

## **Korean Americans' Views on U.S.-North Korean Relations: Survey & Focus Group Results and Analysis**

In April, May, and June 2017, a survey and focus groups were conducted with Korean Americans living in Georgia. The research aimed to assess their opinions and generate ideas among Korean Americans about U.S. foreign policy with North Korea. One of Georgia's U.S. Senators, Sen. Johnny Isakson, sits on the Senate Foreign Relations committee. This is a direct line to informing U.S. foreign relations with North Korea. Therefore Georgia-based Korean Americans are uniquely situated to determine long-term, global relations. This was not a political survey. Georgia WAND Education Fund, Inc. wished to explore the thoughts and feelings of Korean Americans in Georgia who stand to be directly impacted by the U.S.'s military, diplomatic, and trade decisions regarding the Korean peninsula, especially North Korea. Georgia WAND worked with Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta to vet survey questions, translate, conduct focus groups, administer the survey, compile the report, and design the [U.S / Korean Peninsula Foreign Relations Telephone Town Hall](#), being held Wednesday July 12 at 7:00pm EST.

### **Demographics**

One-hundred and seventy-six Korean Americans responded in full to the survey. Of the 176, 90 were female, 57 were male, and the remaining 29 did not disclose their gender. Largely the surveyors were retired, business owners, full time employees, and students. Fifty percent of respondents were 1<sup>st</sup> Generation: older generation immigrants who were the first to come to the United States. Twenty percent were "1.5 Generation": immigrants who came to the United States at a young age or with their parents and went through the school system in the United States. And 30% were 2<sup>nd</sup> Generation: usually younger people born in the United States from immigrant parents in the 1st or 1.5 Generation. Thirty-eight people spoke up in two focus groups. Of the two focus groups, the first one consisted of mostly 1<sup>st</sup> generation Korean Seniors. The second focus group was comprised of a mixture of 1.5 and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation young professionals and students. The majority of "1.5 generation" participants were college-age or young professionals, all below 40; many of them have been here since middle/ high school. Almost everyone had some relative or family in South Korea.

### **Questions**

All questions were presented in either a scale from 1 to 10 format, where 1 represented total disagreement and 10 represented total agreement, or a binary yes/no format where appropriate. All graphs provided are bar graphs indicating how many surveyees selected responses from 1 to 10. The green bars indicate the total in each category, red-male, blue-female and orange-no gender specified.

### **Key Findings**

**1. The Need to Fill Missing Information in Regards to Foreign Policy and Nuclear Weapons:** The findings around foreign policy and nuclear weapons (which make up 12 of the 19 survey questions) follow a strong pattern of "agreement with exception" and demonstrate

some inherent contradictions within the respondent pool. One example is seen in questions #3 and #17, in which the survey revealed an overwhelming majority of respondents believing in missile defense and being comfortable with the U.S. military presence. However, drilling down further in the focus groups revealed that people believe the U.S. military presence in South Korea can lead to other problems in the country.

Results from questions and #2 and #8 revealed respondents' desire for more diplomatic relations with North Korea, a sentiment that was echoed in the focus groups. However, there appeared to be contradictions in the data gathered regarding overall confidence in U.S. foreign policy. This could be attributed to the fact that people want both a military presence and diplomacy; and currently the U.S. is only doing one of those things. The contradictions laid bare in the survey data about the simultaneous interest in a U.S. military presence / need for missile defense and wanting more diplomacy and overall unification of the Korean peninsula was reflected in questions #4 and #18 and in the focus groups. We recommend further research be done to understand these contradictions.

Additionally, the "agreement with exceptions" concept is shown in the differences between what the surveys show and what people talked about during the focus groups regarding foreign policy. For example, when talking about the U.S. military presence in South Korea, the survey results showed a comfort level of 6 or greater; however, in the focus groups, there were strong forces who agreed but didn't like how many U.S. troops are stationed there. They raised issues that U.S. military presence causes in the country and that there's not enough accountability. So some missing information could include researching what issues are being caused by the U.S. military presence in South Korea.

It was revealed in questions #14 and #15 that thoughts about nuclear weapons were generally similar among both survey respondents and focus group participants. In the focus groups, and reflected in the survey, there was a general consensus that nuclear weapons are a main cause of friction between North Korea and United States. This being the case, people felt that North Korea should stop testing nuclear weapons and give up their nuclear capabilities if they want to resume talks and received aid from South Korea and the United States. Regarding leadership in North Korea and the U.S. and nuclear weapons, general consensus on the survey and in the focus groups is that people do not see North Korea or U.S. actually using nuclear weapons.

In addition, focus group participants believed that using nuclear weapons does much harm in and around the country that neither the U.S. or North Korea will use a one. Many did not think that North Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) could even reach the U.S. and questioned the need to build defense against North Korea. However, it was revealed in the focus groups that participants perceived both President Trump and President Kim Jong Un as unpredictable leaders who could send missiles, as shown for President Kim Jong Un in Question #5 results. However, despite these facts, South and North Korea are still in a cease fire, and no one thinks war will happen overnight. Participants said yes, it *could* happen, but it is not a constant worry. Several comments were made that there could be new opportunity for

talks with the new South Korean administration. Questions #13 and #16 show in more detail the sentiments around nuclear posturing and how that impacts U.S. / North Korean relations. One further difference between the survey and the focus groups is that despite the survey results, focus group respondents noted that as current global trends are leaning toward lessening the use of nuclear weapons and that this moment is an opportunity to begin conversations for disarmament.

**2. The Need to Close the Generational and Gender Divides:** The survey data showed that most respondents had a uniform distribution of self-perceived knowledge of North Korea. It should be noted that in question #1 of the 85 females that responded to this question, 54% responded with a 5 or lower indicating limited understanding of U.S. foreign policy with North Korea; revealing a gender divide in perceived knowledge. Therefore, education efforts need to explicitly include and be accessible to women.

The dynamics of conversation regarding improving U.S./Korean Peninsula relations are exacerbated by the generational divide. Based on focus group conversations, the older generation appears to maintain Cold War-era thinking of Communism vs. Democracy. Some perceived the new and current South Korean leadership as trying to be too friendly with North Korea and are worried about opening up relationships again. On the other hand, many focus group participants have been here for many years, they wanted peaceful change to North Korea regime that can bring unification and in turn help relationship with U.S. and Korea. When a focus group was done with the Korean seniors, it was only the “leaders” or older members of the senior association who spoke out and not a wide range of beliefs were shared especially when people brought out “There should not no ties with the communists” type of speech and answers.

On question #2, the overwhelming majority of respondents thought that the US should have diplomatic relations with North Korea with about 65% responding with a 7 or greater. Also, the older generation seeks straighter sanctions and not giving into any demands or talks with North Korea. However, younger people seemed to welcome the new administration and is more looking toward opening up talks between North and South Korea as well as the potential impact on U.S. relations. It is important to note that not all members of the younger generation feel this way. And even in older and younger generations, there is mixture of these two ideas. Some focus group participants of younger generations did not look forward to reunification but rather have two state system and an interest in stricter and harsher sanctions to stop North Korea from doing tests and provocations.

The age gaps revealed in this survey and the focus groups demonstrate the amount of information that people have about the history, foreign relations, and civic engagement of their community. **The recommendation from this set of data is that in order for the U.S. to have more effective foreign policy in the Korean Peninsula, rather than closing ties, it would be better to resume bilateral talks and build relationships, between leaders and in the general population areas (family reuniting, tourism etc.) to help reduce tension.** These efforts can be supported here in the U.S. by properly educating people and helping to connect

some of the dots that are not shared in the media and education channels. To substantiate the focus group ideas, in the results in question #8, respondents showed a belief that the U.S. is able to improve its relationships with North Korea, demonstrating hope for better outcomes.



*Focus Group Photo courtesy of James Woo - Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta (AAAJ)*

**3. The Need to Create Accurate Portrayals of North Korea in the Media:** Survey questions #9 through #12 tell an interesting story about the critical role the media plays in shaping U.S. foreign policy by way of informing voters and decision makers about the Korean peninsula, especially North Korea. Korean Americans think North Korea is not always portrayed accurately and that voters don't have information they need to know. The stories shared in the U.S. media are incomplete, such as what happened after missile tests, not just the tests themselves, or why there was a missile test in the first place. In the focus groups, people shared that the whole story of Korea is not being presented; therefore, Koreans have mixed feelings about how they are portrayed and how they are getting their knowledge.

Korean Americans are more likely to feel discriminated against in the U.S. than not. Despite having varying opinions about discrimination, the focus groups shed light on the fact that across the board, people felt discriminated against, from being asked repeatedly, "Are you Chinese?" to facing racism and discrimination at the workplace. Further research that drills down to questions

of specific experiences is needed to draw conclusions about whether discrimination is related to portrayal of both Koreas in the media.

Marginally, more respondents than not (57% percent) believe that U.S. residents get their knowledge of North Korea from the media. This builds on the possibility of media misportrayal of North Korea leading to increasing tensions and discrimination against Korean Americans since it is believed that most Americans learn about North Korea from the mainstream media. Many focus group participants only get their information regarding North Korea and South Korea as well as United States relationships from Korean media. Many assumed that the general public does not know about the Korean peninsula and United States relationship as only during missile firing these issues come up and might only be for short segment.

One area where Korean Americans agreed was wishing that more U.S. residents were aware of the Korean peninsula being a conflict zone. Eighty-six percent of survey respondents shared this idea. Some younger generation worried about how North Korea is portrayed in the media as Kim Jong Un is often only portrayed as an erratic dictator with bad haircut. It seems U.S. voters are getting only one terrible view of North Korea without balanced perspectives on that end of the peninsula and without the reality that there are also detrimental aspects of the U.S. military presence in South end of the peninsula. We conclude that neither country is receiving accurate representation in the U.S. media, therefore having an effect on U.S. foreign policy toward the region.

**4. The Need to Connect Korean Americans' Vote to Their Issues of Concern:** Based on questions #6, #7, #19, it is evident that Korean Americans may not be connecting the dots between their vote and the public policy decisions being made by elected officials. The Korean American community is electorally engaged: the majority of survey respondents are voting. The vast majority indicated that they frequently vote for candidates for public office (109 out of the 168 that answered this question indicated the affirmative with scores of 7 - 10); and 78% of people eligible to vote in the South Korean elections noted that they planned to vote. However, the vast majority of respondents also indicated that they do not understand the power public officials such as Johnny Isakson wield in shaping U.S. foreign policy (45 out of 150 respondents indicated that they did not understand at all). Throughout the survey and focus group, no one knew about Senator Isakson's influence and did not know about his role or say in the matter. These kinds of knowledge are not often provided and many wanted to know exactly what the Senator does.

In the younger generation, it was also the case that many people either did not know about Senator Isakson's role or were not familiar enough with U.S. foreign policy to answer the questions regarding international relations. Also because of the change in president, the loss of seats by the conservatives in the national assembly, as well as general sentiment going against previous administration, many who believe in conservative harsh line towards North Korea in the younger generation were reluctant to speak out as they can be portrayed in line with ousted president Park.

If Korean Americans do not understand the issues, nor the connection between the issues and their votes, they may not be voting for their best interests. This begs the question, *how are they getting information?* and shows a need for issue education and Civics 101. More research is needed to find what issues the Korean American community cares about. Focus groups might be able to provide better insight as to whether North Korean relations play a major role in their voting patterns. We recommend purposeful efforts to deepen relationships between decision makers, elected officials, and their constituents; more education on contacting elected officials and the importance of voicing opinions; Civics 101 education in the Korean American community, especially among women; conversations within families can address some of the contradictions regarding in foreign policy, and perhaps get a better understanding behind the age gap and gender differences; and, as mentioned several times, more nuanced research in Korean American communities to address the generational and gender differences, there are varying levels of understanding and opinion that could be changed with more research and dialogue.

**5. The Need to Abandon U.S.-Centrism:** Our work with Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta also provided a microcosm of learning outside of the data sets. We found that overall, U.S. foreign policy, U.S. media, and U.S.-based research, like what Georgia WAND embarked on with this project, fundamentally look at the relationship on the Korean peninsula in a U.S.-centric fashion, putting Americans in the middle of a conversation about foreign relations instead of listening to and taking into account the multiple cultural, generational, gender, historical, and political influences and perspectives from the region. In our view, this has contributed to systemic and multi-generational relationship challenges between our nations. This was made evident by the fact the survey initiated two different conversations: the first was about the relationship between North Korea and South Korea for the first time for many 1st Generation Korean American residents. At the same time, the survey initiated more conversation about the relationship between North Korea and the U.S. between many 2nd Generation residents. This example of decades of fractured and incomplete thinking has contributed to a lack of baseline understanding between our nations and our people. By acknowledging that the thoughts and ideas of Korean Americans are missing from the conversation, it changes the conversation. First and foremost this issue is grounded in the Korean Peninsula; so if we deny the engagement of Korean Americans' providing input, we will not create the right policy.

## **Evaluation**

It cannot be overstated that more research is needed. The survey results made it clear that there needs to be more research conducted with a larger audience. There were several questions, such as Question #1, #3, #11, and #13 through #15, showing that more in-depth conversations need to be had and questions re-formulated with additional cultural, historical, and knowledge considerations taken into account in framing the questions. Subsequent surveys will need to be further developed using this first survey to improve accuracy and outcomes. It was clear that an English ethnocentricity, which inherently includes white cultural hegemony in the U.S., limited the project survey outcomes. We must go deeper in how we formulate the

questions, overall survey design, and how we interpret some of the answers we received. Although the survey was translated into Korean, the ideas, explanations, and background information were not given adequate time and attention. Moving forward, we recommend including foreign policy or international relations regarding the questions to help prepare survey respondents to answer the questions. People may not have been able to read some of the difficult words unless they looked up the term. Many did not know exactly what some words meant and had hard time answering the questions.

Also, Korean Americans are not used to how the English questions are framed, using a 1-10 scale; many preferred to just pick Yes or No (as in 1 or 10 in regards to different questions). We found that popular opinion doesn't always show up in focus group because it's people who speak the loudest direct the talking points and there is also the possibility that the answers we received were skewed due to potentially conservative cultural views on publically sharing personal political opinions in fear of reprisals or being cast as certain ideology.

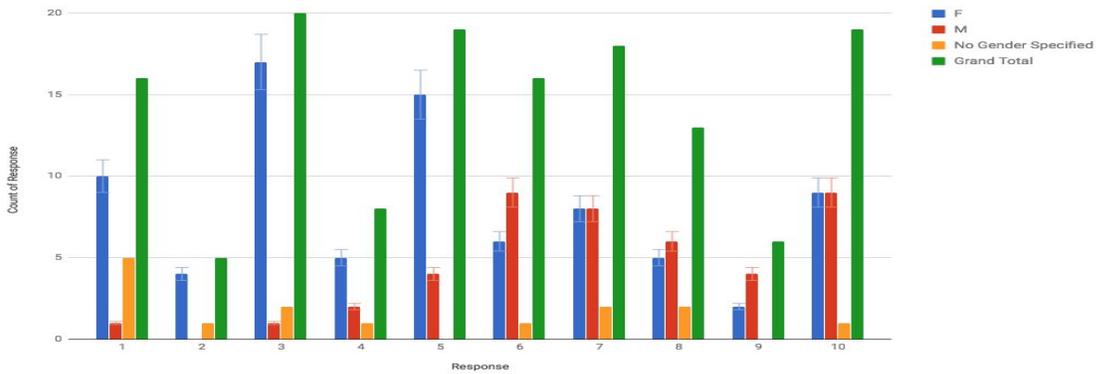


*Survey Respondents Photo courtesy of James Woo - Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta (AAAJ)*

## Appendix - Survey Questions and Results

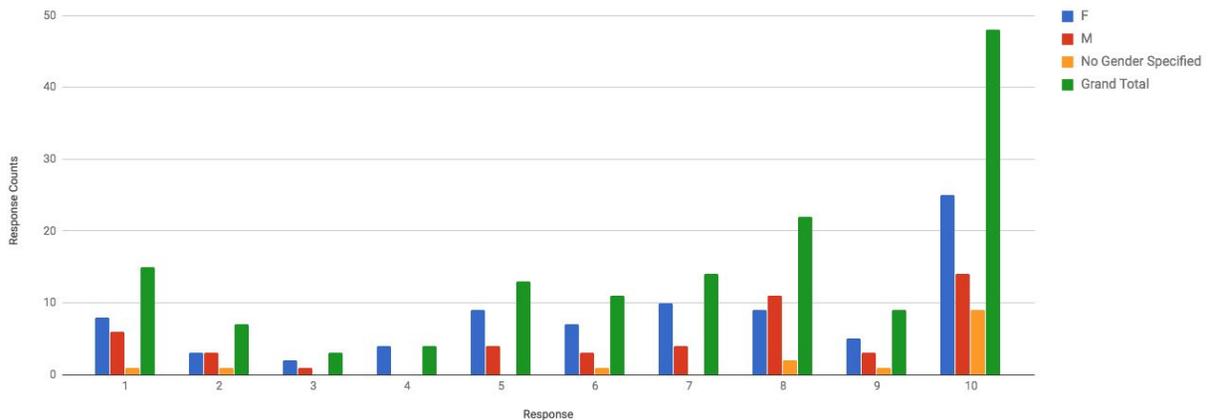
### 1. How much would you say you know about U.S. foreign policy with Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea)?

The data showed a relatively uniform distribution of self-perceived knowledge of North Korea. It is interesting to note the gender gap in the knowledge here. Of the 85 females that responded to this question, a majority, 54, responded with a 5 or lower indicating limited understanding of US foreign policy with North Korea. Why this gender disparity exists could be further explored in focus groups and addressed with better informational outreach to women.



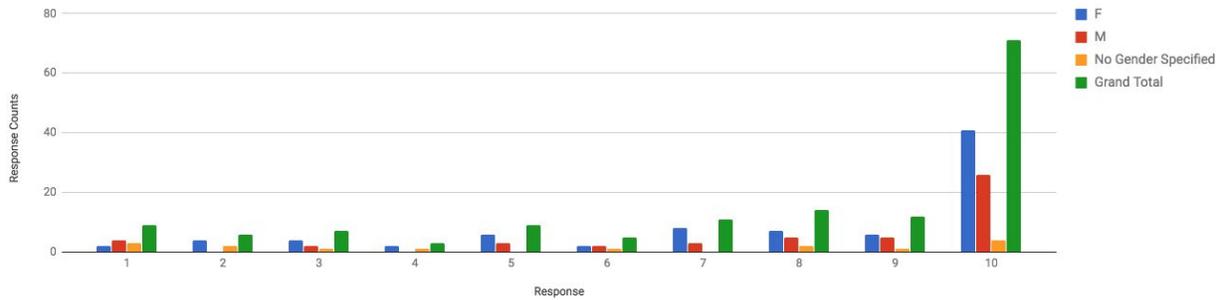
### 2. Do you believe the US should have diplomatic relations with North Korea?

The overwhelming majority of respondents thought that the US should have diplomatic relations with North Korea with about 65% (109 out of the 168 that answered the question) responding with a 7 or greater.



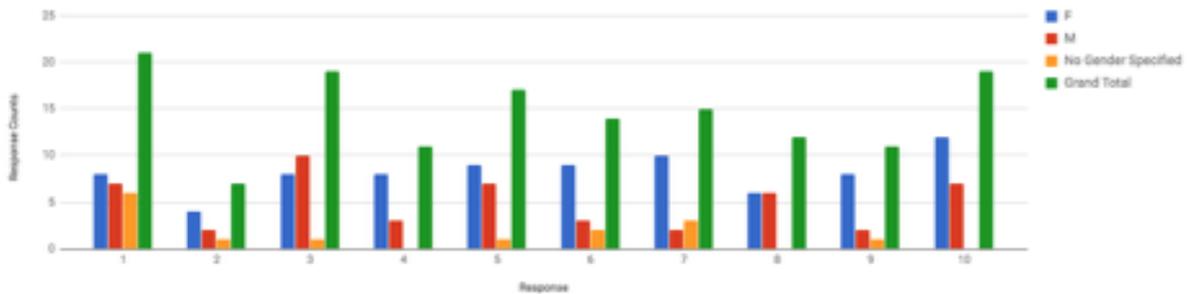
### 3. Do you believe the US should build missile defense against North Korea on its borders?

The vast majority of respondents thought that the US absolutely should build a missile defense system against North Korea on North Korea’s borders. Only 41 out of the 169 respondents who answered this question answered below 5 vs the 112 that answered above 6. These results seemingly contradict the ones for answer above. Diplomatic relations are desired by the majority but there is also support for defensive military action.



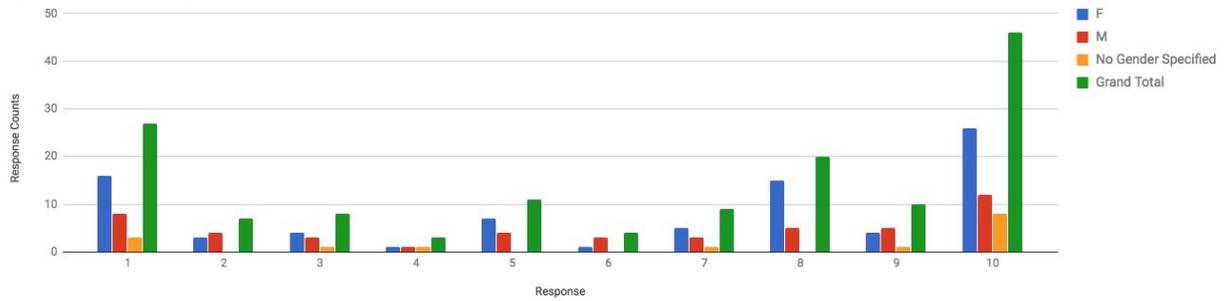
### 4. How confident do you feel about U.S. foreign policy toward North Korea?

The distribution here among responses is very uniform. 69 out of the 168 respondents for this question indicated low confidence (scores of 4 or lower) and 62 indicated high confidence (scores of 7 or higher). Taking the previous questions into account, this may be the result of a lack of information, a lack of diplomatic action, and possibly a lack of defensive military action — that latter two both strongly supported by the respondents of this survey.



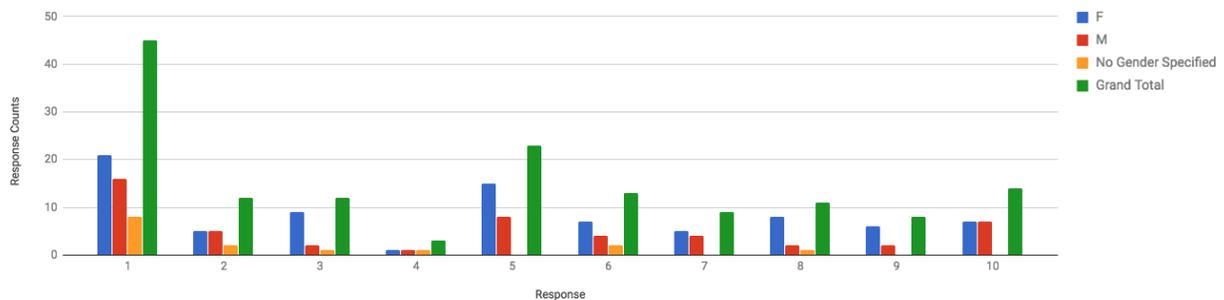
**5. Do you believe Kim Jong-un is capable of launching first-strike nuclear weapons at an adversary?**

Again the majority of the respondents believed that he is capable of launching first-strike nuclear weapons. This response may be the driving force behind the overwhelming support for a missile defense system; an inquiry with a focus group may provide better insight. Approximately of those rating the capability high, 87 out of the 167 respondents for this question (52%) indicated strong belief of the possibility with a response of 7 - 10 .



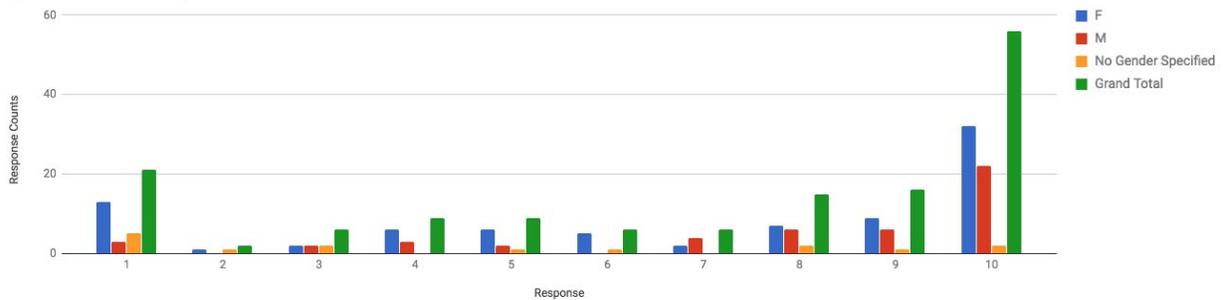
**6. Do you understand that Senator Johnny Isakson and other public officials have the power to influence and make changes to U.S. foreign policy?**

The majority of respondents actually indicate that they do not understand the power of public officials like Johnny Isakson wield in shaping US foreign policy. 45 out of 150 respondents for this question indicated that they did not understand at all. These results demonstrate that there needs to be more education for the Korean American community on the power of public officials on influencing foreign policy.



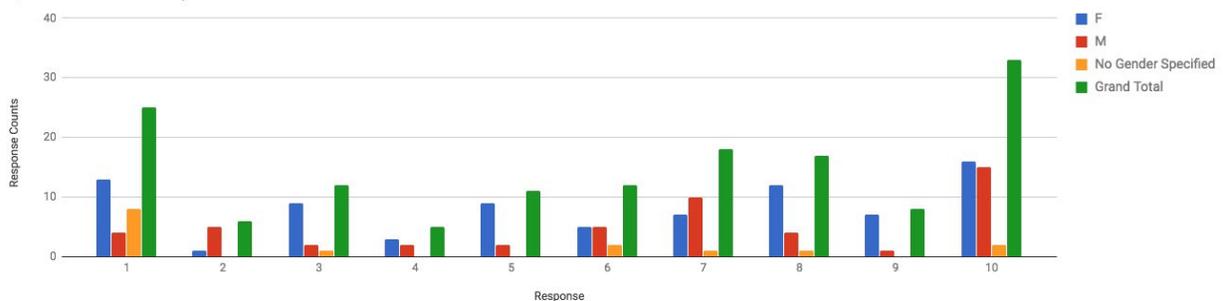
**7. Do you vote for candidates for public office, such as U.S. Senate, Congress, GA state legislators, local offices, etc, based on where they stand on issues that are important to you?**

Despite a minority of respondents claiming that they do not understand the power of public officials to shape foreign policy at all, the vast majority indicated that they frequently vote for candidates for public office. 109 out of the 168 that answered this question indicated the affirmative with scores of 7 - 10. More research is needed to find what major issues the Korean American community votes on. Focus groups might be able to provide better insight as to whether North Korean relations play a major role in their voting patterns.



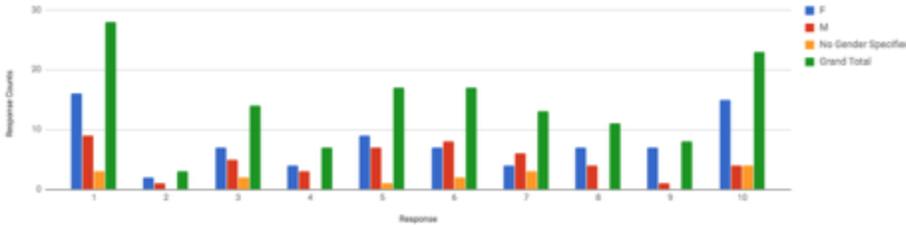
**8. Do you believe that the U.S. is able to improve its relationship with North Korea?**

The response counts were generally uniform here with a slight but significant edge to a more positive outlook on the ability of the US to improve its relationship with North Korea. 55% (94 out of 169) indicated optimism with scores of 7- 10. Further questioning/research needed to find out what brings about this optimism and what hopes Korean Americans have for the future of American relations with North Korea. Previous responses on this survey indicate that there is a strong desire for diplomatic ties to be restored.



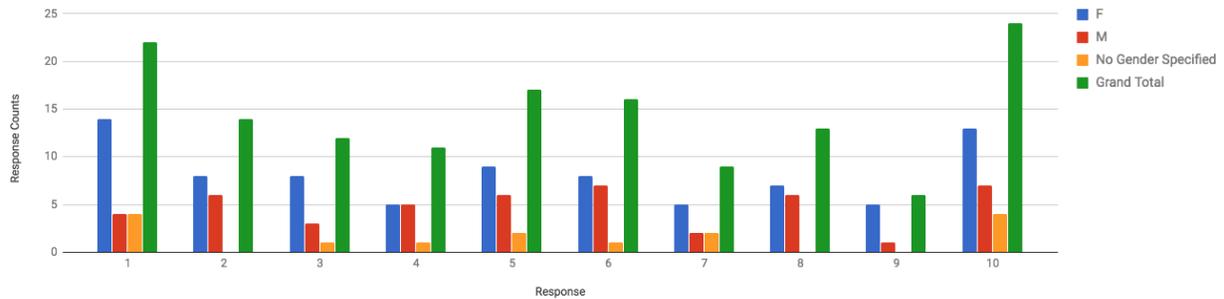
**9. As a Korean American, do you ever feel discriminated against in the U.S.?**

Slightly more people felt discriminated against with 52 out of the 163 respondents for this question indicated low feelings of discrimination with scores of 1-4 and 74 indicated higher feelings of discrimination.



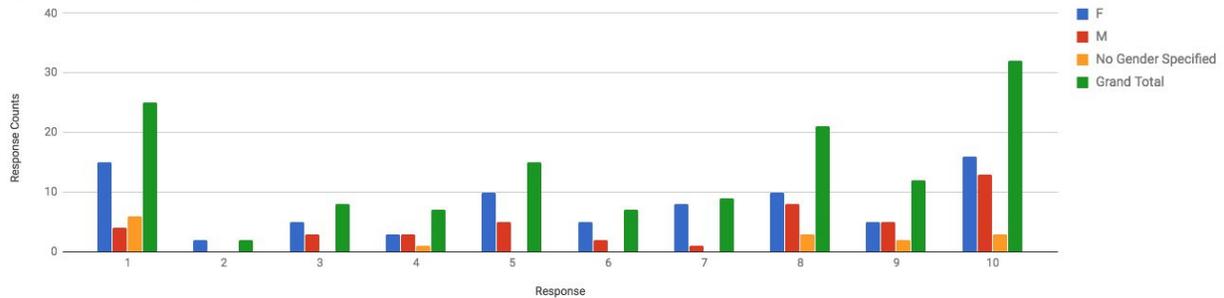
**10. Do you think North Korea is appropriately and accurately portrayed in the U.S. mass media?**

There is no consensus among the Korean American community here with a fairly even distribution across all answers. However further research is needed to draw conclusions about whether discrimination is related to portrayal of both Koreas in the media.



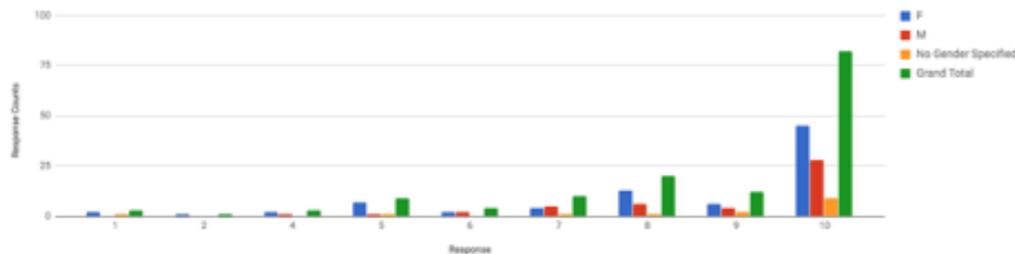
**11. Do you believe the U.S. residents largely get their knowledge of North Korea from the media?**

Here there is a mostly even distribution of responses with marginally more respondents believing that US residents get their knowledge of North Korea from the media. 91 out of the 160 (57%) that answered this question answered with a value of 6 or greater. This builds on the possibility of media misportrayal of North Korea leading to increasing tensions and discrimination against Korean Americans since it is believed that most Americans learn about North Korea from the mainstream media.



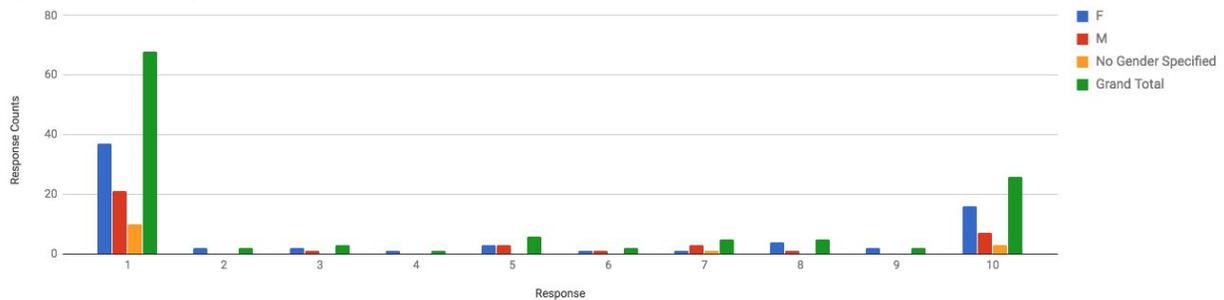
**12. Do you wish that more U.S. residents were aware of the Korean peninsula being a conflict zone?**

The vast majority of respondents indicated strong support. 86 out of 167 (51%) respondents who answered this question indicated 10. 144 out of the 167 (86%) indicated moderate to strong agreement with answer 7 or greater.



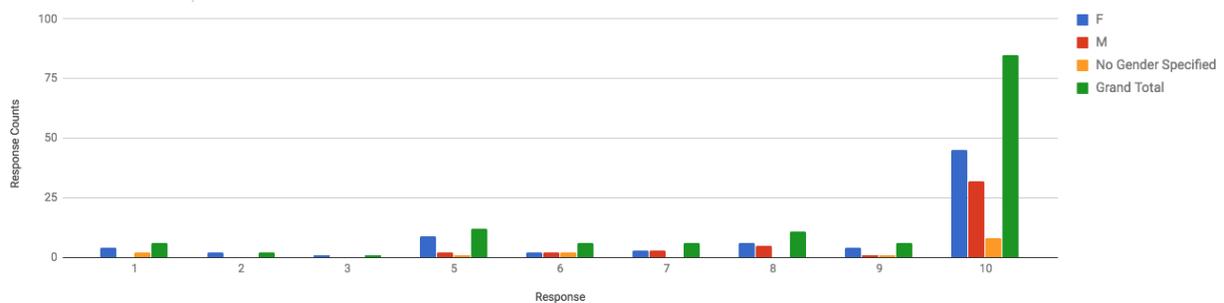
### 13. Do you think nuclear posturing is helpful for harmful?

The responses here were mostly 1 or 10 indicating strong views (with 1 indicating helpful and 10 indicating harmful). The majority (56%) of respondents actually indicated a 1 on this answer while only about a little over a fifth (22%) responded with a 10. Focus groups could clarify why so many Korean Americans believed that nuclear posturing was helpful. There were some consistency issues with this survey question. Some copies were only given a helpful/harmful option instead of the full 10 point scale which is why the answers tend to only be 1 or 10.



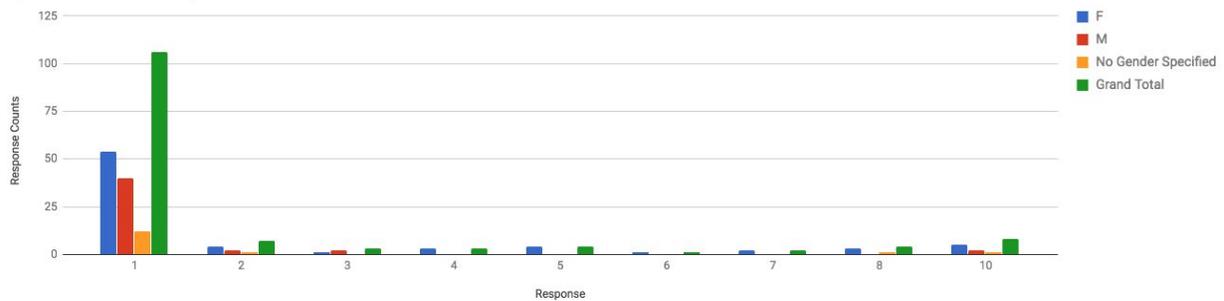
### 14. Do you think the U.S. should have nuclear weapons?

Following in suit with the views on the helpfulness of nuclear posturing respondents did indicate with overwhelming numbers that having nuclear weapons is a must. 114 out of the 159 (72%) respondents for this question indicated a 7-10 for moderate to strong support of US nuclear weapons capabilities.



### 15. Do you think North Korea should have nuclear weapons?

Almost every respondent indicated that they strongly believed that North Korea should not have weapons. 74% of the respondents indicated a 1 on this question. This relates to the previous responses in that US nuclear posturing is believed to be helpful whereas North Korean nuclear posturing poses a threat since they are believed to be more likely to use the weapons.



### 16. Do you think nuclear weapons plays a role in U.S. /North Korea relations?

The majority of respondents agreed with the premise with 104 out of 157 (66%) indicating a 7-10. Of those who gave responses of less than 5, the majority responded with a 1 indicating that of those tend not to believe that nuclear weapons play a role in the US/North Korea relations had strong opinions. These results appear to be consistent with previous question results especially the desire for a missile defense system and the helpfulness of US nuclear posturing. Further research or focus groups could confirm the connection.

