

**What role should South Korean think tanks play in establishing
South Korea as a leading country in solving global issues?**

한국이 글로벌 문제 해결을 선도하는 국가로 자리 잡기 위해 한국 싱크탱크는 어떤 역할을 해야 하는가?

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What role should South Korean think tanks play in establishing South Korea as a leading country in solving global issues?

The history of South Korea's (Korea) think tanks began with national institutes in the 1970s, followed by research societies in the 1990s, and later, civil society-based organisations. Korea's growing international status, exemplified by its G7 invitations and active participation in global policy discussions, presents an opportunity to solidify its role as a leader in solving transnational challenges. For Korea to demonstrate leadership, soft power is the key to which think tanks contribute. This essay highlights three expected roles Korean think tanks play in establishing Korea as a leading country in solving global issues. First, it should conduct cutting-edge research to develop forward-thinking policy frameworks. Second, it should provide strategic policy solutions that advise proactive strategies based on high-quality research on global challenges. Last, it should facilitate platforms for dialogue among experts, policymakers, and stakeholders.

I. Defining Global Issues: A lesson from the World's Leading Problem-Solvers

First, it is crucial to define “global issues.” In this essay, global issues refer to transnational challenges that impact the global population and require international cooperation. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a prime example. They require cross-border collaboration and partnership between the government, the public and private sectors, and think tanks. Some countries have led with clear initiatives, setting an example for others. Sweden is at the top with 84.5% progress toward achieving the SDG target by 2030, and Western European countries are in the top 10.¹ One of the commonalities is that they have institutionalised think tanks for innovation in addressing worldwide challenges. Of the 3,107 think tanks worldwide, 22% are based in Western and Northern Europe, with 697 organisations.² This indicates strengthening Korea's think tank sector could position it to lead in tackling global issues.

II. Ideas: Advancing Policies through Future-Oriented Research

Korean think tanks must prioritise long-term, forward-looking agendas that address complex policy issues. Due to their origin, many face structural limitations in addressing various policy topics. Government-affiliated institutes like the Korea National Diplomatic Academy align their research with state priorities. Political party think tanks, like the Yeouido Institute, often focus on short-term policies that shift with each administration. Global issues, however, transcend political and economic divides, necessitating sustained, independent research efforts.

Future-oriented research is vital for developing innovative policy solutions. Many global challenges require forward-thinking approaches and think tanks must proactively anticipate and address these trends to ensure societal preparedness. For sustainable progress, think tanks must focus on long-term resilience, advising policymakers on crafting strategies that will remain relevant for decades. Furthermore, forward-looking research enables think tanks to identify new opportunities and play a pivotal role in shaping international cooperation frameworks. Structuring think tanks into specialised research divisions can further enhance policy impact.

¹ Global Goals, "The Goals," accessed February 28, 2025, <https://www.globalgoals.org/goals/>.

² On Think Tanks, Think Tank State of the Sector 2020–2021, February 2022, accessed February 28, 2025, https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Think-Tank-State-of-the-Sector_20_21_main-report.pdf.

For instance, the International Institute for Sustainable Development covers 24 work areas, including climate change adaptation, gender equality, standards and value chains.³ This model fosters deep expertise, ensuring credibility and tailored policy advice. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration allows think tanks to respond swiftly to emerging global challenges. Ultimately, by focusing on future-originated research, Korean think tanks can effectively contribute to international cooperation, shaping policy frameworks that drive international cooperation and global solutions.

III. Implementation: Providing practical and strategic policy recommendations

For Korea to establish itself as a global problem-solver, think tanks must bridge the gap between research and real-world application. This requires translating ideas into practical, scalable, and globally relevant policy solutions. Think tanks should analyse problems and create implementable policy frameworks that societies, especially governments and businesses, can adopt. They must also adapt these policies to diverse economic and political contexts, ensuring their applicability beyond Korea. It involves frameworks that allow for customisation based on governance structures and modular policy recommendations that can be adjusted to different levels of government involvement. Moreover, they must offer step-by-step roadmaps with detailed guidelines for stakeholders to execute policies effectively.

Korean think tanks have influenced foreign policy and diplomacy, but their impact must expand to address modern global challenges. They should collaborate with international think tanks and NGOs to promote policy exchange and innovation. Korea Institute for International Economic Policy has been working closely with ASEAN think tanks regarding challenges from the potential of another US-China trade war⁴. Still, the topic should be more far-sighted, such as how developing countries can respond to the aftermath of tariffs with limited resources for sustainable development. By bridging local and global perspectives, Korean think tanks can craft solutions tailored to Korea's domestic landscape while contributing to international problem-solving efforts. This would help identify what only Korea could do worldwide and refine Korea-led solutions that address global problems. Therefore, Think tanks are key in solidifying Korea's role in international decision-making and ensuring its policy recommendations are backed by rigorous research and strategic foresight.

IV. Influence: Facilitating international engagement and shaping global discourse

To transition from a regional power to a globally recognised leader, Korean think tanks can firmly establish themselves as a hub for policy innovation by hosting international policy forums and academic summits. Korean think tanks can distinguish themselves by focusing on emerging policy areas and fields where Korea already holds a competitive edge. This includes the topics of cybersecurity and technology governance related to AI, semiconductors, green energy, and conflict resolution. Additionally, facilitating track-two diplomacy—informal yet impactful discussions among experts and stakeholders—can generate alternative policy solutions

³ International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), "Work Areas," accessed February 28, 2025, <https://www.iisd.org/strategic-priorities/work-areas>.

⁴ https://www.kiep.go.kr/gallery.es?mid=a20308000000&bid=0008&list_no=11645&act=view

beyond conventional diplomatic channels. Building regional think tank networks will strengthen Korea's global partnerships and thought leadership.

Moreover, international dialogue organised by think tanks shape public opinion and narratives around global challenges as they appear via international media outlets. Through a strong media presence, think tanks can ensure that Korea's policy solutions and expert opinions are covered in global news stories, influencing public perception of Korea as a global leader – a part of the contribution to Korea's international visibility. For example, opinions from the public events hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies are present across the U.S. and in global news outlets such as CNN, BBC, and the New York Times.⁵ From the international dialogue that will drive strategic networks and media presence, Korean think tanks can solidify the country's role as a global leader, shaping policy discourse and enhancing Korea's influence on global issues. Conclusively, from leveraged networks via global policy discourse, Korean think tanks can play a pivotal role, cementing Korea's position as a recognised problem-solver.

In conclusion, as Korea seeks to elevate its global leadership, the role of its think tanks becomes indispensable. Their ability to generate forward-thinking research (idea), translate insights into actionable policies (implementation), and foster international engagement (influence) will determine Korea's position as a trusted global problem-solver. The future generation of leadership and global governance will not belong solely to military or economic giants—but to nations that offer the most innovative solutions for global issues. Korea, through its think tanks, can lead this shift.

⁵ Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), "International Security Program Events," accessed February 28, 2025, <https://www.csis.org/programs/international-security-program/events>.

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