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THE FUTURE OF U.S.-SOUTH KOREA
NUCLEAR COOPERATION:
FINDING POLICY DIRECTION
IN A TEMPESTUOUS TIME

BY ANKIT PANDA



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Ankit Panda is the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. His research interests include nuclear strategy, escalation, missiles and missile defense, space security, and U.S. alliances. He is the author of *The New Nuclear Age: At the Precipice of Armageddon* (Polity, 2025), *Indo-Pacific Missile Arsenals: Avoiding Spirals and Mitigating Risks* (Carnegie, 2023), and *Kim Jong Un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea* (Hurst/Oxford, 2020). Panda is co-editor of *New Approaches to Verifying and Monitoring North Korea's Nuclear Arsenal* (Carnegie, 2021).

Panda has consulted for the United Nations in New York and Geneva, and his analysis has been sought by U.S. Strategic Command, Space Command, and Indo-Pacific Command. Panda is among the most highly cited experts worldwide on North Korean nuclear capabilities. He has testified on matters related to South Korea and Japan before the congressionally chartered U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission. Panda has also testified before the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Strategic Forces. Before joining Carnegie, Panda was an adjunct senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists and a journalist covering international security. Panda is a frequent expert commentator in print and broadcast media around the world on nuclear policy and defense matters. His work has appeared in or been featured by the New York Times, the New Yorker, the Economist, the Washington Post, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, the Atlantic, the New Republic, the South China Morning Post, Politico, and the National Interest. Panda has also published in scholarly journals, including *Survival*, the *Washington Quarterly*, and *India Review*, and has contributed to the IISS Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment and Strategic Survey. He is editor-at-large at the *Diplomat*, where he hosts the Asia Geopolitics podcast, and a contributing editor at *War on the Rocks*, where he hosts *Thinking the Unthinkable with Ankit Panda*, a podcast on nuclear matters.



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한·미 핵 협력의 미래: 격변하는 시기 속 정책 방향 탐색

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Following a year of drastic political shifts in both Washington and Seoul, the United States and South Korea would do well to seek predictability and direction in 2026 in their broader relationship, in general, and on nuclear policy matters, in specific. From deterrence to energy, nuclear policy questions have long been central to the broader U.S.-South Korea alliance. Predictability, unfortunately, is not the strong suit of the current U.S. administration, which behaves increasingly as a personalistic regime, where President Donald J. Trump's every whim is translated into policy—or something resembling policy. With this reality in mind, there is nevertheless a framework on nuclear policy matters that may prove useful to those within the U.S. government and in the South Korean government seek to find avenues for progress and cooperation.

In broad terms, the nuclear policy agenda in the bilateral relationship can be divided into three pillars. The first of these concerns security and the nuclear extended deterrence relationship,

큰 틀에서 보면, 양자 관계에서의 핵 정책 의제는 세 가지 축으로 구분할 수 있다

the backbone of South Korea's broader national defense strategy. The second is nuclear energy, where rapid changes are underway in the regulatory environment in the United States and where South Korean global market share continues to expand. The third concerns the still largely inchoate plan for South Korea to pursue a nuclear-propelled, conventionally armed submarine. On each of these matters, the following year may prove determinative in different ways.

Viewed from a distance, the U.S.-South Korea nuclear extended deterrence relationship and broader alliance may appear to remain on strong footing, but malaise lies beneath the surface. In December 2025, the Biden administration-era Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG) [held its fifth meeting](#), with a joint press release affirming “the U.S. commitment to provide extended deterrence to the ROK, utilizing the full range of U.S. defense capabilities, including nuclear.” This continuity should not be taken for granted; the second Trump

administration's willingness to carry forward an initiative germinated under the previous U.S. administration was not a given.

Elsewhere, senior Trump administration officials [have praised Seoul](#) as a “model ally,” underscoring to interlocutors in South Korea that the country is unlikely to face the harsh criticism that certain traditional U.S. allies—especially those in Europe—have faced on defense matters. (Trump [has previously](#) criticized Seoul,

including on the 2024 campaign trail.) In the current geopolitical context, however, continuity alone does not appear to be sufficient and there should be efforts to expand the scope of alliance activities on nuclear extended deterrence, especially as North Korean capabilities continue to rapidly advance amid its new alliance with

**그러나 현재의 지정학적 환경에서는 단순한
연속성만으로는 충분하지 않아 보이며,
핵 확장억제와 관련한 동맹 활동의 범위를
확대하려는 노력이 필요하다**

Russia. For many in Washington, competitive dynamics with China are another consideration. Realistically, ideas on these issues will be unlikely to originate in Washington, where the traditional alliance management policy processes are in a period of [disarray and disruption](#)—best articulated by the significant contraction of the National Security Council. Seoul, however, can and should be proactive.

Promising ideas could include quiet bilateral discussions of expanding the set of activities that could proceed under the aegis of the bilateral NCG. Given the political intention in [the White House](#) and [the Blue House](#) to seek engagement with North Korea, there should be efforts to game out scenarios where meaningful engagement takes place between the United States, South Korea, and North Korea—and how such engagement could bear on nuclear extended deterrence (for instance, through the United States accepting certain limitations on activities on and around the Korean Peninsula).

A rich area for expert-level dialogue and consultation is the area of conventional-nuclear integration—ranging from South Korean conventional support to U.S. nuclear operations on and around the Korean Peninsula, and broader alliance conventional coordination in a potentially nuclearized environment on the Korean Peninsula. The [newly established K-STRATCOM](#), which is currently undergoing shifts under the Lee administration, should continue to closely consult with U.S. Forces Korea and the Combined Forces Command.

**서울은 현재의 ‘모범 동맹국’ 지위와 무관하게,
트럼프 대통령의 동맹 인식이 수시로 변화할 수
있다는 점을 염두에 두고 대비해야 한다**

Meanwhile, Seoul will need to be ready for the possibility that, despite its current “model ally” status, President Trump’s demeanor toward the alliance might shift at any moment. The concern alluded to in the U.S. 2025 [National Security Strategy](#), that Washington would seek “increased

burden-sharing from Japan and South Korea,” could [lead to new demands](#). To this end, South Korea should be ready to communicate the measures it is taking to enhance the broader credibility of the alliance.

While for the moment, Seoul appears to unlikely to face the sort of crisis that [overwhelmed the transatlantic](#) alliance in January 2026—when President Trump began to publicly emphasize the interest of the United States in seeking territorial control of Greenland from its NATO ally Denmark—there should not be complacency. The prospect of crises still does loom (and, in particular, on the nuclear submarine issue, as is discussed below).

On nuclear energy cooperation, there is no shortage of new thinking in both Seoul and Washington. [Proposals abound](#) on everything from industrial collaboration to workforce development to joint research to [civil nuclear exports](#). [Some have pointed](#) to South Korea's promise as a potential strategic partner in facilitating the U.S. interest—articulated more clearly during the Biden administration—in seeing broader market diversification in nuclear energy and nuclear power plant construction away from Russia and China.

In this domain, expectations of meaningful progress will need to be managed in 2026. Discord in the traditional policy formulation process in Washington will likely preclude meaningful entrepreneurship in the bilateral relationship on many proposals; for instance, normal inter-agency coordination and [expertise-driven policy implementation](#) are largely absent in today's Washington—problems that are in turn intensified by federal government [staff reductions](#). Moreover, the second Trump administration's [strong preference](#) in favoring U.S. firms and suppliers over those from other states—including allies and partners—will be a major obstacle. A promising path for the Lee Jae-myung administration, however, may be to seek to identify areas where South Korean firms might be able to co-lead projects with U.S. firms.

이재명 정부에 있어 하나의 유망한 경로는 한국 기업이 미국 기업과 함께 프로젝트를 공동 주도할 수 있는 영역을 발굴하는 것이다

A third area where policy direction is certainly desired in Seoul—and to a more ambiguous degree in Washington—is on the question of South Korea [seeking a nuclear-powered submarine](#). In October 2025, President Trump granted “approval” for Seoul to pursue this capability, with little clarity on what exactly this would mean in practice: technology transfer, an AUKUS-style arrangement, or something else entirely. While there are no shortage of [open technical and legal questions](#), there is the prospect that this deal could lead to a clash between mismatched expectations in Seoul and Washington.

A key question still remains the matter of where such a class of new Republic of Korea Navy submarines would be built. South Korean officials have made it clear that their expectation is that this capability will be built in South Korea itself, and Seoul is seeking a [parallel bilateral agreement on the matter](#). There is little evidence, however, that President Trump has agreed to this—instead having publicly evinced his belief that such a submarine would be built in the United States, [specifically at the Hanhwa Philly Shipyard](#) (a shipyard with no capacity for submarines or military vessels, much less the handling of radioactive materials). Meanwhile, the U.S. submarine industrial base [remains over-capacity](#) and the possibility of added demands for a South Korean delivery are simply implausible.

There are a number of other crucial details, of course, that must be answered for should this plan proceed, but the bigger risk in the coming year is that the mismatched expectations on the “big” questions—where a submarine will be built and by whom and with whose technologies—could cause serious jolts to the broader bilateral relationship and even the alliance. While technocrats and experts in both systems are well-equipped to no doubt find a mutually agreeable settlement, compatible with U.S. nonproliferation law and South Korean expectations, there must be high-level, sustainable political buy-in. Perhaps no task will be greater for Seoul

아마도 서울에 있어 가장 큰 과제는, 잠수함 제조를 한국에서 수행하는 것이 이 프로젝트를 전면적으로 국내 이전(onshoring)하려는 트럼프 대통령의 보다 광범위한 중상주의적 이해관계와 양립 가능하다는 점을 그에게 설득할 준비를 갖추는 일일 것이다

U.S. law) on civil nuclear cooperation. Seoul's key demands—on domestic uranium enrichment and spent fuel reprocessing—would, under a more traditional U.S. administration, encounter friction on nonproliferation grounds. The extent to which this is likely to be true under the Trump administration is unclear. This negotiation will pertain to the peaceful uses of such technologies—i.e., not to the nuclear submarine matter, where Seoul is also seeking to enrich uranium for naval fuel. Non-peaceful applications, such as naval fuel, may require a supplementary defense agreement to enable the transfer of U.S.-sourced material and technology to support a South Korean nuclear-powered submarine. As these negotiations proceed, they will also draw U.S. congressional interest; Congress must ultimately authorize any renegotiated civil nuclear agreement.

than to be ready to persuade President Trump as to why submarine manufacturing in South Korea will be compatible with his broader mercantilist interests in onshoring this project in its entirety.

In parallel to all of the above, Seoul and Washington will [continue to push](#) ahead with talks on renegotiating the so-called “[123 Agreement](#)” (named for a section in the relevant

이러한 협상이 진행됨에 따라 미국 의회의 관심도 함께 집중될 것이며, 재협상된 민간 원자력 협정은 궁극적으로 의회의 승인을 받아야 한다

As this brief discusses, despite the seemingly chaotic environment in Washington, the bilateral agenda on nuclear matters between Washington and Seoul—from extended deterrence to energy to the new submarine issue—remains rich. Perhaps nothing will be more important to alliance unity and durability in 2026

정통적 접근과 절차, 세부 조율을 중시하지 않는 트럼프 행정부의 성향은 서울의 야심찬 목표 달성을 위한 경로를 한층 더 복잡하게 만들 가능성이 있다

than for expectations to be managed—particularly in South Korea. The Trump administration's disdain for orthodoxy, process, and detail-oriented negotiation may leave the path to some of Seoul's most ambitious goals less straightforward than it might have been otherwise. Despite this environment, both sides

can aspire to sustain the essential architecture of extended deterrence that does exist, including through the NCG, while seeking progress in nuclear energy cooperation.

The ROK-US Policy Brief is a joint publication between the Seoul National University Institute for Peace and Unification Studies (IPUS) and The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS) dedicated to exploring current Korea-related policy matters within regional and global contexts.

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