



Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup, a three-term lawmaker, becomes the first head of the Overseas Koreans Agency following the launch of the people-centered government.

‘Actively pursuing lowering age for dual citizenship and improving overseas voting rights’

‘Overseas Koreans are partners in cooperation, not subjects of management or regulation; we will implement demand-driven policies’

“The 7 million overseas Koreans are not subjects to be managed and regulated by our government but partners with whom we must collaborate and move forward together. We will focus on implementing demand-driven policies for overseas Koreans, not those based on administrative convenience.”

Kim Kyung-hyup (63), the first commissioner of the Overseas Koreans Agency since the launch of the “People’s Sovereignty Government,” shared his aspirations on Nov. 6 during an interview with Yonhap News Agency at the agency’s headquarters in Songdo, Incheon, to mark his 50th day in office.

“Although the organization and budget are still half-baked, I will leverage my experience as a three-term lawmaker to coordinate tasks with government ministries and secure cooperation from the National Assembly, striving to meet the expectations of the overseas Korean community,” he stated.

A three-term lawmaker from the Democratic Party of Korea, he was the first to handle overseas compatriot affairs at the Blue House during

the Roh Moo-hyun administration. In the National Assembly, he spearheaded the bill to establish the Overseas Koreans Agency and the Framework Act on Overseas Koreans in 2017.

He also worked to enact the Special Act on Koryo-in Compatriots.

“I feel a sense of destiny taking on this role as commissioner while also feeling a heavier responsibility, knowing the difficulties and various challenges facing the overseas Korean community that need to be resolved,” he said.

Kim emphasized that the OKA, now entering its third year, still has a long way to go as a fledgling organization and that he will focus on improving structural issues.

“Launched hastily by the previous administration without sufficient preparation, the OKA’s unstable and sloppy organizational structure has yet to solidify,” he said. “Moreover, with its budget showing little difference from the days of the Overseas Koreans Foundation, the tangible benefits felt by the overseas Korean community likely remain negligible.”

‘OKA must serve as comprehensive control tower unifying Korean communities worldwide’

He further expressed his determination to tackle issues step by step, stating, “Even when proposing the bill to establish the Overseas Koreans Agency eight years ago, we emphasized the need for integrated management of overseas Korean affairs scattered across multiple ministries. Yet, we still haven’t consolidated them into one.”

The following is a Q&A with Commissioner Kim.

At the 19th World Korean Day commemoration ceremony held Oct. 2, President Lee Jae Myung stated that he would gather wisdom to lower the age for allowing dual citizenship and improve the overseas voting system. What is the response from the OKA regarding this?

A recent study commissioned by the OKA found that lowering the age for multiple citizenship from the current 65 years to 40 would generate a production-inducing effect of 6.2 trillion won and an added-value inducing effect of 2.9 trillion won by 2044. This indicates that lowering the age limit benefits national interests. Political circles are also taking strong interest in this, with two bills to partially amend the Nationality Act already proposed in the National Assembly.

The OKA will derive advisable policy directions by considering the effects of lowering the age limit and reforms to related systems, such as social welfare and military service issues. It will actively pursue system improvements through consultation with relevant ministries, including the Ministry of Justice.

As a global trading nation, cooperation with the international community is crucial for the Republic of Korea, and support from the overseas Korean community is highly beneficial. Lowering the age requirement lays the groundwork for the overseas Korean community to freely travel to and from their homeland and contribute. The OKA plans to actively promote the policy’s effectiveness and the contributions overseas Koreans make to their homeland to foster public consensus.

Furthermore, addressing the inconvenience faced by overseas citizens who must travel hundreds to thousands of kilometers to vote at diplomatic missions should have been accomplished long ago. However, since institutional improvements for overseas elections, such as mail-in or internet voting, require amendments to laws and regulations, the National Assembly’s role is paramount. We plan to actively convey the demands of overseas voters to the National Assembly and work through consultations with the National Election Commission to make it more convenient for overseas citizens to exercise their suffrage rights.

OKA is receiving criticism for falling short of expectations compared to OKA era.

I see this as a structural issue rather than a lack of individual staff aptitude or capability. As a central government ministry, the OKA’s organizational and budgetary rigidity is unavoidable. We are well aware of the complaints from the overseas Korean community that increasingly complex administrative procedures have made receiving support more difficult than before.

This is precisely why, when the bill to establish the agency was proposed, we emphasized the need for a clear division of roles with private sector support organizations. Yet, such organizations are currently absent.

In Israel, for instance, various Jewish foundations share this role with the government. It is regrettable that the Overseas Koreans Framework Act did not explicitly stipulate enabling the Overseas Koreans Cooperation Center to sufficiently perform such functions when it was enacted. We plan to innovate the support system and operational framework for overseas Koreans to align with the current situation. Long term, we also plan to pursue the establishment of a private support organization, tentatively named the World Korean Foundation.

President Lee Jae Myung (3rd from L) salutes the national flag at the 19th World Korean Day Commemoration Ceremony held at the Grand Walkerhill Seoul Hotel in Gwangjin-gu, Seoul, on Oct. 2. From left to right: Ko Sang-gu, president of the World Assembly of Korean Associations; Kim Kyung-hyup, commissioner of the Overseas Koreans Agency; Lee; and Ko Tak-hee, co-chair of the World Korean Association Conference.



‘Organization and budget are still half-baked; I will leverage my experience as three-term lawmaker to drive cooperation with ministries and Nat’l Assembly’



OKA Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup

What about plans to restore and expand the system from the days of the Overseas Koreans Foundation, where consular officers specializing in overseas Korean affairs were dispatched to diplomatic missions?

Since all policy answers lie in the field, it's crucial for policy staff to experience the overseas Korean community firsthand.

To swiftly advance the Lee Jae Myung administration's national agenda item 123 -- "tailored overseas Korean support" and "maximizing overseas Korean capabilities" -- we will expand dispatches beyond the former Overseas Koreans Foundation locations like the U.S. (LA/NY), China (Beijing), Japan (Tokyo), Vietnam (Ho Chi Minh City), Australia (Sydney) and Kazakhstan (Almaty), as well as to locations with high demand from overseas compatriots.

We are currently discussing a consular dispatch plan with relevant ministries with a plan for strengthened institutional stability, differentiating it from the foundation era. Furthermore, considering the unique nature of the OKA, we will review various systems, such as on-site policy visit training programs and in-house overseas training to enhance field capabilities.

The number of compatriots returning to Korea has risen to 860,000, and it is expected to soon reach the 1 million mark. I hear

there are plans to establish a dedicated organization to assist their settlement?

The number of compatriots residing in Korea, which stood at around 300,000 in 2015, has now surpassed 860,000 a decade later. As more compatriots seek permanent settlement in their homeland rather than temporary stays, new policy demands are emerging beyond residency status, including employment, housing security and children's education.

However, these responsibilities are currently scattered across various ministries by sector -- residence, employment and welfare -- and have been implemented from the perspective of foreign nationals residing in Korea. Consequently, returning compatriots find themselves in a policy blind spot.

According to the Framework Act on Overseas Koreans, the state has a duty to support returning compatriots. As a response to the pressing challenges of the low birth rate, aging population and regional depopulation, the return of overseas Koreans who share bloodlines, language and culture must be actively embraced.

The OKA does not view returning compatriots as subjects of management and regulation. Instead, it will understand their historical and cultural backgrounds and implement support measures for stable settlement, tailored to each individual's circumstances.

To this end, a dedicated organization will be newly established to take the lead in overseeing and coordinating domestic compatriot policies within the government, providing customized support, improving systems and enhancing public awareness.

The OKA is entering the third year since its launch, yet overseas Korean affairs remain scattered across various ministries. How do you plan to pursue the unification of service windows?

One of the purposes of the Framework Act on Overseas Koreans is to centralize overseas Korean affairs, currently scattered across ministries, under the OKA.

However, similar responsibilities remain scattered across ministries, leading to inefficiencies due to duplication. We plan to actively coordinate with relevant ministries to integrate tasks while leveraging their expertise, thereby serving as the control tower for overseas compatriot affairs.

Encouragingly, we recently took over the support programs for Sakhalin compatriots and adopted compatriots, which were previously under the Ministry of Health and Welfare, enabling us to manage them more substantively.

The budget for the OKA has not increased significantly compared to its foundation days, leading to complaints that the benefits felt by the overseas Korean community haven't changed.

It rose by 3 billion won from 1.067 trillion won in 2024 to 1.071

‘Need for private sector organizational capacity to share responsibilities’ Actively promoting consular dispatches and support for returning compatriots

trillion won this year. Next year’s proposed budget of 1.092 trillion won is also nearly unchanged. While the budget appears higher than the 600-700 billion-won era of the Overseas Koreans Foundation, the number of employees has more than doubled, resulting in little net change in the budget.

Moving forward, we plan to do our utmost during the National Assembly’s budget deliberation process to secure essential project budgets for implementing the Lee administration’s national agenda.

There are comments that the OKA, which brings together human resources from various government ministries and the private sector, faces challenges in fostering teamwork due to its diverse backgrounds.

In football, assists are just as important as scoring goals. Great assists come when teamwork truly clicks. As I am not a career civil servant, I do not know the backgrounds of individual members. There will absolutely be no discrimination based on origin. Instead, I will focus on leveraging the strengths derived from diverse backgrounds. To foster effective teamwork, I will ensure a balanced distribution of members with varied backgrounds within each department.

Unlike the 1970s to 1990s, South Korea’s national power has risen, and the status of the overseas Korean community has also increased in their countries of residence. I believe changes in overseas Korean policies are necessary to align with this new reality.

South Korea is the only nation among those liberated from colonial rule that has successfully achieved both industrialization and democratization. Alongside the global “hallyu” wave, K-culture, K-dramas, K-food, K-beauty and the rise in national prestige, the status of our overseas Korean communities has also significantly increased.

Despite a brief crisis last year, we overcame it successfully and returned as a model democratic nation and cultural powerhouse. This is thanks to our compatriots overseas who maintained their interest in their homeland, actively engaged in various public diplomacy efforts and cheered us on.

Overseas Koreans are the foundation of a global trading nation and are pioneers who have expanded the economic territory of the Republic of Korea. Their role is also essential in securing international cooperation for establishing a peace regime on the Korean Peninsula, including resolving inter-Korean issues. I will strive to strengthen communication between the homeland and overseas Korean communities, build substantive partnerships and promote people-to-people diplomacy.

To discover, nurture and utilize overseas Korean talent, establishing a human resources database is a priority, yet the current situation is inadequate. What is the plan for this?

The necessary database construction for establishing and implementing



President Lee Jae Myung (R) converses with OKA Commissioner Kim Kyung-hyup at the 19th World Korean Day Commemoration Ceremony held at the Grand Walkerhill Seoul Hotel in Gwangjin-gu, Seoul, on Oct. 2.

proper policies related to overseas Koreans has not been achieved in all the days of the Overseas Koreans Foundation up until the present day. Enacting relevant laws, including measures to supplement personal information protection, is required for this. Long-term improvements to laws and systems are needed to eliminate discrimination between domestic citizens and overseas compatriots, enabling overseas compatriots and overseas nationals to register themselves during domestic entry and exit processes.

Additionally, are there any new policies or visions to be pursued or revised?

We plan to enhance support for Hangeul schools and similar programs to help next-generation compatriots maintain their Korean identity while strengthening tailored support for each compatriot community to ensure their stable settlement within their host countries.

Furthermore, to address crises, such as the regional population decline, and secure outstanding overseas talent to bolster Korea’s growth engines, we plan to newly launch the “Overseas Korean Youth Talent Attraction and Settlement Support Project” next year.

The OKA will strive to implement policies for our compatriots that embody the true Republic of Korea, enabling them to take pride in Korea anywhere in the world without any anxiety. 🇰🇷