

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

South Korea's Sovereign AI Initiative for Democracy: A Transferable Model for the Global Community

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Introduction: Why AI Sovereignty matters for Democracy

The geopolitics of artificial intelligence has entered a decisive phase. As large language models (LLMs), autonomous agents, and AI-integrated defense systems proliferate, the question of who controls the core determinants of AI — data, compute, model weights, and alignment values — has become inseparable from questions of political sovereignty and democratic legitimacy.

For decades, liberal democracies outsourced digital infrastructure to a handful of Silicon Valley platform companies. The costs are now visible: algorithmic radicalization, epistemic fragmentation, and “epistemological colonization,” in which foreign-designed AI systems quietly impose particular worldviews on national publics without democratic consent.

South Korea's response is distinctive. Rather than importing AI infrastructure or racing for commercial dominance, Korea has pursued a third path: Sovereign AI as a democratic institution — embedding democratic values into AI training, establishing public compute infrastructure, securing rights over model weights, and institutionalizing civic oversight.

Korea has codified these commitments in the AI Basic Act (2024/2026) — one of the most comprehensive national AI governance frameworks in existence. The result is a model that is globally transferable, particularly to middle-power democracies seeking an alternative to both Silicon Valley techno-liberalism and Chinese state-AI authoritarianism.

The Democratic Stakes: AI and the Crisis of Political Participation

Before examining Korea's model, it is essential to understand the democratic threat that Sovereign AI is designed to address. Scholars have increasingly documented a structural tension between AI-optimized systems and democratic deliberation.

Song Kyungho (2025) identifies a structural shift in post-AI governance — “the technologization of politics” — in which AI reconfigures politics as a problem of computational optimization. This manifests through three dangerous archetypes: the Necromancy Model (AI simulating political figures to fragment discourse); the Utilitarian Machine (AI policy engines maximizing efficiency at the expense of democratic accountability); and the Philosopher King Model (AGI-based governance that renders human political agency structurally redundant).

Each archetype instantiates a “participation paradox”: technology ostensibly expands civic engagement while actually displacing genuine political agency. Citizens become data points; deliberation becomes optimization; accountability dissolves into algorithmic black boxes.

This structural threat is compounded by the ideological projects of dominant technology entrepreneurs. Peter Thiel’s libertarian exit from democratic accountability, Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) model of technocratic state management, and Alexander Karp’s technology republic vision all converge on one conclusion: democratic deliberation is an inefficiency to be engineered away. Farrell and Newman’s diagnosis of “digital feudalism” captures the result — private AI infrastructure functioning as sovereignty without democratic legitimacy (Farrell and Newman, 2023).

For South Korea, a frontline democracy geographically adjacent to North Korea’s AI-enabled influence operations and geopolitically entangled in US-China technology competition, these threats are not abstract. They are existential. The Korean model of Sovereign AI is therefore not merely a policy preference but a strategic necessity.

South Korea’s Sovereign AI Framework: Architecture and Institutions

Korea’s AI governance framework has evolved through three distinct phases since 2016, each layering new institutional capacity onto the previous foundation.

(1) Phase One: Ethical Foundation (2016–2020)

The 2016 AlphaGo shock catalyzed Korea’s AI governance consciousness. In response, the government established the AI Ethics Research Committee, which produced the Seoul PACT — Korea’s first national AI ethics guidelines — in March 2018. The 2020 National Guidelines for AI Ethics elaborated this into a multilayered framework anchored by three core principles:

Table 1 Three Core Principles and Key Requirements of Korea's National Guidelines for AI Ethics (2020)

Principle	Key Requirements
Respect for Human Dignity	Safeguarding human rights, protection of privacy, respect for diversity, prevention of harm
Common Good of Society	Public good, solidarity, accessibility for the vulnerable, equitable distribution of AI benefits
Proper Use of Technology	Data management, accountability, safety, transparency, explainability

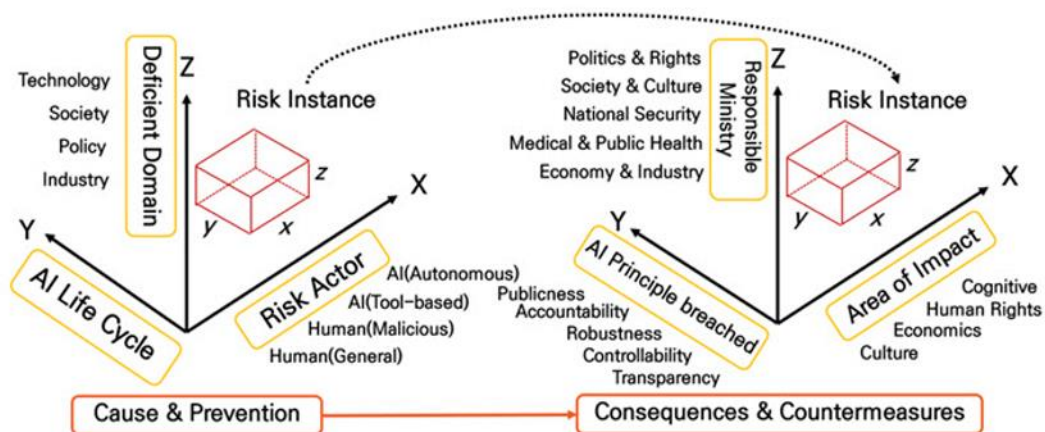
(2) Phase Two: Institutional Architecture (2020–2025)

Building on this ethical foundation, Korea constructed a layered institutional architecture. The AI Basic Act, passed in December 2024 and entering full effect in January 2026, is the centerpiece, with three key institutional innovations.

First is the National AI Strategy Committee. Chaired by the President and composed of cabinet ministers and civilian experts, it serves as both advisory and decision-making authority for AI policy. Following the 2025 change of government, the Committee's authority was strengthened as AI competitiveness became the highest national policy priority.

Second is the Korea AI Safety Institute (AISI). Established in November 2024, Korea became the sixth country globally to create a national AI Safety Institute. Korea AISI serves as the national hub for AI safety, with seven statutory functions: risk definition and analysis, safety policy research, evaluation criteria development, safety technology standardization, international cooperation, frontier AI safety assurance, and other presidential decree functions.

Figure 1. Risk-Mapping Methodology of Korea AISI by Kim (2026)



As seen in the Figure 1, AISI's distinctive contribution is its risk-mapping methodology — a three-dimensional analytical framework (MECI: mutually exclusive, collectively inclusive) that maps risks along axes of risk actor, AI life cycle stage, and deficient domain, then assigns countermeasures to responsible ministries. This moves beyond conventional risk cataloguing toward dynamic, actionable risk governance.

Third is the AI Policy Center. It is tasked with developing comprehensive AI policies and, critically, promoting the establishment and dissemination of international norms. This function explicitly positions Korea as a norm exporter rather than merely a norm taker in global AI governance.

(3) Phase Three: The K-AI Initiative and Sovereign Model Development

The K-AI Initiative represents Korea's most ambitious Sovereign AI project: the development of a globally competitive LLM that embeds Korean values and democratic processes directly into its technical core — specifically its weights. The initiative was launched with fifteen corporate consortia applicants, from which five teams were selected in August 2025 — Naver Cloud, Upstage, SK Telecom, NC AI, and LG AI Research. Following a first-stage evaluation in January 2026 that eliminated Naver Cloud and NC AI, three remaining consortia (LG AI Research, SK Telecom, and Upstage) are currently advancing through the second phase of testing, with a final evaluation scheduled for December 2026 and two finalists to be designated by 2027. Throughout this process, Korea AISI conducts safety and trustworthiness evaluations alongside performance assessments.

The theoretical framework (proposed framework not yet implemented policy) underlying the K-AI Initiative rests on five pillars of democratic AI architecture:

Table 2 Five-Layer Democratic AI Architecture of the K-AI Initiative (Proposed Framework)

Layer	Component	Democratic Rationale
Data	Democratic Value Alignment Datasets	Establishes a foundational worldview grounded in Korean values and norms, preventing epistemic colonization by foreign corpora
Infrastructure	Public GPU Farms	Dismantles technology monopolies; universal access for academia and SMEs; sovereignty over compute
Weights	Auditable Weight Control	Secures modification and audit rights over the core determinants of AI values; “cognitive shield” against algorithmic bias
Learning	Citizen Jury RLHF [Aspirational]	Replaces closed Silicon Valley labeler decisions with deliberative democratic input; reward functions based on social consensus
Algorithms	Pluralistic AI Ecosystem	Guards against single-model monopoly; enables NGO, academic, and SME models to coexist and check filter bubbles

Democratic Alignment: Korea’s Distinctive Contribution

South Korea’s AI policy can be assessed from the lens of “Democratic Alignment.” This concept captures a genuine orientation in Korea’s AI policy: the question of who decides what values are embedded in AI systems, and through what processes. While most national AI strategies focus on safety or competitiveness, Korea’s National Guidelines for AI Ethics (2020) and AI Basic Act (2026) both position democratic legitimacy and civic participation as foundational governance concerns. This section presents that orientation’s normative elaboration, distinguishing codified provisions from proposals or aspirations.

(1) Democratic RLHF: Citizen Juries as Alignment Mechanism¹

The most innovative element of Korea’s proposed democratic AI architecture is a mechanism to replace closed-door labeling decisions — currently made by a handful of contractors in AI companies — with deliberative democratic processes. “Democratic Reinforcement Learning from Human Feedback(RLHF)” involves randomly selected citizen juries whose deliberated judgments are reflected in AI reward functions, addressing a fundamental democratic deficit: the values embedded in frontier AI models are determined by private actors without democratic accountability. Korea’s proposed framework would democratize this process. The AI Basic Act’s Article 27 provides a partial legislative foundation, requiring MSIT to collect opinions from diverse sectors of society in establishing ethical principles — but this falls well short of the binding citizen jury mechanism proposed here.

Precedents exist for the broader approach. Taiwan’s pol.is platform engaged nearly 12 million citizens in AI-assisted deliberation (Tang, 2025), with AI serving as what Google DeepMind researchers call a “deliberative mediator” rather than a decision-maker. The Habermas Machine experiment demonstrated that AI-mediated deliberation can produce consensus statements rated higher in clarity, fairness, and representativeness than those produced by human facilitators. Korea itself has piloted deliberative polling through the National Assembly (2023), providing a domestic institutional basis for scaling such mechanisms to AI governance.

(2) Procedural Delay as Democratic Safeguard²

Against the efficiency logic of Big Tech — which treats deliberative friction as overhead to be engineered away — this analysis argues for “procedural delay” as a structural feature of democratic AI governance, building on the human oversight requirements already embedded in the AI Basic Act. Under this framework, AI-generated decisions in the public sector must be subject to human deliberation and critical review.

This principle applies particularly to “epistemic” domains: AI interpretation of national history, security assessments, judicial decisions, and policy recommendations. The argument is not that AI is wrong in these domains, but that democratic legitimacy requires human deliberation regardless of AI accuracy. In this light, the human-in-the-loop oversight mandated by Article 32 of Korea’s AI Basic Act should not be treated as a bureaucratic hurdle, but as an institutional mechanism that operationalizes “procedural delay” by ensuring high-stakes automated decisions are legally paused for deliberative human judgment.

¹ “Democratic RLHF” and the Citizen Jury mechanism described in this section are the author’s policy proposals, not provisions of current Korean law. No official government document — including the AI Basic Act, the National AI Ethics Guidelines, or the K-AI Initiative framework — specifies citizen juries as a component of AI training. The proposals are presented here as a normative extension of Korea’s existing civic participation orientation, grounded in international deliberative democracy precedents.

² “Procedural delay” as a named principle does not appear in Korean official documents. However, its underlying rationale — that AI-generated outputs in high-stakes public domains must be subject to mandatory human review — is partially codified in the AI Basic Act. Article 32 requires providers of high-impact AI to establish and operate human management and supervision mechanisms and to explain AI-derived results to affected parties. This statutory human oversight requirement provides a legal anchor for the broader “procedural delay” concept articulated here.

Of the three components, civic oversight has the strongest basis in enacted law. The AI Basic Act (Articles 27–29) establishes a multi-layered oversight structure that this analysis extends into three operational layers. Items marked [Codified] reflect provisions already in force; items marked [Proposed] reflect the author’s recommended extensions beyond current law:

- **Offensive Red Teams** [Codified — Article 29, AISI mandate]: Systematic adversarial testing of AI models for biases and potential authoritarian misuse, with results made publicly available. Korea AISI is already operationalizing this through its dual-use CBRN-E task force and deepfake detection research. The extension proposed here is that red-team findings be made available not only to government ministries but to the general public.
- **Self-Regulatory Ethics Committees** [Codified — Article 28]: The AI Basic Act authorizes companies, universities, and research institutes to form Private Autonomous AI Ethics Committees with authority to verify compliance, investigate human rights concerns, and conduct ethics education. These committees must include external members capable of evaluating ethical and social validity, and must not consist solely of one gender. Proposed extension: grant independent civil society organizations — not only institutional actors — standing to conduct equivalent oversight, and make findings subject to regulatory follow-up.
- **Auditable Sandboxes** [Proposed — not yet codified]: External auditors with access rights to internal model structures and training data to verify technical malfunctions or human rights violations, balanced against trade secret protection. The AI Basic Act (Article 40) grants MSIT authority to demand data and inspect AI business operators, but this is a government power rather than a civil society right. The “Auditable Sandbox” concept proposed here would extend equivalent access — under appropriate confidentiality protections — to independent researchers and civil society organizations, bringing Korean practice closer to the EU AI Act’s provisions for third-party auditing of high-risk systems.

Taken together, these three layers — one fully codified, one partially codified, one proposed — represent a trajectory rather than a completed architecture. Korea’s AI Basic Act has established the institutional foundations for civic participation in AI governance; the proposals here argue for deepening those foundations toward a model in which citizens are active agents of AI accountability, not merely protected from AI harms. The distance between Korea’s current provisions and the full democratic alignment framework is a measurable legislative challenge — specific and addressable through concrete policy action.

The International Dimension: Korea as Norm Exporter

Korea's Sovereign AI framework has explicit international ambitions. The AI Basic Act establishes the AI Policy Center with a mandate to "promote the establishment and dissemination of international norms." Korea AISI participates in the international AISI Network (10 countries) and has signed MOUs with France, the US, Poland, Singapore, and ASEAN partners — reflecting a strategic positioning of Korea as a middle-power norm entrepreneur in global AI governance.

(1) The Middle Power Advantage

Korea's middle-power status is a governance asset in the current AI landscape. Unlike the US or China, Korea does not trigger hegemonic anxieties when proposing international AI standards, while possessing distinctive asymmetric technological credibility: world-leading hardware capacity paired with a rapidly advancing but not yet frontier-level software stack.

On hardware, Korea's position is unambiguous. Samsung and SK Hynix together dominate global high-bandwidth memory (HBM) production — the critical component powering AI accelerators worldwide — with SK Hynix holding approximately 57% of the HBM market as of 2026 (CNBC 2026.4). Both are confirmed suppliers for Nvidia's next-generation Vera Rubin architecture, and Korea's DRAM and advanced packaging capabilities are widely regarded as irreplaceable in the near term.

On software, the picture is more nuanced. Korean LLMs — including LG's EXAONE, Naver's HyperClova X, and Upstage's Solar series — have demonstrated competitive performance on multilingual benchmarks, and the K-AI Initiative targets 95% of frontier model performance. However, these models currently operate well below the scale of leading US frontier systems, and domestic GPU infrastructure remains substantially dependent on imported Nvidia hardware. Korea's LLM capabilities are best characterized as rapidly advancing rather than frontier-equivalent — a distinction that honest governance advocacy must acknowledge.

This asymmetry is a source of credibility, not weakness. Korea is not seeking to dominate global AI; it is seeking to govern it responsibly while building indigenous capacity. The result is a form of "techno-diplomatic" influence that operates differently from traditional power politics: Korea can convene conversations that neither Washington nor Beijing can host without triggering strategic suspicion — particularly valuable in the Indo-Pacific, where partners like Japan, Australia, and ASEAN members seek governance frameworks that protect technological sovereignty without forcing sides in US-China competition.

This positioning is no longer merely aspirational. In May 2026, the Korean government formalized its role as a multilateral AI convener by launching the Global AI Hub — a joint initiative signed with nine major UN agencies (ILO, IOM, ITU, UNDP, UNEP, UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, WHO) and five multilateral development banks (WB, ADB, IDB, EBRD, CABI). Operating under the vision of "AI for All, AI to Solve Global Challenges," the Hub is designed to integrate fragmented international AI capacities into a shared infrastructure platform, enabling coordinated responses to climate change, public health, food security, forced displacement, and labor transitions. Critically, the Hub's Joint Statement — signed in Seoul on 21 May 2026 — explicitly positions the initiative not as a Korean-directed program but as a collaborative capability co-shaped by the Participating Organizations, with additional UN entities invited to join over time. This architecture embodies precisely the "horizontal partnership" logic that distinguishes Korea's international AI strategy: Korea

as convener and funder, not as norm hegemon.

(2) Three Transferable Frameworks

Korea's model offers three distinct frameworks for partner democracies. The first — AI Security — provides concrete mechanisms for defending against “epistemological colonization”: the “Cognitive Shield” framework secures sovereign control over model weights, establishes national corpora reflecting domestic values, and builds red-team capacity to identify AI-enabled influence operations. The second — AI Ethics — constitutes a comprehensive democratic alignment architecture: Korea's ten-requirement ethics framework, “Democratic RLHF” model, and procedural delay principles, explicitly designed to distinguish engineering-based safety from normative governance. The third — Technical Standards — advances international “Auditable Sandbox” standards, Hub-and-Spoke interoperability norms, and open-source foundation model development with EU and Japan partners, designed to prevent single-source monopolies while enabling sector-specific AI development across academic, NGO, and SME communities.

(3) Strategic Alliances: Beyond Donor-Recipient Dynamics

A distinctive feature of Korea's international AI strategy is its emphasis on “horizontal and strategic partnerships that transcend the traditional donor-recipient dynamic.” Unlike technology transfer models in which a leading state exports pre-packaged governance solutions, Korea's approach is premised on genuine co-production — shared institutional design, mutual accountability, and reciprocal learning across partners at varying stages of AI development.

This orientation is already visible in Korea's multilateral engagements. At the research level, Korea co-participates in international AISI tracks on deepfakes, multicultural AI testing, and risk identification — contributing as a peer, not a recipient. At the policy level, Korea's participation in the Pax Silica Initiative alongside Australia, Japan, and the UK, and its EU-ROK joint semiconductor research under the Chips Joint Undertaking, demonstrate multilateral engagement on AI supply chain security and semiconductor resilience. At the standards level, Korea is co-developing open-source foundation model components with EU and Japanese partners, and sharing its AI safety evaluation frameworks with ASEAN members.

The logic of horizontal partnership also applies to the governance frameworks in this report. The three transferable frameworks — AI security resilience, democratic alignment, and pluralistic technical standards — are most likely to gain international traction when co-developed with partner democracies rather than exported as a finished Korean model. Korea's role is most credibly that of a norm entrepreneur and convening partner, not a norm hegemon. The May 2026 launch of the Global AI Hub — a Korea-hosted, UN-co-shaped platform uniting nine international organizations and five multilateral development banks under the vision of “AI for All, AI to Solve Global Challenges” — stands as the most institutionally concrete demonstration of this horizontal partnership logic to date.

Translating this into concrete action requires three priorities. First, Korea should accelerate the AISI International Network's expansion — particularly toward middle-power democracies in Africa, Latin America, and South Asia — positioning Korea as a co-leader in global AI safety capacity-building alongside, not subordinate to, the US-UK-EU axis. Second, Korea should work actively within

UNESCO, OECD, and UN frameworks to establish its AI Basic Act and AISI as reference models for member states, building on the precedent set by the EU AI Act's international influence. Third, Korea should commission joint research with Japan and Australia on AI supply chain security, hardware trust frameworks, and model integrity standards — an area where the three countries' combined expertise constitutes a uniquely credible Indo-Pacific contribution to global AI norm-setting.

The ultimate measure of Korea's international AI strategy will not be the volume of MOUs signed or framework documents published. It will be whether the governance architecture described in this report — democratic alignment, civic oversight, cooperative sovereignty — becomes a reference point that other middle-power democracies adapt and build upon.

Transferability: Conditions and Constraints

While Korea's model offers genuine transferable value, adoption requires contextual adaptation. Three conditions are necessary for successful transfer:

(1) Institutional Preconditions

Korea's model rests on foundations that took decades to build: a mature civil society capable of meaningful AI oversight; strong rule of law capable of enforcing auditable sandbox provisions; and technical capacity in both the public sector (Korea AISI) and private sector (Samsung, SK Hynix, Kakao, Naver). Democracies lacking these foundations will need to invest in institutional capacity before attempting to replicate the full framework.

(2) Political Preconditions

Korea's AI governance has maintained bipartisan continuity across multiple government changes, reflecting an underlying consensus that AI governance is a national security issue, not a partisan one. Democracies where AI governance is politically contested — where opposition parties might systematically undermine AI safety regulations for competitive advantage — will face structural obstacles to implementing Korea's model.

(3) Modular Adoption

For democracies that cannot immediately implement Korea's full framework, a modular adoption approach is recommended. Priority modules include:

- Immediate (Year 1–2): Adopt Korea's ten-requirement AI ethics framework; establish a national AI Safety Institute with mandate for international cooperation; enact basic auditable sandbox provisions.
- Medium-term (Year 2–4): Develop national AI corpora with democratic value alignment; establish Public GPU access programs for academia and SMEs; build civil society AI auditing capacity.

- Long-term (Year 4+): Develop sovereign foundation models with Democratic RLHF mechanisms; establish international interoperability standards with partner democracies; build Hub-and-Spoke pluralistic AI ecosystems.

Conclusion

The central question of AI governance in the coming decade is not merely technical — it is political. It concerns who controls the values embedded in AI systems that increasingly mediate political discourse, public administration, security decisions, and cultural identity. The answer will determine whether AI becomes an instrument of democratic self-determination or an engine of authoritarian control.

South Korea's Sovereign AI Initiative for Democracy offers a compelling answer: AI systems should be democratically aligned, civically governed, technically sovereign, and internationally transferable. This is not utopianism — it is a concrete institutional architecture that Korea has been building for nearly a decade, and which is now codified in the AI Basic Act.

The model is not perfect. Korea's democratic AI aspirations outrun current technical capacities in some domains; civil society oversight mechanisms are still nascent; and the tension between commercial AI competitiveness and democratic alignment remains unresolved. But these are engineering and institutional challenges — solvable. The conceptual framework is sound, the institutional architecture is established, and the political will is present. For the global democratic community navigating an AI landscape increasingly dominated by authoritarian state AI and unaccountable private AI, Korea's model represents a democratic third way that makes it not just a Korean achievement, but a global public good.■

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The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

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979-11-7584-105-5 95340

Date of Issue: 11 June, 2026

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