

Loud Outcry, Quiet Policy: Where Securitization Stalled in South Korea's Response to China's West Sea Gray - Zone Tactics

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| Abstract |

Despite escalating domestic alarm over China's expanding gray - zone activities in the West Sea—including fixed structures and observation buoys in the Provisional Measures Zone, navigation restrictions, and interference with Korean maritime surveys—South Korea's executive branch has kept its response within normal politics. Applying the Copenhagen School's securitization theory, this article investigates where the securitization process stalled despite sustained securitizing pressure from the press and the National Assembly. This article argues that while the press and National Assembly frequently made securitizing moves and occasionally demanded exceptional measures, executive discourse acknowledged security implications without publicly justifying exceptional action. Drawing on large - language - model - assisted coding of press, legislative, and executive discourse and a longitudinal reconstruction of policy documents, the study

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identifies an uneven configuration of facilitating conditions: the ambiguity of the gray - zone activities left room for competing interpretations of the same conduct, explicit threat framing was not joined to executive justification of exceptional measures, and security framing varied across executive institutions rather than converging on a common justification for exceptional action. The findings show how a target state can acknowledge and respond to gray - zone activities while continuing to process them through legal, diplomatic, and law - enforcement instruments. The West Sea case demonstrates that securitization can stall after threat recognition, at the point where a recognized threat would have to be joined to authoritative justification of exceptional action.

▪ Key words: Securitization, Gray - zone Coercion, Limited Policy Response, West Sea, Korea - China Maritime Relations

I. Introduction

Since 2018, China has expanded its physical presence in and around the West Sea Provisional Measures Zone (PMZ), where South Korea and China jointly manage fisheries pending the delimitation of their overlapping exclusive economic zones. The activities include fixed aquaculture platforms, a rig - like management structure, observation buoys, and repeated interference with Korean maritime surveys. The 2000 Korea - China Fisheries Agreement regulates fisheries management in the zone but does not expressly address fixed installations. Neither government has publicly classified the structures as military facilities, and their accumulation has not led to an armed confrontation. The pattern nonetheless resembles a familiar form of maritime gray - zone activity: incremental attempts to change the status quo while remaining below the

threshold of an overt military response.

For several years, these activities attracted little sustained political attention in South Korea. That changed in March 2025, when the press reported that the China Coast Guard had blocked the Korean research vessel *Onnuri* from approaching one of the Chinese structures. The incident rapidly transformed a largely invisible maritime dispute into a national political issue. Newspapers described the structures as an encroachment on maritime sovereignty. Members of the National Assembly framed them as evidence of a broader Chinese attempt to expand its influence in the West Sea and called for their removal, proportionate countermeasures, special legislation, and supplementary funding. In July 2025, the Assembly adopted a resolution condemning the installations and demanding a stronger government response. By January 2026, the issue had reached the agenda of a Korea - China summit.

The executive branch also responded, but in a markedly different way. It lodged diplomatic protests, requested that the structures be relocated, convened inter - agency meetings, disclosed Korean buoys as a proportionate response, and expanded coast - guard patrol arrangements. These were not trivial measures, nor did they amount to official silence. They nevertheless remained within the established instruments of diplomacy, fisheries administration, and maritime law enforcement. Across 112 documented government responses between 2018 and January 2026, none crossed the threshold into exceptional action, such as forcible removal, coercive military action, or the use of emergency authority.

This divergence presents the central puzzle of the article. Where did the securitization process stall despite sustained pressure from the press and the National Assembly? More precisely, how did strong security - threat framing and occasional demands for exceptional action coexist with an executive response that acknowledged the issue yet remained below the exceptional threshold in both discourse and policy? The puzzle is therefore

not governmental inaction, but the coexistence of sustained securitizing pressure with an executive response that remained within legal, diplomatic, and law - enforcement instruments.

Existing research on gray - zone coercion provides only a partial answer. One strand examines the strategic logic of operating below the threshold of armed conflict. It explains why states employ gradual, ambiguous, and often non - military instruments to alter the status quo while complicating deterrence. Another strand documents the operational repertoire of maritime gray - zone activity, including coast guards, fishing fleets, survey vessels, artificial structures, navigation restrictions, and administrative claims. Together, these studies explain how gray - zone practices can impose cumulative costs while denying the target state a clear trigger for military retaliation.

What these literatures address less directly is the domestic politics of the target state. The response to a gray - zone activity does not follow automatically from its material characteristics. The same installation may be described as a sovereignty threat requiring extraordinary action, a legal dispute requiring negotiation, or an administrative problem requiring monitoring and enforcement. These interpretations are produced and contested within domestic institutions. The press, legislature, foreign ministry, fisheries authorities, coast guard, and defense establishment do not necessarily define the threat or the appropriate response in the same way. Gray - zone activity therefore poses not only a military - threshold problem but also a domestic political question.

The Copenhagen School's securitization theory offers a framework for examining this process. Its central distinction is between a securitizing move and completed securitization. An actor makes a securitizing move by framing an issue as an existential threat to a valued referent object. Such a move does not by itself complete securitization; it must obtain sufficient acceptance from a relevant audience to legitimate measures outside normal

politics. This distinction is crucial in the West Sea case because strong security claims were clearly present, but they did not result in executive legitimization or authorization of exceptional measures.

The executive occupies a dual position in this analysis. When executive officials themselves frame the issue as a threat to sovereignty, maritime rights, or national security, they act as securitizing actors. When securitizing claims call for removal, deployment, or other coercive maritime measures requiring executive authority, the executive functions as the principal operational audience. Audience status is nevertheless measure - specific: the National Assembly retains formal authority over legislation and appropriations. Executive level - 2 statements are therefore treated as executive - generated threat framing rather than as evidence of audience acceptance of moves initiated by other actors. Where executive statements respond to securitizing claims initiated elsewhere, they are examined as public evidence of how those claims were received and reframed, while the separate policy record provides an additional indicator of whether the response crossed the exceptional threshold.

Empirically, the study compares discourse across three institutional actor groups: the press, elected members of the National Assembly, and the executive branch. It codes 815 press articles, 223 legislative utterances, and 174 executive statements on a four - level scale ranging from factual or managerial discussion to the explicit justification of measures outside normal politics. Two large language models perform the initial coding under a common coding protocol, with a model - output - blinded author audit used as an internal diagnostic. The discourse analysis is then set beside a separately reconstructed record of 112 government responses, each classified according to whether it remained within ordinary procedures or crossed into exceptional action. The design does not estimate a causal effect of public discourse on policy. It measures how securitizing pressure, executive framing, and policy authorization were configured across

institutions and over time.

The results reveal a clear institutional gradient in securitization intensity. Over time, the government expanded its response, but it continued to rely on measures within normal politics. Mean securitization intensity is highest in the press, followed by the National Assembly and the executive. Demands for measures outside normal politics appear in 37 press articles and 15 legislative utterances, but in no executive statement; none of the documented government responses crosses into exceptional action. The case instead reveals an uneven configuration of the Copenhagen School's facilitating conditions. The ambiguity of the gray - zone activities left room for competing interpretations of the same conduct; security framing became widespread without being joined to executive justification of an exceptional remedy; and security framing varied across executive institutions rather than converging on a common justification for exceptional action.

The article makes two principal contributions. It brings the domestic institutional politics of the target state into the study of gray - zone coercion by showing that security framing varies not only across the press, legislature, and executive, but also among institutions within the executive itself. It also contributes to securitization research by distinguishing the intensity of securitizing pressure from the institutional authorization of exceptional action. In the West Sea case, securitization stalled not at threat recognition, but at the point where a recognized threat would have had to be joined to authoritative justification of exceptional action.

Section II develops the theoretical framework, Section III explains the data and measurement strategy, Section IV presents the cross - sectional and longitudinal findings, and Section V discusses their implications.

II. Theoretical Background

1. Gray - Zone Coercion and the Target State's Domestic Politics

The West Sea is a semi - enclosed body of water whose maritime boundary between Korea and China has never been delimited. In the absence of an agreed line, the two states established a Provisional Measures Zone in the 2000 Korea - China Fisheries Agreement, each exercising jurisdiction only over its own vessels pending delimitation. Since 2018 China has deployed maritime structures in and around this zone, including the semi - submersible Seonlan aquaculture platforms and a fixed rig - like structure, together with observation buoys, unilaterally declared navigation - ban areas, and the obstruction of Korean survey vessels. Taken together, these activities display the incremental, ambiguous, and sub - threshold features commonly associated with maritime gray - zone tactics. They create pressure without presenting South Korea with a clear trigger for an armed response, while Beijing portrays them as ordinary or permitted conduct.

The concept of the gray zone now anchors a substantial literature. Mazarr (2015) characterizes gray - zone conflict as a form of competition below the threshold of major war, driven by revisionist intent, strategic gradualism, and unconventional tools; Green et al. (2017) show that Chinese maritime gray - zone coercion often relies on layered non - military and paramilitary instruments, including maritime law - enforcement agencies, fishing fleets, maritime militia, coast guard vessels, oil rigs, and land reclamation or construction on disputed features; and Erickson and Martinson (2019) show how China combines coast guard and maritime militia forces to advance maritime claims below the threshold of war, while Morris et al. (2019) emphasize that gray - zone campaigns are designed to obscure the clarity needed for a decisive deterrent response. The strategic logic is by now well understood: the gray zone works by presenting the target with a

provocation too serious to ignore and too ambiguous to answer with force.

Two gaps in these literatures are particularly relevant to the present study. The first is geographic. Much of the international gray - zone literature concerns the South and East China Seas, where the disputes are older, the incidents more numerous, and the claimants more numerous still. The West Sea has received comparatively less attention in this international literature, although several recent Korean studies have examined the issue directly. The setting is also distinctive: the maritime boundary remains undelimited, the fisheries agreement does not expressly regulate the construction of maritime facilities, and South Korea maintains close economic ties with China while facing broader strategic constraints.

The second is one of standpoint, and it is the more consequential. The gray - zone literature is written largely from the perspective of the coercer or of the counter - coercer. It asks what China does, why the tactics succeed, and how the United States and its partners might deter them. What it seldom asks is what happens inside the target state: how the coercion is publicly named, who contests the naming, and whether the naming translates into policy. Yet how the target state interprets such activity is itself politically contested. Because such activity does not automatically trigger an armed response, domestic institutions must determine how the issue should be described and what form of response is appropriate. Whether the activity is framed as a sovereignty threat or an administrative problem therefore depends not only on its material features but also on how domestic actors interpret it. Gray - zone coercion is thus routinely studied as a problem of deterrence, and only rarely as a problem of domestic politics.

Recent Korean research relevant to China's West Sea activities has focused primarily on two questions. The first concerns Chinese strategy and gray - zone tactics. Lee (2025), for example, interprets the artificial structures and aquaculture facilities in the Korea - China Provisional Measures Zone as part of a broader gray - zone strategy aimed at the

territorialization of the West and South Sea of Korea. The second concerns the legal and jurisdictional constraints on South Korea's response. Choi (2025) proposes military response measures for the Provisional Measures Zone that would remain consistent with the obligation of mutual restraint under UNCLOS, while Shim (2025) and Jung (2025) assess the international - law implications of the Chinese structures and the legal and procedural options available to South Korean authorities.

Taken together, these studies clarify the strategic character of China's activities and the legal and operational constraints surrounding South Korea's response. Their primary focus, however, is on strategic characterization, legal assessment, and available policy options rather than on how the issue was constructed across South Korea's domestic institutions.

This study addresses those gaps by examining how South Korea's domestic institutions framed and responded to China's West Sea activities. It does not adjudicate Beijing's intentions or the legal status of the structures. Instead, it examines where the securitization process stalled as strong securitizing pressure in the press and the National Assembly coexisted with an executive response that remained within legal, diplomatic, and law - enforcement channels. Securitization theory provides the framework for analyzing this divergence and for identifying the executive as the principal operational audience for the coercive measures at issue.

2. Securitization Theory

The main theoretical framework of this study is the Copenhagen School's 'securitization theory.' Its central claim is that security is not simply an objective condition to be reported; an issue becomes a security issue through the way it is publicly constructed. Wæver (1995) treats security as a speech act rather than a neutral description: by defining an issue as a security threat, a state representative claims that ordinary political

procedures may no longer be sufficient. Buzan et al. (1998) developed this insight into a general analytical framework. A securitizing move occurs when an actor presents an issue as an existential threat to a valued referent object. Such a move results in securitization only if it gains sufficient acceptance from a relevant audience.

Three components of the framework structure the analysis that follows. The first is the securitizing move: the speech act in which the issue is presented as an existential threat to a referent object. The second is the audience: the party whose acceptance is required for the move to succeed. The third is the emergency measure: the action outside normal politics that acceptance licenses. The relationship among the three is the theory's central proposition. A securitizing move is not securitization. The issue is securitized not when an actor calls it a threat but when the designation is accepted by the relevant audience and, in consequence, emergency action becomes possible.

<Table 1> The Components of Securitization

Component	Definition	Observable in this case
Securitizing move	An actor frames the issue as an existential threat to a referent object	Press articles, National Assembly utterances, and executive statements framing the structures as threats to sovereignty, maritime rights, or national security
Audience	The party whose acceptance is required to license the exception; must possess the standing to grant it	The executive as the principal operational audience for removal, maritime deployment, and other coercive operational measures; the National Assembly retains formal authority over legislation and appropriations
Emergency measure	Action that departs from ordinary political or legal procedures or invokes exceptional coercive authority in response to the threat	Forcible dismantlement, the threat or use of military force, emergency authority, or other measures that bypass ordinary constraints

▪ Note. Definitions adapted from Buzan et al. (1998). Subsequent debates concerning audience identification and authorization are discussed below.

Beyond the basic components of securitization, Buzan et al. (1998) identify three facilitating conditions that can make a securitizing move more or less likely to succeed. First, the claim should follow a recognizable security grammar by identifying an existential threat, point of no return, and a possible way out. Second, the securitizing actor must hold sufficient authority in relation to the relevant audience. Third, features of the alleged threat itself—for example, tanks or polluted waters—may make a security construction easier or harder to sustain. These conditions are enabling rather than deterministic.

The second condition requires particular clarification because, for the Copenhagen School, a securitizing move does not complete securitization without sufficient acceptance by a relevant audience. Subsequent scholarship has therefore focused on who the relevant audience is and what such acceptance entails. Balzacq (2005) criticizes the framework for conflating illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, while Stritzel (2007) highlights the tension between securitization as a performative speech act and as an intersubjective process involving actors, audiences, and contexts. McDonald (2008) similarly argues that audiences and facilitating conditions remain under-theorized.

Later work develops the audience concept more explicitly. Balzacq (2005, 2011) distinguishes moral from formal support and identifies an empowering audience as an actor or institution capable of granting or withholding something consequential. Salter (2008) shows that audience relations vary across popular, elite, technocratic, and scientific settings, while Côté (2016) treats audiences as active agents capable of authorizing security discourse and legitimizing the treatment of the issue through security practice. These debates are used here to clarify how the Copenhagen School's audience requirement can be identified empirically, not to replace its distinction between a securitizing move and completed securitization.

The executive occupies a dual position in this analysis. When executive

officials themselves frame the issue as a threat to sovereignty, maritime rights, or national security, they act as securitizing actors. When securitizing claims call for removal, deployment, or other coercive maritime measures requiring executive authority, the executive functions as the principal operational audience. Audience status is nevertheless measure-specific: the National Assembly retains formal authority over legislation and appropriations. Executive level-2 statements are therefore treated as executive-generated threat framing rather than as evidence of audience acceptance of moves initiated by other actors. Where executive statements respond to securitizing claims initiated elsewhere, they are examined as public evidence of how those claims were received and reframed, while the separate policy record provides an additional indicator of whether the response crossed the exceptional threshold.

To describe the informational environment confronting this operational audience, the study draws loosely on Zaller's (1992) distinction between one-sided and two-sided information flows. Zaller uses this distinction to explain how competing elite messages shape mass opinion; this study does not. Here, convergence and fragmentation refer only to whether authoritative security claims reaching the executive aligned or diverged. Cue convergence is therefore not treated as equivalent to Copenhagen School audience acceptance, nor is cue fragmentation assumed to cause executive restraint. The terminology is used only to describe whether claims voiced by authoritative actors were reproduced, reinforced, or contradicted as they reached the executive.

The three facilitating conditions are applied diagnostically to the West Sea case. First, the civilian or administrative appearance of the structures and buoys, together with unsettled maritime jurisdiction, may leave room for competing security, legal, diplomatic, and administrative constructions of the same activities. Second, the analysis examines whether explicit threat framing developed into justification of an exceptional remedy. Third, it asks

whether authoritative security claims converged or remained fragmented across the actor - audience relationship. Accordingly, the empirical analysis addresses three questions: how did the characteristics of the alleged threat shape competing constructions; how far did security framing develop from threat recognition toward justification of exceptional action; and did authoritative security cues converge or remain fragmented as they reached the executive? Section III explains how these distinctions are operationalized across discourse and policy.

III. Research Design

This section explains how the study measures securitizing discourse, executive audience reception, and policy response. The design separates discourse from policy rather than treating the absence of exceptional action as evidence that no securitizing move occurred. Press and National Assembly discourse capture domestic securitizing pressure, executive discourse records how the principal operational audience publicly framed the issue, and a separate policy timeline assesses whether government responses crossed into exceptional action. Discourse is coded on a common 0 - 3 scale, while the documented government responses are classified as normal or exceptional. The study does not estimate a causal effect of discourse on policy; it compares their configuration across actors and over time and interprets the resulting pattern through the Copenhagen School's facilitating conditions.

1. Data and Measurement

The study constructs three discourse corpora—for the press, the National Assembly, and the executive—covering the period from 1 January 2018 to

31 January 2026, together with a timeline of government responses over the same period. Speakers are classified by their institutional affiliation rather than by the venue in which they speak: statements by executive officials—ministers, vice - ministers, agency heads, military commanders, and diplomats—are assigned to the executive corpus even when delivered before the National Assembly, and only elected legislators’ utterances are treated as National Assembly discourse. The final analytical corpus comprises 815 press articles, 223 National Assembly utterances, and 174 executive statements, alongside 112 documented government responses. Full search strings and the retrieval and screening flow are reported in the Appendix.

The press corpus covers fourteen national and major business dailies indexed by BigKinds (Korea Press Foundation), spanning the mainstream ideological spectrum from Chosun Ilbo and JoongAng Ilbo to Hankyoreh and Kyunghyang Shinmun. The corpus is not confined to the fixed structures alone but includes associated gray - zone activities such as observation buoys, unilateral navigation restrictions, and interference with Korean maritime surveys. The National Assembly corpus covers plenary and committee records, restricted to the utterances of elected members. The executive corpus draws on two sources: briefings and press releases from the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Korea Coast Guard, the Ministry of National Defense, and the Presidential Office; and statements by executive officials appearing before National Assembly committees. Procedural briefings by non - elected committee staff are excluded from the analysis. Because archive structures required different retrieval terms across the three sources, comparability rests on relevance screening and the application of a common coding protocol rather than on identical search universes.

<Table 2> Corpora and analytical units

Actor group	Sources	Final analytical units
Press	12 national and 2 business dailies (articles)	815
National Assembly	Elected members' committee and plenary utterances	223
Executive	Briefings, releases, and officials' Assembly testimony	174
Policy record	Government releases and press articles	112

▪ Note. Discourse counts report relevant units within the observation window. The policy record consists of documented government responses and was classified separately from the discourse corpora.

Discourse and policy share the same conceptual boundary between normal and exceptional politics but are measured separately. Each relevant press, National Assembly, and executive unit is assigned an ordinal securitization - intensity score from 0 to 3. The scores measure the intensity of securitizing discourse, including the executive's own public framing of the issue. The 112 documented government responses are classified separately according to whether they remained within normal politics or crossed into exceptional action. The policy record is then used to assess whether exceptional measures were actually legitimated or authorized. The discourse scale is presented in Table 3.

<Table 3> Securitization intensity scale

Score	Definition	Illustrative case
0	No threat framing; factual or managerial reference	Agreement to discuss zone management at the Korea - China fisheries commission
1	Security - adjacent framing; concern or criticism without construction of an existential threat	A call for the government to establish the facts about the structures and prepare a response

Score	Definition	Illustrative case
2	Securitizing move; the issue framed as a threat to sovereignty, maritime rights, or national security	The installation of structures infringes our maritime sovereignty and threatens national security
3	Justification of measures outside normal politics in response to the threat	Protest is not enough: forcible removal, naval deployment, and special legislation, or an emergency supplementary budget are required

▪ Note. Where multiple levels appear in one unit, the highest is coded.

The decisive boundaries are $1 \rightarrow 2$, where an explicit sovereignty, maritime - rights, or national - security threat frame appears, and $2 \rightarrow 3$, where that threat is explicitly linked to an exceptional response. Not every demand for stronger action reaches level 3. Level 3 is reserved for demands such as forcible dismantlement of another state's installations, coercive military deployment or the threat or use of force, special or emergency legislation, and supplementary budgetary measures explicitly justified as extraordinary responses to the identified threat. Routine legislation, regular appropriations, and future - year budget requests do not automatically qualify unless explicitly framed as exceptional responses. For example, the government's disclosure that Korean buoys already operating in the area constituted a proportionate response is classified as normal politics rather than exceptional action.

The scale measures the intensity of securitizing discourse, not securitization success: a level - 3 utterance may justify exceptional action even when no such action is authorized. For the executive corpus, routine fisheries enforcement—including interdiction or seizure of illegal fishing vessels, fisheries - cooperation meetings, and joint patrols—is coded 0 or 1 unless the statement explicitly frames the issue as a threat to sovereignty or national security.

The policy timeline applies the same conceptual boundary to conduct. Each

of the 112 documented responses is classified according to whether it remained within normal politics or crossed into exceptional action. Diplomatic protests, consultations, relocation requests, inter - agency coordination, Coast Guard patrols, announcements, and proportionate in - kind countermeasures are classified as normal politics. Forcible dismantlement, coercive military action directed at the structures, special or emergency legislation, or emergency supplementary measures, or comparable departures from ordinary policy instruments would cross the exceptional threshold.

Although the full record begins in 2018, the longitudinal reconstruction focuses on March 2025 to January 2026, which contains 89% of the relevant press articles and all relevant National Assembly utterances. Three phases are defined by trigger events rather than equal calendar intervals, with August - September 2025 treated as an interregnum. The reconstruction examines whether institutional divergence persisted as executive responses expanded, before Section IV.3 interprets the pattern through the Copenhagen School's facilitating conditions.

2. Coding, Validation, and Robustness

Large - language - model - assisted annotation was used to classify the Korean - language corpora at scale. Existing research shows that large language models can perform political - text annotation effectively (Gilardi et al. 2023; Törnberg 2025), while also demonstrating that performance varies across tasks, languages, and text types (Heseltine & Clemm von Hohenberg 2024). Model - generated labels therefore require task - specific validation rather than being treated as equivalent to human judgment by default (Pangakis et al. 2023; Egami et al. 2023). The coding procedure was evaluated through model substitution, repeated - run stability, and a model - output - blinded author audit.

Claude Haiku 4.5 and GPT-4o-mini independently coded the available

units under the same Korean - language base prompt at temperature 0; executive documents received an additional supplementary instruction concerning routine maritime administration. Each successful output contained a relevance judgment, an intensity score, and a brief rationale. The complete instructions are reproduced in the Appendix. A rule specified in advance designated the model showing greater agreement with the model - output - blinded author audit as the primary coder, while the other was retained as a model - dependence check. The two scores were not averaged because an arithmetic mean between ordinal categories would correspond to neither model's classification and would obscure rather than expose disagreement.

Agreement between the two models was moderate overall but substantially stronger at the upper threshold. Linear weighted κ was 0.583, while agreement on whether a unit reached level 3 was 96.6%. Replacing the primary labels with those of the secondary model preserved the ordering of the press, the National Assembly, and the executive, and again produced no level - 3 executive document.¹⁾ Repeated coding of identical texts also showed high within - model stability. Linear weighted κ was 0.987 for the primary model and 0.939 for the secondary model under the fixed temperature setting.²⁾

1) The model - agreement analysis was restricted to units within the observation window that both models classified as relevant ($n = 1,204$: 814 press articles, 218 National Assembly utterances, and 172 executive statements). Exact score agreement was 75.8%, agreement within one scale point was 99.8%, and agreement on the level - 2 boundary was 82.8%. Under the secondary model, after applying the same speaker reclassification, mean scores were 1.80 for the press ($n = 986$), 1.36 for the National Assembly ($n = 242$), and 1.15 for the executive ($n = 222$). The two models applied relevance classification independently, which accounts for their different corpus sizes. Both models preserve the actor hierarchy and assign no level - 3 score to any executive unit.

2) The repeated - run test used the same stratified sample of 100 units across three runs. The primary model reproduced 99% of its scores and the secondary model 96%. Temperature 0 was used in all runs but is not assumed to guarantee deterministic output.

A model - output - blinded author audit was conducted, in which the author manually recoded the sample without access to either model's outputs. Agreement was higher with the primary model than with the secondary model, with linear weighted κ values of 0.760 and 0.402, respectively. Because the manual coder was a study author rather than an external domain expert, this exercise is treated as an internal diagnostic rather than independent human validation. Agreement was strongest for the press and weaker for the executive corpus, indicating uncertainty in distinguishing among the lower categories of restrained official language. The upper - threshold result is more stable: neither model assigned any executive statement in the full corpus to level 3, and the author audit identified none in its sample. A stronger design would employ multiple independent specialists in security studies with formal intercoder reliability assessment; resource constraints placed this beyond the present study, and it remains a task for future research.³⁾

A targeted post - coding review was conducted to check the consistent application of the level - 3 boundary, particularly for references to coercive action, special legislation, parliamentary resolutions, and supplementary budgets. Level 3 was applied only when the proposed measure was explicitly justified as a departure from normal politics; international legal action, legislation, regular appropriations, and ordinary legal or diplomatic measures did not automatically qualify. The substantive analysis uses the scores recorded in the final coded corpora. In the final data, 37 press articles and 15 elected - legislator utterances reached level 3, while no executive statement did so.

3) The blind validation sample initially contained 120 units. After applying the observation window, 116 units remained for comparison with the primary model and 114 with the secondary model, because the latter classified two National Assembly units as not relevant. Human - primary agreement was 75.0% exact and 97.4% within one scale point; human - secondary exact agreement was 44.7%.

IV. Findings

The findings are presented in three stages. Section IV.1 compares the institutional distribution of securitizing discourse and sets it against the recorded policy response. Section IV.2 reconstructs the sequence from March 2025 to January 2026, when domestic attention became concentrated around a series of trigger events. Section IV.3 interprets these patterns through the Copenhagen School's facilitating conditions to identify where the securitization process stalled.

The observation window begins in 2018, when the first Seonlan structure was installed, but sustained domestic attention emerged much later. Before 2025, the corpus records only 84 relevant press articles—2018(14), 2019(7), 2020(9), 2021(19), 2022(19), 2023(10), and 2024(6)—and no relevant National Assembly utterance. The March 2025 Onnuri standoff therefore marks not the physical onset of China's activities, but an observable break from episodic coverage to sustained national political attention. The present design cannot determine whether this shift reflected differences in media visibility, changes in government disclosure or agenda-setting, broader geopolitical developments, or some combination of these factors. Nonetheless, this temporal gap is itself part of the empirical pattern: China's physical presence developed incrementally, while sustained securitizing pressure emerged only after the issue entered the national political agenda in 2025.

1. The Institutional Distribution of Securitizing Discourse and Policy Response

The cross-sectional analysis first compares securitizing discourse across the press, elected members of the National Assembly, and the executive. Table 4 reports the number of relevant units, mean intensity, and frequency of discourse for each level and each actor group.

<Table 4> Securitization intensity by actor groups

Actor group	Relevant units (n)	Mean (0 - 3)	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Press	815	1.74	0 (0%)	249 (30.6%)	529 (64.9%)	37 (4.5%)
National Assembly	223	1.55	13 (5.8%)	90 (40.4%)	105 (47.1%)	15 (6.7%)
Executive	174	0.99	39 (22.4%)	98 (56.3%)	37 (21.3%)	0 (0%)

• Note. The executive category combines relevant government publications with statements by executive officials in National Assembly proceedings.

Table 4 shows two related but distinct patterns. First, mean securitization intensity declines from the press to the National Assembly and the executive. Second, and more importantly, level - 3 discourse appears in the press and the National Assembly but not in the executive corpus. This upper - threshold contrast is more robust than the precise difference in means: neither model identified a level - 3 executive statement, and none appeared in the author - audit sample. The lower executive mean therefore should not be read as evidence that the executive ignored the issue or failed to recognize its security implications; rather, executive discourse remained concentrated below the threshold of explicit justification for exceptional measures.

The score distributions further clarify this divergence. Press coverage was concentrated at level 2, with nearly two - thirds of relevant articles framing the activities as threats to national security. Legislative discourse was concentrated at levels 1 and 2: 47.1% of legislators' utterances reached level 2, while 6.7% reached level 3. Executive discourse, by contrast, was concentrated at levels 0 and 1. Thirty - seven executive statements nevertheless reached level 2, confirming that explicit security - threat framing was present within the executive, but none reached level 3. The contrast is therefore not between public alarm and executive denial, but between stronger securitizing pressure outside the executive and executive

threat framing that stopped short of justifying exceptional measures. Table 5 disaggregates the executive corpus by institutional affiliation.

<Table 5> Executive securitization intensity by institutional affiliation

Institution	Relevant Units (n)	Mean Intensity	Max Level (n)
Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries	85	0.81	2(13)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	50	1.16	2(14)
Korea Coast Guard	25	1.08	2(4)
Defense establishment (MND, JCS, and ROK Navy)	9	1.22	2(4)
Prime Minister and Office for Government Policy Coordination	4	1.25	2(1)
Presidential Office	1	2.00	2(1)

- Note. No directly relevant statement was identified in the Ministry of National Defense's publicly issued briefings and releases; the nine defense - related units derive from testimony before the National Assembly.

The distribution shows that executive discourse was produced primarily through fisheries administration, diplomacy, and maritime law enforcement. The Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries accounted for 85 of the 174 relevant units and had the lowest mean intensity. Smaller institutional groups, including the Prime Minister and Office for Government Policy Coordination and the defense establishment, showed somewhat higher mean intensities.

Defense actors did engage the issue in parliamentary testimony, and these statements are included in the executive corpus under the speaker - affiliation rule. They reached at most level 2, as did the other executive institutions; no executive institution produced a level - 3 statement. None of the fifteen retrieved Ministry of National Defense briefings was classified as directly relevant under the study's relevance rule. This pattern should be interpreted in light of differences in institutional communication practices. Whereas ministries such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Oceans

and Fisheries routinely communicate policy positions through public briefings and press materials, defense - related assessments may also circulate through parliamentary testimony, internal reporting, or non - public and classified channels. The public corpus is therefore less likely to capture the full range of defense communication, and the small number of publicly observable defense units should not be interpreted as evidence of institutional inattention.

The discourse distributions must next be compared with the policy record. All 112 documented government responses remained within normal politics, including fisheries enforcement, diplomatic consultation and protest, inter - agency coordination, and other administrative measures (see Appendix). One response—the disclosure that Korean buoys already operating in the area constituted a proportionate countermeasure—was identified separately as an in - kind response, but it likewise did not cross the exceptional threshold.

Taken together, the discourse and policy records show a clear institutional divergence. The result is not a contrast between securitizing language and governmental inaction: the executive protested, negotiated, coordinated among agencies, disclosed an in - kind response, and expanded law - enforcement activity. The contrast lies between the intensity of securitizing pressure outside the executive and the executive's continued reliance on ordinary legal, diplomatic, administrative, and coast - guard instruments. The cross - sectional evidence cannot show whether this divergence persisted as domestic pressure intensified and the government expanded its response. Section IV.2 therefore turns to the sequence from March 2025 to January 2026.

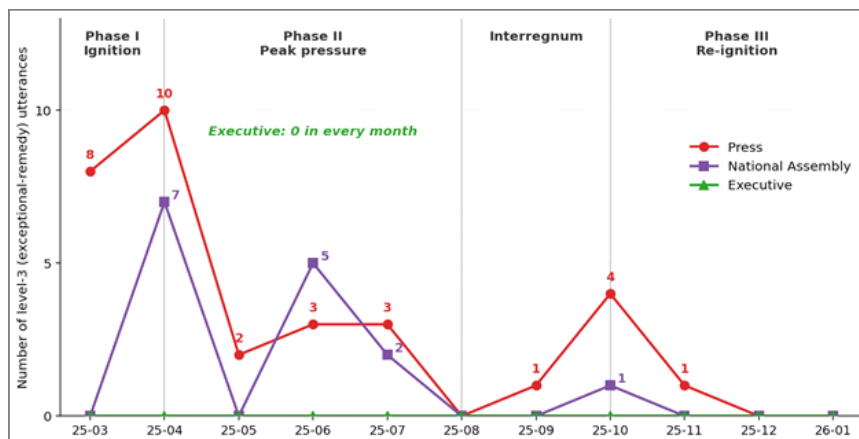
2. Three Phases of Divergence Between Securitizing Pressure and Executive Response

Section IV.1 established an institutional divergence across the full observation window. This section examines whether that divergence persisted as domestic pressure intensified and the government expanded its

response from March 2025 to January 2026. The analysis describes patterns of alignment, divergence, and temporal co - occurrence across actors and policy responses; it does not attribute one actor's framing or policy choice to another actor's discourse.

The phases are defined by trigger events rather than by equal calendar intervals. Phase I (Ignition, March 2025) begins with reporting of the Onnuri standoff and the introduction of the National Assembly resolution. Phase II (Peak Pressure, April - July 2025) extends from the public disclosure of Seonlan No. 2 to the resolution's plenary passage. Phase III (Re - Ignition and Institutionalization, October 2025 - January 2026) begins with renewed reports concerning Seonlan No. 2 and a second Onnuri standoff, and continues through the Korea - China summit. August and September 2025 are treated as an interregnum: they remain visible in the monthly series but are excluded from the phase summaries.

<Figure 1> Monthly Distribution of Level - 3 Securizing Discourse



▪ Note. Figure 1 plots the monthly number of discourse units coded at level 3 by actor. No executive statement reached level 3 in any month; such utterances appear only in the press and the National Assembly, clustering in Phase II.

Figure 1 isolates the upper threshold of the coding scale and shows when demands for exceptional measures were concentrated. Level - 3 press discourse was most frequent at the onset of the controversy in March and April, whereas legislative level - 3 discourse was concentrated in Phase II, particularly in April and June. Fourteen of the National Assembly's fifteen level - 3 utterances occurred during Phase II, followed by only one in Phase III. Most importantly, no executive statement reached level 3 in any month. The temporal pattern therefore shows that even when exceptional - response demands intensified outside the executive, executive discourse consistently remained below the exceptional threshold.

Where Figure 1 highlights the monthly concentration of exceptional - response discourse, Table 6 provides the broader phase - level comparison by reporting mean securitization intensity, the share of level - 3 units, and the principal government responses recorded in each period. The table does not imply that the listed responses were caused by the contemporaneous discourse; rather, it places discourse and policy developments within a common chronology.

<Table 6> Three - Phase Sequence of Discourse and Recorded Government Response

Phase	Trigger events	Press mean (L3 %)	Assembly mean (L3 %)	Executive mean (L3 %)	Principal recorded government response
Phase I Ignition (Mar 2025)	Onnuri standoff reported (3.18); condemnation resolution introduced (3.25)	1.97 (10%)	1.30 (0%)	1.00 (0%)	Diplomatic summons, protest, and public statements

Phase	Trigger events	Press mean (L3 %)	Assembly mean (L3 %)	Executive mean (L3 %)	Principal recorded government response
Phase II Peak pressure (Apr - Jul 2025)	Seonlan No.2 publicly disclosed (4.24); 13 buoys confirmed (5.31); resolution passed in plenary (7.3)	1.96 (8%)	1.66 (12%)	1.18 (0%)	Relocation requests, inter - agency coordination, and disclosure of pre - existing Korean buoys as a proportionate response
Phase III Re - Ignition (Oct 2025 - Jan 2026)	First personnel on Seonlan No.2 (10.22); second Onnuri standoff (10.28); Korea - China summit (26.15)	1.53 (1%)	1.44 (1%)	1.28 (0%)	Announcement of a wide - area patrol zone and large - vessel deployment; summit - level consultation

(1) Phase I: Ignition (March 2025)

The reporting of the 18 March Onnuri standoff marked the point at which the West Sea structures became a sustained national political issue. The structures themselves had existed for years, but the encounter between a Korean research vessel and the China Coast Guard was publicly reported as a direct maritime confrontation and coincided with a sharp increase in domestic attention. Press attention expanded immediately. All eleven relevant articles published on 18 March were coded at level 2 or 3, producing a daily mean of 2.09. As Figure 1 shows, eight press articles reached level 3 during March, principally through demands for the removal of the structures or reciprocal Korean installations.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded on the same day by

summoning a Chinese embassy official and lodging a protest. At its regular briefing, the ministry stated (intensity 2):

“We have conveyed a firm position to China. The government has been responding actively, on a whole - of - government basis, so that our legitimate and lawful maritime rights and interests in the West Sea are not affected.”

— Ministry of Foreign Affairs, daily press briefing
(2025.03.18.)

The statement was coded at level 2 because it invoked Korea's legitimate maritime rights and interests. It nevertheless remained within the established language of diplomatic protest and did not justify an operational measure outside normal politics.

A few days later, Foreign Minister Cho Tae - yul raised the issue during a meeting with Wang Yi. In the official readout, however, the West Sea appeared alongside APEC preparations, prospective high - level exchanges, and economic and cultural cooperation. The executive thus acknowledged the dispute while continuing to situate it within the wider bilateral relationship. Legislative discourse was still developing during this phase, with a mean intensity of 1.30, but explicit security framing was already present. On 24 March, Representative Wi Sung - lak stated (intensity 2):

“It is not only the structures. China's efforts to expand its influence in the West Sea through its navy and its coast guard are a serious security problem for us.”

— Rep. Wi Sung - lak, Foreign Affairs and Unification
Committee (2025.03.24.)

In the same committee meeting, Foreign Minister Cho answered a

question about the installations in narrower factual terms (intensity 0):

“At present this is known only through media reports. As for what has been installed—as you will have seen in the coverage—two structures called Seonlan have been put in place.”

— Foreign Minister Cho Tae - yul, Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee (2025.03.24.)

The contrast is important because it appeared in the same institutional setting at the moment the issue entered the national agenda. Representative Wi connected the structures to a broader security problem involving Chinese naval and coast - guard activity, whereas Foreign Minister Cho confined his public answer to what the government could confirm about the installations. This does not mean that the executive dismissed the issue: it had already lodged a formal protest and issued public statements. It does show a clear difference between legislative and executive framing at the outset of the dispute.

The introduction of a non - binding National Assembly resolution on 25 March gave legislative expression to the emerging pressure. The resolution could formally endorse demands for a stronger response, but it did not itself authorize removal or direct maritime operations. The executive continued to respond through diplomatic protest, public statements, and communication with China. Phase I therefore established the configuration that would recur later: rapid securitizing pressure, visible executive engagement, and no authorization of measures outside normal politics.

(2) Phase II: Peak Pressure (April - July 2025)

Phase II contained the highest concentration of legislative demands for measures outside normal politics. Press intensity remained high at 1.96, while the National Assembly reached its highest phase mean of 1.66. Fourteen of the Assembly's fifteen audited level - 3 utterances occurred during this period. The public disclosure of Seonlan No.2 in April, reports of a Chinese navigation - restriction area, and confirmation of thirteen Chinese buoys in May were accompanied by sustained media and legislative attention through the resolution's plenary passage on 3 July.

The National Assembly debate moved beyond expressions of concern to explicit demands for deterrent or reciprocal measures. On 24 April, Representative Lee Byung - jin stated (intensity 3):

“They block us from even approaching. It has to reach the point of ‘if you touch ours, you die too’ –at least that, if things go wrong—though such a thing must not happen.”

– Rep. Lee Byung - jin, Agriculture, Food, Rural Affairs, Oceans and Fisheries Committee (2025.04.24.)

Three legislative utterances reached level 3 on that date. Several connected sovereignty or territorial language to proposed funding for reciprocal Korean structures. Representative Cho Kyoung - tae stated (intensity 3):

“This is truly a matter of defending our territory... see to it that a strong response is mounted through proportionate measures, and that this budget is not cut... if any country's aggression against our territory is felt, the government must respond more forcefully.”

— Rep. Cho Kyoung - tae, Agriculture, Food, Rural Affairs,
Oceans and Fisheries Committee (2025.04.24.)

These statements illustrate the upper end of legislative discourse during the phase. They did not merely describe the structures as problematic; they linked the threat frame to concrete demands for reciprocal installations, deterrence, and dedicated funding. The Assembly's strongest discourse was therefore concentrated not at the initial moment of public attention but during the subsequent period of oversight and resolution deliberation.

Executive discourse remained below that threshold. A statement issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after the third Korea - China maritime cooperation dialogue combined an expression of concern with an emphasis on continued bilateral management (intensity 1):

“conveyed its deep concern regarding the Chinese structures in the West Sea and emphasized that our legitimate maritime rights and interests must not be infringed... Both sides, on the shared understanding that this issue must not become an obstacle to the development of bilateral relations, agreed to continue communicating through channels at every level.”

— MOFA press release (2025.04.24.)

The statement acknowledged the seriousness of the dispute through the language of “deep concern” and “legitimate maritime rights and interests.” At the same time, it embedded the issue in continued communication and the management of the broader bilateral relationship. The two elements appeared in the same statement rather than in separate stages of the government's response. The inter - agency meeting announced on 27 May represented a further institutional development. Responsibility was no longer confined to a single ministry, and the government publicly presented

the matter as requiring coordination across relevant agencies. Yet the announcement still emphasized monitoring, inter - agency coordination, and protection of maritime rights rather than exceptional action (intensity 1):

“The government, in close coordination among the relevant ministries, will closely monitor the movements of the Chinese side in the West Sea and respond actively so that our legitimate rights and interests are not infringed.”

— MOFA press release (2025.05.27.)

The most distinct operational response recorded during Phase II was disclosed on 2 June. The government stated that Korean buoys installed in 2018 remained in operation and constituted a proportionate response to Chinese buoys. This was not a new deployment undertaken in June 2025. Nor did it involve dismantling the Chinese installations or employing military force. The chronology therefore classifies the buoy response as an in - kind measure that remained within normal politics.

On 3 July, the National Assembly adopted its resolution, formally endorsing demands for a stronger response. By that point, executive activity had expanded to include repeated relocation requests, diplomatic consultations, inter - agency coordination, and public disclosure of the pre - existing Korean buoys. Policy therefore expanded during the phase, but it remained within normal politics. The period of greatest legislative pressure coincided with broader coordination and a more visible government response, but not with executive legitimation or authorization of exceptional action.

(3) Phase III: Re - Ignition and Institutionalization (October 2025
- January 2026)

Sustained attention re - emerged in October, when reports appeared that personnel had been observed on Seonlan No.2 and that the Onnuri had again encountered interference from the China Coast Guard. Phase III contained 337 relevant press articles and 87 elected - legislator utterances. Mean intensity was lower than in Phase II: press intensity averaged 1.53 and legislative intensity 1.44. Explicit threat framing remained present, but it was accompanied by more routine oversight, factual reporting, and discussion of policy implementation.

The phase's only level - 3 legislative utterance drew an explicit analogy with China's conduct in the South China Sea. Representative Lim Jong - deuk stated (intensity 3):

“Doesn't this look familiar? It closely resembles what China did to seize the South China Sea and provoke a sovereignty dispute: first it installs maritime structures, then conducts reconnaissance, generates conflict, and on that basis asserts sovereignty. This must be seen not as mere information - gathering but as a deliberate 'West Sea project.'”

— Rep. Lim Jong - deuk, National Defense Committee
(2025.10.14.)

The statement located the structures within an alleged sequence of maritime expansion rather than treating them as isolated installations. Legislative criticism also increasingly addressed the South Korean government's response. Representative Cho Kyoung - tae stated (intensity 2):

“I will voice criticism that the government's response to

China's illegal structures in the West Sea has been lukewarm and that it is neglecting the infringement of our maritime sovereignty... I have said repeatedly that we must respond strongly and proportionately, yet the government's will is very weak."

— Rep. Cho Kyoung - tae, Agriculture, Food, Rural Affairs, Oceans and Fisheries Committee (2025.10.15.)

The object of criticism had therefore expanded. Legislators continued to securitize China's activities, but they also characterized the executive's response as inadequate protection of sovereignty. Members again raised reciprocal structures and related funding, including during budget deliberations. These debates sustained legislative pressure, although most Phase III legislative utterances remained below level 3; only one reached the exceptional - response threshold.

The most durable policy adjustment recorded during the phase came on 24 December, when the Coast Guard announced a plan to establish a wide - area patrol zone and to deploy large patrol vessels in connection with concerns over the Chinese structures. Earlier responses had included diplomatic protests, consultations, inter - agency meetings, and disclosure of the pre - existing Korean buoys. The December measure differed by establishing a standing maritime law - enforcement arrangement rather than an episodic response to an individual incident.

The measure was operationally significant, but it remained within normal politics. It did not authorize an exceptional measure, and it assigned the operational role to the Coast Guard rather than the navy. The measure therefore institutionalized maritime law enforcement without crossing the exceptional threshold. This describes the observable form of the policy response; it does not establish the executive's private motivation.

The issue subsequently reached the Korea - China summit on 5 January

2026. This represented a further elevation of the diplomatic agenda, but not a change in the type of instruments employed. After China stated later in January that it had begun relocating one structure, Foreign Minister Cho Hyun declined to present the development as a discrete achievement of the summit:

“As for the West Sea structures, as has already been reported, I do not wish to say that we moved them as an achievement of the summit. Because Korea - China relations will not end with a single summit –there will be others –and because we must also consider the other side’s position...”

– Foreign Minister Cho Hyun, Foreign Affairs and Unification Committee (2026.01.28.)

The statement again situated the issue within a continuing bilateral relationship. By the end of Phase III, the government had elevated the matter to summit - level consultation and established a standing Coast Guard response. These were substantive policy adjustments, but neither legitimated nor authorized measures outside normal politics. Phase III therefore ended with a more institutionalized government response, not completed securitization.

Across the three phases, the executive response expanded in scope without crossing the exceptional threshold. Diplomatic protest in Phase I was followed by broader inter - agency coordination and an acknowledged in - kind response in Phase II, and by a standing Coast Guard arrangement and summit - level consultation in Phase III. The sequence therefore does not support a description of governmental inaction. It shows an accumulating and increasingly institutionalized policy response conducted through ordinary diplomatic, administrative, and law - enforcement authority.

The longitudinal record thus confirms that the institutional divergence

identified in Section IV.1 persisted even as domestic pressure intensified and the government expanded its response. Section IV.3 turns from this sequence to the question of where the securitization process stalled, interpreting the pattern through the Copenhagen School's facilitating conditions.

3. Where Securitization Stalled: An Uneven Configuration of Facilitating Conditions

Sections IV.1 and IV.2 establish the empirical pattern: securitizing pressure was stronger in the press and the National Assembly than in executive discourse, while the executive response expanded over time without crossing the exceptional threshold. This section interprets that pattern through the Copenhagen School's three facilitating conditions to identify where the securitization process stalled. As outlined in Section II, these conditions concern (1) whether the claim follows a recognizable security grammar by identifying a threat, point of no return, and a possible way out; (2) whether the securitizing actor holds sufficient authority in relation to the relevant audience; and (3) whether features of the alleged threat itself make a security construction easier or harder to sustain. The conditions are used here diagnostically rather than as deterministic causes.

In the West Sea case, the facilitating conditions formed an uneven configuration: the ambiguity of the gray - zone activities left room for competing constructions; explicit threat recognition was not joined to executive justification of an exceptional remedy; and actor - audience relations were characterized by differentiated reception and non - convergent framing across the relevant institutional setting.

(1) Threat Characteristics and the Ambiguity of Gray - Zone Activities

The third facilitating condition concerns features of the alleged threat that can make a security construction easier or harder to sustain. Buzan et al. (1998) note that securitization is easier when actors can point to objects that are already widely recognized as threatening, such as tanks or polluted waters. China's West Sea activities presented a very different kind of threat object. Rather than overtly military platforms or other readily recognizable signs of coercion, they took the form of structures, buoys, aquaculture facilities, and navigation - related measures with civilian or administrative appearances, many of them located in an area where the maritime boundary remained unsettled.

In this sense, the gray - zone character of the activities lay partly in their avoidance of the kinds of material markers that would make a security construction relatively straightforward. This did not prevent securitization: press and legislative actors frequently framed the same activities as threats to sovereignty, maritime rights, or national security. It did, however, leave the objects open to competing security, legal, diplomatic, and administrative constructions.

Executive discourse repeatedly reflected this ambiguity. Legal and jurisdictional language emphasized the unsettled status of the PMZ and Korea's "legitimate maritime rights and interests." Asked whether the installations violated the Korea - China Fisheries Agreement, the Minister of Oceans and Fisheries stated:

"It does not violate the fisheries agreement. Because the boundary is undelimited, both sides should refrain from the unilateral exercise of rights."

— Minister of Oceans and Fisheries Kang Do - hyung,
Agriculture, Food, Rural Affairs, Oceans and Fisheries

Committee (2025.04.10.)

This statement is not treated here as a determination of the installations' legal status. Its significance lies in the competing construction it makes visible. The government opposed further installations and requested relocation of the existing structures outside the zone, but it did not publicly claim an established legal right to dismantle them unilaterally. The contrast between legislative demands for removal and executive requests for relocation therefore illustrates two different constructions of the same dispute: one emphasizing a security infringement warranting stronger reversal, and the other emphasizing an unsettled jurisdictional problem to be handled through protest, consultation, and maritime diplomacy.

The characteristics of the alleged threat are therefore treated as potentially impeding rather than as preventing securitization. The ambiguity of the gray - zone activities left room for multiple publicly defensible constructions of the same conduct. The executive's recurring legal and jurisdictional framing is referred to here as legal caution. It is treated as an observable manifestation of the competing constructions sustained by the ambiguous material and jurisdictional setting, not as evidence that international law objectively prohibited every stronger response.

Yet ambiguity alone cannot account for the observed pattern, because other domestic actors successfully constructed the same activities as explicit security threats. The next question is therefore how far that security construction developed once it entered political discourse.

(2) Security Grammar: Threat Recognition Without an Exceptional Way Out

The first facilitating condition concerns the grammar of security. The coding scheme used here does not separately measure every component of

the Copenhagen School's full security grammar, including a distinct "point of no return." It does, however, identify two observable elements central to the process: explicit construction of the issue as a security threat and explicit linkage of that threat to an exceptional remedy. On this dimension, the West Sea case exhibits a clear discontinuity.

Threat construction was widespread across the political system. Press discourse was concentrated at level 2, and 47.1% of legislative utterances explicitly framed the issue as a threat to sovereignty, maritime rights, or national security. Executive discourse was more restrained, but security framing was not absent: 21% of executive statements reached level 2. The critical boundary appeared at the next step. 37 press articles and 15 legislative utterances reached level 3, whereas no executive statement did so. The policy record mirrors this discursive boundary: none of the 112 documented government responses crossed into exceptional action.

The empirical pattern is therefore more specific than an absence of executive threat recognition. Executive actors sometimes framed the activities in explicitly security - related terms, but their public discourse never linked that framing to the exceptional remedy. The observable gap therefore lay at the executive level, where explicit threat framing was not joined to a public justification of an exceptional remedy.

The government's emphasis on proportionality and Coast Guard - led enforcement illustrates the form of response that accompanied this incomplete articulation. Government action expanded through instruments already available within normal politics: diplomatic protest, inter - agency coordination, surveillance, patrols, contingency channels, and proportionate in - kind measures. Even defense - related executive statements remained below level 3. In National Assembly testimony (2025.11.06.), the Minister of National Defense described the government as proceeding "step by step, on the principle of proportionality." Such language did not deny the security implications of the issue; it framed the appropriate response in terms of

incremental and ordinarily available instruments.

Proportionality and Coast Guard - led enforcement therefore represent the ordinary - policy form of the executive response. They show how threat recognition could be accompanied by substantive policy adjustment without a corresponding public justification of an exceptional remedy. They are not treated as independently demonstrated causes of executive restraint. The discontinuity was thus not between recognition and non - recognition of a threat, but between threat recognition and the public justification of 'an exceptional way out.' This raises a further question: whether authoritative securitizing cues converged or remained fragmented as they reached the executive.

(3) Actor - Audience Relations: Differentiated Reception and Non - Convergent Framing

The second facilitating condition concerns the relationship between securitizing actors and the relevant audience. The West Sea case was not characterized by an absence of authoritative security claims. Rather, reception of those claims was differentiated within the executive itself. Although the executive is treated here as the principal operational audience, it was not a unitary audience: its constituent institutions publicly framed the same issue at different levels of securitization intensity.

This variation is visible in the institutional distribution of executive discourse. As Table 5 shows, the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, which accounted for 85 of the 174 executive units, had the lowest mean securitization intensity (0.81). The Korea Coast Guard averaged 1.08, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1.16, and defense - establishment actors 1.22. The smaller Prime Minister/Office for Government Policy Coordination category averaged 1.25, while the single Presidential Office statement scored 2.00.

The differences were substantive as well as numerical. The Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries most often addressed the issue through fisheries administration and enforcement against illegal fishing. The Coast Guard emphasized surveillance, patrol, and law enforcement. Foreign Ministry statements more readily invoked Korea's maritime rights and expressed concern, but repeatedly combined those claims with communication and management of the broader Korea - China relationship. Defense - related testimony displayed the strongest security orientation among the larger institutional categories, including military monitoring and recognition of security implications, but still framed the response in terms of surveillance and proportionality rather than exceptional action. These institutional frames were not necessarily contradictory, but neither were they interchangeable: the same Chinese activities entered different executive domains as a fisheries - jurisdictional problem, a law - enforcement problem, a diplomatic problem, and a security problem.

This intra - executive variation matters for the second facilitating condition because authoritative securitizing claims were not received within a uniformly security - oriented institutional environment. Executive institutions publicly expressed different degrees of security salience in framing the same activities, and their public frames did not converge on a common characterization of the issue as a national - security threat requiring exceptional action. The pattern is therefore better understood as differentiated audience reception and non - convergent executive framing than as simple executive denial of a threat.

The observable record is more consistent with the non - completion of securitization than with active desecuritization. Executive officials sometimes produced their own security - threat framing, but, for coercive maritime measures requiring executive authority, the public record does not show acceptance sufficient to legitimate exceptional action. Separately, none of the 112 documented government responses crossed the exceptional

threshold. Executive institutions nevertheless continued to frame the issue through legal, diplomatic, law - enforcement, and security lenses. The study therefore identifies non - completion and differentiated reframing within normal politics without inferring a deliberate desecuritizing or counter - framing strategy.

A limited vocabulary from the elite - cue literature helps characterize this pattern of non - convergence. Drawing loosely on Zaller's (1992) distinction between one - sided and two - sided information flows, the study uses convergence only to ask whether authoritative security claims were reinforced across the institutional environment confronting the executive. It does not treat the executive as a mass public, equate cue convergence with audience acceptance, or claim that institutional variation caused a particular policy choice. The narrower finding is that security framing differed across executive institutions and did not consolidate into a common executive justification for exceptional action.

V. Conclusion

This article examined where the securitization of China's West Sea gray - zone activities stalled despite sustained securitizing pressure from the press and the National Assembly. The evidence identifies a persistent institutional divergence. Press and legislative discourse frequently framed the activities as threats to sovereignty, maritime rights, or national security, and sometimes justified measures outside normal politics. Executive discourse also contained explicit threat framing, but no executive statement reached level 3, and none of the government responses crossed the exceptional threshold. This was not governmental inaction. The central finding is that an expanding government response remained organized through the instruments of normal politics.

The case therefore demonstrates the importance of separating securitizing moves from their reception and political completion. The press and the National Assembly generated and formally amplified securitizing claims, while the National Assembly's non-binding resolution supplied legislative endorsement of a stronger response. For the operational measures examined here, however, the executive was the principal operational audience because it held the primary authority to direct maritime operations, implement coercive measures, and conduct the relevant diplomacy. Executive discourse itself also contained securitizing moves. Where executive statements responded to claims initiated elsewhere, they provide public evidence of reception and reframing. The separate policy record, meanwhile, contains no exceptional measure and therefore provides no evidence that the observable response crossed the exceptional threshold.

Viewed through the Copenhagen School's facilitating conditions, the case displays an uneven configuration rather than a simple absence of the conditions associated with successful securitization. First, the gray-zone activities did not present the kinds of readily recognizable threat markers that would make a security construction straightforward: structures, buoys, and ostensibly civilian facilities operated in an unsettled jurisdictional setting and remained open to competing security, legal, diplomatic, and administrative constructions. Second, explicit threat framing was widespread, including within the executive, but at the executive level it was never joined to a public justification of an exceptional remedy. Third, authoritative securitizing claims reached the executive, but security framing varied across executive institutions and did not converge into a common executive justification for exceptional action. The legal, diplomatic, law-enforcement, and security frames identified across executive institutions are therefore treated as observable expressions of differentiated audience reception and non-convergent executive framing, not as separate causal explanations of executive choice.

The longitudinal reconstruction reinforces this pattern. As domestic attention intensified and later re-emerged, the government response expanded from diplomatic protest to inter-agency coordination, proportionate countermeasures, standing Coast Guard arrangements, and summit-level consultation, yet it never crossed the exceptional threshold.

This finding contributes to research on gray-zone coercion by shifting attention from the coercing state's tactics to the target state's domestic processing of them. The political consequences of below-threshold activity do not follow automatically from its material characteristics. They depend partly on which domestic institutions define the activity, which institution possesses authority over the proposed response, and how that institution publicly constructs the available legal and operational choices. In the West Sea case, the same activities generated intensive sovereignty and security claims in the press and the National Assembly, while executive institutions framed them with different degrees of security salience through maritime-rights, diplomatic, law-enforcement, and security lenses, without converging on a common justification for exceptional action. Gray-zone dynamics therefore involve not only an external threshold below armed conflict but also a domestic institutional threshold between normal and exceptional politics.

The article also contributes to securitization research by showing that threat framing, justification of an exceptional remedy, and institutional convergence within the operational audience need not develop together. In the West Sea case, security-threat framing became widespread without producing executive justification of exceptional action, while security framing remained uneven across executive institutions and did not converge on a common justification for exceptional measures. The case also shows why executive discourse and policy should be analyzed separately: the executive was both a producer of security discourse and the principal operational audience for many of the measures being demanded, while actual policy provides a separate indicator of whether exceptional action

was legitimated or authorized.

On a strict Copenhagen School reading, securitization was not completed because the principal operational audience did not provide acceptance sufficient to legitimate measures outside normal politics. The process is more precisely described as ‘stalled securitization’: explicit threat framing, legislative endorsement, executive reception, and substantial policy adjustment all occurred, but executive threat framing was never joined to a public justification of an exceptional remedy, while security framing remained uneven across executive institutions rather than converging on a common justification for exceptional action. Stalled securitization is used here as a description of the observed process rather than as a new theoretical category.

The study’s conclusions are subject to several limitations. The corpora capture public discourse rather than internal deliberations, classified assessments, or private diplomacy; the legal, diplomatic, and operational frames identified here therefore cannot be interpreted as a complete account of executive motives or as independently established causal determinants. The model - output - blinded manual audit was conducted by a single study author and should be treated as an internal diagnostic rather than independent expert validation. Finally, the single - case design cannot determine whether the same configuration would appear in states with different constitutional arrangements, alliance relationships, or exposure to China.

Future research could test the argument through comparative analysis of target states confronting similar maritime activities, interviews with officials involved in legal and operational decision - making, and closer examination of how authority shifts when proposed responses require legislation, appropriations, military deployment, or law - enforcement action. Such research could determine when domestic institutions absorb gray - zone pressure into normal politics and when they instead authorize an exceptional response.

Appendix. Coding Protocol

This appendix reports the coding instrument in full. Both models were called at temperature 0 with a fixed output schema and identical instructions: Claude Haiku 4.5 as the primary coder, whose scores are reported throughout, and GPT-4o-mini as the secondary coder, retained as a robustness check. The base prompt below was applied to the press and Assembly corpora; the executive corpus received the same prompt with a supplementary block on routine fisheries administration. The prompt was administered in Korean, the language of the corpora; the original Korean is given below.

1. Base prompt

(1) English translation

You are an expert coder classifying South Korean news articles according to Copenhagen School securitization theory. Read the article below and judge the “intensity of securitizing speech” regarding China’s gray - zone activities in the West Sea.

[Step 0 Relevance – important]

Does this article address “China’s gray - zone activities in the West Sea (including the Provisional Measures Zone)” (structures, buoys, aquaculture facilities, internalization of the sea, China Coast Guard/Navy activity, aircraft - carrier drills, and South Korea’s responses to or discussions of these)?

- If the West Sea structures or gray - zone activities are “substantively described in one paragraph or more,” it is relevant (relevant=true). It is still relevant even when they are treated as grounds or examples

- with meaningful weight while discussing another topic (e.g., the ROK - U.S. alliance, nuclear - powered submarines, U.S. - China competition).
- However, if the West Sea structures are mentioned only “in passing, in a single line” (e.g., listed as background or in an enumeration) and the main body of the article is about something entirely different, it is not relevant (relevant=false).
- Topics unrelated to security—such as the THAAD retaliation (“Hanhanryeong”), “xiexie,” the ROK - China summit in general, cultural exchange, or West Sea cod - release, aquaculture, and tourism—are not relevant.

If not relevant, relevant=false, score=null.

[Step 1 Score] only when relevant:

- 0 Non - securitization: no threat frame. Mere facts, routine management, or consultation.
- 1 Politicization: raises a problem or concern and calls for a response, but at the level of normal politics rather than a security threat.
- 2 Securitizing speech: frames the issue as a threat to sovereignty, maritime rights and interests, jurisdiction, or national security.
- 3 Justification of exceptional measures: in addition to 2, justifies or demands forcible dismantlement, military response, special legislation, emergency budget, international legal action, and the like.

[Rules] Judge by frame, not by tone. (1->2) presence of a sovereignty/security frame; (2->3) presence of justification for exceptional measures.

If multiple levels are mixed, assign the highest.

[Output] JSON only: {"relevant": true/false, "score": 0 - 3 or null, "frames": [], "emergency": [], "rationale": "one sentence"}

(2) Original Korean prompt used for coding

당신은 코펜하겐 학파 안보화 이론에 따라 한국 언론 기사를 코딩하는 전문가 코더다.

아래 기사를 읽고, 중국의 서해 회색지대 활동에 대한 ‘안보화 발화의 강도’를 판정하라.

[0단계 관련성 - 중요]

이 기사가 ‘중국의 서해(잠정조치수역 포함) 회색지대 활동’(구조물·부표·양식시설·내해화·중국 해경/해군 활동·항공모함 훈련 및 그에 대한 한국의 대응·논의)을 다루는가?

- 서해 구조물·회색지대 활동이 기사에서 ‘한 문단 이상 실질적으로 서술’되면 관련(relevant=true).
다른 주제(한미동맹·원잠·미중경쟁 등)를 논하면서 근거·사례로 비중 있게 다뤄도 관련이다.
- 단, 서해 구조물이 ‘한 줄만 스치듯’ 언급되고(예: 배경 나열·목록에 김) 기사 본문이 전혀 다른 것이면 무관(relevant=false).
- 한한령·세세·한중정상회담 일반·문화교류, 서해 대구방류·양식·관광 등 안보와 무관한 주제는 무관. 무관하면 relevant=false, score=null.

[1단계 점수] 관련일 때만:

0 비안보화: 위협 프레임 없음. 단순 사실·일상 관리·협의를

1 정치화: 문제·우려 제기, 대응 요구. 단 안보 위협 아닌 정상정치 수준

2 안보화 발화: 주권·해양권익·관할권·국가안보 위협으로 규정

3 비상조치 정당화: 2에 더해 강제철거·군사대응·특별법·긴급예산·국제제소 등 정당화·요구

[규칙] 어조가 아니라 프레임으로 판단. (1->2) 주권·안보 프레임 유무, (2->3) 비상조치 정당화 유무. 여러 수준 섞이면 최고 단계.

[출력] JSON만: {"relevant": true/false, "score": 0~3 또는 null, "frames": [], "emergency": [], "rationale": "한 문장"}

2. Supplementary block for the executive corpus

(1) English translation

Appended to the base prompt for the executive corpus. Its purpose is to prevent routine maritime administration from being misread as security speech, and to prevent the ordinarily restrained register of official language from being mistaken for de-escalation.

- These are ministry briefings and press releases. Enforcement against illegal fishing, seizure of Chinese vessels, fisheries cooperation meetings, joint patrols, and fisheries agreements are routine maritime administration. Where management or enforcement appears without a threat frame, code 0 or 1.
- Where the government frames the structures, buoys, internalization of the sea, or a standoff with the Chinese coast guard as a threat to sovereignty or security, code 2; where it announces or justifies hardline or exceptional measures, code 3.
- Official language is restrained by convention (“regret,” “watching closely,” “consultation through diplomatic channels”). A restrained protest is normally 1. Do not raise a text to 2 merely because its tone appears firm, if the substance is an ordinary diplomatic response.

(2) Original Korean prompt used for coding

- 정부 부처 브리핑 · 보도자료다. ‘불법조업 단속 · 중국어선 나포 · 어업 협력회의 · 공동순시 · 어업협정’은 일상적 어업·해양 관리이다. 위협 프레임 없이 관리 · 단속만 있으면 -> 0 또는 1.
- ‘구조물 · 부표 · 내해화 · 중국 해경 대치’를 주권·안보 위협으로 규정하면 -> 2, 강경 · 예외 조치를 예고 · 정당화하면 -> 3.
- 정부 언어는 원래 절제적임(‘유감’, ‘예의주시’, ‘외교채널 협의’). 절제된 항의는 대개 1이며, 어조가 세게 보여도 정상 외교 대응이면 2로 올리지 말 것.

3. Corpus Retrieval and Screening

Press articles were retrieved from BigKinds using two Korean Boolean searches combining 서해 or 잠정조치수역 with 구조물, 선란/선란, 부표, 양식시설, 회색지대, 항행금지, 해양조사, 내해화, and 서해공정, while excluding 서해대교 and 서해안고속도로. National Assembly records were retrieved using 서해 중국 combined with 불법 or 구조물 across the relevant committees and plenary sessions. Executive documents were retrieved using 서해 중국 in the briefing archives of the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Korea Coast Guard, Ministry of National Defense, and Presidential Office. The policy chronology was compiled from relevant government archives and supplementary news searches.

Corpus	Final analytical units
Press	815
National Assembly	223
Executive	174
Policy record	112

- Note. The National Assembly dataset includes records from committees and plenary sessions. The policy record was classified separately from the three discourse corpora.

4. Documented Government Responses by Policy Instrument

Response Type	n
Fisheries enforcement (routine management)	72
Fisheries cooperation (routine management)	1
Diplomatic consultation / meeting	16
Diplomatic protest	5
Inter - ministerial coordination (domestic)	1
Announcement / other	17
Total	112

- Note. The table includes both responses directed specifically at the structures and routine West Sea fisheries - enforcement measures covered by the study's broader case definition. All 112 responses remained within normal politics.

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| 국문초록 |

강한 안보화 압력과 제한된 정책 대응: 중국의 서해 회색지대 전술에 대한 한국의 대응에서 안보화는 어디에서 멈추었는가

김하은

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중국은 서해 잠정조치수역에 고정식 구조물과 관측부표를 설치하고 한국의 해양조사를 방해하는 등 회색지대 활동을 확대해 왔다. 이에 국내 언론과 국회에서는 이를 국가안보 위협으로 규정하고 강력한 대응을 요구해 왔지만, 한국 정부의 대응은 여전히 정상정치 범위 내 머물러 있다. 본 연구는 이러한 괴리에 주목하여 코펜하겐 학파의 안보화 이론을 바탕으로 서해 문제의 안보화가 어느 지점에서 정체되었는지를 분석한다.

언론 보도 815건, 국회의원 발언 223건, 행정부 발언 174건을 대규모 언어모델(LLM)로 코딩하고, 정부 대응 112건을 종단적으로 재구성하였다. 분석 결과, 언론과 국회에서는 위협 프레임이 지속되었으나 행정부에서는 이것이 예외적 조치의 정당화로 이어지지 않았다. 회색지대 활동의 모호성은 동일한 행위에 대한 상이한 해석을 가능하게 했고, 행정부 내부의 위협 인식 역시 예외적 대응의 필요성을 뒷받침하는 방향으로 수렴하지 않았다. 실제로 행정부 자료에서 레벨 3 발언은 한 건도 확인되지 않았으며, 기록된 정부 대응에서도 예외적 조치로 분류된 사례는 없었다. 이는 안보화가 위협 담론의 확산만으로 완성되는 것이 아니라, 인지된 위협이 예외적 조치의 필요성을 정당화하는 권위 있는 주장으로 전환되는 단계에서 정체될 수 있음을 보여준다.

▪ 주제어: 안보화, 회색지대 강압, 제한된 정책 대응, 서해, 한중 해양 관계