



## Securitizing Youth: North Korea’s Ideological Strategy amid Signs of Generation Drift

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

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# Securitizing Youth: North Korea’s Ideological Strategy amid Signs of Generation Drift

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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.<sup>1)</sup> 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.”<sup>2)</sup> 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.<sup>3)</sup> 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.<sup>4)</sup>

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.”<sup>5)</sup> 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 Stępką, “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.

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## 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.<sup>6)</sup> 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

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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.

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## 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.

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## 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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