Perceptions toward North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons Program: Findings from a Public Opinion Survey

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Due to the potential spread of nuclear weapons, North Korea’s nuclear weapons test represents a serious security threat to East Asia as well as a global risk. Many sources, including the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, argue that North Korea’s nuclear weapons program poses a security threat to the United States because missiles fired from North Korea could reach Hawaii or Alaska. Against this backdrop, however, no empirical research analyzing how much the ordinary American feels threatened by North Korea’s nuclear weapons program has been conducted. This paper examines American public opinion toward North Korea’s nuclear weapons program based on a regional survey conducted in Hawaii during the summer of 2005. The research compares and evaluates through various quantitative research methods, to what extent the respondents’ various demographic, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds seem to have divergently influenced the perception of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. In the evaluation of the majority of people in Hawaii, North Korea is pursuing the nuclear weapons program to enhance their national prestige and for self-defense purposes. Many respondents proposed multilateral negotiation as a desirable settlement method for managing North Korea’s nuclear program.

Key words: DPRK, North Korea, nuclear weapons program, weapons of mass destruction, public opinion, nuclear threat.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s (hereafter referred to as DPRK or North Korea) nuclear ambition causes acute concern in regional and global security. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has claimed that North Korea has developed one or two destructive nuclear weapons and that its test-fired multiple-stage Daepodong–2 missile would reach parts of the United States (Hawaii and Alaska). This anxiety became manifest when North Korea successfully conducted its first nuclear weapons test on October 9, 2006.

The Bush administration worries further that North Korea might sell its nuclear weapon technology or high-enriched uranium to anonymous internationa-
al terrorist organizations.3 Despite efforts by China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and the U.S. to resolve the nuclear crisis peacefully within a six-party framework, North Korea continues to worsen the situation. Recently, North Korea's nuclear weapon testing jeopardized security in the Northeast Asian region4 resulting in the unanimous adoption of the UN Security Council Resolution 1718, which imposed sanctions on the country and demanded that it return immediately to multilateral talks.5 The failure to dismantle the nuclear weapons program in North Korea might prompt other states—South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan—to arm themselves with nuclear weapons in pursuit of self-defense. Thus, there is now a pessimistic view that sees the situation in Northeast Asia as perilous.

The Clinton administration appeared to have quelled development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program under the 1994 Agreed Framework (AF). The agreement was shattered in early 2002 when President Bush, in his State of the Union speech just months after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S., declared that North Korea was part of "an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world." The Bush administration renounced the AF alleging that Pyongyang had continued secretly to develop nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, the DPRK argued that the Bush administration had abandoned its commitment to provide a heavy fuel oil and two light-water nuclear reactors to compensate for the loss of the Yongbyon nuclear plant as agreed in AF. Pyongyang further alleged that the Bush administration’s aggressively hawkish policy drove them to develop nuclear weapons in order to defend their country.

Although many sources argue that North Korea’s nuclear weapons pose a security threat to the United States, it is difficult to find any credible evidence to back up this claim.6 Unfortunately, neither has there been any empirical research analyzing how the American public evaluates the DPRK’s nuclear weapons program. How endangered does the American public feel by North Korea’s nuclear weapons program? How big a threat is the North Korea’s nuclear weapons program to U.S. security? To fill the gap between the reality and the academic debate, this paper introduces the results of a public opinion survey on North Korean nuclear weapons program. Based on a regional survey in Hawaii, the research tries to compare and evaluate the extent to which respondents’ various demographic, political, and socioeconomic backgrounds seem to have divergently influenced their perceptions of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. Although a regional survey conducted in Hawaii does not necessarily represent public opinion in the United States as a whole, the survey contains important implications from two perspectives. Firstly, since the Hawaiian Islands would be within the possible effective range of a North Korean missile, it offers a litmus test to measure the general perceptions of Americans on the security threat from North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. Secondly, the divergent ethnic groups living in Hawaii will provide an interesting research focus to compare various views concerning the issue. Through the survey we can evaluate views of Asian Americans, particularly Korean and Japanese Americans, who might have a physiological and physical closeness to North Korea.

Firstly, the paper discusses the North Korean nuclear crisis from October 2002 to the current North Korean nuclear test. The second section presents the research hypotheses and survey design with an explanation of the respondents’ demographic characteristics. Thirdly, the study examines public opinion towards