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# South Korea Unveils Jangbogo-N: Indo-Pacific Nuclear Submarine Race

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# South Korea Unveils Jangbogo-N: Indo-Pacific Nuclear Submarine Race

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## WHY IN NEWS:

South Korea's **Ministry of National Defense** on **May 26, 2026** unveiled the **“Basic Plan for the Development of the Republic of Korea Nuclear-Powered Submarine”** – formally the **Jangbogo-N Project** (“N” denoting next-generation and nuclear). The lead boat is targeted for launch in the mid-2030s and operational service by the late 2030s. Planned displacement is ~5,000 tonnes with a **low-enriched uranium (LEU) reactor**, in a fully domestic build.

The unveiling reshapes the Indo-Pacific underwater balance and adds South Korea to a hitherto exclusive group of nuclear-submarine powers.

## ABOUT JANGBOGO-N

ATTRIBUTE	DETAIL
Named after	<b>Jang Bogo</b> – 9th-century Korean naval commander who dominated East Asian seas
Class	Nuclear-powered attack submarine ( <b>SSN</b> )
Displacement	~5,000 tonnes
Reactor fuel	<b>Low-Enriched Uranium (LEU)</b> , <20% U-235
Build	Fully domestic – KAERI + Hanwha Ocean expected to lead
Lead boat launch	Mid-2030s
Operational service	Late 2030s

## THE 7-NATION NUCLEAR-SUBMARINE CLUB

With Jangbogo-N, the club of nations operating nuclear-powered submarines expands from six to seven.

#	COUNTRY	NOTES
1	<b>United States</b>	USS Nautilus (commissioned <b>1954</b> ); SSN, SSBN, SSGN; ~67 hulls
2	<b>Russia</b>	Since <b>1958</b> ; SSN and SSBN; ~50 hulls
3	<b>United Kingdom</b>	Astute-class SSN; Vanguard-class SSBN
4	<b>France</b>	Suffren-class SSN; Triomphant-class SSBN
5	<b>China</b>	Type 093/094/096 classes; ~12 nuclear hulls
6	<b>India</b>	Arihant-class SSBN; indigenous SSN cleared 2024
7	<b>South Korea</b>	Jangbogo-N — joining in the 2030s

## LEU VS HEU — THE REACTOR CHOICE

PARAMETER	LEU	HEU
U-235 enrichment	<20%	20–90+%
Proliferation risk	Lower	Higher
NPT compliance signal	Strong	Weaker
Core size	Larger	Smaller
Mid-life refuelling	Required	Often “lifetime fuel”
Examples	South Korea’s Jangbogo-N	US Virginia-class; UK Astute-class

- Seoul’s LEU choice navigates the **US–ROK 123 Agreement (renewed 2015)**, which restricts South Korean uranium enrichment.
- **INS Arihant** reportedly uses an HEU-derived design (~40% enrichment).
- **AUKUS Pillar-1** will eventually equip Australia with HEU-fuelled SSNs derived from US Virginia-class and UK Astute-class designs.

## AUKUS CONTEXT

- **AUKUS pact** signed **September 15, 2021** by Australia, the UK and the US.
- **Pillar-1:** Australia to acquire ~8 SSNs — Virginia-class transition, then long-term **SSN-AUKUS** class.
- First Virginia-class transfer expected **~2032**.

- **Pillar-2:** advanced technology cooperation — AI, quantum, hypersonics, undersea capabilities.

## INDIA'S NUCLEAR SUBMARINE PROGRAMME

### SSBN Fleet

BOAT	STATUS
<b>INS Arihant</b>	First SSBN, commissioned <b>August 2016</b> ; SLBM-capable
<b>INS Arighaat</b>	Second SSBN, commissioned <b>August 29, 2024</b>
<b>INS Aridhaman</b>	Third SSBN, undergoing fitting-out; commissioning expected 2026–27
<b>S4</b>	Fourth SSBN, planned

### SSN Programme and Infrastructure

- **Project Varsha** — strategic submarine base at **Rambilli, Andhra Pradesh**; under construction.
- **SSN programme** — CCS approved in **October 2024**: two indigenous nuclear-powered attack submarines; outlay ~**₹40,000 crore**.

### K-Series SLBMs

MISSILE	RANGE
K-15 Sagarika	750 km
K-4	3,500 km
K-5	5,000+ km (in development)

## STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

- The Indo-Pacific underwater architecture is being transformed.
- South Korea joining the SSN club acts as a **counter to China's A2/AD** (Anti-Access/Area-Denial) posture and the PLAN's expanding Type 093/094 and future Type 096 SSBN fleet.
- For India, the challenge is to **sustain undersea dominance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR)**.
- A Korean nuclear submarine arm bolsters Quad-adjacent capability in Northeast Asia.

## US 123 AGREEMENT FRAMEWORK

- A “**123 Agreement**” refers to **Section 123 of the US Atomic Energy Act, 1954** – the legal framework for US civil nuclear cooperation.
- **India–US 123 Agreement**: signed **2007**; operational from **2008**.
- **ROK–US 123 Agreement**: **renewed 2015** – restricts South Korea’s enrichment activities.

## INDIA’S NUCLEAR DOCTRINE

The doctrine adopted by the **Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in 2003** rests on four pillars:

- **No First Use (NFU)** of nuclear weapons.
- **Credible Minimum Deterrent (CMD)**.
- **Massive retaliation** designed to inflict unacceptable damage.
- **SSBN-based second-strike capability** – the maturing leg of the triad.

## WAY FORWARD FOR INDIA

- Accelerate the indigenous **SSN programme** – target the first hull by 2032–33.
- Operationalise **Project Varsha** at Rambilli.
- Sustain SSBN deterrence patrols armed with K-4 and K-5 SLBMs.
- Expand Indo-Pacific undersea surveillance, including through Quad maritime initiatives.
- Counter Chinese expansion in the IOR – Hambantota, Gwadar and Djibouti dual-use footprints.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

- **GS Paper 2** – India’s defence partnerships, bilateral and multilateral groupings (Quad, AUKUS), Indo-Pacific.
- **GS Paper 3** – Defence technology, nuclear policy, indigenisation.
- **Prelims** – AUKUS, 123 Agreement, K-series missiles, Arihant-class boats, Project Varsha.
- **Mains** – Nuclear submarine race in the Indo-Pacific; India’s strategic options under the 2003 nuclear doctrine.

**FACTS CORNER**

Jangbogo-N — South Korea's nuclear submarine project announced May 26, 2026.

Named after Jang Bogo, 9th-century Korean naval commander.

Displacement: ~5,000 tonnes; reactor: LEU (<20% U-235).

Timeline — launch mid-2030s; operational late 2030s.

Nuclear submarine powers expand from 6 to 7 with South Korea joining (USA, Russia, UK, France, China, India + ROK).

First nuclear submarine — USS Nautilus (USA, commissioned September 30, 1954).

AUKUS pact — September 15, 2021.

India's SSN programme cleared by CCS — October 2024 (2 hulls; ~₹40,000 crore).

INS Arihant commissioned August 2016.

INS Arighaat commissioned August 29, 2024.

INS Aridhaman under fitting-out (2026–27 expected).

Project Varsha — Rambilli, Andhra Pradesh.

K-15 Sagarika — 750 km SLBM.

K-4 — 3,500 km SLBM.

K-5 — 5,000+ km SLBM (in development).

ROK–US 123 Agreement renewed 2015.

India–US 123 Agreement signed 2007; operational 2008.

India's nuclear doctrine adopted by CCS in 2003 — NFU, CMD, massive retaliation.

Sources: [PIB](#), [Ministry of Defence](#), [Korea Times](#)

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