Over the almost two years since its historic announcement, the AUKUS agreement has elicited a broad range of regional responses. While some countries have welcomed the strategic alignment that AUKUS brings, others share concerns over increased regional instability, the emergence of antagonistic security blocs, and nuclear proliferation.

To guarantee the security that the pact promises, Australia and its fellow AUKUS partners will need to understand the region’s perspectives.

This series is designed to provide insight into regional responses to AUKUS, two years on. It will delve into the concerns, qualms, and avenues for opportunity in seven Indo–Pacific countries, through the eyes of regional authors.
KEY MESSAGES:

➤ South Korea sees AUKUS as part of US efforts to balance China and as an acknowledgement of Australia's growing strategic value.

➤ In the wake of AUKUS, South Koreans are debating the direction of their US alliance strategy.

➤ AUKUS has renewed a domestic debate in South Korea about its own ambitions for a nuclear submarine program.

➤ South Korea is open to joining an expanded AUKUS in the future.

The formation of AUKUS has had a profound impact on South Korean society. As one of the few countries viewing Australia’s controversial acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines positively – or even with envy – South Korea has been paying close attention to the United States’ assessment of Australia’s strategic value in relation to the establishment of AUKUS.

This report examines South Korea’s perspective on the regional security implications of AUKUS and the opportunities for South Korea to participate as cooperation expands.

Initial response:

Firstly, South Korea perceives the establishment of AUKUS as a consequence of the US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific region and as an endeavor to merge security alliances.¹

South Korea regards US efforts to strengthen its security partnerships with both European and Asian nations – including through the establishment of AUKUS – as a means to counterbalance China’s influence.² In response, China has already warned of the inevitability of conflict should South Korea participate in a grouping designed to balance China.³

It is important to note that South Korea is highly concerned about the possible deterioration of its relationship with China. As South Korea’s primary trading partner and the only country with significant leverage over North Korea, any degradation in their relationship is a serious security risk. To counter this, South Korea has shown interest in the expanding scope of AUKUS framework, through the so-called AUKUS-Plus – albeit in a cautious manner, considering the widespread perception of AUKUS as an anti-China coalition. In fact, there are already concerns that AUKUS’ perceived containment of China may increase the burden on South Korea.⁴ Despite concerns about managing its relationship with China, South Korea is itself already participating in the trend to merge security alliances. For example, it is enhancing ties with European countries. In June 2022, President Yoon Seok-yul attended the NATO Summit and, in September, South Korea decided to designate its embassy in Belgium as its Mission to NATO.⁵ South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy, released in December 2022, provides opportunities for dialogue and cooperation with other countries pursuing similar strategies. It also demonstrates that South Korea expects collaboration with the US-led regional network, including and beyond AUKUS.

Secondly, South Korea perceives the establishment of AUKUS as indicative of the decline in US power.
AUKUS is the outcome of the US’ recognition that it cannot effectively counter China and maintain its status as a global power without collaborating with “like-minded” middle powers. This is demonstrated by the US offering nuclear-powered submarine technology, despite the risk of conflict with France during Australia’s negotiations to acquire diesel submarines.

The timing of the AUKUS announcement, just one month after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, underscores this sense of urgency. The fact that AUKUS goes beyond regular meetings between senior defence and foreign affairs officials, incorporating cutting-edge science and technology cooperation – including artificial intelligence and quantum computers as well as the sharing of core defense technologies – reflects this crisis-induced sentiment.

Thirdly, South Korea sees AUKUS as a partnership that is progressively evolving into a formal alliance. This argument stems from the notion that the sharing of weapons systems technology and operational systems is the most significant indicator of alliance cohesion, making AUKUS a stronger partnership compared to the Quad.

The decision of the US, a nuclear weapons state, to share advanced military technology such as nuclear-powered submarines with Australia, a non-nuclear power, speaks volumes about the level of trust among AUKUS members. It also signifies Australia’s increased value, potentially linked to its shift to a more proactive role in Indo-Pacific strategy since 2017. Australia has demonstrated greater strategic clarity, especially in terms of its willingness to confront China.

Fourthly, South Korea sees a role for itself in AUKUS. Specifically, its value as an economic and security ally is growing as it increases investment in the US and participates in US-led efforts to establish stable supply chains for semiconductors, batteries, and electric vehicles. Some argue that the US-ROK ‘Comprehensive Strategic Alliance’ should continue to be translated into practice rather than just words. South Korea’s Indo-Pacific strategy also indicates its willingness to further collaborate with the US in the region.
Ongoing debates

Since the launch of AUKUS, South Korea’s alliance strategy has become a subject of divisive debate, resulting in the emergence of two distinct camps.

**Pursue strategic autonomy**

The first camp advocates for the pursuit of strategic autonomy — that is, South Korea’s long-held aim to chart its own course and be as independent as possible in its foreign policy.

Proponents of this perspective argue that the United Kingdom, following its economic departure from the European Union, redirected its military focus to align more closely with the US through arrangements like AUKUS.

South Korean experts suggest that South Korea should similarly strive for strategic autonomy, so that it can navigate changing geopolitical dynamics and uncertainty in the international system effectively.\(^\text{11}\)

**Deepen alliances and cooperation**

On the other hand, the second camp argues that South Korea has an opportunity to pursue more alliances and more cooperation.

This perspective suggests that the US ranks its allies in order of importance. Advocates of this viewpoint observe that Australia has benefited greatly from aligning itself with the US Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China.\(^\text{12}\) By engaging in AUKUS and opening up a huge market for US defense contractors, as well as offering a military outpost to defend Taiwan, Australia has in turn benefited from cooperation on nuclear submarine technology.

Proponents argue that South Korea should seize the opportunity to define its alignment with the US through either AUKUS or a similar agreement.\(^\text{13}\)

Against this backdrop, the statement made by US Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific, Kurt Campbell, that AUKUS is “an open architecture,” and that the US expects to see “other countries joining” over time has intensified the debate on whether South Korea should join AUKUS when it begins accepting new members.\(^\text{14}\)
The nuclear debate

South Korea’s interest in AUKUS primarily revolves around the issue of nuclear-powered submarines, as evident from the way South Korean media characterises AUKUS as a “nuclear submarine alliance.”

South Korea believes its own navy would be significantly enhanced by nuclear submarines, potentially making it five to ten times stronger. Nuclear-powered submarines are seen as an effective means to detect North Korean submarines equipped with submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) and as a countermeasure against China and Russia.

However, South Korea faces challenges in acquiring enriched uranium, the fuel required for nuclear submarine reactors, without US approval. According to Article 11 of the revised 2015 US-South Korea nuclear agreement, South Korea is allowed to enrich uranium up to “less than 20 percent” but only with written agreement from both sides. Additionally, Article 13 states that nuclear material “shall not be utilised for any military purpose.” While South Korea can consult with the US about uranium enrichment options through a high-level commission, the US generally asserts that the primary purpose of this commission is to promote “peaceful nuclear cooperation” and focus discussions on matters related to “civil nuclear energy.”

The US, committed to upholding the nuclear nonproliferation regime, has shown reservations about South Korea’s pursuit of nuclear-powered submarines. When Kim Hyun-jong, former Deputy National Security Advisor to the President of South Korea, visited the US and requested the provision of nuclear fuel to secure a nuclear-powered submarine, Washington reportedly declined, citing concerns about proliferation.

The announcement of AUKUS has sparked a renewed domestic debate in South Korea concerning its own nuclear-powered submarine program.

Box 1: What to know about the 2015 US-South Korea nuclear agreement

- **Article 11:** South Korea is only allowed to enrich uranium up to “less than 20 percent”, and only with written agreement from both sides.
- **Article 13:** Nuclear material shall not be used for “any military purpose.”
- **Agreed Minute 7.1:** The Parties may consult in the High Level Bilateral Commission with a view to identifying “appropriate options for enrichment of uranium.”
- **Annex III 1:** The purpose of the High Level Bilateral Commission is to facilitate the “peaceful nuclear and strategic cooperation” and on-going dialogue regarding areas of mutual interest in “civil nuclear energy.”

Way forward

Following President Biden’s foreign policy commitment to prioritise the Indo-Pacific region, there are now calls for South Korea to engage in renegotiations with the Biden administration about South Korea’s nuclear submarine ambitions.

The recent summit between the US and South Korea in May 2023 elevated the relationship to a global alliance, raising expectations for enhanced cooperation. News of the AUKUS trilateral research team to develop Australian nuclear submarines has raised South Korean hopes that the US might take a proactive stance on South Korea’s nuclear-powered submarine aspirations. But, if the US refuses to cooperate with South Korea on nuclear submarine development while making exceptions for other countries like Australia, South Koreans may feel embarrassed by what they perceive as inconsistent US behaviour.
Should AUKUS evolve into a more inclusive forum, South Korea would support the idea of expanding the partnership. While the risk of increased Chinese containment is an ongoing concern for South Korea, it recognises the potential additional benefits of security cooperation.

South Koreans see nuclear-powered submarines as a key advantage. A survey conducted in December 2021 revealed that 75.2 per cent of respondents supported South Korea developing nuclear-powered submarines.23 Levels of support were consistent across political affiliations. As a result, South Korea will closely monitor the possibility of the US extending similar offers to other allies and actively strive to seize any opportunities that may arise.

About the author

Prof. Jina Kim is Dean of Language and Diplomacy Division at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Previously, she was Chief of the North Korean Military Division at Korea Institute for Defense Analyses and Adjunct Professor at Yonsei Graduate School of International Studies. She is on multiple advisory boards for the Republic of Korea Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of National Unification, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force, Seoul Metropolitan Government, and Peaceful Unification Advisory Council. She also served as a member of the advisory board for the Blue House National Security Office, US–ROK Combined Forces Command, and Policy Evaluation Committee for the Prime Minister’s Office. She authored *North Korean Nuclear Weapons Crisis* (Palgrave McMillan 2014), *US Policy toward North Korea: Change for the Future* (KIDA 2022), and *Cooperative Threat Reduction and the Korean Peninsula* (KIDA 2020) and co-authored many books including *Handbook of Europe–Korea Relations* (Routledge 2021) and *The Sheathed Sword* (Bloomsbury 2022). She published more than 50 monographs and articles in academic journals such as *The Washington Quarterly*, *Survival*, *International Spectator*, *Journal of International Relations*, *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, and others. She holds a Ph.D. in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, and an MA in International Studies from Yonsei Graduate School of International Studies.

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Endnotes


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