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This paper examines North Korea’s evolving discourse and policy toward its younger generation, arguing that the regime has begun to securitize youth as an existential threat to its ideological foundations. Drawing on the Copenhagen School’s theory of securitization, the study analyzes how the North Korean state discursively constructs youth behavior, cultural preferences, and value orientations—shaped by marketization, exposure to foreign media, and growing political cynicism—as challenges to national cohesion and regime legitimacy. In response, the regime has institutionalized a series of social control measures, including restrictive laws and intensified ideological campaigns, in an effort to reassert control over the moral and cultural lives of young people. This generational shift reveals the limits of North Korea’s traditional tools of social integration and highlights the emergence of a youth cohort increasingly detached from state narratives. The paper concludes by outlining implications for South Korea’s North Korea policy, suggesting that engagement strategies should be recalibrated to reflect the evolving social and ideological landscape within the North, with a particular emphasis on the aspirations and lived realities of its younger population.

Introduction

In recent years, North Korean authorities have begun to regard the country’s youth no longer as passive recipients of ideological education. Rather, they are seen as a potential threat to regime stability. Kim Jong Un has repeatedly called for the reinforcement of ideological discipline among young people in public appearances, while North Korea’s state media have intensified their rhetoric warning against the

spread of non-socialist culture and the dangers of ideological laxity.¹⁾ This shift signals a significant transformation in the regime’s perception of social security. Once idealized as “successors to the revolution,” the youth are increasingly

1) At the 75th anniversary ceremony of the Mangyongdae Revolutionary School and the Kang Pan Sok Revolutionary School—North Korea’s premier institutions for training elite youth—on October 12, 2022, Kim Jong Un stated, “We must intensify the struggle and ideological education so that non-Party, non-revolutionary, and non-socialist elements cannot seep in, not even by the tip of a needle.”

being redefined as an unstable group susceptible to ideological deviation and external influence.

This change reflects more than just a generational gap—it suggests that the ideological foundations underpinning the North Korean regime are facing structural challenges. Unlike previous generations, today's youth no longer internalize socialism or Juche ideology as a matter of course. Their attitudes and values are increasingly shaped by pragmatic, market-oriented thinking and exposure to external information. As a result, the regime no longer perceives youth as reliable participants in the system but instead views them as a destabilizing force that could threaten the regime's long-term viability.

This perception has been made explicit in numerous state media reports. For example, a December 24, 2024 editorial in the *Rodong Sinmun* stated that “ensuring that younger generations, who have not experienced the oppression of imperialism and the exploiting classes, never forget the blood-stained legacy of the enemy is the foremost task of the anti-imperialist class struggle passed down through generations.”²⁾ The article further warned that “without class vigilance, youth will be tainted by bourgeois and reactionary ideas,” emphasizing the urgency of uninterrupted ideological indoctrination regardless of generational change. Such rhetoric reveals the regime's deep anxiety that youth, as the most impressionable and information-sensitive group, could serve as the catalyst for ideological subversion and, ultimately, regime collapse.

This securitized view of youth is not limited to rhetoric. Since the early 2020s, the regime has enacted a series of social control laws—collectively known as the “Three Major Laws of Social Control”—aimed at suppressing ideological looseness and blocking the influx of foreign culture among the younger generation.

In this context, North Korea is fundamentally restructuring its strategies of education, control, surveillance, and punishment aimed at its youth. While socialist norms once shaped individual values through state institutions, the rise of grassroots market activity, the influx of foreign information, and horizontal peer communication now define the moral and cognitive frameworks of younger North Koreans. Youth no longer live within a monolithic ideological world defined by the Party. Their everyday infractions and emotional distancing are now actively eroding the cohesion of the regime's ideological apparatus.

This paper argues that the North Korean regime has begun to construct the generational drift among youth as an existential threat to its ideological foundations and political legitimacy. Drawing on the Copenhagen School's theory of securitization, the paper examines how the regime discursively reframes youth behavior, culture, and values as a matter of national security, and how this framing leads to concrete institutional responses and intensified

2) “The blood-soaked past is a lesson of history that must never be forgotten.” *Rodong Sinmun* (Dec. 24, 2024)

control strategies. In doing so, it seeks to show that the regime's treatment of its youth reflects a deeper crisis in the legitimacy and authority of the North Korean state—one that goes beyond a simple generational concern.

Theoretical Framework: The Copenhagen School and the Concept of Societal Security

The Copenhagen School's theory of security views threats as socially constructed phenomena rather than objective or material realities. Whether an issue is treated as a matter of security depends less on its intrinsic danger and more on how it is framed by influential actors.³⁾ This process, known as securitization, refers to the discursive act through which a particular issue, group, or behavior is portrayed as an existential threat to the survival of the state or society, thereby justifying extraordinary measures outside normal political procedures.⁴⁾

Once an issue is successfully securitized, it legitimizes the suspension of legal norms and democratic procedures in favor of emergency actions. These may include repression, surveillance, and restrictions on personal freedoms. In North Korea, the youth have increasingly been portrayed as ideologically contaminated by foreign influences and lacking in loyalty to the regime. By framing young people in this way, the regime secures the moral and political justification for expanding its control over their behavior, speech, appearance, and even emotional expressions.

This logic is clearly evident in the series of social control laws enacted since the early 2020s. These laws criminalize a wide range of youth behaviors—from foreign hairstyles and clothing styles to informal slang expressions derived from South Korean media—labeling them as “non-socialist elements.”⁵⁾ Such laws extend the regime's control over young people's private lives while also redefining deviations in lifestyle and culture as acts of ideological treason.

The Copenhagen School's concept of societal security broadens the scope of security to include the protection of identity, culture, and social cohesion. It posits that when a society perceives its core identity to be under threat—particularly from internal erosion rather than external attack—it may respond with measures that are just as

3) Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (ECPR Press, 1983); Ole Wæver, Barry Buzan, Morten Kelstrup and Pierre Lemaitre, *Identity, Migration and the New Security Agenda in Europe* (St. Martin's Press, 1993); Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap De Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998)

4) Maciej Stępk. “The Copenhagen School and Beyond. A Closer Look at Securitisation Theory.” In *Identifying Security Logics in the EU Policy Discourse: The “Migration Crisis” and the EU* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 17-31.

5) Chantal Da Silva, “North Korea warns youth to shun slang from South as Kim Jong Un guards against ‘cultural penetration,’” *NBC News* (July 22, 2021) <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/north-korea-warns-youth-shun-slang-south-kim-jong-un-n1274352>

forceful as in traditional military conflicts. From this perspective, the North Korean regime's alarm over cultural shifts, informational openness, and political apathy among its youth can be understood as a response to what it perceives as an existential threat to the ideological identity of the state.

Thus, the control of North Korea's youth is more than a matter of moral discipline or ideological training. It is a response to what the regime defines as an ontological security crisis—a threat to the state's continued identity and coherence. The securitization of youth enables the regime to reframe everyday behavior and generational change as threats to national survival, thereby legitimizing expanded surveillance, ideological purification campaigns, and punitive enforcement measures. In doing so, the regime attempts to reclaim its fading authority over a generation increasingly shaped by forces beyond its control.

Three Key Dynamics of North Korea's Youth

1) Marketization

The rise of North Korea's market economy in the aftermath of the 1990s famine, known as the "Arduous March," profoundly shaped the worldview of the post-famine youth generation. Many young North Koreans today have little to no experience with the state's public distribution system and instead grew up relying on private markets (*jangmadang*) for survival. Surveys (2011-2020) conducted by the Institute for Peace and Unification Studies at Seoul National University show that around 70% of North Korean defectors have engaged in some form of market activity, underscoring the embeddedness of marketization in everyday life.

This generation, raised amid informal markets, became the first cohort whose survival instinct was shaped less by socialist labor and more by trade and entrepreneurial exchange. Unlike older generations who were socialized into loyalty and obedience to the state, the youth tend to prioritize practical gains and individual agency. Their experiences in *jangmadang* have cultivated a transactional mindset, an early exposure to value exchange, and a utilitarian approach to life.

In cities like Pyongyang and Hamhung, young people frequently chose market work over attending school, which reversed the traditional hierarchy of labor and education. These youth learned bargaining, negotiation, and strategic planning not in classrooms but in alleyway stalls and hidden shops. As a result, they internalized capitalist behaviors and values much earlier than prior generations. The moral education provided by the Party no longer resonated with them as strongly as the tangible rewards found in the market.

This sense of pragmatic realism alienates youth from the ideological expectations of the regime. Consequently, the state regards their growing autonomy as an ideological

threat. Kim Jong Un's report at the Eighth Party Congress in 2021, which emphasized the need to restore "socialist lifestyle norms," reflects this sense of crisis. The regime's increasing suspicion toward youth is rooted in their evolving consumer habits as well as the wider cultural and psychological shifts triggered by marketization.

2) Korean Wave and Informational Exposure

Another powerful force reshaping youth consciousness is the inflow of South Korean popular culture and foreign information. Through USB drives, micro SD cards, Chinese-made mobile phones, and other media devices, North Korean youth have accessed South Korean dramas, music, and films—exposing them to entirely new styles of emotion, behavior, and aesthetics. According to a Ministry of Unification survey, over 83% of North Korean defectors who arrived in South Korea between 2016 and 2020 had watched foreign media while still in the North.

Such exposure provides alternative narratives of love, success, gender roles, personal freedom, and individual dignity. These media contents serve not merely as entertainment but as blueprints for other possible lives, undermining the regime's narrative monopoly. As young North Koreans encounter these alternative worlds, they begin to relativize the state's ideological claims and seek personal meaning beyond collective slogans.

The regime's response has been swift and severe. It has characterized the Korean Wave (*hallyu*) as a form of "spiritual poison" and enacted the Reactionary Thought and Culture Rejection Act in 2020. The law bans the viewing and distribution of foreign media and criminalizes the use of South Korean-style speech, hairstyles, and clothing—offenses that can carry severe penalties, including the death sentence. These draconian measures reveal the regime's perception of cultural exposure as a serious ideological threat rather than a harmless influence.

Indeed, empirical studies of defectors suggest that repeated contact with South Korean media correlates with significant changes in political attitudes and perceptions of regime legitimacy.⁶⁾ For the youth who consume these materials, external culture serves as both a mirror and a window—revealing the limitations of their reality and expanding their imagination of the possible.

3) Depoliticization and Cynicism

The third defining trait of North Korean youth is a growing detachment from politics and ideology. Although political rituals and group activities remain a routine part of daily life, the nature of participation has become increasingly passive and superficial. Rather than internalizing Party slogans or revolutionary values, young people often perceive political events as compulsory burdens, irrelevant to their

6) Taekbin Kim, "The Effect of Hallyu on the Perceptions of North Koreans: Does the Korean Wave Change North Koreans?," *Korea & World Politics* 40, no. 3 (2024), 63-94. [In Korean]

personal goals.

This depoliticization manifests in subtle yet widespread ways. Party meetings and organizational life review sessions are often regarded as time-wasting formalities. Instead of memorizing ideological slogans, youth devote their attention to practical information and skills relevant to livelihood. The symbolic language of collectivism is gradually losing emotional resonance, and ironic detachment or avoidance of political expressions has become normalized in peer culture.

Such trends highlight a weakening of affective engagement with the regime's narrative. Repetitive and formulaic slogans, ritualistic loyalty oaths, and monolithic propaganda no longer inspire genuine conviction. Instead, ideology is increasingly perceived as a source of fatigue. The youth prioritize personal gain, individual achievements, and social mobility over abstract loyalty to the regime or its founding mythology.

This widespread cynicism erodes collective identity and weakens the regime's capacity for emotional mobilization. Political disaffection is becoming a generational condition—one that signals a fundamental erosion of North Korea's authoritarian culture. The youth may not openly rebel, but their inner estrangement from the system constitutes a form of "everyday resistance" that threatens the regime's long-term cohesion.

As the effectiveness of ideological mobilization declines, the depoliticization of youth becomes a structural vulnerability for the state. The emotional and symbolic foundations of state legitimacy are increasingly failing to resonate with a generation more attuned to survival, self-expression, and external reference points than to patriotic sacrifice or collective mission.

Policy Implications

The transformation of North Korea's youth represents a structural warning sign that calls for a fundamental overhaul of the regime's survival strategy. The emerging trends of marketization, information exposure, and depoliticization are inducing gradual but irreversible changes within North Korean society. These developments suggest that the regime can no longer rely on traditional, top-down control mechanisms to integrate its youth.

First, South Korea and the international community should redesign their long-term strategies toward North Korea based on a precise understanding of the internal differentiation among the youth and their evolving desires. It is critical to diversify the channels and formats of engagement by producing content that resonates with the youth's everyday experience, emotional sensibilities, and informational needs. Cultural materials grounded not in overt political messaging but in practical knowledge, relatable language, and authentic emotion may prove more effective in influencing perceptions and fostering soft connections.

Second, the regime's intensified ideological repression and punitive control may yield short-term compliance but risk accelerating long-term alienation. As North Korea tightens surveillance and censorship under the banner of anti-capitalist purity, it is likely to deepen generational estrangement. South Korea, in cooperation with global actors, should prioritize the protection of basic freedoms—especially freedom of expression and youth self-determination—as core elements of its North Korea policy agenda. Such efforts are both morally grounded and strategically important for building psychological solidarity and undermining the regime's monopoly on narrative authority.

Third, it is important that peace and unification policies take into account the unique outlook of North Korea's youth. Unlike older generations, they are unlikely to respond to appeals based on shared ethnic identity or abstract ideals of national unity. Instead, they are more attuned to concrete conditions: opportunities for individual development, economic participation, and social autonomy. Accordingly, South Korean policymakers should craft tailored public diplomacy strategies that speak to these practical aspirations, rather than relying solely on conventional unification discourse.

Ultimately, the changes within North Korea's youth represent both a challenge and an opportunity for the Korean Peninsula. The existence of a new generation with post-ideological sensitivities and latent imaginations—even under coercive conditions—shows that the seeds of change may arise internally as well as from the outside. Strategic imagination is required to view these young people not merely as subjects of state control, but as potential partners in shaping a different future.

Conclusion

This paper has examined North Korea's shifting perception of its younger generation and the regime's evolving strategies for ideological control. The North Korean leadership no longer views youth as passive recipients of socialist indoctrination, but as active agents of potential disruption. Their exposure to market dynamics, foreign media, and nonconformist sensibilities is now portrayed as a fundamental threat to the regime's ideological identity, far beyond a simple generational trait.

In response, the state has securitized the youth, portraying them as targets of surveillance, regulation, and moral correction. This securitization has been institutionalized through new laws, intensified ideological campaigns, and a discourse that frames cultural and behavioral deviation as existential danger. Yet these strategies fail to account for the everyday realities and desires of the youth themselves—realities shaped by pragmatic survival, aspirational consumption, and growing detachment from state narratives.

North Korean youth are no longer fully containable within the regime's ideological boundaries. They have acquired post-socialist imaginations through exposure to markets and South Korean culture. Their political disengagement signals a deliberate emotional and cognitive withdrawal rather than mere apathy toward the authoritarian order. Even if they do not become overt agents of resistance, their daily acts of disaffiliation and cultural divergence may erode the regime's capacity to reproduce loyalty and cohesion.

Going forward, future research should continue to investigate the evolving value systems, lifestyle practices, and media consumption patterns of North Korea's younger generation. Such inquiry will be essential for understanding the long-term cultural and political trajectories of North Korean society. Equally important is the development of theoretical and policy frameworks that view these youth as emerging stakeholders in the peninsula's future rather than reducing them to victims or objects of control. The securitization of youth may reflect the regime's anxieties—but it also reveals the profound political potential embedded in generational change.

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Trump 2.0 Tariff Politics and the Implications for Korea's Economic Security

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Trump 2.0's tariff policy is reshaping global trade by targeting strategic sectors and critical materials, extending beyond China to key allies. For South Korea, this raises export risks in semiconductors, automobiles, and steel, while exposing its reliance on China for essential minerals like graphite and lithium. The new trade architecture reflects a broader shift toward securitized supply chains, where economic and geopolitical considerations are increasingly intertwined. Korea's competitiveness will hinge on its ability to adapt swiftly to these structural changes. As global value chains reorganize around national security priorities, Korea must reduce input dependencies, strengthen technological self-reliance, and diversify supply sources. At the same time, it must navigate a delicate balance between alliance commitments to the U.S. and economic interdependence with China to safeguard long-term economic security.

Introduction

President Trump's second-term "America First" agenda continues to reshape U.S. trade and foreign policy, reflecting a shift from multilateralism to bilateral and interest-driven engagement. Tariffs have evolved from economic tools into instruments of geopolitical leverage—linking market access to strategic alignment, particularly in the context of intensifying rivalry with China.

In early 2025, the administration introduced a new round of tariffs not only on China but also key allies and major trading partners, including Canada, Mexico, South Korea, the European Union, and Japan. While Canada and Mexico secured temporary exemptions, tariffs on China remained in place. In May, the U.S. and China reached a partial tariff truce that reduced general tariffs rates, but kept high tariffs on strategic sectors such as semiconductors, electric vehicles, solar panels, battery minerals (including lithium and graphite), and defense-related components.

Tariff expansions also affected several allied economies. In May, the U.S. formalized tariffs on imported automobiles, impacting key producers including South Korea, Germany, and Japan. Additional duties were imposed on steel, petrochemicals, and select electronic components, intensifying pressure on export-oriented manufacturing bases and raising broader concerns over the politicization of trade policy in critical supply chains.

For South Korea, this shift in U.S. trade policy presents a strategic dilemma. As both a U.S. ally and major trading partner of China, Korea must carefully balance geopolitical alignment with economic interests. Trump's tariff agenda has revealed structural vulnerabilities rooted in Korea's reliance on global markets, highlighting the need for strategic recalibration in an increasingly politicized trade environment.

Trump 2.0 Trade Policy Outlook

While the Trump administration continues to frame tariffs as instruments for reinforcing national security and reviving industrial competitiveness, growing domestic and fiscal constraints are casting doubt on the long-term viability of this approach. The sustained application of tariffs in high-tech and defense-related sectors has served strategic purposes, but their economic costs are becoming harder to ignore.

One key challenge is the growing strain on the U.S. fiscal position. The impending expiration of the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) at the end of 2025 presents a significant policy crossroads for the Trump administration. While the administration has proposed extending and expanding these tax cuts through the "One Big Beautiful Bill," the bill's passage remains uncertain due to internal GOP divisions and concerns over its fiscal implications.

Extending the TCJA without offsetting spending cuts or new revenue sources would exacerbate existing fiscal pressures, especially as the administration seeks to raise defense spending by 13% in fiscal year 2026. Reflecting these concerns, Moody's downgraded the U.S. sovereign credit rating from Aaa to Aa1 on May 16, 2025, citing the persistent rise in national debt and interest payment ratios, as well as the failure to address chronic fiscal deficits. This downgrade underscores doubts about the sustainability of the U.S. government's debt trajectory and its capacity to implement further fiscal stimulus.

On the other hand, allowing the TCJA to expire as scheduled would likely reduce household disposable income, dampen consumption, and slow economic growth—further compounding the political difficulty of maintaining expansive trade measures. Public sentiment already reflects

growing discontent: a recent survey¹⁾ shows that 58% of Americans oppose continued tariff increases.

Given this combination of fiscal constraints and public opposition, a broad-based escalation of tariffs appears increasingly untenable. Instead, the administration is more likely to pursue alternative strategies to maintain its geopolitical and technological advantage, such as realigning global value chain around allied nations and leveraging non-tariff barriers, including export controls, to reinforce its leadership in strategic industries.

Economic Impacts on South Korea

Korea's major export sectors showed early signs of strain, amid escalating trade tensions and tariff uncertainty. Exports of petroleum products and petrochemicals declined by 20.9% and 20.8% respectively, while automobile exports fell by 4.4% year-over-year in May.²⁾ These declines reflect the immediate sensitivity of key industrial sectors to global demand fluctuations. Semiconductor exports, by contrast, increased by 21.2% during the same period. However, this rise is largely attributed to front-loaded demand from global buyers anticipating possible U.S. tariffs on advanced chips.³⁾ While this short-term surge provided temporary support, it masks the underlying vulnerability of Korea's trade-dependent sectors to abrupt policy shocks.

Korea's export outlook will hinge heavily on the extent of U.S. tariff implementation. According to an analysis by the Korea International Trade Association (KITA, 2025),⁴⁾ if universal tariffs - 10% on all trading partners — are implemented alongside targeted hikes on China, Canada, and Mexico, Korea's exports to the U.S. could fall by up to 7.9%, or roughly \$13 billion. Semiconductors, automobiles, and steel are projected to be among the hardest-hit sectors, reflecting Korea's exposure to both direct tariffs and reduced demand for intermediate goods in third countries.

While trade diversion from China or Mexico could offer partial benefits in areas like electric vehicles and batteries, these are unlikely to offset broader risks. Without a coordinated industrial and diplomatic strategy, Korea faces long-term market share erosion and diminished positioning within restructured supply chains.

More broadly, the ongoing restructuring of global supply chains is contributing to heightened uncertainty for Korea's economy. The shift in trade architecture — marked by changes in production hubs and sourcing strategies — is placing additional stress on Korean firms already navigating

a complex and volatile geopolitical environment. In the short term, these changes are likely to disrupt Korea's intermediate goods exports and erode efficiency gains previously enabled by integrated GVCs. However, in the longer term, Korea may benefit from growing demand for supply chain resilience and diversification. Opportunities could arise from reshoring-friendly technologies, nearshoring trends in North America and Southeast Asia, and increased demand for trusted suppliers in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, batteries, and high-precision machinery.

Yet the challenge lies in the fact that this realignment is concentrated not on general merchandise trade, but on materials and technology-intensive sectors. These domains span the full length of the production value chain, from upstream control over critical raw materials to downstream leadership in advanced technological applications. Given their strategic relevance to national security, these sectors have become focal points in the emerging global supply chain landscape.

The Broader Context: Economic Security and Geopolitics

One of the most pressing strategic challenges for Korea lies in safeguarding its technological and economic sovereignty in the context of U.S.-China geopolitical tensions. Under Trump's tariff-centered and unilateral trade policy, the United States is expected to tighten export controls and expand restrictions on strategic technologies and materials such as semiconductors, AI chips, and defense-related components. At the same time, Korea remains heavily reliant on China for the processing of critical minerals like lithium, cobalt, and especially graphite — over 70% of which is sourced from China — creating structural vulnerabilities. These material dependencies, particularly in technology-intensive and clean energy sectors, magnify Korea's exposure to economic coercion and limit its room to maneuver in both industrial and foreign policy arenas.

Multilateral trade governance is facing increasing strain. As institutions such as the WTO lose authority and unilateral tariff measures become more common, the rules-based order that has long supported Korea's economic and diplomatic strategy is being weakened. This erosion undermines the stability and predictability of the external environment. In the absence of credible dispute resolution mechanisms, Korea's ability to manage external shocks and defend its trade interests is significantly constrained. Upholding and contributing to a transparent, rules-based global trading system remains a strategic priority for preserving long-term economic security.

At the same time, strategic decoupling is reshaping Korea's foreign economic environment. As technological rivalry deepens and supply chains are increasingly politicized, economic choices are becoming inseparable from national

1) Pew Research Center. The number is from the survey of U.S. adults conducted April 7-13, 2015. Available at: www.pewresearch.org

2) Press release from the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (June 1st, 2025)

3) KDB Industry Trends report (April, 2025)

4) Korea International Trade Association (2025). Analysis of the Impact of Tariff Measures under the Second Trump Administration, KITA Trade Brief No. 2, February 2025.

security considerations. Korea faces growing pressure to recalibrate its industrial strategy in response to competing geopolitical expectations from key partners. In particular, securing access to critical materials and mineral resources—many of which are now subject to geopolitical leverage—is emerging as important as advancing technological capabilities. This dynamic is driving complex trade-offs between maintaining access to major markets and protecting its strategic autonomy.

Policy Recommendations for Korea

To respond effectively to the evolving global trade environment under a second Trump administration, Korea should pursue a pragmatic and balanced strategy anchored in national interest and long-term resilience. First, it must strengthen domestic capabilities in strategic sectors such as semiconductors, batteries, and clean energy by accelerating the localization of core technologies. This effort should be matched with measures to secure a stable supply of critical minerals—such as high-purity graphite, lithium, rare earths, and cobalt—through investment in domestic processing, strategic stockpiling, and upstream partnerships. Leveraging existing production bases in the U.S. can also help preserve market access under evolving industrial policies like the CHIPS Act.

Second, Korea should strengthen its export resilience and competitiveness. In the near term, it should institutionalize contingency planning for trade shocks by establishing tariff-response task forces across relevant ministries and industry associations. These bodies would coordinate policy responses, support firm-level risk management, and disseminate timely, actionable information to mitigate external disruptions. Looking ahead, Korea should focus on expanding strategic export capacity by deepening its presence in key markets, strengthening industrial partnerships, and aligning product standards and certifications with global requirements.

Third, Korea must deepen issue-based cooperation with like-minded partners to improve supply chain transparency, promote digital trade standards, and secure access to strategic inputs. Rather than relying solely on multilateral frameworks, Korea should pursue flexible, targeted engagements that advance its strategic autonomy—such as bilateral resource agreements and joint initiatives in mineral processing and recycling technologies. This includes building strategic partnerships with resource-rich countries for stable sourcing of materials such as graphite, lithium, and cobalt, and investing in domestic refining and processing capacity. In parallel, Korea should actively contribute to global rule-making in areas like carbon adjustment mechanisms, data

governance, and green transition frameworks.

Finally, strategic discipline in diplomacy is essential in navigating a fragmented trade landscape shaped by great power rivalry. Korea should avoid reactive alignment and instead engage in coordinated dialogue with allies, balancing economic security with geopolitical stability. Long-term resilience will depend on reducing excessive dependence on any single partner, while preserving its credibility as an adaptable, rules-based trading nation.

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 Publisher : Ki Hoon Lim
 Editor : Park Young-June

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