

‘It is very rewarding to make Korean American community stronger politically’

Bringing second-generation Korean Americans into politics is most important core project

Kim Dong-seok, president of the Korean American Grassroots Conference (KAGC), has been contributing to the advancement of Korean American issues, rights and U.S.-Korea relations for the past 30 years, starting in 1993, by encouraging Korean Americans to participate in politics, including obtaining citizenship and exercising their right to vote. In 2007, he contributed to the unanimous passage of the U.S. House of Representatives’ resolution on Japanese comfort women (H.Res. 121), and since launching KAGC in 2013, he has been actively engaged in legislative activities to advance the rights of Korean Americans in the U.S. Congress. In recognition of his work, he was recently awarded the 2024 Korea Negotiator of the Year by the Korean Association of Negotiation Studies. Kim participated in the following written interview.



Kim Dong-seok, president of the Korean American Grassroots Conference (KAGC)

Please tell us how you feel to have won the 2024 Korea Negotiator Award.

The Korean American community is a very diverse and heterogeneous group, and my guiding principle for political mobilization in the Korean American community over the past 30 years has been to stand in the middle in terms of arguments and positions. I don’t mean an inflexible, robotic middle ground. The political cohesion of immigrant minorities is to find a comfortable center in the middle of a narrowed-down issue. These deals. The mediations. Negotiations. Collaboration. And I think that’s what the conference was focusing on in my work to create the best possible consensus. I’m grateful for the award, even though I had declined it several times.

What is the most rewarding thing you’ve done over the past 30 years?

The most rewarding thing is that Korean Americans in the U.S.

have become very engaged in politics. When I first started this work in the early 1990s, Korean Americans were not really interested in voting, elections, politicians, etc. Even in areas with high concentrations of Korean Americans, you couldn’t find Koreans at the polling stations. Maybe 3 or 4 out of every 100 people voted. Now, at least half of Korean Americans are registered to vote, and in presidential elections, about 60 percent of them vote. That’s a big change. I’m very proud of the fact that we’ve been able to build up the political power of the Korean American community in this way, more so than the more well-known cases of

than the comfort women bill, the Visa Waiver Program or the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement.

What are the KAGC’s plans for this year and future goals?

Trump was reelected president on the strength of a social movement called MAGA (Make America Great Again!). MAGA’s basic ideology is a combination of white supremacy, Christian nationalism and America First. The United States, a country of immigrants that has fostered diversity, equality and inclusion, is no longer a country of inclusion and tolerance. We can’t just stand up for Korean Americans, we have to stand in solidarity with immigrant minorities to fight anti-immigrant racism. As a member of the Asian American community, I am determined to fight for immigrant rights and against racism by focusing on issues on the political agenda.

What are your specific goals?

My goal is for the Adoptee Citizenship Act to pass this session. There are many adoptees who have fallen through the cracks of the U.S. adoption system and have not been granted U.S. citizenship. Around 20,000 Korean Americans are undocumented adoptees,



KAGC President Kim Dong-seok, Rep. Josh Gottheimer, House Foreign Affairs Committee's East Asia and Pacific Subcommittee Chair and Rep. Young Kim, and KAGC Secretary-General Song Won-seok pose for a photo at the opening of the KAGC office in Washington, D.C., on June 21, 2023.

around half of the total undocumented adoptee population. We've been pushing for this legislation for years. Many civil rights organizations are working on it. The KAGC has been traveling to Congress and conducting citizen lobbying. The most important core project of KAGC is to expose second-generation Korean Americans (Korean American college students) to the political arena so that they can enter the U.S. political arena or Congress. As a result of this work, many Korean Americans are working in Congress and the federal government. It's a great achievement.

The latest election saw the election of Andy Kim to the Senate and the rise of Korean American politicians.

For the first time in the 122-year history of Korean immigration, a Korean has been elected to the Senate. There are currently three senators of Asian heritage out of 100, and Andy Kim is one of them. In the Senate each representative is like a presidential equivalent, so having Andy Kim in the Senate has a huge impact on second-generation Koreans across the country. What makes Andy Kim a star in the national political arena is that he has shown leadership that fits the American nation. Many middle-class whites across the country are enthusiastic about him. I see Andy Kim's name on the Democratic presidential ticket in 2028.

What can we do to increase the influence of Korean Americans in politics?

The foundation of political influence is a sense of civic duty. I believe that the issue of Korean Americans needing to cooperate well with other minorities in the United States will be the foundation

of our political power. Of course, the most important thing is that Koreans must first establish themselves as American citizens. It's not a diaspora if one goes back and forth between Korea and the U.S. and only takes the aspects that are favorable to them. Korean Americans are a diaspora that has decided not to go back. It's time for this level of awakening in the basic practices of diasporic identity, voter registration and voter participation.

What changes do you expect to see in U.S.-Korea relations under President Trump?

President Trump recognizes and deals with authoritarian dictators like Putin in Russia, Xi Jinping in China and Kim Jong-un in North Korea. He will do business with anyone if it serves U.S. interests. He will thoroughly reorganize the U.S.-South Korea relationship around U.S. interests. I expect him to make a lot of demands based on strength compared to the Biden administration. This will be not only in diplomacy and security but also in economic, trade, social and cultural aspects.

What can be done to achieve political stability in South Korea?

Ruling and opposition leaders need to sit down and work together, even if they have different positions, rather than being polarized. In the U.S. Congress, there are bipartisan problem-solving committees. There are about 20 conservative Democrats and 20 liberal Republicans on each side of the aisle who are within striking distance of each other on ideology and policy. These committees come into play when the parties are strongly at odds with each other. 🇺🇸