

U.S. Public Favors Negotiating With North Korea

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But Divided on Whether North Koreans Willing to Forego Nukes

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In contrast to the position of the Bush administration, a very large majority of Americans is willing to negotiate with North Korea, according to a new poll by the Program on International Policy Attitudes and Knowledge Networks.

While the Bush administration has refused to talk with North Korea until it first gives up its nuclear weapons program, 83 percent of respondents rejected the argument that “the U.S. should not talk with North Korea until it first proves it is not developing nuclear weapons, because talking first would be submitting to blackmail.” They opted instead for talking with North Korea “at this time.”

An overwhelming 76 percent also expressed a readiness to sign a nonaggression commitment with North Korea in exchange for North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons program. This would go beyond the Administration’s statements that it has no intention to attack North Korea and would make it a formal and bilateral declaration.

More broadly, an overwhelming majority favors trying to get the 1994 Agreed Framework back on track. When respondents were told about the basic features of the 1994 agreement and that it had broken down, 79 percent said that the United States should try to get the agreement back on track.

Despite this overwhelming support for negotiating with North Korea, however, Americans are divided about whether it can ultimately succeed in getting the North Koreans to relinquish their nuclear weapons. Asked, “if North Korea was confident that it would not be attacked” whether it would be willing to “forego having nuclear weapons,” just 43 percent said that it would, while 46 percent said it would not.

The poll of 1,063 American adults was conducted January 21-26 (margin of error plus or minus 3%) using the Knowledge Networks panel—a representative national sample that has been randomly selected and subsequently provided internet access to answer poll questions.

Consistent with the public’s non-confrontational orientation in favor of negotiations, a majority opposes withholding food aid to North Koreans. Just 39 percent endorsed the argument that the United States should withhold food aid “so as to put pressure on it to

stop building nuclear weapons.” Rather, 56 percent opposed withholding food aid “from starving civilians in North Korea because food aid should not be a political weapon.”

Also consistent with a non-confrontational orientation, only a tiny minority (6%) favored discouraging South Korea from pursuing its “sunshine policy” of increased economic and diplomatic engagement with North Korea. Approximately one in three favored encouraging such a policy, while just over one half said the United States should not take a position either way.

Perhaps one reason Americans so overwhelmingly favor the United States negotiating with North Korea is that the lack of a consensus that the United States has the right to use military force to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons. Asked whether “the U.S., without UN approval” has the right “to use military force to prevent a country that does not have nuclear weapons from acquiring them,” the response was evenly divided. When asked specifically whether they thought the United States would have the right to “to bomb a nuclear power plant in North Korea if it thought the North Koreans were using it to make nuclear weapons,” 51 percent said the US would not have the right, while 45 percent said that it would.

However, an overwhelming majority said that the United Nations does have such a right. Seventy-six percent said the U.N. Security Council has “the right to authorize the use of military force to prevent a country that does not have nuclear weapons from acquiring them.”

Not surprisingly, given recent events, Americans show a rising concern over North Korea as a foreign policy priority relative to other priorities, with North Korea for the first time moving into the third highest priority position, led only by Iraq and al-Qaeda, and now ahead of the Israel-Palestinian conflict.

Given the gaps between the Bush administration policy and majority preferences, ratings of U.S. foreign policy toward North Korea are understandably lackluster. Asked to rate “how well... the U.S. government is dealing with” a list of “international problems and issues” on “on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being very poorly and 10 being very well,” respondents give U.S. foreign policy toward North Korea mean rating of 4.91, with 36 percent giving a positive rating (6-10), 35 percent giving a negative rating (0-4), and 24 percent giving a neutral rating (5). These responses are essentially unchanged from November.