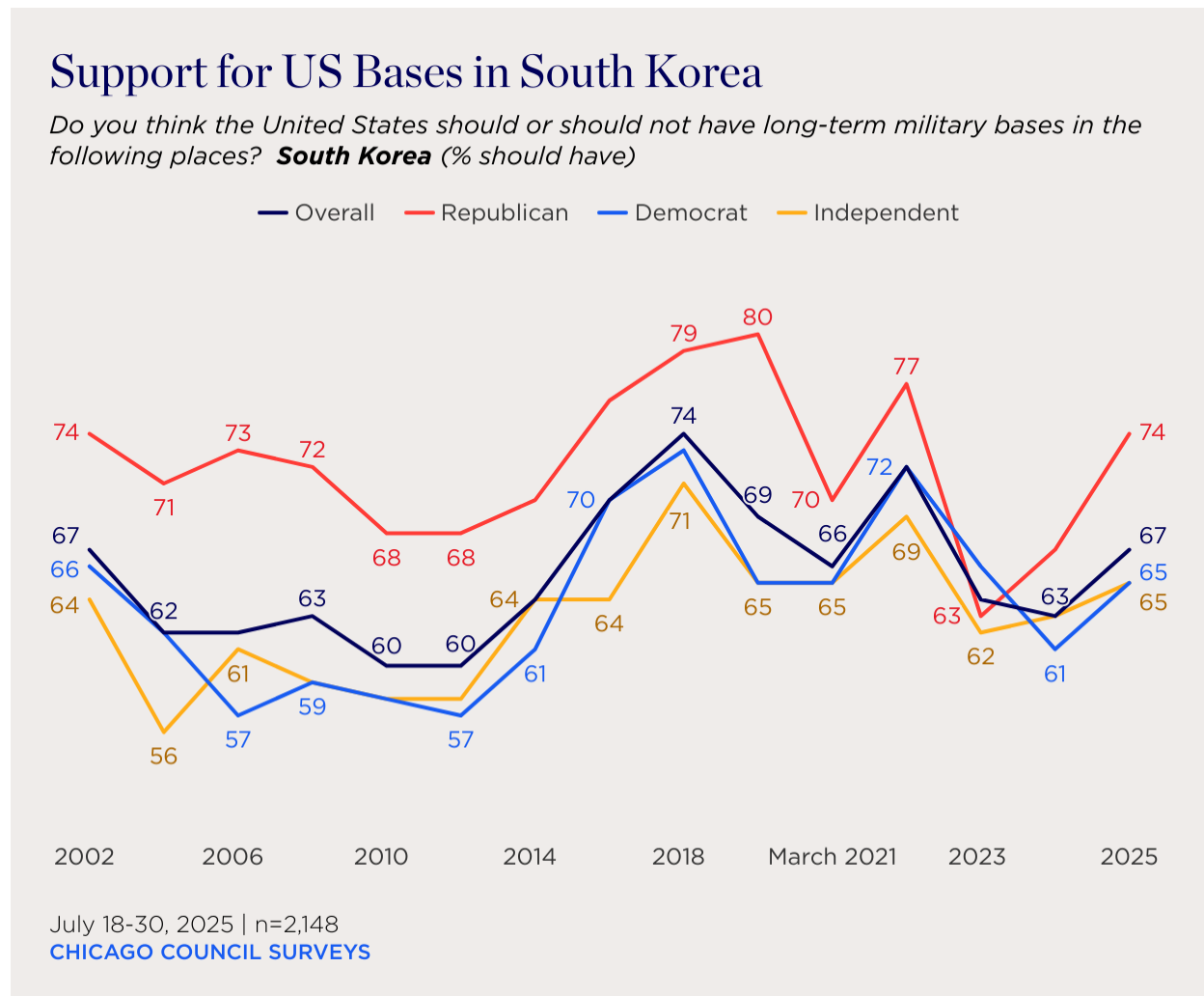
Canada



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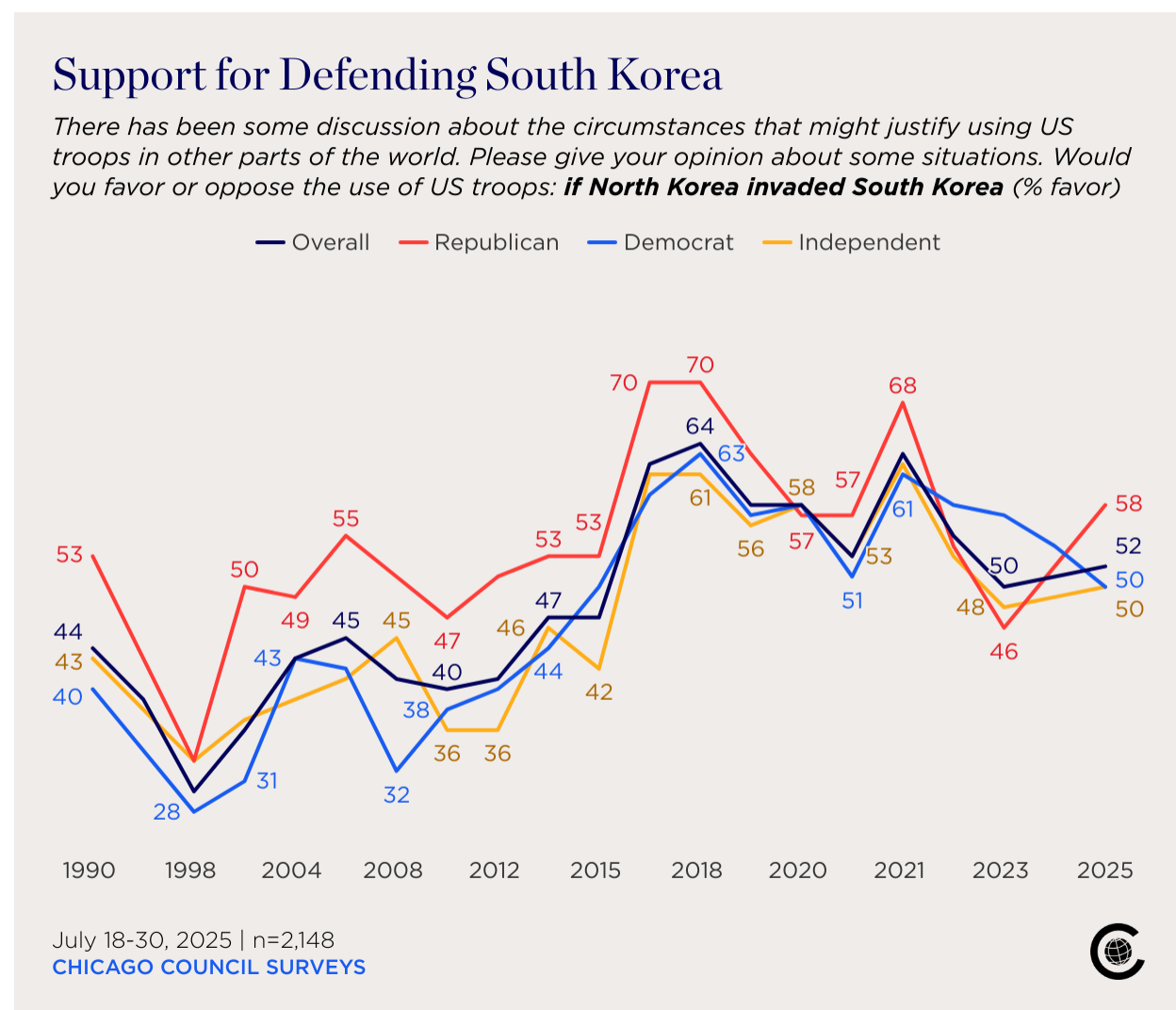


This tie between trade and security helps to inform the consistent support of the American public for long-term US military bases in South Korea. In 2025, 67 percent of Americans say the United States should have long-term military bases in South Korea. While that support has fluctuated since the Council began asking the question in 2002, it has never fallen below 60 percent overall, as recorded in 2010 and 2012. Importantly, this support remains bipartisan, with Republicans typically more strongly supporting the US military presence in South Korea.



Beyond support for maintaining long-term military bases in South Korea—which could have several important factors—the most immediate potential use of those bases is likely seen as defending South Korea. In that scenario, a majority of Americans (52%) support using US troops to defend South Korea if North Korea invaded. This has been the case since 2017, when 62 percent said the same, indicating an increase from the first years of Council polling on this hypothetical scenario. In the years from 1990 to 2015, only a minority of

Americans overall supported defending South Korea in the case of a North Korean invasion.



The drivers of this shift in American public opinion are unclear, but it seems to have taken place across the political spectrum. While Republicans have typically been more likely to favor defending South Korea, they were not overwhelmingly so. From 1990 to 2015, Republicans ranged from a low of 33 percent in 1998 to a high of 55 percent in 2006. In that same time period, Democrats ranged from 28 percent in 1998 to 50 percent in 2015. And Independents hit a low of 33 percent in 1998 to a high of 46 percent in 2014. From 2017, however, there is a notable shift among all partisans in favor of defending South Korea, although those attitudes have begun to slip toward previous norms from 2023.

There does not appear to be a single reason that explains this shift from 2015 to 2017, nor why it has proven to be so lasting. North Korea's 2016 and 2017 nuclear tests, its ongoing missile tests, the rise of South Korea's cultural power, and resonant events such as the death of American tourist [Otto Warmbier](#) likely all contributed to the shift and its durability.

Conclusion

The American public remains highly supportive of the relationship with South Korea and is prepared to back some form of diplomacy with North Korea. But how these relationships develop in the next three years will depend on the direction of the Trump administration. Should it pursue diplomacy with North Korea, it will have an eager partner in South Korea's Lee Jae Myung. But should it continue to target South Korea with demands of cash investment, and then co-mingle those demands with implicit threats that target the US security guarantee, it could reawaken a long-dormant anti-Americanism among the South Korea public and push Seoul to consider new ways to take its security into its own hands.

Appendix

Q5. Below is a list of possible threats to the vital interests 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.

Q5/29. North Korea's nuclear program (% critical threat)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2015	55	58	53	56	5
2016	60	63	64	52	-1
2017	75	80	76	70	4
2018	59	61	62	53	-1
2019	61	67	62	55	5
January 2020	52	57	58	41	-1
2020	51	53	54	47	-1
March 2021	59	65	61	53	4
2022	52	57	55	45	2
2023	52	57	53	48	4
2024	52	59	53	45	6
2025	49	55	49	45	6

Q30. There has been some discussion about the circumstances that might justify using US troops in other parts of the world. Please give your opinion about some situations. Would you favor or oppose the use of US troops:

Q30/1. If North Korea invaded South Korea (% favor)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
1990	44	53	40	43	13
1994	39	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
1998	30	33	28	33	5
2002	36	50	31	37	19
2004	43	49	43	39	6
2006	45	55	42	41	13
2008	41	51	32	45	19
2010	40	47	38	36	9
2012	41	51	40	36	11
2014	47	53	44	46	9
2015	47	53	50	42	3
2017	62	70	59	61	11
2018	64	70	63	61	7
2019	58	63	57	56	6
2020	58	57	58	58	-1
March 2021	53	57	51	53	6
2021	63	68	61	62	7
2022	55	54	58	53	-4
2023	50	46	57	48	-11
2024	51	52	54	49	-2
2025	52	58	50	50	8

Q40. Do you think the United States should or should not have long-term military bases in the following places?

Q40/3. South Korea (% should have)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2002	67	74	66	64	8
2004	62	71	62	56	9
2006	62	73	57	61	16
2008	63	72	59	59	13
2010	60	68	58	58	10
2012	60	68	57	58	11
2014	64	70	61	64	9
2016	70	76	70	64	6
2018	74	79	73	71	6
January 2020	69	80	65	65	15
March 2021	66	70	65	65	5
2022	72	77	72	69	5

2023	64	63	66	62	-3
2024	63	67	61	63	6
2025	67	74	65	65	9

Q354. Does trade between the US and the following countries do more to strengthen US national security or weaken US national security?

Q345. Trade and national security (% more to strengthen)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
Q354/4. South Korea	70	63	76	71	-13

Q345. Trade and national security (% more to weaken)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
Q354/4. South Korea	24	31	20	23	11

Q819. Please tell me whether you would support or oppose each of the following kinds of US actions in its relations with North Korea:

Q819/1. Establish diplomatic relations despite North Korea's continued development of nuclear weapons program (% support)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2021	44	38	43	50	-5
2022	46	44	46	47	-2
2025	44	47	42	44	5

Q819/4: Isolate and pressure North Korea with economic sanctions as long as it continues to build its nuclear weapons program (% support)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2021	70	77	65	70	12
2022	75	79	77	71	2
2023	75	79	75	74	4
2025	71	78	69	68	9

Q819/5: Take military action to force North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons (% support)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2021	35	51	29	30	22
2022	31	35	29	29	6
2023	28	29	29	28	0
Aug. 2024	24	32	18	23	14
2025	32	40	30	28	10

Q819/6: Focus on other pressing problems facing the United States besides North Korea (% support)					
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	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2022	77	77	78	78	-1
2023	79	80	81	79	-1
2025	76	80	74	75	6

*Q822A. Under what conditions should Donald Trump meet with North Korea's Kim Jong Un? (Nuclear Weapons) *In 2022, the question referred to former US President Joe Biden**

He should not meet with him under any conditions (%)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2022	26	37	21	23	16
2025	20	7	29	22	-22

He should meet with him only if North Korea first agrees to give up its nuclear weapons (%)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2022	37	32	40	39	-8
2025	38	39	41	34	-2

He should meet with him without any preconditions (%)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2022	32	29	35	33	-6
2025	38	49	27	40	22

*Q822B. Under what conditions should Donald Trump meet with North Korea's Kim Jong Un? (Missile Tests) *In 2022, the question referred to former US President Joe Biden**

He should not meet with him under any conditions (%)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2022	30	39	24	28	15
2025	19	9	26	19	-17

He should meet with him only if North Korea first agrees to halt missile tests (%)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap
2022	46	39	56	42	-17
2025	45	48	46	43	2

He should meet with him without any preconditions (%)					
	Overall	Republican	Democrat	Independent	R-D Gap

2022	22	20	19	28	1
2025	33	41	25	34	16

Methodology

This analysis is primarily based on data from the 2025 Chicago Council Survey of the American public on foreign policy, a project of the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy.

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey was conducted July 18-30, 2025, by Ipsos using its large-scale nationwide online research panel (KnowledgePanel) in English and Spanish among a weighted national sample of 2,148 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 ± 2.2 percentage points, including a design effect of 1.07.

Partisan identification is based on how respondents answered a standard partisan self-identification question: “Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?”

The 2025 Chicago Council Survey is made possible by the generous support of the Crown family and the Korea Foundation.

Additional results reported from August 2025 are from a Chicago Council on Global Affairs-Ipsos survey conducted August 22-24, 2025 by Ipsos using its large-scale, nationwide, online research panel (KnowledgePanel) among a weighted national sample of 1,021 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 ± 3.1 percentage points including a design effect of 1.05.

The data for the total sample were weighted to adjust for gender by age, race/ethnicity, education, Census region, metropolitan status, and household income using demographic benchmarks from the 2024 March Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). The specific categories used were:

- Gender (Male, Female) by Age (18-29, 30-44, 45-59 and 60+)
- Race/Hispanic Ethnicity (White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Other, Non-Hispanic, Hispanic, 2+ Races, Non-Hispanic)
- Education (Less than High School, High School, Some College, Bachelor or higher)
- Census Region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West)
- Metropolitan status (Metro, non-Metro)
- Household Income (Under \$25,000, \$25,000-\$49,999, \$50,000-\$74,999, \$75,000-\$99,999, \$100,000-\$149,999, \$150,000+)

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Established in 2018 with a transformative gift from the Crown Family, the Lester Crown Center on US Foreign Policy is driven by the belief that the public plays a critical role in determining the direction of US foreign policy and that an informed and engaged public is critical for effective policymaking. The centerpiece of the Lester Crown Center is its annual survey of American public opinion and US foreign policy, the Chicago Council Survey, which has been conducted since 1974.