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The 2025 G20 South Africa Summit and
South Korea's Global South Strategy:
Toward a Responsible Global Power

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Abstract

The 2025 G20 South Africa Summit and President Lee Jae Myung's tour of the Middle East and Africa underscored that the strategic rise of the Global South is now reshaping the structure of the international order. The fact that the G20 convened on the African continent for the first time symbolized a shift in the center of gravity in global agenda-setting away from the traditional Western-centric model toward the Global South. Through this summit, President Lee translated his governing philosophy of inclusive growth, sustainability, and a fair future into concrete terms on the international stage, signaling South Korea's intent to participate actively in the reconfiguration of the emerging international economic and political order by expanding cooperation with Global South countries.

In the G20 sessions, South Korea brought to the forefront the priority agendas of the Global South: alleviating developing countries' debt vulnerabilities, restoring the multilateral trading system, responding to the climate crisis, enhancing disaster-management cooperation, reducing the digital divide, and building critical minerals supply chains. This indicates that South Korea is moving beyond a passive or *ex post* posture to become a state that substantively contributes to debates on international norms. Parallel progress in cooperation with three Middle Eastern partners—infrastructure, AI, energy, nuclear power, and the defense industry—also confirmed that South Korea can construct mutually complementary cooperation models with Global South countries on the basis of its technological and industrial capabilities.

These changes present South Korean diplomacy with a new set of tasks. The Global South combines economic growth potential, favorable demographic structures, and critical mineral resources. It is also indispensable for South Korea's supply chain stability, market expansion, international norm-setting, and the strengthening of its middle-power diplomacy. South Korea must therefore move beyond short-term, event-driven engagement and establish the Global South as a long-term axis of cooperation, designing a complex cooperation structure that encompasses the economy, technology, security, and norms.

This report, grounded in the governing principles articulated by the Lee Jae Myung administration, proposes strategic directions for South Korea to advance as a responsible global power. South Korea should strengthen its role as a norm creator and coordinator on core Global South agendas—climate, debt, digital transformation, food and health security, youth employment, and critical

minerals—while expanding partnerships that generate mutual opportunities in technological innovation, renewable energy, AI, and smart infrastructure. In addition, South Korea needs to build a multi-layered cooperation system that emphasizes people-centered, inclusive cooperation with the participation of civil society and private enterprises, thereby enhancing the durability and credibility of its cooperation efforts. The country's assumption of the G20 presidency in 2028 provides the institutional foundation for this strategy and offers an important opportunity for South Korea to emerge both as a balanced coordinator between the Global South and advanced economies and as a leading actor in international norm design.

Keywords

G20 South Africa Summit, Global South, national interest-centered pragmatic diplomacy, global leadership, responsible global power

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President Lee Jae Myung visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt, South Africa, and Turkiye from November 17 to 26, 2025. On the surface, it was a four-country tour of the Middle East and Africa; in substance, it revealed how central the Middle East and Global South have become in South Korea's diplomatic priorities, having long occupied a secondary place.

His participation in the G20 Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, on November 22-23, 2025, was especially significant. At the summit, President Lee noted that South Korea will assume the G20 presidency in 2028 and expressed his intention to further consolidate South Korea's status as a responsible global power at the world's premier economic forum. The message was unambiguous: South Korea will not be content with simply attending meetings but will proactively drive the core agendas of the Global South—debt, climate, the digital divide, critical minerals supply chains—and communicate them actively to the international community.

There were also concrete achievements with three Middle Eastern states. In the UAE, Seoul created a foundation for enhanced cooperation in AI and the defense industry. With Egypt, discussions advanced toward a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement

(CEPA), along with cooperation to reinforce Egypt's role as an infrastructure and logistics hub. With Türkiye, the two sides agreed to expand future-oriented cooperation in nuclear power, defense, and renewable energy and to reactivate dormant economic cooperation channels. These results demonstrate that South Korea is engaging in substantive cooperation with Middle Eastern and Global South countries across diverse sectors, including energy, infrastructure, advanced technology, and defense.

South Korea's Role and Vision at the G20 South Africa Summit

The 2025 G20 South Africa Summit took place without the leaders of the United States, China, or Russia. Its theme—"Solidarity, Equality, Sustainability"—constituted, in effect, a direct challenge to the Western-centric international order. "Solidarity" pointed to strengthened cooperation among Global South states; "equality" referred to redressing structural inequalities between advanced and developing countries; "sustainability" to balancing environmental protection and economic development. One can read this as an attempt to pivot away from a G20 practice that has tended to prioritize the interests of advanced countries.

President Lee made clear that South Korea is a state that genuinely pursues cooperation with the Global South. He took part in all official sessions of the G20 and presented South Korea's policy directions. In doing so, he signaled that South Korea's diplomatic strategy toward the Global South is shifting from selective, case-by-case participation to a more proactive and leadership-oriented approach.

In the first session, “Inclusive and Sustainable Economic Growth,” President Lee emphasized the importance of inclusive growth that excludes no one. He proposed three priorities: alleviating developing countries’ debt vulnerabilities, restoring the functions of the multilateral trading system, and enhancing the effectiveness of development cooperation. By bringing the structural debt problem of the Global South to the table as a major agenda item, he showed South Korea’s substantive understanding of, and willingness to support, the region’s economic crises. His call for restoring the multilateral trading system underscored the responsible role that middle powers can play in stabilizing the international economic order.

The second session, “A Resilient World,” focused on global challenges centered on climate change. President Lee called for strengthening the international community’s response to the climate crisis, reorganizing disaster-response systems, and expanding investment in climate-related infrastructure. He stressed that Global South countries are among the most vulnerable and severely affected by the climate crisis. The message was that South Korea can mitigate inequalities in climate response by providing infrastructure investment and that Korean technologies—such as renewable energy and smart cities—can make tangible contributions to enhancing the climate resilience of Global South states.

In the final session, “A Fair and Just Future for All,” critical minerals, quality jobs, and artificial intelligence were addressed as core agenda items. President Lee expanded the “Global AI Basic Society” initiative he had proposed at APEC to the G20 framework,

arguing that technological innovation can help the Global South achieve economic take-off. With respect to critical minerals, he welcomed the G20 Critical Minerals Framework and noted that, as chair of the Minerals Security Partnership, South Korea has been expanding mineral cooperation projects. He also announced the future “Korea-Africa Critical Minerals Dialogue” as a platform to deepen trust-based cooperation with resource-holding states and pledged to continue international efforts to build stable and mutually beneficial supply chains in which both resource-holding and resource-demanding countries share the gains.

The policy visions articulated at the G20 have one particularly salient feature: they concretize the Lee Jae Myung administration’s governing principles in the international arena. The themes of inclusive growth, sustainability, and a fair future are closely aligned with the administration’s domestic policy orientation. The decision for South Korea to host the 2028 G20 Summit—the first time in 18 years since the 2010 Seoul summit—is not merely an opportunity to stage a global event. It creates a four-year window in which to sustain cooperation with the Global South. Through the 2028 summit, South Korea will be able to define more clearly its role in the development of the Global South and in the reshaping of the international order, and to present corresponding visions and strategies. Systematic preparation must begin now.

Africa’s Rise and a New Axis of Cooperation for South Korea

President Lee’s participation in the G20 South Africa Summit confirmed both South Korea’s international standing and the rising

importance of Africa. This summit carries symbolic significance as the first G20 held on the African continent since the forum's inception, with the participation of the African Union (AU), which was granted full member status in 2023. The formal confirmation of South Korea's 2028 G20 presidency during the summit went beyond symbolic hosting rights; it expressed diplomatic resolve to strengthen the Republic of Korea's role and responsibility in a rapidly changing international environment.

The visions of "inclusive growth" and "a fair future" that President Lee outlined can only be realized with substantive cooperation with the Global South, including Africa which is a strategically important region. Africa's population is projected to reach roughly 2.5 billion by around 2050. It is a major producer of critical mineral resources essential to semiconductors, electric vehicles, and renewable energy. Its 54 countries together hold around 28 percent of UN General Assembly votes, which makes Africa a key actor in global politics, security, and norm-setting. At the same time, the continent is becoming a testing ground for next-generation defense technologies such as drones and cyber capabilities. In this context, South Korea must view Africa not simply as a provider of resources or a passive aid recipient, but as an equal strategic partner in the emerging international order.

President Lee's tour aimed to strengthen mutually beneficial diplomatic and economic cooperation with the Middle East and Africa and to broaden South Korea's role on the global stage. In parallel, at the G20 Summit, South Korea used bilateral meetings with leaders of advanced countries, including France and Germany, to consolidate existing ties and engaged through emerging-economy

groupings such as MIKTA to reaffirm shared commitments to multilateralism and middle-power solidarity.

South Korea's Global South Strategy: Advancing as a Responsible Global Power

The 2025 G20 South Africa Summit served as a clear turning point for South Korean diplomacy. It confirmed a shift toward a structure in which the Global South participates more actively in shaping major international agendas. In this evolving environment, South Korea's role cannot remain limited to participation. It must grow into a responsible global power that works with Global South countries to design international norms and cooperation architectures.

Despite sustained participation in Global South cooperation, South Korea's relations with these countries have not deepened or broadened to the extent anticipated. There are several reasons. Changes of administration have prevented the maintenance of a consistent diplomatic and development-cooperation line, undermining the accumulation of long-term partnerships. Cooperation in diplomacy, industry, development, education, and climate has often been pursued as discrete, project-based efforts, making it difficult for partners to see South Korea as a structural, long-term cooperation actor. Moreover, although Seoul recognizes the strategic value of the Global South, it has not sufficiently developed regional expertise or public-private platforms, which has constrained policy expansion. These limitations are visible not only in Africa but across the Global South, including the Middle East, South Asia, and Latin America.

To overcome these constraints and move toward the status of a responsible global power, the South Korean government must first establish a systematic strategy. The Global South strategy should be redesigned so that it is structurally aligned with the administration's governing principles of inclusiveness, fairness, sustainability, opportunity creation, and pragmatic diplomacy.

First, South Korea should reinforce its role as a norm creator and policy coordinator on the core issues prioritized by the Global South: climate crisis response, debt restructuring, food and health crises, the digital divide, critical mineral value chains, and youth employment. This requires presenting comprehensive cooperation models that combine South Korea's experience and technological strengths in climate policy, debt management, digital governance, mineral development, and youth capacity-building. At the same time, Seoul should proactively propose norms and policy directions that reflect the realities of Global South societies. In areas such as digital and AI governance, critical mineral value chains, and youth employment, it will be important to move beyond one-way provision of technology and finance and instead jointly identify agendas with Global South partners, designing cooperation structures that link policy, institutions, and technology. When agenda-setting, implementation, and evaluation are jointly carried out on the basis of shared responsibilities and benefits, South Korea can consolidate its position as a substantive norm-creating state and coordinator.

Second, cooperation with the Global South should be closely integrated into South Korea's medium-to long-term growth strategy. Technological innovation, renewable energy, AI, and smart

infrastructure are not only central to the development strategies of Global South countries; they are also sectors in which Korean firms can secure new markets and growth opportunities. South Korea ought to build a medium- to long-term cooperation portfolio in these areas that combines development cooperation, investment, trade, and public-private partnerships. This would support the expansion of social infrastructure within the Global South while simultaneously focusing on South Korea's supply chain resilience and new market development. When the administration's technology-driven growth strategy is linked to such a cooperation framework, South Korea can pursue both the consolidation of its image as a responsible global power and the creation of economic opportunities.

Third, the Global South strategy should be designed around people-centered, inclusive cooperation so that the Lee Jae Myung administration's emphasis on inclusiveness and fairness is reflected externally. This calls for expanding vocational training, digital skills programs, and scholarship and exchange schemes for youth, women, and vulnerable groups, thereby supporting human capital accumulation and social mobility in Global South countries. At the same time, cooperation to improve access to basic services—health care, education, and social protection—should proceed in parallel. Public diplomacy programs that combine the Korean language, culture, content, and K-culture industries with civil society exchanges should be strategically linked to the Global South, creating a soft-power-based cooperation model in which development cooperation and cultural and educational exchanges reinforce each other. Such people-centered cooperation can alleviate perceptions that South Korean technology and investment

benefit only a narrow elite and help establish an inclusive cooperation structure in which the outcomes and opportunities of cooperation are more evenly distributed across local societies. The Global South should be regarded not merely as a market and resource supplier but as a partner in building future generations.

South Korea's assumption of the G20 presidency in 2028 presents a major opportunity to advance as a responsible global power. Over the next four years, the government should act as a coordinator linking major advanced economies, including the G7, with the Global South and create a platform that systematically reflects the priority tasks of developing and emerging countries in the G20 agenda. In doing so, South Korea can make substantive contributions to international norm formation and strengthen its position as an active actor in the process of shaping a new international order. At the same time, by offering more opportunities to Global South countries and supporting a fairer global development order, South Korea can lead future-generation-oriented, sustainable international cooperation. This direction is consistent with the current administration's governing principles and will form an important foundation for South Korea's evolution into a responsible global power that exercises responsibility and influence in a balanced manner in the international community.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.