Pathways to Cooperation for South Korea's Successful Nuclear-Powered Submarine Acquisition

By Jihoon Yu

South Korea's interest in a conventionally armed, nuclear-powered attack submarine (SSN) is no longer a distant strategic aspiration. It has become a live policy issue. Recent U.S.-South Korea summit-level discussions have placed the question of nuclear-powered submarines within a broader alliance agenda that also includes civil nuclear cooperation, shipbuilding, and maritime industrial capacity.[1] The U.S.-South Korea Joint Fact Sheet released by the White House after the summit meeting stated that the United States had "given approval for the ROK to build nuclear-powered attack submarines" and would work with South Korea to advance requirements for the project, including fuel sourcing options.[2]

That language did not settle the issue. It did, however, move South Korea's SSN debate from the realm of aspiration to the realm of alliance management and structured policy follow-up discussions. Since the summit, the Lee Jae Myung administration has established an interagency task force to support working-level talks with the Donald Trump administration on nuclear-powered submarines, civil nuclear cooperation, and other related issues. U.S. and South Korean officials have also begun follow-up discussions on how to turn language in the Joint Fact Sheet into practical requirements. These developments do not make an SSN program inevitable, but they underscore that the issue has become concrete enough that both countries must decide how to manage it responsibly.

The more important question, then, is not whether South Korea can articulate a strategic case for nuclear-powered submarines. The harder question is whether the two countries can build a pathway that is politically credible, legally defensible, technologically manageable, industrially useful, and strategically stabilizing. A South Korean SSN capability would never be purely for its own national security. From the outset, it would be bound up with the U.S.-South Korea alliance, U.S. nonproliferation policy, export-control rules, congressional oversight, and the condition of the U.S. submarine industrial base.

From Washington's perspective, this issue is not simply about whether Seoul wants a more capable submarine. It is about how a major U.S. ally can modernize its maritime capabilities without weakening global nonproliferation norms, straining the U.S. submarine industrial base, or creating new doubts about alliance cohesion. Just as importantly, U.S. policymakers will want to understand how a South Korean SSN capability could serve U.S. strategic interests, strengthening allied undersea deterrence, improving burden-sharing in the Indo-Pacific, relieving pressure on U.S. naval assets, and contributing to a more resilient maritime balance.

Dr. Jihoon Yu is Research Fellow at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses (KIDA), where he previously served as a Director of External Cooperation. He served in the Republic of Korea Navy for 27 years as a submarine officer and strategic planning officer.

For Seoul, the lesson is equally important: strategic logic alone will not carry the case in Washington. South Korea will need to show not only why an SSN capability matters for its own security, but also how it can reinforce the alliance, support U.S. regional strategy, and remain compatible with nonproliferation norms. That is why the most promising course is not a demand for a submarine transfer or an immediate AUKUS-style exception. It should be a phased strategy built around an alliance-centered rationale, a nonproliferation-compatible framework, and industrial and human capital cooperation that also benefits the United States. In addition, South Korea should pursue a sustainment-first approach, with a disciplined, diplomatic narrative that presents a South Korean SSN as a stabilizing contribution to Indo-Pacific maritime security. Even if both governments can build that pathway, meaningful U.S. cooperation will still be difficult. But it will become more plausible over time.

Why South Korea Wants SSN Capabilities

South Korea operates in a demanding maritime environment, as North Korea continues to diversify its missile arsenal, deepen its undersea ambitions, and harden its military posture.[3] Beyond the peninsula, the Indo-Pacific maritime environment is growing more contested. Sea lines of communication (SLOC) are under greater pressure, undersea competition is intensifying, and the premium on survivable, persistent, and long-range undersea operations is only increasing.[4]

Advanced conventional submarines still matter, including those with air-independent propulsion. However, their limitations in endurance, speed, and sustained operational flexibility remain.[5] An SSN offers a different set of advantages: faster deployment, longer submerged endurance, greater freedom of maneuver, more persistent intelligence and surveillance missions, and a stronger capacity to complicate an adversary's targeting and operational planning.[6] For South Korea, those advantages matter not only in a wartime scenario on the Korean Peninsula but also in alliance missions involving sea lane security, anti-submarine warfare, undersea domain awareness, and the defense of maritime approaches.

However, the case for a South Korean SSN cannot be built around prestige or slogans about autonomy. In Washington, that kind of framing would likely raise skepticism rather than build support. If SSNs are presented as symbols of status or as tools for reducing South Korea's dependence on the alliance, suspicion may arise. The more persuasive case is an alliance case. A South Korean SSN capability would carry more weight in Washington if it is framed as a force multiplier for combined deterrence and maritime security, strengthening undersea surveillance near the peninsula, improving burden-sharing in Northeast Asia, supporting anti-submarine and anti-surface operations, and contributing to the defense of vital sea lanes in a more dangerous regional environment.

That framing matters because the United States has already shown a willingness to share extraordinary forms of naval nuclear propulsion technology under tightly controlled conditions. The 2023 AUKUS "optimal pathway" was not built around a quick transfer of boats. Rather, it was built around time, personnel integration, infrastructure development, rotational presence,

and eventually capability transfer.[7] The takeaway for South Korea is that the United States cooperates on highly sensitive issues only when strategic trust is high, long-term political alignment is clear, and the project is structured to reinforce rather than weaken U.S. force posture and industrial resilience. Therefore, South Korea should highlight the benefits of its SSN capability for the alliance's maritime strategy.

The First Pathway: Build an Alliance-Centered Strategic Narrative

Any serious South Korean effort should begin with narrative discipline. Too often, SSN debates drift toward maximalist language: strategic autonomy, prestige, latent nuclear status, or the idea that Seoul should possess what "advanced countries" possess.[8] That language may have domestic appeal, but it is politically counterproductive in Washington. It quickly creates the impression that undersea capability is only part of the story, and that nuclear hedging may be the larger objective.[9]

The first pathway, then, is conceptual. South Korea should define the mission of a future SSN capability narrowly, carefully, and responsibly. The most persuasive missions are those that align with U.S.-South Korea alliance priorities and with regional stability: countering North Korean undersea and missile threats, protecting critical maritime approaches, supporting anti-submarine and intelligence missions, escorting naval task groups, and contributing to maritime commons security with allies.[10] Therefore, a South Korean SSN should be described as conventionally armed, unrelated to nuclear weapons, and defensive in nature.

That matters because the United States will judge South Korea's intentions as much as its technical competence. The basic question will be straightforward: is Seoul seeking a capability that fits within allied deterrence, or one that signals eventual strategic divergence? If South Korea wants U.S. cooperation, it needs to remove ambiguity on that point.

The alliance-centered narrative should also stress complementarity rather than duplication. South Korea does not need to mirror the global mission profile of the U.S. Navy. A smaller South Korean SSN force tailored to regional contingencies could instead free U.S. assets for broader missions while improving the resilience of allied undersea operations in Northeast Asia. The argument for South Korean SSNs should focus on the alliance needing a more capable and persistent division of labor in the undersea domain, rather than on the fact that major powers have them.

Related to this, Seoul should avoid fusing the SSN debate with arguments for indigenous nuclear weapons. Under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), non-nuclear-weapon states remain bound by safeguards obligations, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) continues to treat safeguards as central to verifying the peaceful use of nuclear material.[11] Once SSNs are rhetorically tied to nuclear armament, practical U.S. cooperation becomes harder to defend. Seoul's message has to remain disciplined: this is about naval propulsion, maritime defense, and alliance burden-sharing, not nuclear weapons.

The Second Pathway: Use the Existing Nuclear Cooperation Framework More Creatively

Law and politics matter just as much as strategy. The 2015 U.S.-South Korea Agreement for Peaceful Nuclear Cooperation renewed the bilateral "123 Agreement" framework for civil nuclear cooperation and created the High-Level Bilateral Commission as an institutional setting for senior-level dialogue on peaceful nuclear and strategic cooperation.[12] That framework was not built for naval propulsion; still, it remains the most important political and institutional platform through which the two governments can begin structured discussions on issues that would eventually shape any SSN path.

For that reason, South Korea should not dismiss the 123 framework as irrelevant simply because it is civilian in nature. In practice, that existing structure can help build the habits of transparency, technical dialogue, regulatory confidence, and fuel cycle trust that Washington would want to see long before entertaining anything more sensitive.[13] Seoul should use existing bilateral nuclear mechanisms to deepen cooperation on nuclear safety and safeguards, fuel-cycle transparency, and export-control compliance. None of those steps would authorize a South Korean SSN, but together they would address one of Washington's central anxieties: that Seoul wants the outcome without first building the trust architecture needed to support it.

There is also a wider nonproliferation issue. Naval nuclear propulsion occupies an unusually sensitive space because it intersects with safeguard obligations in ways that require special treatment. The IAEA has continued to engage states on safeguards questions related to naval propulsion, including Brazil's proposal concerning special procedures for nuclear material used in naval propulsion.[14] South Korea should study those developments carefully, not because Brazil offers a ready-made model, but because any future South Korean path will require early thinking about how to reconcile alliance cooperation, reactor fuel arrangements, and confidence in international verification.

That leads to a basic strategic principle: South Korea should default to a low-enriched uranium (LEU), transparency-first approach. LEU would not eliminate safeguards concerns because naval propulsion still involves nuclear material that may require special safeguards treatment. But it would be a more credible nonproliferation marker than highly enriched uranium (HEU) because LEU is not directly usable in nuclear weapons without further enrichment and would make Seoul's program easier to present as proliferation-resistant, verifiable, and compatible with alliance oversight.[15] Fuel choice and perceptions of safeguards will weigh heavily in determining whether the United States supports a South Korean SSN pathway. A visibly disciplined approach, anchored in verifiability, proliferation resistance, and alliance oversight, will be far more credible than one that appears designed to maximize fuel cycle freedom. The more Seoul presents itself as the ally pursuing the most nonproliferation-compatible route, the easier it becomes for U.S. officials and legislators to justify close nuclear partnership.

The Third Pathway: Make South Korean SSN Cooperation a U.S. Industrial Base Opportunity

One of the most overlooked aspects of the SSN question is industrial politics. Washington's immediate problem is not a lack of appreciation for alliance cooperation; it is capacity. The U.S. submarine and maritime industrial base is under serious strain, and U.S. officials have repeatedly pointed to workforce shortages, maintenance delays, and the difficulty of meeting ambitious shipbuilding and readiness goals as the root causes.[16] The U.S. Navy's messaging on the maritime industrial base has emphasized the need to use submarine-focused efforts as a springboard for broader maritime industrial integration, while public statements continue to highlight workforce bottlenecks and production constraints.[17]

That reality means South Korea should not approach the United States with a proposal that sounds like a zero-sum demand on scarce U.S. capacity. A better approach is to make South Korean SSN cooperation part of the answer to U.S. maritime industrial stress. South Korea remains one of the world's leading shipbuilding powers. It has a large-scale shipyard capacity, advanced digital shipbuilding capabilities, a sophisticated supplier network, and experience in complex naval construction and maintenance.[18] None of that automatically translates into naval nuclear propulsion competence, but it does mean Seoul has something tangible to bring to the alliance conversation.

The key is sequencing. Before requesting the most sensitive technology transfers, Seoul should expand bilateral industrial cooperation in areas useful to the U.S. Navy and politically easier to support in Washington. Initial focus should be on less sensitive domains where South Korea can add immediate value: non-nuclear maintenance and repair, digital shipyard and workforce cooperation, and supply-chain resilience for key maritime components. Such cooperation would build a practical, credible track record of contribution before Seoul seeks deeper cooperation in more sensitive areas.

Such cooperation would do at least three things. First, it would show that South Korea is investing in allied industrial resilience. Second, it would build practical relationships among South Korean firms, U.S. shipyards, and naval program offices. Third, it would gradually socialize the South Korean industry into the disciplines that any future SSN-related work would demand: rigorous quality assurance, cybersecurity, security compliance, and a culture aligned with the exacting standards of nuclear programs.[19]

This is where Seoul should draw the right lesson from AUKUS. Australia did not begin by asking for finished boats but after years of integrating people, infrastructure, and industrial planning.[20] The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia also moved to reduce barriers to defense trade through export control reform; in 2024, Washington implemented new International Traffic in Arms Regulations (ITAR) exemptions and related measures to facilitate deeper defense trade integration with Australia and the United Kingdom.[21] South Korea should not expect identical treatment anytime soon. Yet, it should seek a South Korean version of defense-industrial

streamlining in less sensitive areas to build a record that could eventually justify tailored treatment in more sensitive domains.

The message to the United States should be clear and practical: helping South Korea prepare for an eventual SSN capability can reinforce the U.S. maritime industrial ecosystem rather than drain it.

The Fourth Pathway: Invest in People Before Platforms

No country acquires an SSN capability simply by purchasing reactors or drawing up hull designs. It does so by building a generational ecosystem of trained operators, technical experts, regulators, and industrial personnel who can meet the demanding standards of naval nuclear propulsion over decades.

This is where South Korea should move fastest, as human capital cooperation is strategically valuable and politically more feasible than early platform transfers. A serious U.S.-South Korea pathway should begin with personnel embedding, education, and long-term training. Again, AUKUS offers a useful precedent: it places heavy emphasis on embedding Australian military and civilian personnel within the U.S. Navy and the Royal Navy, as well as supporting industrial bases.[22]

For South Korea, a parallel effort could take several forms. Washington and Seoul could build on existing patterns of naval training and industrial education cooperation by expanding educational and observational exchanges in areas such as submarine operations, shipyard management, quality assurance, and lifecycle sustainment. Recent bilateral naval exercises have already included in-port academics, liaison officer exchanges, and anti-submarine warfare training, while the two countries have also begun shipbuilding education initiatives that could provide a foundation for broader workforce cooperation.[23]

Over time, those exchanges could expand into more specialized training for South Korean officers, engineers, regulators, and industrial personnel in nuclear safety culture, systems engineering, maintenance planning, and oversight. South Korean shipyards could also develop joint workforce programs with U.S. counterparts focused on demanding naval standards. More ambitiously, the alliance could establish a dedicated U.S.-South Korea maritime nuclear talent initiative under a broader defense-industrial cooperation framework.

This matters for two reasons. First, it addresses the most basic truth about SSNs: the real bottleneck is often trust in people and institutions, not money or steel. Second, it provides an early-success model. Even if platform-level cooperation remains politically difficult for some time, training and personnel cooperation can still move the alliance forward while strengthening the long-term foundation for an SSN pathway.

South Korea should also build its own domestic institutional architecture in parallel. An SSN capability cannot depend solely on naval enthusiasm; it requires interagency alignment across defense, foreign affairs, industry, energy, export controls, nuclear regulation, and legislative

oversight for maximum efficacy. Washington will want to see that Seoul has moved beyond conceptual ambition and is building the bureaucratic foundation needed for a program of exceptional sensitivity.

The Fifth Pathway: Pursue a Sustainment-First Model

A sustainment-first model deserves separate attention because sustainment is not simply another form of industrial cooperation. It is where operational trust is tested over time. Building a submarine is one challenge; keeping it deployable, safe, secure, and integrated into allied operations over decades is another. For a capability as sensitive as naval nuclear propulsion, Washington will care not only about whether Seoul can eventually acquire platforms but also about whether South Korean institutions can sustain the long-term disciplines of maintenance planning, configuration control, safety oversight, security compliance, and lifecycle accountability.

This is why South Korea should avoid defining success too narrowly as indigenous construction from the outset. A more realistic path would begin with sustainment roles that are politically easier to support and operationally useful to the alliance. These could include non-nuclear maintenance support, dockside infrastructure cooperation, spare-parts resilience, digital sustainment tools, and selected lifecycle support functions for allied maritime forces. Such activities would not resolve the most sensitive propulsion questions, but they would help South Korea demonstrate reliability in the daily work that makes undersea operations viable.

The value of this approach is cumulative. Sustainment cooperation would allow South Korean shipyards, naval personnel, and regulators to build habits of precision, documentation, security, and schedule discipline in practical settings. It would also give U.S. officials a record of performance to evaluate before considering more sensitive forms of cooperation. In Washington, confidence is rarely built through abstract assurances alone. It is built through repeated evidence that a partner can meet demanding standards under real operational conditions.

A sustainment-first model, therefore, creates a ladder of credibility. It shifts the question from whether the United States should make an immediate exception for South Korea to whether South Korea has already become a dependable contributor to allied maritime readiness. Over time, that record could make deeper SSN-related cooperation appear less like a speculative political favor and more like the next step in an established alliance practice. Sustainment, in this sense, is not a lesser goal. It is the practical foundation on which any more ambitious SSN pathway would have to rest.

The Sixth Pathway: Keep the Program Conventionally Armed and Strategically Bounded

Washington's concerns are not solely legal or technical—they are also geopolitical. U.S. officials may worry about how China interprets South Korea's SSN path, how other allies react, and whether a South Korean SSN sets precedents that complicate U.S. nonproliferation diplomacy elsewhere.[24] More specifically, they will want reassurance that South Korea's SSN effort does

not blur the line between allied naval modernization and a broader regional conversation about nuclear latency or strategic autonomy. Seoul cannot remove all of those concerns, but it can reduce them through consistent signaling and careful policy design.

The most important step is self-limitation. South Korea should repeatedly affirm that any future SSN capability would be conventionally armed and tightly bounded in mission, force structure, and doctrine. It should reject any narrative that presents an SSN as a stepping stone to nuclear weapons, a shortcut to latent nuclear status, or an instrument of independent strategic coercion. Instead, Seoul should emphasize deterrence, defense, maritime surveillance, anti-submarine warfare, protection of critical SLOC, and support for the maritime commons in coordination with allies. The narrower and more disciplined the stated mission, the easier it will be to present the program as stabilizing rather than escalatory.

This message is not just for Washington but for the wider region as well. South Korea should clarify that an SSN capability would not be designed for power projection detached from alliance obligations, let alone to change the regional nuclear order. It should be explained as a defensive maritime capability shaped by a demanding strategic environment, not as a prestige platform or a symbol of geopolitical ambition. That distinction will affect how much diplomatic friction the program creates over time.

The more Seoul frames the program as a disciplined, alliance-based contribution to stability, under strong safeguards and close alliance coordination, the more manageable the diplomatic environment becomes. Strategic restraint in this instance is not a concession but a condition for political feasibility.

The Seventh Pathway: Build Political Support in Washington Before Seeking Policy Breakthroughs

No South Korean SSN pathway will succeed if Seoul focuses only on the executive branch. The U.S. Congress matters, as evidenced by the defense trade reforms linked to AUKUS.[25] Legislative authorities, export controls, budget politics, and industrial oversight all shape what Washington can and cannot do.[26] South Korea, therefore, needs a long game in Washington that extends beyond the White House to Congress, think tanks, naval communities, industrial stakeholders, former defense officials, and the broader nonproliferation policy world. Without that wider political groundwork, even a strategically sensible proposal could stall.

This means patient coalition-building. Seoul should engage not only those already inclined toward stronger alliance burden-sharing, but also skeptics concerned about precedent, proliferation, industrial strain, or regional escalation. The goal should be to normalize serious discussion of a future pathway as legitimate, strategically rational, and compatible with nonproliferation instead of securing an immediate endorsement of a South Korean SSN. In Washington, major new ideas usually have to become discussable before they become possible.

That requires answering hard questions directly and repeatedly. Why is an SSN necessary as opposed to advanced conventional submarines? How would safeguards concerns be handled? How would Seoul avoid burdening U.S. industry? How would the program strengthen rather than dilute U.S. deterrence? How would it be sequenced? What guardrails should be in place to prevent mission creep or political misinterpretation? These are the questions that South Korea must answer if it wants serious support.

The more specific and restrained South Korea's answers are, the more persuasive they will be. Ambition without sequencing will fail, and sequencing without political outreach will fail. A steady campaign of explanation in Washington does not guarantee success, but it would gradually lower the barriers to future cooperation. In alliance politics, breakthroughs are usually prepared long before they are announced.

What South Korea Should Not Do

A practical pathway also requires clarity about what to avoid. In a project as politically sensitive as naval nuclear propulsion, poor framing can be as damaging as poor policy. South Korea should develop both a positive roadmap and a clear sense of what arguments and tactics are most likely to backfire in Washington.

First, Seoul should not publicly demand immediate access to the AUKUS model. Australia's pathway rests on a unique trilateral structure, decades of nuclear stewardship trust with the United States and the United Kingdom, and a very specific political setting. Treating AUKUS as an entitlement benchmark would likely provoke backlash in Washington and reinforce the impression that Seoul is seeking shortcuts on a highly sensitive issue. The better course is to study AUKUS carefully and adapt the parts of it that matter most: personnel embedding, industrial integration, long timelines, and strict alliance framing.

Second, South Korea should not allow domestic debates to blur the line between SSNs and nuclear weapons. The more those two issues are fused in public rhetoric, the harder it becomes for U.S. officials to defend even exploratory cooperation. Once SSNs are folded into a broader argument about nuclear sovereignty or armament, the political cost of supporting South Korea rises sharply.

Third, Seoul should not present the program as an abrupt sovereign leap. The United States will be much more receptive to a phased pathway than to a symbolic declaration unsupported by institutional preparation. Large strategic announcements may work in domestic politics, but in Washington, they often raise doubts about seriousness and sequencing.

Fourth, South Korea should not underestimate the compliance burden that comes with sensitive defense cooperation. Even modest growth in defense trade integration would require Seoul to demonstrate that it can protect classified information, manage controlled technologies, and operate within U.S. export-control rules. For Washington, political will alone will not be enough.

Confidence will depend on whether South Korean institutions and firms can meet exacting standards consistently over time.

Finally, Seoul should not assume that strategic logic alone will carry the argument. Even if the military case for a South Korean SSN strengthens, U.S. support will still depend on whether South Korea appears politically disciplined, nonproliferation-responsible, and industrially useful. In alliance politics, legitimacy has to be built as carefully as capability.[27]

A Realistic Roadmap

If South Korea wants a successful long-term outcome, the roadmap should be sequential. The point is not to force an immediate breakthrough on the most sensitive issue but to structure the pathway in stages so that each step strengthens the political and institutional basis for the next. The success of that strategy will depend on the alliance's ability to gradually build trust, habits of cooperation, and concrete evidence of South Korea's seriousness.

In the near term, Seoul should focus on narrative discipline, mission definition, and political engagement in Washington. It should make clear that a future South Korean SSN capability would be conventionally armed, alliance-centered, strategically bounded, and nonproliferation-responsible. At the same time, it should expand maritime industrial cooperation in non-nuclear domains and invest heavily in human capital, nuclear governance preparation, export control trust, and submarine sustainment cooperation. Quiet but technical consultations on safeguards, fuel cycle perceptions, and regulatory requirements should begin early, even if they remain largely out of public view. The near-term objective is not to force a decision but to make South Korea look disciplined, useful, and credible.

In the medium term, South Korea should seek a more formalized U.S.-South Korea maritime strategic cooperation track centered on undersea deterrence, industrial integration, workforce development, and alliance resilience. That could include embedded personnel, expanded submarine education and observation programs, more ambitious MRO cooperation, joint workforce initiatives, and limited but meaningful technical exchanges. At this stage, Seoul's goal should be to make itself indispensable to allied maritime resilience in Northeast Asia. The more South Korea is seen as helping solve operational and industrial problems, the more plausible SSN-related cooperation will become.

Only in the long term, after years of trust-building and demonstrated performance, should Seoul seek decisions on the most sensitive dimensions of SSN cooperation: reactor arrangements, fuel pathways, deeper technology access, and possible construction or acquisition models. By then, the question in Washington should focus on responsibly structuring the next step.

Table 1. A Phased Roadmap for U.S.-South Korea SSN Cooperation

Phase	Main Objective	Priority Actions	Strategic Effect
Near Term	Build credibility before asking for sensitive concessions	Clarify mission definition; maintain conventionally armed framing; expand Washington outreach; begin safeguards, fuel-cycle, and regulatory consultations; deepen non-nuclear maritime industrial cooperation.	Makes South Korea appear disciplined, useful, and nonproliferation-responsible.
Medium Term	Make South Korea indispensable to allied maritime resilience	Formalize a U.S.-South Korea maritime cooperation track; expand personnel embedding; develop submarine education programs; broaden MRO and workforce cooperation; strengthen export-control and industrial-security trust.	Builds practical performance records and lowers political resistance to deeper cooperation.
Long Term	Structure sensitive SSN cooperation responsibly	Consider reactor arrangements, fuel pathways, deeper technology access, and construction or acquisition models only after years of demonstrated performance and institutional trust.	Turns a politically difficult request into the next step in a proven alliance relationship.

A realistic roadmap is not gradual for the sake of caution alone. It is gradual because the issue itself is unusually sensitive. Naval nuclear propulsion sits at the intersection of alliance politics, nonproliferation, industrial capacity, legal authority, and regional strategy. Any effort to accelerate every dimension simultaneously would likely provoke resistance. A phased approach lowers that risk by ensuring that political support, institutional preparation, industrial cooperation, and diplomatic messaging evolve together rather than at cross-purposes. In this sense, sequencing is what makes an otherwise implausible objective strategically imaginable.

Conclusion

If South Korea ever acquires an SSN capability, it will not be because of a single dramatic negotiation or a bold political decision: it will be the result of patient alliance statecraft. The decisive question is not whether Seoul can make a strategic case for nuclear-powered submarines, but whether South Korea can persuade the United States that helping it move in that direction would strengthen the alliance, reinforce nonproliferation discipline, ease maritime industrial strain, and contribute to Indo-Pacific stability.

That is why the most promising path is gradual, alliance-centered, and institutionally serious. Seoul should begin by demonstrating restraint, nonproliferation responsibility, and a credible record of practical contribution to the alliance. It should anchor the SSN debate in combined deterrence rather than prestige, in maritime burden-sharing rather than autonomy theatrics, in safeguards-compatible discipline rather than ambiguity, and in long-term alliance trust rather than short-term political pressure.

Even if South Korea follows that course, U.S. cooperation will not be easy. However, it will become thinkable. And in alliance politics, that is often where major change begins.

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