

## Next year's World Korean Association Conference: first test of initiative led by Korean associations

‘Compatriot events should be led by compatriots’; ‘OKA should provide administrative and budgetary support’

‘Organizing intern programs, next-generation leader forums, and global youth conference. We need to open path for next-generation proportional representation’

“I do not wish for the government, such as the Overseas Koreans Agency, to host events for overseas compatriots. The structure should be one where Korean associations take the lead, with the government providing administrative and budgetary support,” Ko Sang-gu, president of the World Association of Korean Associations (WAKA), said in a recent interview with Yonhap News.

“The World Korean Association Conference, previously hosted by the OKA, has now shifted to a Korean association-led organization starting with this year’s event. The greatest achievement is gained through enduring conflict and pain.

“We held numerous steering committee meetings, going through cycles of breakdown and restart, until we finally reached an agreement. The fundamental principle of democracy is not forcing through decisions through tyranny of the majority but persuading even the single dissenting voice,” he said.

“Had the agreement fallen through, this convention would have been remembered as a negative experience. We talked and persuaded over two days until our tongues were sore. That’s how committed we were.”

### ‘Disputes to be mediated locally. Dispute Mediation Committee to be made permanent’

Regarding recurring disputes within Korean associations worldwide, he said: “Government intervention only deepens legal battles and emotional rifts. The overseas compatriot community, which understands local public opinion, bylaws and practices better than anyone, must resolve these issues themselves.”

To this end, he outlined a plan: “We will establish a permanent Dispute Mediation Committee within the WAKA to neutrally verify facts and find common ground through mediation and arbitration. If agreement cannot be reached, decisions will be made based on majority opinion and legitimacy, but bias is strictly prohibited.”

Throughout the interview, Ko emphasized the next generation and the sustainability of the Korean Wave.



Ko Sang-gu, president of the World Assembly of Korean Associations, is interviewed by Yonhap News Agency.

“The blood and sweat of overseas Koreans underpin the global reach of ‘hallyu,’ K-food and K-culture,” he said. “Without building on this foundation, the craze will fade.” He argued that short-term industrial facility tours and culture-focused homeland visitation experiences have limitations. He proposed a “reverse internship system,” sending overseas youth to Korean companies and institutions for six months or longer, as a core solution.

### ‘Foundation of Korean Wave is diaspora. To sustain it, we must strengthen its roots’

“We must place the next generation of overseas compatriots in Korean SMEs, midsize companies, and content, food, manufacturing and IT workplaces. They should experience the ‘real Korea’ -- from commuting and subway rides to lunch breaks -- to foster identity and networks. This can be started without a large

budget if companies can provide minimum wage-level salaries, while the government and local authorities support airfare and basic settlement costs.

“We will broaden the spectrum to include content companies like SM, JYP and YG; K-food franchises; and manufacturing, semiconductor and IT workplaces,” he said. “We must meticulously design participation periods and qualifications within legal boundaries to lower barriers to entry.”

Regarding nurturing the next generation of overseas compatriots, Ko proposed a phased model: “First, convene a ‘Next Generation Leaders Forum’ to gather youth with proven leadership, then expand this into a ‘Global Youth Conference.’”

He stressed that accommodation, meals and programs should be jointly provided by the public and private sectors to minimize participant costs, and that a tightly woven network enabling practical exchanges must be established.

Regarding the budget for overseas compatriot policies, he raised his voice in stating, “While compatriots are verbally recognized as a precious national asset, the reality that the budget fails to support this is regrettable. A groundbreaking increase commensurate with the scale of 7 million people is necessary.”

### Leaders of overseas Korean organizations taking proportional representation seats could breed division

“Having leaders of overseas Korean organizations directly take proportional representation seats could breed division,” he emphasized regarding political participation. “Transcending left and right, we must open the way for innovative next-generation overseas compatriots in their 40s who hold South Korean citizenship to represent the interests of overseas Koreans based on principles.”

Ko stressed, “Today’s spread of the Korean Wave is not solely the result of government budgets; it is built upon the trust and networks overseas compatriots have cultivated locally. We must recognize this contribution and prioritize support for overseas compatriot businesses. Policies using taxpayer money to support local foreign companies competing with Korean businesses should be reconsidered.”

When asked about his expectations for the new administration and the OKA, he said: “I hope this government’s message of ‘people’s sovereignty’ extends to overseas Koreans. I hope there will be an institutionalized structure where overseas Koreans take the lead and the government provides support. Next year’s World Korean Association Conference will be the first test. I hope the government shows its investment in youth and the next generation through the budget.”

Ko, who operates 150 K-Markets, Korean food distribution stores, in Vietnam, is a global entrepreneur who has served as vice chairperson of the Asia-Pacific Region for the 21st Peaceful Unification Advisory Council, chairperson of the 18th World Korean Business Convention and chairperson of the 2nd Jang Bogo Korean Entrepreneurs Award Council. He is also an honorary ambassador for North Chungcheong Province. 



President Lee Jae Myung (5th from L) and OKA Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup (4th from L) sing the national anthem with attendees at the 19th World Korean Day commemoration ceremony held at the Grand Walkerhill Seoul Hotel in Gwangjin-gu, Seoul, on Oct. 2. Ko Sang-gu, president of the World Assembly of Korean Associations, is third from the left. (Photo provided by Presidential Press Office)



President Ko Sang-gu delivers remarks at the 2025 4th Korean Association Public Diplomacy Seminar held at the National Assembly Members' Office Building on Sept. 26. Attendees included Lee Jae-kang, chairman of the Overseas Koreans Committee of the Democratic Party of Korea; Kim Gun, secretary of the Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee of the People Power Party; Kim Young-bae, secretary of the Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee of the Democratic Party of Korea; and OKA Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup (2nd from L).



Chairman Ko Sang-gu delivers remarks at the World Korean Association Presidents Workshop hosted by the World Assembly of Korean Associations at the Grand Walkerhill Seoul Hotel in Gwangjin-gu, Seoul, on Oct. 2.