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Routines die hard: Ontological security and audience agency in securitisation

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Abstract

How can we understand the audience agency and securitisation processes that can induce anxiety? The Copenhagen School of security studies conceptualises an audience as possessing political agency which is contingent on their capabilities to respond to securitising moves. Drawing on Anthony Giddens's approach to ontological security, we argue that there is another type of agency supplementing political agency. Ontological agency refers to exercising control over the stability and continuity of one's everyday routines and practices to minimise disruption to these routines caused by securitisation. Because routines of day-to-day life are central to bracketing sources of anxiety, people may choose to overlook and not react to securitising moves designating threats and implementing emergency measures that can undermine ontological security. We illustrate the analytical purchase of ontological agency by using unstructured observations of South Korean people's responses to military practices that securitise North Korea. Our observations reveal that there is latent anxiety regarding North Korea that manifests in varying degrees ranging from inaction when routines are not disrupted by securitisation to outward bursts of emotional reactions and breakdown when securitisation practices disrupt people's basic routines. This raises implications about the importance of ontological security driving the success or failure of securitisation and the politics of existentialism.

Keywords: anxiety; audience agency; ontological security; securitisation; South Korea; North Korea

Introduction

How can we understand the relationship between securitisation and the audience's acceptance or rejection despite the potential anxiety-inducing implications of securitising moves? We build on existing works on the intersection of securitisation and anxiety to further theorise the audience dimension of the Copenhagen School (CS) of security studies.[1] The audience is critical in the CS's formulation of securitisation – theoretically, audience consent determines if an issue transforms into a security issue involving an existential threat requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the boundaries of normally accepted political procedures.[2] Defined as

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[1]For work on securitisation as anxiety-inducing process, see Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of International Relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24 (2021), pp.1020–36; Stuart Croft, *Securitizing Islam: Identity and the Search for Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

[2]Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998).

'those the securitising act attempts to convince to accept' such measures,[3] the audience, how-
ever, remains under-theorised despite the theoretical claim that securitisation 'can never only be
imposed' because it requires this consent.[4] International Relations (IR) scholars have addressed the
role of the audience in the securitisation process but have criticised the theory for its ambiguity in
conceptualising an audience.[5]

To address this, we argue that the audience in securitisation possesses another type of agency in
addition to political agency. Drawing on Anthony Giddens's conceptualisation of ontological secu-
rity that centres the minimisation of disruptions to everyday routines and practices,[6] we theorise
audience agency by introducing the concept of *ontological* agency. This refers to exercising control
over the stability and continuity of one's *everyday* routines and practices to minimise disruption,
including disruption caused by securitisation. This is based on people's need for ontological secu-
rity, or the security of being preserved through the continuous reproduction of coherent narratives
about the self and everyday practices that have been routinised over time.

Ontological agency is a way of coping with securitisation, which reminds audiences of the pres-
ence of existential threats and thus perpetuates a sense of insecurity. These reminders can threaten
ontological security, leading people to exercise ontological agency to preserve and maintain daily
activities and practices to bracket out anxiety associated with securitisation. Doing so may entail
people not responding or reacting to reminders of threats and insecurity, whether they be onto-
logical or physical. Thus, ontological agency is about inaction as much as action in the face of
securitising acts.

Audience agency in securitisation is thus less straightforward than conceptualised in exist-
ing works. To exercise agency is not limited to accepting, rejecting, or contesting securitising
moves. Rather, whether securitisation is accepted or not is secondary to how the audience exer-
cises ontological agency to pay attention to or ignore securitising moves in the first place. However,
ontological agency is not always status-quo-oriented or choosing inaction in the construction of
security. It can also manifest as action and contestation if people find securitisation encroaches
upon their orderly routines of day-to-day life or threatens the stability and continuity of being. As
such, the concept offers a framework for understanding when people choose to act, react, or not
act in the face of securitisation.

We illustrate the analytical purchase of the concept of ontological agency in securitisation using
within-case variation in the South Korean public's inaction and reaction under the securitisation of
the Korean War, in particular the securitisation of North Korea as posing an immediate and exis-
tential threat to South Korea and South Korean people. As one of the most militarised societies in
the world, within South Korea there is a juxtaposition of securitisation of the North Korean regime
and its ideology in the form of policies and political rhetoric, and actual existential threat caused
by North Korea's provocations. This serves as a useful illustration in understanding how people
cope with perennial securitising moves that function as reminders of an immediate threat. We
examine South Korean people's inaction and reaction to South Korea's missile tests in Gangneung,
located on the eastern coast of South Korea, on two occasions: in May and October 2022. We inte-
grate ethnography and textual analysis to illustrate the behavioural manifestations of ontological
agency.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we point out that the nature of the audience in securitisa-
tion theory remains under-theorised, with audience agency being reduced to political acceptance,

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[3]Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 41.

[4]Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security,* p. 25, pp. 35–6.

[5]Thierry Balzacq, 'The three faces of securitization: Political agency, audience and context', *European Journal of International Relations*, 11:2 (2005), pp. 171–201; Sarah Leonard and Christian Kaunert, 'Reconceptualizing the audience in securitisation theory', in Thierry Balzacq (ed.), *Securitization Theory: How Security Problems Emerge and Dissolve* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2010), pp. 57–76; Mark B. Salter, 'Securitization and desecuritization: A dramaturgical analysis of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 11 (2008), pp. 321–49.

[6]Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

rejection, or contestation. Second, we introduce the concept of ontological agency as a way of understanding the audience's practices, reactions, and inaction in the face of securitisation. Next, we illustrate ontological agency by describing and analysing public discourse and practices in reaction to missile tests and military facilities in South Korea by casting the Korean War as a securitisation of North Korean threat. Finally, we conclude with implications of ontological agency for understanding the politics of (de)securitisation and existentialism.

Audience agency in securitisation theory

The existing literature on audience agency conceptualises it as *political*. Political agency refers to the audience's agency in accepting or rejecting securitising moves. Adam Côté's meta-synthesis analysis finds that the literature leans towards empirically defining the audience as an 'active agent' in the highly intersubjective and iterative process of securitisation. This agency is political, as the audience's active role relies on their *capabilities* to authorise and legitimate securitisation through their identity and engagement. At the same time, the analysis reveals the yawning gap between theoretical and empirical understandings of an audience of securitisation.[7]

The conceptualisations of political agency vary in terms of when the audience exercises it. For some, the audience may never exercise their agency in an outright manner because of their lack of power over securitising actors.[8] For others, the audience exercises their agency in two stages – the framing and the implementation of measures.[9] The political agency of an audience can also apply to authoritarian or illiberal contexts. Drawing on the case of the failed securitisation of a eugenics programme in Singapore, Pradeep Krishnan argues that the categorisation of audience agency in securitisation can expand beyond a simple acceptance or rejection to include more nuanced reactions such as engaging, interpreting, scrutinising, ridiculing, etc.[10]

Characterising audience agency as political, however, is problematic for two reasons. First, it reduces the audience to passive reactors to securitising actors and their moves. Doing so potentially marginalises those who cannot act or react visibly or audibly, as political agency entails voicing out to be seen or heard. This compounds the challenge of identifying the audience because of their fluid nature and multiplicity,[11] raising further questions on treating political agency as axiomatic. Much has been written on the debate over the normativity of (de)securitisation, but it ironically marginalises the audience, whose fate under securitisation is first and foremost a normative concern.[12] Rather than assuming the passivity of an audience, we prefer to question their role as security subjects bound to the power of securitising moves, as they are autonomous

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[7]Adam Côté, 'Agents without agency: Assessing the role of the audience in securitization theory', *Security Dialogue*, 47:6 (2016), pp. 541–58 (p. 548).

[8]Balzacq, 'The three faces of securitization', pp. 184–5; Michael P. A. Murphy, 'The securitization audience in theologico-political perspective: Giorgio Agamben, doxological acclamations, and paraconsistent logic', *International Relations*, 34:1 (2020), pp. 67–83.

[9]Paul Roe, 'Is securitization a "negative" concept? Revisiting the normative debate over normal versus extraordinary politics', *Security Dialogue*, 43:3 (2012), pp. 249–66.

[10]Pradeep Krishnan, 'Audience agency in a curious instance of failed securitization: Public resistance to the Singapore government's eugenics program', *Security Dialogue*, 55:2 (2024), pp. 179–96.

[11]Ana Soares, 'The accountability solution: Understanding the audience in securitisation theory by asking a different question', *Critical Studies on Security*, 10:2 (2022), pp. 55–69; Salter, 'Securitization and desecuritization'; Rita Floyd, 'Securitisation and the function of functional actors', *Critical Studies on Security*, 9:2 (2021), pp. 81–97.

[12]See, for example, Lene Hansen, 'Reconstructing desecuritisation: The normative-political in the Copenhagen School and directions for how to apply it', *Review of International Studies*, 38:3 (2011), pp. 525–46; Rita Floyd, 'Can securitization theory be used in normative analysis? Towards a just securitization theory', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 427–39; Claudia Aradau, 'Security and the democratic scene: Desecuritization and emancipation', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 7 (2004), pp. 388–413; Andrew A. Szarejko, 'Foreign or domestic? The desecuritisation of Indian affairs and normativity in securitisation theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 50:3 (2023), pp. 785–809; Roe, 'Is securitization a "negative" concept?'.

decision-makers with the potential to make security choices.[13] Doing so can help contribute towards developing a general formulation of securitisation theory.[14]

Second, the action–reaction dynamic also hints at an audience's psychological needs in the face of securitised threats that cannot be captured adequately by political agency. As Eric Van Rythoven points out, securitisation is an emotional process that invokes fear and horror in descriptions of international politics, utterances of security, and visual representations that 'speak' security.[15] Designating an issue or entity as a threat has psychological implications for the audience's threat perception, generating political processes that cannot be reduced to simple acceptance or rejection.[16] In other words, can an audience meaningfully deliberate or contest their mortality or existential peril with securitising actors who are justifying emergency measures in the face of existential threats? This is also partly a response to the goal of securitisation theory studies, which is to question the ethico-political decision invoking the construction of security and threats for political purposes and to aim for desecuritisation, which is the 'optimal long-range option' of placing countermeasures in the 'ordinary public sphere'.[17]

Ontological agency

To understand how an audience interacts with securitisation in ways that are not fully captured by the concept of political agency, we introduce the concept of ontological agency, which refers to individuals exercising agency to preserve and maintain their daily routines and protect their everyday lived experiences from disruption that could cause ontological insecurity. Existing works on securitisation and ontological security have focused on the securitisation of subjectivity and identity,[18] but ontological (in)security under securitisation is not only about securing identity and securitising subjectivity through the reproduction of consistent biographical narratives and developing trust towards the world. We broaden the scope of the nexus between securitisation and ontological security to consider the fundamental role of everyday routinised practices in addition to identity narratives as anchors of ontological security under securitisation. Subjectivity and identity are also securitised or maintained by preserving bodily routines, because who we are is also largely defined by what we do in an unthinking manner.

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[13]While we are not claiming that individual human security is the referent object or the object to be protected from an existential threat, we recognise that laypeople and public opinion can shape the securitisation of states and societies identified by securitising actors as referent objects. For more on human security and securitisation, see Scott Watson, 'The "human" as referent object? Humanitarianism as securitization', *Security Dialogue*, 42:1 (2011), pp. 3–20.

[14]Ole Wæver, 'Securitization and desecuritization', in Ronnie D. Lipschutz (ed.), *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp. 46–86.

[15]Eric Van Rythoven, 'Learning to feel, learning to fear? Emotions, imaginaries, and limits in the politics of securitization', *Security Dialogue*, 46:5 (2015), pp. 458–75.

[16]See, for example, Shana K. Gadarian, 'The politics of threat: How terrorism news shapes foreign policy attitudes', *The Journal of Politics*, 72:2 (2010), pp. 469–83; Jarrod Hayes, 'Securitization, social identity, and democratic security: Nixon, India, and the ties that bind', *International Organization*, 66:1 (2012), pp. 63–93; Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, 'A bottom-up theory of public opinion about foreign policy', *American Journal of Political Science*, 61:3 (2017), pp. 543–58; Christopher Gelpi, 'Performing on cue? The formation of public opinion toward war', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 54:1 (2010), pp. 88–116; Catarina Kinnvall and Paul Nesbitt-Larking, 'The political psychology of (de)securitization: Place-making strategies in Denmark, Sweden, and Canada', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 28:6 (2010), pp. 1051–70.

[17]Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 29.

[18]For example, Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67; Bahar Rumelili, 'Identity and desecuritisation: The pitfalls of conflating ontological and physical security', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18:1 (2015), pp. 52–74; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47; Michael C. Williams, 'Securitization and the liberalism of fear', *Security Dialogue*, 42:4–5 (2011), pp. 453–63; Thierry Balzacq, Sarah Léonard, and Jan Ruzicka, '"Securitization" revisited: Theory and cases', *International Relations*, 30:4 (2016), pp. 494–531; Rita Floyd, 'Ontological vs. societal security: Same difference or distinct concepts', *International Politics* (2024), pp. 1–19, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00581-w}.

In building our theoretical concept of ontological agency, we draw on Anthony Giddens's theory of ontological security but emphasise stability and continuity of everyday practices as being just as important as the (re)production of narratives of self that undergird the behaviour of social actors.[19] We clarify ontological agency by unpacking its three interrelated features: the centrality of routinised practices, the importance of the feeling of control over one's existence, and the importance of the physical self.

Routinised practices

The ontological security lens posits that actors, whether individuals or states, seek to maintain a secure sense of self and identity over time by establishing routines and relationships with relevant others or working on the Self through narrative-making processes – at times at the cost of physical security.[20] Besides the making and reproducing of narratives, routines also serve as an anchor of a social entity's ontological security needs. Routines in ontological security include practices, or non-verbal articulations of self, that are patterned and reiterated in similar behaviours and with consistent meaning.[21] Routinised practices are therefore expressions of self crucial to feeling rooted in one's existence but distinct from the (re)production of identity narratives that are located in verbal expressions. Practices driven by ontological security prioritise the feeling of stability and continuity of the social actor first and foremost rather than social recognition, at which practices are normally aimed.[22] They are not primarily aimed at communicating with others but are driven in practical consciousness by the need to feel as though oneself exists wholly.

According to Giddens, practices reinforcing ontological security by keeping threats at bay are selected in one's practical consciousness and repeated regularly. Practical consciousness is socially mutual knowledge required by everyday life, integrated into one's life and thus routines of daily practices that one hardly notices.[23] That is, people do not usually cognitively notice their routines or habits.[24] These routinised practices are 'natural' in that they reflect individuals' background or implicit knowledge and self-understanding of their subjective needs.[25] They help individuals bracket out questions about themselves, others, and the object-world such that these are taken for granted so that people can go on with their everyday life.[26] This is because the security of being is anchored by a certainty and predictability marked by everyday activities and life, and in social routines that structure everyday experiences as 'natural and normal'.[27] The day-to-day reiteration of practices – the daily commute route, the people one interacts with daily, and the habits to which one has grown accustomed – provides a sense of safety against potential threats to one's feeling of existence such that the practices function as a 'protective cocoon'.[28] The routines of everyday life are therefore 'rituals' of coping mechanisms to manage anxiety.

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[19]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

[20]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 519–40.

[21]Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot, 'International practices', *International Theory*, 3:1 (2011), pp. 1–36 (p. 6).

[22]Adler and Pouliot, 'International practices', p. 6.

[23]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 36.

[24]This does not mean that routinised practices cannot change. We agree with Ted Hopf (2018) that incremental changes in practices are possible. Our distinction is that routinised practices are selected in or out as demanded by an individual's ontological security needs. Ted Hopf, 'Change in international practices', *European Journal of International Relations*, 24:3 (2018), pp. 687–711.

[25]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43; Minseon Ku and Jennifer Mitzen, 'The dark matter of world politics: System trust, summits, and state personhood', *International Organization*, 76:4 (2022), pp. 799–829.

[26]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 37.

[27]Kinnvall, 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries'.

[28]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 40.

Agency: Having a sense of control

Routinised practices and narratives not only ward off anxiety; they are also given intrinsic meaning. These everyday routines are not only important anchors to maintain ontological security in the face of uncertainty and threats to stability but are also important sites for exercising agency – how to make choices in the pursuit of meaning? This indicates the importance of the maintenance of routines for continuity and stability, as well as the ability to *choose* which routines to maintain. Agency is also implicated in ontological security because it involves control that a person is expected to maintain over the body in all social interactions and everyday activities. To be seen as a competent agent to avoid giving wrong signals to others is also crucial to ontological security.[29]

The agency in ontological agency is not a blank cheque giving social actors unrestricted agency. Rather, it is a self-imposed restriction in the conservative sense and broadly relates to having 'answers' to existential questions facing all human life. Social actors, therefore, seek agency insofar as it reinforces a sense of ontological security. They do what they can and are willing to do to preserve as best as possible their sense of security derived from having a sense of control over something that is immediate to one's everyday experiences in terms of physical environment, activities, and stability. This agency is, therefore, limited, as it is about having a sense of control over what one thinks is serving one's ontological security.[30]

Physical self

Ontological security is fundamentally about being able to control or possess a 'bodily orientation' in everyday settings that comes with seemingly little effort. The embodied self also supports routine maintenance. The need to feel 'whole' is not limited to identity; wholeness also refers to the preservation of the body or feeling whole *physically*. The body is, as Giddens puts it, 'at the very origin of the original explorations of the world' and functions as a conduit that allows for the experience of reality on a day-to-day basis.[31] Routinised control of the body and the self is essential to maintaining the protective cocoon in everyday situations. Maintaining control over or managing bodily orientation is usually the result of constancy and consistency such that individuals are prone to stress when their competence to perform such easy control and routines breaks down.[32] Because of this, the possibility of the embodied self being threatened – threats to physical security – may also cause anxiety. Reminders of physical insecurity, therefore, may need to be ignored to allow for the maintenance of ontological security.

Based on these three features, we can therefore understand ontological agency as being in operation or activated 24/7. Driven by the ontological security need to maintain the stability and continuity of being, ontological agency is thus a coping mechanism to keep threats at bay at all times. When ontological security is threatened, the consequences could be 'disastrous', as the opposite of day-to-day routines that seem trivial is 'chaos'.[33] This chaos, however, is more than disorganisation. It is 'a loss of the sense of the very reality of things and of other persons' as a result of a loss of maintenance of 'time, space, continuity and identity' that threatens to uproot one's 'coherent' sense of being in the world.[34] The breakdown of this coping mechanism that we conceptualise as ontological agency is naturally followed by steps to restore continuity and stability by seeking

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[29]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 56.

[30]Ontological agency is distinct from reactance in psychology, which refers to the control or protection of autonomy or freedom, which leads to an aversion to rules, regulations, and restrictive policies. See Steven Taylor and Gordon J. G. Asmundson, 'Negative attitudes about facemasks during the COVID-19 pandemic: The dual importance of perceived ineffectiveness and psychological reactance', *PLOS ONE*, 16:2 (2021), p. e0246317.

[31]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 56.

[32]Ibid.

[33]John Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy, and ontological insecurity', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 306–21.

[34]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, pp. 36–7.

certainty that may manifest in a range of emotions such as fear, shame, anger, and hate alongside discursive reactions.[35]

In their day-to-day life, people may face a wide range of sources of anxiety and potential threats to ontological security; such disruptions may range from the personal to the political to security issues. There may not be only a single potential threat to ontological security to attend to, just as individuals may have a broad set of routines and practices that structure their daily lives. Instead, individuals must always make a series of choices – what to pay attention to or ignore, which routines to prioritise over others, etc. To maintain the routines of everyday life, individuals may willingly choose to ignore or overlook some interventions, including others' demands, rules, policies, or changes that are disruptive to their sense of being in the world.

Inaction or the lack of reaction may still be an exercise of ontological agency because it entails the desire to avoid becoming aware of or learning about potentially anxiety-inducing things, such as one's own vulnerability. It may entail cognitively knowing but still refusing to overtly attend to or acknowledge the source of anxiety to minimise the affective consequences and bracket them from awareness.[36] Ignoring one's vulnerability to physical or ontological insecurity may be constructed as necessary, but at the same time it gives a sense of control and agency over the structure of one's everyday life. Therefore, ontological agency entails selectively choosing to see or unsee insecurity for the purpose of preserving routines that are central to one's stable sense of self. This may also translate into inaction as long as it is necessary to preserve one's routines.

Ontological agency and the audience in securitisation

When applied to securitisation, the concept of ontological agency directs our attention not only to people as security subjects with agency but also to the importance of their everyday lived experiences to their ontological security vis-à-vis securitising moves by a wide range of securitising actors, including but not limited to political elites, societal actors, and even peers. Central to the nexus between securitisation and ontological agency is anxiety that may be warranted to make a securitising actor's move successful in designating an issue as an existential threat. Securitisation, however, can produce different effects on individuals and their ontological security based on their subjective security needs and wants. For a security subject, securitisation poses an inherent tension because anxiety can be experienced as normal or manageable or existential.

On the one hand, securitisation can transform anxiety due to uncertainty into knowable, identifiable fears that purportedly can be addressed through emergency measures, which may come at the price of sacrificing prior routines of narratives and practices. Securitisation can thus be considered one way of managing ontological security needs. This is especially pertinent when securitisation is repeated or reiterated through speech acts or practices through an imbalanced power structure favouring securitising actors, such that securitising speech acts and practices are reproduced to become a narrative framework shaping societal discourse. Over time, securitising moves accrete to form a structure of securitisation that may, under certain circumstances, provide certainty and reassurance.

Accepting securitisation is also a way for laypeople to delegate the task of managing their anxiety to political elites, giving the former some sense of breathing room to tend to the demands of their day-to-day activities, while empowering securitising actors. As long as the audience feels confident

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[35]Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity'; Christine Agius, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Catarina Kinnvall, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered nationalism: Masculinity, climate denial and Covid-19', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21:4 (2020), pp. 432–50.

[36]Nancy Tuana, 'The speculum of ignorance: The women's health movement and epistemologies of ignorance', *Hypatia*, 21:3 (2006), pp. 1–19; Nancy Tuana, 'Coming to understand: Orgasm and the epistemology of ignorance', *Hypatia*, 1:1 (2004), pp. 194–232; see also Harding (2006) for a discussion of Marxian and Freudian theories of ignorance, including the critique of the assumption that our true thoughts and preferences are always available to us and whether behavioural evidence undercuts this assumption. Sandra Harding, 'Two influential theories of ignorance and philosophy's interests in ignoring them', *Hypatia*, 21:3 (2006), pp. 20–36.

that the world will continue to exist as it is tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and so on, they can afford to prioritise what is immediate to them – their daily activity and social interactions. This combination of confidence in the continuity of the world because of the delegation of the security task to securitising actors and the need to preserve routines leads to them choosing to not respond outwardly to potential sources of insecurity. This helps explain how things that may be 'known' by the public on one level remain ignored; it is not that securitisation and securitising moves are invisible from the start. Rather, the audience ignores (or at least pays much less attention to) even very obvious securitising moves, choosing instead to attend to everyday routines and practices.

On the other hand, securitisation is a means of governmentality legitimising the exercise of power and authority by implementing emergency measures, leaving little room for intersubjective deliberation and inducing anxiety in three ways. First, the certainty and predictability constructed by securitisation – designating a specific threat requiring emergency measures – are accompanied by fear and anxiety associated with the disruption of routines that were in place prior to securitisation. Designating something as a threat increases uncertainty, leading to security subjects questioning their ability to go on with life without feeling and thinking about the threat. Concomitantly, securitising actors can mobilise the audience's insecurity and anxiety vis-à-vis a 'threat' that is seemingly beyond the audience's capabilities to manage, to increase the success of securitisation.

Second, securitisation can also be disruptive to ontological security by implementing 'emergency' measures that are intrusive to the fundamental daily activities in life. A securitising move will require adjustments to the simplest yet necessary daily routines and practices of the audience that anchor their ontological security, subject to the context of the securitisation. This entails regulating what people can or cannot do in the name of emergency and security. For example, securitising the Covid-19 pandemic was accompanied by significant disruptive emergency measures in the form of lockdowns, physical distancing, and masking that required the audience to make adjustments to the way they went on with their daily routinised rituals of life. Additionally, securitisation is disruptive to people's sense of stability and continuity of the world by demanding their attention and taking up cognitive and affective 'space' that otherwise need not be spent on securitising moves.

Third, securitisation also demands that an audience adapts willingly or unwillingly to the measures. Subsequent emergency measures could also be implemented without seeking the audience's consent, as securitisation reproduces the power of structure constructed by securitising actors.[37] Individual securitising moves become part of the larger structure of securitisation, whereby initial speech acts designating a particular issue as a security issue are followed and reinforced by a broad range of potential securitising moves, including subsequent speech acts as well as routinised security practices especially by security professionals.[38] Such securitising moves are carried out not only by the initial securitising actor but also by functional actors such as the police or military.[39] In this way, practices carried out within a larger structure of securitisation become securitising moves that may be routinised knowingly or unknowingly, leading to the persistent reproduction of insecurity and hence anxiety. While this anxiety may be bracketed from overt attention, allowing people to focus on their day-to-day lives and routines, such anxiety remains latent, with the potential to be activated in the face of more significant disruptions.

Ontological agency is thus different from political agency, as spelled out in most securitisation works, in three ways. First, it is 'backstage' agency, always exercised and activated without people

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[37]Alexandria Innes, 'Un-siloing securitization: An intersectional intervention', *International Politics* (2024), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-024-00584-7}.

[38]While our argument speaks to the Copenhagen School of securitisation, ontological agency is applicable to the PARIS school of securitisation that adds practices to speech acts as securitising moves. For example, see Didier Bigo, 'The (in)securitization practices of the three universes of EU border control: Military/navy – border guards/police – database analysts', *Security Dialogue*, 45:3 (2014), pp. 209–25.

[39]Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 56.

realising it, as it involves constant efforts to maintain routines that simultaneously involve bracketing potential threats, allowing people to go on with their day-to-day life. Political agency, on the other hand, is 'frontstage' agency, expressed outwardly and thus more readily observable.

Second, it also entails allowing for (though not necessarily actively or consciously accepting) securitising moves insofar as they do not disrupt stability and order in daily activities. In this sense, it is limited agency as it may allow for the reproduction of securitising practices and the structure of securitisation. It moderates the willingness of groups and individuals to act or react, hence often resulting in inaction as long as routines that reinforce ontological security are preserved. This also means that people are willing to accept (or at least ignore) intersubjectively constructed existential threats as they willingly choose to ignore securitising moves reminding them of insecurity that threatens the continuity and stability of routines. As such, it does not entail the audience exercising political agency to accept, reject, or contest securitisation, which can strengthen, change, or thwart securitisation efforts.

Instead, ontological agency may manifest as interjections or intermittent interventions to securitising moves when routines are disrupted and people's ontological security is undermined. Often, these largely do not affect changes to the existing structure of the securitisation, and they may constitute a reproduction of power structures that blind people and prevent them from recognising their insecurity or vulnerability.[40]

Third, when exercised as action, unlike political agency that can lead to the contesting of hegemonic narratives of securitisation,[41] ontological agency often reflects securitisation discourse, reproducing the structure that supports present routines that reinforce one's sense of ontological security. When activated due to disruptions to everyday routines, individuals' ontological agency may shift from inaction to explicit discursive action aimed at restoring the disrupted routines within the limits or boundaries of the securitisation and its associated narratives and practices that must be defended. However, these disruptions may also result in the questioning, contestation, or rejection of the securitisation rhetoric and measures. This can happen when disruptions to everyday routines make inaction untenable and activate latent anxiety associated with the securitisation narratives and practices, which then may become the object of individuals' scrutiny or critique if the securitising moves themselves are seen as the source of threat to everyday routines and practices more so than the actual securitised threat.

From the ontological agency perspective of securitisation, the success or failure of securitising moves cannot be reduced to an audience reacting outwardly by exercising political agency to accept, reject, or contest. Rather, it concerns the extent to which securitising actors are able to reproduce securitising moves, or the securitising moves reproduce themselves, without facing outward contestation from other securitising or functional actors or the audience. These reproductions may take any form, including speech acts, practices, social and material environments, and most importantly, collectively shared discourse and narratives. The audience may choose inaction in the face of these reproductions, or the silent action of knowing but not acknowledging them, and act not out of pure consent or support, but out of prioritising the stability of their everyday activities so long as they are not significantly disrupted.

Centring ontological security in audience agency also illuminates why certain securitising moves require more persuasion and sometimes even coercion than others, because they may be accompanied by significant disruptions to the audience's routinised practices and narratives. Some securitising moves therefore may appear to attend to the audience's needs and security through effective persuasion, while others require coercing consent, especially if they are highly disruptive. Coercion can be in different forms, such as by tamping down the disruptiveness of securitisation and blending in with routinised practices and narratives.

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[40] Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, p. 36.

[41] Julie Wilhelmsen, 'How does war become a legitimate undertaking? Re-engaging the post-structuralist foundation of securitization theory', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:2 (2017), pp. 166–83.

The bottom line is that the audience also holds some power over what securitisation looks like or how it evolves. Securitisation may start off as 'thin' securitisation that invites constant contestation. But over time it may become 'thick' securitisation that is not only ignored but may be accepted to the extent that it is not disruptive. Successful and continuous securitisation thus depends on the extent to which securitising moves fit in with the audience's routines with minimal disruption.

'The forgotten war': The Korean War as securitisation and South Korean people's ontological agency

To illustrate the analytical purchase of ontological agency in understanding audience action, reaction, or inaction in securitisation, we examine the South Korean people's ontological agency in light of the ongoing Korean War, which involves the South Korean state securitising North Korea and its threats through decades of military action and practices.[42] Routinised practices conducted by the military in the name of national security, such as conscription, military exercises, weapons testing, etc., as well as the placing and maintaining of infrastructure in support of such practices, are hence reproductions of the state's securitisation. Viewed from a physical security perspective, military practices are vital for national security and to protect the territory, citizens, and the overall well-being of the state.

We view military security from a securitisation theory perspective that involves an intersubjective construction of security by designating an enemy among political elites, the military, and the civilian public.[43] South Korea is a 'hard case' for our theory, as securitisation of North Korea and the Korean War by the South Korean state since 1948 has not been limited to speech acts contributing to narratives of the threat of North Korea but has also entailed highly visible security measures such as military exercises and civil defence drills, which are both routinised by the military and the government and disruptive to the everyday routines of civilians and more difficult to ignore, relative to speech acts alone.

Often referred to as 'the forgotten war' in American discourse because it was sandwiched between and overshadowed by the Second World War and the Vietnam War, we characterise the Korean War as also having been collectively 'forgotten' within contemporary South Korean society.[44] The Korean War has technically not ended since the 1953 truce, making it a *de jure* and *de facto* war. Since Kim Il Sung's founding, the North Korean regime has been legally designated as a source of existential threat by the South Korean state in its constitution and law. For example, Article 3 of the constitution stipulates that the Korean Peninsula, currently comprising North and South Korea, is its territory, thus claiming legitimacy to govern the population in North Korea.[45] Similarly, enacted in 1948 after the legal establishment of the Republic of Korea, the expansive National Security Act interprets activities challenging the legitimacy of the Seoul government by individuals or groups, including North Korea's Kim regime, as illegal and jeopardising 'the security of the [South Korean] state'.[46] The war further justified and normalised exceptional state measures, including in the form of military practices, associated with North Korea, even to this day.

In today's South Korea, it appears that the Korean War is *de facto* over, at least based on the South Korean people's day-to-day lived experiences. They have become not only aloof to North

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[42]We are not the first to frame inter-Korea relations as cases of securitisation. For example, see Seongwon Yoon, 'Why is there no securitisation theory in the Korean nuclear crisis?', *The Pacific Review*, 32:3 (2018), pp. 336–64; Sung-han Kim and Geun Lee, 'When security met politics: Desecuritization of North Korean threats by South Korea's Kim Dae-jung government', *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 11:1 (2011), pp. 25–55.

[43]Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security*, pp. 57–8.

[44]This collective 'forgetting' of an ongoing war is not literal but figurative, as South Korean society overall appears to be a peacetime society.

[45]'Constitution of the Republic of Korea' (29 October 1987), available at: {https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView. do?hseq=1&lang=ENGhttps://perma.cc/XHC5-R2EJNational}.

[46]'National Security Act' (15 September 2011), available at: {https://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_service/lawView.do?hseq=26692& lang=ENG}.

Korea's threats but also desensitised to the fact that the country is still at war. Media reports have alluded to the 'indifference', 'apathy', and even 'helplessness' among the South Korean people when it comes to North Korea's military provocations in the form of nuclear and missile tests.[47]

A possible explanation for South Korean society's ability to get on with life despite being under constant threat from North Korea is perhaps because these provocations are seen as empty threats posing no real danger. Yet inter-Korea skirmishes and North Korea's provocations and terrorism have claimed South Korean lives since the 1953 truce. Military servicemembers were killed in the 2002 skirmish in the West Sea as well as the 2010 torpedoing of a navy frigate, presumably by North Korea. The 2010 Yonpyong Island shelling by North Korea claimed two civilian lives. These are some of the more recent examples of limited Korean War skirmishes to which South Korean people have been exposed.

Research method

To illustrate how South Koreans' ontological agency manifests under securitisation and actual military threat from North Korea, we compare and contrast South Koreans' everyday public discourse and practices on two occasions of securitisation of the Korean War and North Korea in the form of South Korea's missile launches in Gangneung in 2022, which we observed by happenstance on 25 May and 4 October.[48] Our method is guided by the micro-moves approach to international politics, where we describe the everyday practices and emotions of laypeople, illuminating their agency as security subjects. As such, it brings 'people back into view'[49] empirically in security studies and world politics. More specifically, the micro-moves approach advocates redirecting attention to people's affect as a combination of emotions and cognition.[50]

To capture everyday security practices and emotions, we use unstructured observation methods in person and virtually to describe the South Korean people's security discourse, including textual and embodied practices, as observed during the two occasions.[51] Despite the limitations of

[47]Anna Fifield, 'Who's afraid of North Korea's Kim Jong Un? Not South Koreans', *The Washington Post* (23 August 2017), available at: {https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/08/23/whos-afraid-of-north-koreas-kim-jong-un-well-not-south-koreans/}; Haeryun Kang, 'In South Korea we're scared but we've normalised the fear', *The Guardian* (9 August 2017), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/09/south-korea-normalised-fear-north-korea-missile-kim-jong-un}; Michael Lee, '[WHY] South Koreans and their apparent lack of concern over their northern neighbors', *Joongang Daily* (27 August 2022), available at: {https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2022/08/27/national/northKorea/Korea-North-Korea-nuclear-weapons/20220827070006818.html}.

[48]We had no prior information about the missile launches due to the confidential nature of weapons tests. We recognise that this may be problematic from the perspective of rigorous social science research; however, serendipitous observations can be of value in advancing our understanding of the social world. On the importance of serendipity in scientific discoveries, see M. K. Stoskopf, 'Observation and cogitation: How serendipity provides the building blocks of scientific discovery', *ILAR Journal*, 46:4 (2005), pp. 332–7. As for the 4 October missile test, a direct observation of the audience's reaction would have been impossible even if we were in Gangneung, as the explosion happened after 11:00 pm.

[49]Ty Solomon and Brent J. Steele, 'Micro-moves in International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:2 (2017), pp. 267–291 (p. 272).

[50]Existing literature on public opinion in South Korea uses survey experiments to study the South Korean public's foreign policy preferences surrounding alliance politics and nuclear weapons acquisition. While they provide valuable insights into what South Korean people think about national security, they overlook everyday experiences, including emotions, related to security and war among civilians. For example, see David M. Allison, Stephen Herzog, and Jiyoung Ko, 'Under the umbrella: Nuclear crises, extended deterrence, and public opinion', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 66:10 (2022), pp. 1766–96; Sangyong Son and Jong Hee Park, 'Nonproliferation information and attitude change: Evidence from South Korea', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 67:6 (2023), pp. 1095–127.

[51]For greater discussion on how unstructured or indirect observations are used in research, see Anne Mulhall, 'In the field: Notes on observation in qualitative research', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 4:3 (2003), pp. 306–13; Teresa M. Anguera, Mariona Portell, Salvador Chacón-Moscoso, and Susana Sanduvete-Chaves, 'Indirect observation in everyday contexts: Concepts and methodological guidelines within a mixed methods framework', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), pp. 1–20 (p. 13), available at: {https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00013}.

ethnography in studying IR and the biases that may be introduced by researchers' interpretations,[52] we utilise its strength to observe people's security experiences as it helps capture the 'slippery, messy, overdetermined, and contradictory processes of collective meaning making' which is at the heart of the Copenhagen School of security studies.[53] We observe people's practices and discourse from a distance, akin to 'eavesdropping', so as not to 'contaminate' people's behaviour through our intervention as researchers. Our observations are also complemented by content analysis of samples of public discourse in the form of social media posts on the X platform, formerly known as Twitter. By integrating different methods of observation, we also avoid 'armchair analysing'[54] by describing security experiences observed in real time.

The comparison of people's behaviour on 25 May and on 4 October demonstrates the observable implications of ontological agency with regard to military practices that securitise North Korea. Both observations involved military practices in Gangneung – a city on the eastern coast of South Korea and a popular tourist destination for South Korean and international visitors – from where the Hyunmoo-2 missiles were launched in response to North Korea's missile tests. The observation on 25 May also included other forms of securitising practices in the form of military infrastructure.

Direct observation on 25 May: Audience inaction to securitisation

Our in-person, direct observation took place on 25 May 2022, in Gangneung. Here, we observed three forms of practices of securitisation of the Korean War: a retaliatory Hyunmoo-2 surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missile (SRBM) launch, military facilities camouflaged to blend in with the immediate civilian-centred surroundings, and a series of smaller missile launches.

As a likely reaction to US President Joe Biden's recent visit to Seoul, North Korea had test-launched three ballistic missiles the day before, prompting the United States and South Korea to respond. The launch involved South Korea's Hyunmoo-2 missile on the morning of 25 May 2022,[55] which created a loud roar like an aircraft engine, except it lasted much longer and felt out of place. There were no news media reports on a possible military drill near Gangneung that day. Shortly after 11:00 am, a non-mainstream media outlet reported a possible projectile launched by the South Korean military flying over the East Sea as 'witnessed' by Gangneung residents.[56] Other than the loud noise and a visible contrail, there was no visible reaction either in the media, on social media, or on the ground.

The coastal path was lined with military facilities, functioning as a form of securitisation of the Korean War and North Korea as a source of existential threat to South Korea, on what is an otherwise scenic and leisure-purposed beach lined with pine trees (Figure 1). At the time of observation, there were a handful of people, possibly Gangneung residents, taking a stroll along the beach trail. The military facilities did not appear to be an object of interest to these people, who seemed to pay them little attention.[57] At the same time, the military's efforts to 'disguise' the facilities by painting popular tourist spots on the walls surrounding the military facilities (Figure 2) were apparent, suggesting efforts to persuade the South Korean public of the necessity of the emergency measures

[52]For the state of ethnography in IR, see Jean Michel Montsion, 'Ethnography and International Relations: Situating recent trends, debates and limitations from an interdisciplinary perspective', *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 5:9 (2018), pp.1–21.

[53]Rebecca Hanson, 'Ethnographies of security: Pushing security studies beyond the bounds of international relations', *Qualitative Sociology*, 41 (2018), pp. 135–44 (p. 137).

[54]Iver Neumann, 'Returning practice to the linguistic turn: The case of diplomacy', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:3 (2002), pp. 627–51.

[55]Sung-hoon Kim, '달라진 합참…軍은 현무II, 미군은 에이태큠스 발사 [A more reactive Joint Chiefs of Staff: ROK launchesHyunmoo-2 while the US launches ATACMS]', *Maeil Kyungjae* (25 May 2022), available at: {https://www.mk.co.kr/news/politics/10331184}.

[56]Wang-geun Yoon, '강릉 동해상서 우리군 대응 미사일 추정 발사체 목격 [ROK's missile witnessed over Gangneung East Sea]', *News1* (25 May 2022), available at: {https://www.news1.kr/articles/?4691365}.

[57]While we cannot access people's internal reactions, they seemed unfazed based on their outward behaviour.

Figure 1. Military facility on the Gangneung coast with a sign warning people to keep off.

Figure 2. Colourful mural of scenic spots in the Gangneung area on the wall of a military facility on the beach.

in the form of these military structures that are potential reminders of the threat posed by North Korea.[58]

By doing so, the civilian-friendly appearance of military facilities coerces consent from the public towards these facilities, which function as securitising moves. Despite the Concertina wire

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[58]These colourful murals were painted in collaboration with the Korean army and local students in 2019, with residents expressing 'appreciation' to the army for such efforts. Source: Soon-Cheol Lee, '강릉 송정동 군부대 담벼락이 해변 그린 벽화로 새 단장 [Gangneung Songjeong army unit walls re-decorated with paintings of beaches]', *Newspim* (24 July 2019), available at: {https://www.newspim.com/news/view/20190724000634}.

Figure 3. The gate to Korean Army unit 2191 located on the beach.

and dire warnings, the military facilities were rendered mundane (if colourful), blending in with Gangneung's tourist sights. Securitisation thus involved a delicate balance between emergency measures as designed and desired by the political elites in the form of military infrastructure, and persuading the audience to accept, or at the very least, not contest or reject them by making them seem aesthetically appealing.

Signage on the main gate to military unit 2191 (Figure 3) reads 'On the Battlefront of the East Sea Coast', with a cartoon animal mascot in a military uniform and the words 'Strong Friend: The ROK Army' to the side of the gate. The efforts to appear civilian-friendly again suggest efforts to persuade the Korean public of the necessity of the military presence as an emergency measure. The gate presents a stark contrast to the colourful painting of sights, sounds, and tastes of Gangneung on the wall of this military facility that appeared to camouflage the reality of war, national security, and most importantly, South Korea's physical and national insecurity.

The same afternoon, on 25 May, illustrated how the South Korean public accepts the routinisation of security practices in the form of missile launches in retaliation against North Korea's missile tests.[59] Around 2:00 pm, there was a loud noise similar to the roar of an aircraft engine heard approximately every 10 minutes for about an hour. The noise, audible across Gangneung's beachfront lined with restaurants and cafés, was the result of projectiles being launched from the Gangnueng airbase (located approximately two kilometres away) towards the East Sea. The projectiles themselves were barely visible, but the flame and exhaust from the missiles were clearly visible even in the bright sunlight, as seen in Figure 4.[60]

During the launches, we observed the nearby patrons of the restaurants and cafes, who mostly did not appear to pay much attention to either the sight of the missiles or the loud noise. Most of the people we observed continued conversations or took in the sights while outwardly ignoring

[59]This series of missile launches was part of South Korea's retaliatory missile launches, which included the Hyunmoo-2 missile launch earlier in the morning. Source: Eunbok Ahn, ‖ 북 미사일 발사에… 강릉 군부대서 즉각 맞대응 사격 [Gangneung miliary unit responds to North Korea's missile launch with immediate counterfire]', *Gangwon Daily Newspaper* (25 May 2022), available at: {https://www.kado.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=1127991}.

[60]Figure 4 is a still image of a video recorded by the researchers. For the actual sights and sounds of the missile launches, you can view the video (MOV format) through the link to Supplementary Materials at the end of the article.

Figure 4. One of the missiles being launched from the Gangneung Air Base as seen from a cafe.

the missile launches. One or two people briefly reacted but quickly resumed what they had been doing.

Military drills in South Korea are not uncommon, especially in Gangneung where the airbase is the nearest to the inter-Korea border. It appeared that the South Korean public had learned to live with military practices that were not only visible but also proximate to them, thanks to decades of living with civil defence drills that were inevitable given North Korea's constant provocations and the ongoing war.[61] Coping with missile launches by ignoring them perhaps not only ensures South Koreans' ontological security of *their* Korea as the more prosperous and ironically more 'peaceful' Korea but also minimises their sense of disruption to their immediate everyday routines and hence reinforces their ontological security. By doing so, they wilfully choose to bracket out cognitively and affectively the ever-present possibility of North Korea inflicting death upon civilians.

Direct observation on 4 October: Audience reaction to securitisation

The second instance of securitisation occurred on the night of 4 October 2022, when the South Korean military fired a Hyunmoo-2 missile from the Gangneung airbase during exercises conducted along with US forces in response to North Korea's launch of a missile demonstrating its capability to reach the US territory of Guam. The Hyunmoo-2 launch, however, resulted in an accident. The missile malfunctioned, blowing up as it fell within a golf course at the airbase, causing panic among both locals and the public elsewhere in South Korea.[62] Between 11:00 pm on 4 October and 7:00 am on 5 October, when a government press conference was held, there was no

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[61] It is unclear how many South Koreans had seen media coverage of North Korea's recent missile tests; while some may have been aware and expected South Korea to respond, it is unlikely that the vast majority of people at Gangneung on this day would have both been aware of North Korea's provocations the previous day and expected South Korea's missile tests in advance.

[62] Tong-Hyung Kim, 'South Korea suffers malfunction in missile test response to North Korea, panics local residents', *PBS News* (5 October 2022), available at: {https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/south-korea-suffers-malfunction-in-missile-test-response-to-north-korea-panics-local-residents}.

official confirmation about what had occurred despite numerous social media posts and speculation online. In the immediate aftermath, the government did not confirm what had occurred, and the media was embargoed from reporting on it.[63] News articles on the incident were posted only to be taken down minutes later, and we observed that many tweets regarding the incident were deleted in near-real time.[64] The government's embargo created an information vacuum, during which the public was left to speculate on what had actually happened.

Because we were not present in Gangneung during the second missile test, we virtually observed and captured the South Korean public's reactions. We learned about the accident from Korean-language tweets about a large explosion and fire near the Gangneung airbase around midnight local time. We observed the social media discourse in real time for nearly four hours. Starting at roughly 11:00 pm on 4 October, Gangneung-based Twitter users expressed alarm at what sounded like an aircraft crashing, the sound of a massive explosion, and a large, highly visible fire in the vicinity of the airbase, fuelling speculation as to the cause from Twitter users in Gangneung and across South Korea. Some Gangneung residents and users in other parts of South Korea speculated about a possible 'invasion' from North Korea. News media and emergency services were silent, leading to even more speculation that South Korea could be under attack.

Indirect observations of reactions to 4 October missile accident

To uncover the public discourse surrounding the accident, we collected the text of social media posts to indirectly observe the production of public discourse and how it evolved, if at all. Under our framework of ontological agency, we would expect the public to see the incident through a securitised lens. Upon seeing visceral images of fire and explosions near a military installation, and in the absence of information, we would expect some portion of the public to speculate that the fire and explosion were somehow related to North Korea.

Using the R package *academictwitteR*,[65] we first collected tweets across three samples for 4 October in two phases – first, as the fire from the explosion was active around midnight, and, second, following the government's press conference regarding the explosion held at 7:00 am on 5 October.[66] We combined these three samples to form a snapshot of Twitter discourse related to the missile accident. We collected the tweets and analysed them for Korean words like 'war' or 'battle' or 'North Korea'.[67]

Our data collected in the aftermath of the mysterious explosion reveals two major themes.[68] The first theme involves speculations about the cause of the explosion (Tables 1 and 2). Much of the discourse centred around uncertainty about whether the incident was an accident or an intentional provocation. In the absence of information, some users expressed anxiety that war had broken out or that North Korea was attacking. Some users expressed emotions of anger and frustration in the form of profanity (censored here as 'xxxx').

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[63]Sung-min Hong, '"Is it war?" Gangneung residents spent the night shaking in fear', *Hankyung* (5 October 2022), available at: {https://www.hankyung.com/article/2022100556297}.

[64]This may also have affected the samples obtained for analysis, as they would not have included tweets deleted immediately.

[65]Christopher Barrie and Justin Chun-ting Ho, 'academictwitteR: An R package to access the Twitter academic research product track v2 API endpoint', *Journal of Open Source Software*, 6:62 (2022), p. 3272, available at: {https://doi.org/10.21105/joss.03272}.

[66]The three samples included one small sample collected in near-real time on 4 October 2022 (2,805 unique tweets); an expanded keyword-based sample (7,456 unique tweets); and a broad-based sample of Korean-language tweets not tied to specific keywords (470,466 unique tweets). For more information on how these samples were collected and expanded lists of representative tweets from each sample, see Appendix A in the Supplementary Materials linked to at the end of the article.

[67]None of these terms were used for generating the samples, so the goal was to get a sense of whether the public associated the fire and explosion with North Korea.

[68]The results are necessarily constrained by focusing only on tweets containing both 'war' and 'North Korea', such that tweets without both these terms but still contributing to these two major themes of concern over war and criticism of the government are excluded.

Table 1. Tweets in immediate aftermath of 4 October accident expressing concern about North Korea or the outbreak of war

Time	Translated tweet	Original Korean-language tweet
11:46 pm, 4 Oct.	'I heard something happened in Gangneung. Is it a warning for war??'	'강릉에 뭐 터졌다던데 전쟁각임??'
1:10 am, 5 Oct.	'If they fired after the explosion, didn't they really say that North Korea had spies infiltrate them by surprise and caused the explosion?'	'폭발 이후에 쏘는 거면 진짜 북한이 기습적으로 간첩 침투시켜서 폭발시킨 거 아니?'
1:16 am, 5 Oct.	'Are you launching anti-aircraft missiles? So is there a war?'	'대공미사일 발사하나요? 그럼 전쟁 난 건가?'
1:19 am, 5 Oct.	'Something seems to have happened in Gangneung… Is there a war?'	'강릉 무슨일 생겼나보네… 전쟁나는건가'
1:20 am, 5 Oct.	'It's quiet here So, is there a war in Gangneung?'	'여긴 조용하네 그래서 강릉 전쟁임?'
1:27 am, 5 Oct.	'Did a North Korean fighter plane come down and shoot it down?'	'북한 전투기라도 내려와서 현무로 격추시킨거야 뭐야'
1:27 am, 5 Oct.	'What's going on in Gangneung? Is there a war or something?'	'강릉 뭔일있냐 전쟁난거야 뭐야'
1:28 am, 5 Oct.	'If Gangneung is a North Korean provocation the stock market will crash tomorrow'	'강릉 북한 도발이면 낼 주식시장 개폭락'
1:28 am, 5 Oct.	'What's going on in Gangneung? Is there a war? What the xxxx?'	'강릉 뭔일이여 xx 전쟁난거냐고무슨xx'
1:28 am, 5 Oct.	'North Korea attacked so that all Gangneung citizens could see, but embargo?? It's nonsense.'	'북한이 강릉시민들 다 알 수 있게 타격했는데 엠바고?? 말도 안되는소리고'
1:33 am, 5 Oct.	'Did an explosion occur during training in Gangneung, or did North Korea fire a missile? Why is there not a single news headline?'	'강릉에 훈련하다 폭발사고가 일어난거야 아님 북한이 미사일이라도 쏜거야 뭔데 왜 무섭게 기사할줄 안남?'
1:38 am, 5 Oct.	'What is going on in Gangneung? Are we at war?'	'강릉 뭐야? 우리 전쟁나?'
1:47 am, 5 Oct.	'What's going on in Gangneung? It's not like they launched a missile from North Korea???'	'강릉 무슨일이야 ㅠㅠ 북한에서 미사일쏜거는 아니겠지???'
1:51 am, 5 Oct.	'What is the Gangneung explosion…? What is it, what is it, a war? Why are they embargoing the news???????"	'뭐야 강릉 폭발…? 뭐야 전쟁이야 뭐야 뉴스는 왜 막어???????'

The second theme was the criticism of the military or the administration of President Yoon Suk Yeol, a visible and easy 'target' to blame for securitisation of North Korea and the Korean War (Table 3). Some speculated that the explosion may have been caused by an accident resulting from negligence, accusing the government and the military of incompetence in providing security to South Korean citizens. Others criticised the government for a lack of transparency and failing to communicate in a timely manner. Another questioned whether the government would inform the public in the event of war or an attack by North Korea. Many also questioned whether the government could handle an actual attack by North Korea.

These responses suggest that even if they did not immediately think the 4 October explosion was caused by North Korea, some residents still expressed fear or anxiety about a hypothetical attack by North Korea and the government's competence in defending the country. Furthermore,

Table 2. Tweets in immediate aftermath of 4 October accident expressing concern about North Korea or the outbreak of war (continued)

Time	Translated tweet	Original Korean-language tweet
1:55 am, 5 Oct.	'What happened to the Gangneung explosion? Is there a war?'	'강릉 폭발사고 뭐지 전쟁났나?'
1:59 am, 5 Oct.	'An explosion was heard in Gangneung while Japan was also on evacuation warning due to North Korea's ballistic missile. Really haha… This is the first time I've been this nervous;'	'북한 탄도미사일때문에 일본도 대피경보 내린 마당에 강릉에서 폭발음 들림. 진짜 ㅎㄷㄷ… 이렇게 긴장 씨게 한 것도 처음이다;'
12:41 am, 5 Oct.	'It's been over an hour since the Gangneung explosion was posted, but nothing is showing up on the news. If there's a war, we'll all die, right? They will put an embargo on it so that only they will flee and all the citizens will die. oh my!'	'강릉 폭발 올라온지 1시간이 넘었는데 뉴스에 하나도 안나온다. 전쟁나면 다 죽겠지? 엠바고 걸고 그들만 피난가고 국민은 다 죽겠다. 아이고!'
12:50 am, 5 Oct.	"xxxx What happened to Gangneung? Is there a war? I can hear it again." (reply tweet)	'xx 강릉 뭼일이야 전쟁났나 소리 또들림'
12:50 am, 5 Oct.	'xxxx What's going on in Gangneung? I hear people say there's a war again.'	'xx 강릉 뭼일이야 전쟁났나 소리 또들림'
12:58 am, 5 Oct.	'What is going on in Gangneung?? Isn't an explosion of that magnitude dangerous? But it's so quiet… I don't even know if there's a real war'	'강릉 뭐야?? 저 정도 폭발이면 위험한거 아니야?? 근데 너무 조용하잖아.. 진짜 전쟁나도 모르겠네'
2:15 am, 5 Oct.	'No, now I'm going to die of anxiety if I hear anything about missiles… The area is already so close to North Korea that it wouldn't be surprising if a war broke out at any time… xxxx.'	'아니 나 이제 미사일 뭔 얘기 들리면 불안해죽겠음… 가뜩이나 지역도 북한이랑 존나 가까워서 언제 전쟁나도 이상하지 않은데… xx'
2:58 am, 5 Oct.	'Please send out breaking news from Gangneung. If a war breaks out, there will be a huge battle ～～ I'm anxious'	'강릉 속보 좀 내보내라 전쟁나면 초 다툼 인데 ～～ 불안하다'
6:36 am, 5 Oct.	'What's going on in Gangneung?? Training at 1 in the morning. It's almost like Yonpyeong scale of shelling! It's North Korea's deliberate provocation targeting the ROK–US joint military exercises. 😳 Embargo. How about wiping out North Korea at this point? 🤬 .'	"강릉 머선129?? 새벽1시에 훈련이라니. 연평도급인데! 한미연합훈련을 겨냥한 북한의 고의적 도발이구만. 😳 엠바고. 이참에 북한 쓸어버리던가. 🤬"

some users focused on the ongoing designation of North Korea as a major security threat, criticising the government and the government's political party and disparaging the 'far right' for blaming North Korea. Another user suggested a conspiracy – that President Yoon would try to blame North Korea for the explosion. In other words, some members of the public appeared to specifically criticise moves by the government or other securitising actors to securitise North Korea.

Table 3. Tweets in immediate aftermath of the 4 October accident criticising the government or military

Time	Translated tweet	Original Korean-language tweet
1:22 am, 5 Oct.	'Training in progress. (Honestly, this is not as bad as a war, but our military's reputation will drop and this administration must be prepared for its approval rating to fall below 10%.) 3. … The last thing is that North Korea explodes and our military carries out a point strike or retaliatory operation…'	'훈련 진행함. (솔직히 이것도 전쟁만큼은 아니지만 우리 군 ㅈㄴ 격 떨어지고 이번 정권은 지지율 10프로 이하로 떨어질 각오해야함.) 3. … xx xx 마지막은 북한이 만저 폭발 일으켜서 우리 군이 원점타격이나 보복작전 수행하는 거임…'
1:30 am, 5 Oct.	'Even if it is not a big deal, accurate information should be provided quickly to local residents. A loud explosion and a fire broke out this night in a country that was under ceasefire, and we don't know what caused it. If something like this happens again, even if war actually breaks out, people say, "It won't be a big deal this time either."'	'별 일 아닌거라고 해도 지역주민들에게는 정확한 안내가 신속하게 이루어져지. 휴전 중인 나라에서 이 밤에 큰 폭발음과 화재가 발생했는데 뭐 때문인지 정체도 모른다니. 이런 일이 반복되면 실제로 전쟁나도'이번에도 별 일 아니겠지..'이렇게 된다고'
2:04 am, 5 Oct.	'Gangneung: I just got into an accident while training. I don't know if it's a missile or a fighter jet. Those b******* who are talking about North Korea and talking about the political world and creating fear should be killed. Common sense tells us that if there is an air raid, there will be an embargo and the media will not be quiet, but an air raid warning and breaking news will appear together. Let's be rational about this.'	"강릉 걍 훈련하다 사고 난거에요 미사일인지 전투기인지는 모르는거고 북한 들먹이고 정치권 운운하며 공포심 조성하는 Xxx 들은 자1살하십쇼. 상식적으로 공습이면 엠바고 걸려고 언론이 조용할 게 아니라 공습경보와 뉴스속보가 같이 뜨겠죠. 생각 좀 하고 삽시다."
2:10 am, 5 Oct.	'It is very unlikely that it was North Korea's doing, and it is highly likely that it happened due to negligence, either due to poor maintenance by the Air Force or poor management. There have been cases in the past where the bow was fired incorrectly and blown away.'	'북한 짓일 가능성은 매우 낮고 공군에서 정비를 잘못했거나 뭐 관리를 개판으로 했든 과실로 일어났을 가능성이 농후. 예전에도 천궁 잘못쏴서 날라간 사례가 있음.'
2:46 am, 5 Oct.	'A fire broke out in Gangneung due to a training mistake. Even as the residents of Gangneung were shaking in fear the trash government doesn't want to be transparent and disclose the details…The far right says it's North Korea's fault again. Spreading fake news Really, damn the world. The People Power Party is trash…'	'강릉에서 훈련 실수로 불이나 날리가 나서 강릉 주민들이 공포불안에 떠는대도 투명하게 공개도 못하는 이 쓰레기정부. 극우애들은 또 북한소행 이니 하면서 가짜뉴스를 퍼트리고 다니고 진짜 (**) 세상말세여 왜 국민의힘 쓰레기들이…'
4:38 am, 5 Oct.	'If an accident occurred in the middle of the night, shouldn't you notify the residents as soon as possible? You think there's a war. Why is there an embargo? Even if North Korea attacks, are they going to put an embargo on it and wait until VIP wakes up?'	'오밤중에 사고 났으면 사고 났다고 최대한 빨리 주민들한테 알려야 할 거 아니야. 전쟁난 줄 알잖아. 엠바고를 왜 걸어. 진짜 북한 공격 들어와도 엠바고 걸고 vip 깨실 때까지 기다리려나…'
6:55 am, 5 Oct.	'Aren't you trying to blame North Korea for the Gangneung explosion? Why is there an embargo? Mr Yoon, are you sleeping?'	'강릉폭발사고 북한테 뒤집어 씌우려고 그러는거 아냐? 엠바고가 왜걸려? 윤씨 자나?'

After the press conference clarifying the cause of the explosion and fire, South Korean users continued criticising the government and military.[69] The public discourse reveals two broad themes,

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[69]While the tweets in Tables 4 and 5 were posted after the start of the 7:00 am press conference, we cannot conclude one way or the other whether the Twitter users who posted these tweets were aware of or had seen the press conference. However, the press conference provides a useful temporal demarcation between the immediate aftermath of the accident, when there was no official confirmation and media coverage was embargoed, and the period after the press conference, when the accident was confirmed to not be a North Korean attack and details of the accident were being reported in the media.

similar to those in the first phase. First, there were criticisms of the media embargo and inadequate government communications (Table 4). Many criticised the government for the long period of information vacuum between the time of the accident and the conference. Others expressed concerns about the embargo and being lied to by the government. An undercurrent among these tweets is anger at the government for failing to inform the public despite the anxiety generated by the obscuration of the cause of the explosion. For example, one post specifically mentioned that the citizens in Gangneung 'must have been anxious all night long, not knowing if it was a war, a forest fire, or an accident' in criticising the government for the media embargo.

Similar to the first phase, the second theme that emerged on the morning of 5 October was criticisms of the government for failing to adequately provide security (Tables 5 and 6). Many expressed embarrassment at the accident. This embarrassment seems to stem from perceptions that the accident was a result of South Korea's demonstration of its military prowess in response to North Korea's missile tests, only to have the missile launch fail and be potentially dangerous to the South Korean people – the very referent objects of securitising North Korea. Others indicated concerns that the missile could have accidentally fallen on North Korea, which could have ironically caused a renewed outbreak of war unintentionally. Others specified that the missile could have fallen into civilian areas.

The 4 October missile launch accident reveals that the former mundanity of the missile tests conducted regularly as part of South Korea's securitisation efforts, which could otherwise be easily ignored and hence would not solicit outward reaction, was replaced by anxiety. The accident and the vivid images that accompanied it raised questions about what was to come, undermining the confidence of those who were witnessing the explosion directly or virtually, to go on with their day-to-day life. The public discourse revealed latent anxiety regarding North Korea and the possibility of South Korea being attacked again. Furthermore, once the accident made it so the public could no longer 'unsee' the missile tests and the attendant proof of their vulnerability to North Korea-related policies and military practices, the South Korean people's latent anxiety related to North Korea became more apparent and even expressive.

Comparing the reactions to the 25 May and 4 October missile launches on social media

To demonstrate that the public reaction to the 25 May missile launches was different from that to the 4 October missile launch and accident, we collected tweets from the 12-hour period between 4:00 am and 4:00 pm local time on 25 May using the Korean-language keywords for 'Gangneung', 'missile', 'explosion', 'Hyunmoo', 'bomb', 'Air Force base', 'airport', and 'North Korea'. This returned 139,583 tweets (19,630 unique tweets). Of these, only 23 unique tweets mentioned war,[70] 4 of which directly or indirectly discussed the Hyunmoo-2 missile launch (see Table 7). All four tweets criticised the government for the retaliatory missile launch as it could escalate inter-Korea tensions.

The social media analysis reveals that in the face of securitising practices that undermine public ontological security by disrupting their day-to-day life, people react in two ways. First, they blame securitising actors for failing to manage the South Korean people's ontological security needs. From our theoretical perspective, the South Korean people have delegated to the government the power to ensure that the North Korean threats and the anxiety that flow from them are being managed, so that they can go on with their lives without having to constantly put in effort to bracket or manage the anxiety. In the case of 25 May, many rhetorically blamed the Yoon government for choosing to carry out retaliatory missile launches following North Korea's missile tests and thus contributing to (re)securitising North Korea. Despite the 'competent performance' of defending South Korea's

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[70]Within the sample, 951 tweets included either a term for war or 'North Korea', but this larger inclusion is to be expected, both because of the North Korean missile tests and the fact that 'North Korea' was one of the keywords used to generate the sample.

Table 4. Tweets after 7:00 am press conference criticising the media embargo and government communications

Time	Translated tweet	Original Korean-language tweet
7:27 am, 5 Oct.	'Didn't they put in an embargo? The missile launch as a provocation by North Korea didn't end with yesterday's announcement of the Gangneung fire, right? Even if war breaks out, they will just run away and say it's a preemptive bombing of North Korea on the Korean peninsula from a safe place. I never thought war would be more fearful than when I was a child doing anti-communist speech contests. Are we living in 2022?'	'엠바고 안 풀렸냐 북 대응도발로 미사일 쏜 게 어제 강릉화재 알림으로 끝인거는 아니겠지? 전쟁나도 지들만 도망가고 안전한 곳에서 한반도 북한 선제폭격 이러고 말겠네 반공웅변대회 하던 내 어린시절보다 더 전쟁이 공포일 줄이야 지금 2022년 맞나요?'
7:31 am, 5 Oct.	'The Gangneung explosion, which had been delayed all night due to an embargo, was finally announced as a mistaken explosion during missile training. Even after brainstorming all night long, he couldn't think of a way to connect North Korea, Moon Jae-in, and Lee Jae-myung.'	'밤새 엠바고로 시간 끌던 강릉 폭발 사고가 결국 미사일 훈련 중 오폭으로 발표났구나. 밤새 아이디어를 짜내도 북한, 문재인, 이재명을 엮을 방법이 안떠올랐던 모냥이재.'
7:35 am, 5 Oct.	'It seems that a military training accident occurred in Gangneung early in the morning. Several hours have passed since there were no reports, and only now is there breaking news that a missile (Hyunmoo) has landed. A video taken overnight in Gangneung appears to be more than just a misfire accident. Under the current government, if a war breaks out, we could face it without knowing.'	'새벽에 강릉에서 군 훈련 사고가 났나 봅니다. 보도가 전무하다 수시간이 지난 이제서야 미사일(현무) 한 발이 낙탄했다는 속보를 냅니다. 밤새 강릉 현지에서 직접 찍어 올린 동영상은 오발 사고 이상으로 보이기도 합니다. 현정부에서는 전쟁이 나도 우린 모르고 당할 수 있겠네요.'
7:37 am, 5 Oct.	'In my prediction…they tried to respond to a North Korean missile and failed and hit the Gangneung Air Force Wing. They are giving an embargo to the media and lying.'	'내예상에는…날라오는 북한 미사일에 대응하려다 실패 강릉 공군비행단에 명중한거여 언론에 엠바고 돌리고 거짓말 하고있다'
7:42 am, 5 Oct.	'Gangneung Missile I think the bigger problem is not whether it's from North Korea or South Korea, but why they hid the incident. The country's economy and national defence have become so messed up that it wouldn't be surprising if they collapsed at any time. Is now the time to consider security? Is that guy who said he will attend the NSC meeting in the middle of it still trying to get away with it??'	"강릉 미사일그게 북한거다 남한거다가 문제가 아니고 왜 그걸 왜 감추냐는게 더 큰 문제가 아닐까 싶군요.나라가 경제며 국방이며 지금 언제 망해도 이상하지 않을 정도로 개판이 났는데 지금이 보안을 따질때 인가요?? NSC 회의 중간에 참석하겠다는 그XX는 아직도 처자려나??"
7:55 am, 5 Oct.	'There may be a missile malfunction, but there are citizens of Gangneung who must have been anxious all night long, not knowing if it was a war, a forest fire, or an accident. Was it really necessary to announce it in the morning with an embargo? Could it be that the person who was supposed to get the report of the accident was drunk again? At this point, I think we should make it mandatory for the president to take a breathalyzer test every morning instead of doorstepping.'	'미사일 고장이야 있을 수 있는거지만, 밤새 전쟁인지 산불인지 사고인지도 모르고 불안했을 강릉시민들이 있는데 굳이 엠바고 걸고 아침에 발표해야했나? 설마 사고 보고 받아야할 인간이 또 만취상태였던거 아닌가? 이쯤되면 아침마다 도어스테핑이 아니라 음주측정을 의무화 해야하는거 아닌가 싶다.'
7:59 am, 5 Oct.	'The Gangneung explosion news was under embargo all night long. The news comes out in the morning. If a war breaks out they will probably tell people not to cross over to the south of the Han River'	'강릉 폭발 밤새 엠바고 걸려있다 아침에 뉴스 뜨네 전쟁나면 한강 이남으로 피난 가지 말라는 소리 나오겠네'
8:55 am, 5 Oct.	'As it is time to go to work, the media is pouring out articles on Gangneung Hyunmoo. Even if war breaks out, you won't immediately notify the public under an embargo? There was no Covid disaster text message system in Gangneung this time, right?'	"출근 시간되니 언론들이 강릉 현무 기사 쏟아져 나옵니다. 전쟁나도 엠바고 걸고 국민들에게 즉각 알리지 않을것인가요. 코로나 재난문자 시스템은 이번 강릉에는 없었지요?"

Table 5. Tweets after 7:00 am press conference criticising the government for failing to provide security

Time	Translated tweet	Original Korean-language tweet
8:06 am, 5 Oct.	'If you look at overseas news during the last administration, was Korea like this? I used to be proud, but these days, when I look at overseas news, I see… Is Korea like this???? Was it?? Embarrassed… They made a fuss about launching a missile in response to North Korea, and then dropped it on Gangneung …'	'지난 정권때 해외 뉴스 보면 와 한국이 이정도 였나?? 자랑 스러웠는데 요즘은 해외 뉴스 보면 아… 한국이 이정도???? 였나?? 쪽팔림..무슨 북한 대응한다고 미사일 쏜다고 난리더니 그걸 강릉에 떨어트려..'
8:21 am, 5 Oct.	'After an abnormal flight 1) What if the missile had fallen in Gangneung city? 2) What if it crossed the Military Demarcation Line and landed in North Korea? 3) Is embarrassment the people's responsibility again this time?'	'비정상 비행후 1) 강릉시내에 낙탄되었다면? 2) 군사분계선 넘어 북한에 낙탄되었다면? 3) 이번에도 쪽팔림은 국민의 몫인가?'
8:22 am, 5 Oct.	'If it is true that the Gangneung explosion was a failed launch training in response to North Korea's missile protests, it would likely serve as an opportunity to extend the image of this regime's incompetence to the military…'	'강릉 폭발사고가 북한 미사일 시위에 대응한 발사훈련 실패라는 게 사실이라면 이 정권의 무능 이미지가 -군- 까지 확장되는 계기가 될 것 같잖아…'
8:28 am, Oct. 5	'So you burned down Gangneung all night long? To demonstrate to North Korea?'	'그래서 밤새 강릉을 불태웠구나? 북한에게 보여주려고?'
9:02 am, 5 Oct.	'Gangneung missile launch fails, announced by the military in 7 hours…confusion all night long Are you putting national defence on the back burner while fighting with high school kids?'	'강릉 미사일 낙탄, 군 7시간만에 발표..밤새 혼란 고딩하고 전투하느라 국방은 뒷전이냐?'
8:20 am, 5 Oct.	'Yes, that's right. Does anyone realise how scary this is??? How dare they gloss over that they misfired the missile lol. If it had been a mistake, it could have landed in acivilian's house or in North Korea. Then it's war haha'	'[단독] 北 IRBM 대응사격하다 '현무 – 2' 1발 오발, 화염 치솟아…인명피해 없어 응 맞았네 이게 얼마나 섬뜩한 일인지 앎??? 어딜 그냥 얼버무리려 그래 미사일을 잘못 쏜거임ㅋㅋㅋㅋ 미사일을 아차했으면 민간인 집에 떨어질 수도 있었고 북한에 떨어트릴 수도 있었음 그럼 전쟁이야ㅋㅋㅋ'
8:38 am, 5 Oct.	'Things are going well, aren't they? He posted a prophecy that when North Korealaunches a nuclear missile warhead, South Korea will disappear. Did Yoon Seok-yeol's boastful US–ROK nuclear umbrella cause a fire at the airfield dueto a dropped bomb? Our national defence is not capable of a limited war let alone World War 3.	'잘도 한다 북한이 미사일 핵 탄두를 쏘았을 때는 대한민국은 없어진다고 예언을 올렸다 윤석열씨가 자랑하던 한미 핵우산이 낙탄으로 비행장 화재이느냐 제3차세계대전이 아니라 국지전쟁인 남북미 전쟁에서 패배하고 항복하겠다는 증거로 국방력의 북한에 얼굴도 못 내밀겠다'
4:41 pm, 7 Oct.	'Hyunmoo 2 ballistic missile in response to provocations Landfall into abnormal flight base could have fallen on North Korea… It could have been a pretext for war… It's so scary…'	'도발 대응 현무2탄도미사일 비정상 비행 기지 내로 낙탄 만일 북한에 떨어졌다면… 전쟁의 빌미가 되었을 수도… 너무 아찔 한데…'
2:03 pm, 8 Oct.	'An unstable Republic of Korea…What if the missile that fell in Gangneung or fell in North Korea? We might be at war now. I would have seen my family and friends dying'	'불안한 대한민국… 강릉에 떨어진 미사일이…북한에 떨어졌다면 우린 지금 전쟁중일지도 모른다. 내가족, 친구.. 인이들이 죽어가는걸 보아야됬을꺼다…'

national security through such retaliatory missile drills, the tweets in Table 7 illuminate the latency of anxiety among South Koreans towards the possibility of renewed warfare.

In the case of the 4 October missile accident, South Koreans blamed the Yoon government for not only failing to protect the country competently but also for the information vacuum which

Table 6. Tweets after 7:00 am press conference criticising the government for failing to provide security, continued

Time	Translated tweet	Original Korean-language tweet
10:38 am, 5 Oct.	'North Korea is launching missiles into the Pacific Ocean, while Yoon is launching missiles at his own people. Just five months after taking office, our national security is collapsing. These bastards are the ones talking about a pre-emptive strike…'	'북한은 태평양으로 미슬을 날리더니 윤가놈은 자국민한테 미사일을 날리는군. 취임 5개월만에 국가 안보가 무너지고 있다. 이런 새끼들이 선재타격을 운운하다니…'
11:59 am, 5 Oct.	'It was revealed that it was caused by a dropped bomb that occurred while the South Korean and US militaries were firing surface-to-surface missiles in response to North Korea's intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM) provocation on the 4th. There wasn't a single person who could explain this properly. Would this be the case if war broke out? What a xxxxing disaster.'	'한 · 미 양국 군이 북한의 4일 중거리탄도미사일(IRBM) 도발에 따른 대응 차원에서 지대지 미사일 사격을 하던 중 발생한 낙탄으로 인한 것으로 밝혀졌다. xx 어느 한 xx도 제대로 이야기 해 주는 놈이 없었다. 전쟁이 발발해도 이럴 것 아닌가. 이런 xxx.'
12:56 pm, 5 Oct.	'If a missile falls on North Korea, let Yoon Seok-yeol take responsibility and commit seppuku to prevent war.'	'혹시라도 북한에 미사일 떨어지면 윤석열이 책임지고 할복해서 전쟁 막도록 해라.'
1:07 pm, 5 Oct.	'A military barbarian like that is the Minister of Defence who protects this country… Even if North Korean missiles come right in front of us, he will probably answer that we can win the war because we are reviewing our defence system… If I were Kim Jong-un, I would invade right now. Even if there was a war now, our 48-second meeting ally (the US) and Japan would not help us. What a great opportunity this is???'	"저런 군바리가 이 나라 지키는 국방장관이라니… 코앞에 북한 미사일 들이닥쳐도, 방어시스템 검토중이니 전쟁 이길 수 있다라고 답할 듯… 내가 김정은이면 지금 쳐들어 왔다.. 지금 전쟁해도 48초 미국이랑 간담회 일본이 안도와줄거 같다.. 이 얼마나 좋은 기회인가??? "
6:56 pm, 5 Oct.	'If a missile falls on North Korea, World War 3 will start and our country will disappear regardless of whether we win or lose the war. If we lose, we will become a communist country, and if we win, we will be colonised by Japan again, with the United States acting as an intermediary.' (reply tweet)	'미사일이 북한에 떨어졌으면 3차 대전 시작하고 전쟁승패와 관계없이 우리나라는 없어짐. 패하면 공산국가되고 이기면 일본에 다시 식민지되겠죠 미국이 중간역할하면서'
7:38 pm, 5 Oct.	"It's hard to live as a citizen of this regime – to have to worry about being killed by our own missiles in addition to worrying about being killed by North Korean missiles during the war."	'전쟁 나서 북한군 미사일에 죽을 걱정 외에도 우리군 미사일에 죽을 걱정까지 해야되다니 공정권 국민으로 살기 개빡셈.'
3:24 pm, 6 Oct.	'#Yoon Seok-yeol Let's strike Gangneung preemptively again. He can't attack North Korea because he's a coward. At least if you fire, you have to counterattack immediately. Do you want to watch it and do it the next day? That too is a shortcut to losing the war on its own territory.'	'#윤석열 또 강릉에 선제 타격해보자 용기가 없어서 북한에는 못하지 적어도 발사하면 즉시 반격해야지 눈치보고 다음날하냐 그것도 자국 영토에 그게 전쟁에서 지는 지름길이다.'
8:21 am, 7 Oct.	'If the bomb fell on North Korea ∼∼∼∼∼ Many people, who are the sovereign people of the Republic of Korea, could have lost their lives in the war. They must be impeached urgently.'	'만약 폭탄이 북한에 떨어졌다면 ∼∼∼∼∼ 대한민국 주권자인 수많은 국민이 전쟁으로 생명을 잃을 수도 있었어 ∼∼, 시급히 탄핵시켜야 ∼∼∼'

added to uncertainty and anxiety about the accident. Furthermore, this shows that the audience to securitisation is more tolerant of emergency measures to the extent that they are implemented with adequate communication and transparency.

Table 7. Tweets from 25 May

Time	Translated tweet	Original Korean-language tweet
3:57 pm, 25 May	'They say that the Cheonan crashed because its sonar was old, that it crashed because its fighter jets were old, that Ukraine needs to add functions to its tanks because portable anti-tank weapons are threatening, and that they make a fuss when North Korea tests nuclear weapons… Why are they cutting defence spending? Do you want to do it!!! How many more of our young people must die!'	'천안함은 소나가 낡아서 당했다고 하고, 전투기가 노후화 되서 추락 했다고 하고, 우크라이나에서 휴대용 대전차 무기가 위협적이라서 전차에 기능을 추가 해야 한다고 하고, 또 북한이 핵실험 한다고 하면 호들갑 떨면서… 국방비는 왜 삭감 하냐고!!! 우리 젊은이들이 얼마나 더 죽어나가야 하는데!'
1:57 pm, 25 May	'Yoon Seok-yeol launches a surface-to-ground missile in response to North Korea's ICBM! "Precision strike at the origin of provocation" Dozens of F15-K fighter jets gather in a show of force! Aimed at Kim Jong-un!'	윤석열, 북한 ICBM에 대응해 지대지 미사일 발사!'도발원점 정밀타격' F – 15 K 전투기 수십대 집결 무력시위! 김정은 겨냥했다!
10:50 AM, 25 May	'Are you running on the runway with a fighter jet as a countermeasure against a missile launch? Not even a flight? Hahahahahahahahahaha I think it would be more effective if Julie said good things.'	'살다살다 미사일 발사 대책으로 전투기 갖고 활주로 질주? 비행도 아니고? ㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋㅋ 차라리 쥴리가 굿 하는게 더 효과 있겠다 xx'
11:13 AM, 25 May	'Why? Did Yoon Seok-yeol instruct them to use a fighter jet to counter North Korea's missiles?'	'왜? 공석열이가 전투기로 北 미사일 몸빵하라디?'

Second, and more importantly, the social media analysis of the 4 October reactions highlights the automatic activation and regurgitation of the securitising rhetoric of North Korea as an existential threat to South Korean society. As Tables 1 and 2 show, as uncertainty, unknowability, and unpredictability ensued following the mysterious explosion and fire that was captured and shared on social media, a sense of confidence in going on with life broke down as people sought answers. The undermining of ontological security can spur people to exercise political agency, as evident from calls by politicians and the public demanding an investigation into the accident, as well as for accountability by the military, which was chastised for its lack of transparency.

That the missile launch was also conducted in response to North Korea's missile tests raised questions about the ability of the military to respond effectively.[71] Securitising moves in the form of military exercises have come to be questioned as people choose to 'see' their insecurity not just from North Korea but from South Korea's security apparatus, which relies on continued successful securitisation of the Korean War.

That the Korean War and North Korea are raised by some South Korean people regardless of the success of military exercises demonstrates that latent anxiety about North Korea is expressed in degrees rather than in a binary manner. Ontological agency helps account for inaction, or the lack of outward action and reaction, to military security policies and practices even if they are conspicuous to the general civilian public. People can afford to not act and attend to their day-to-day activities because of securitisation and the delegation of authority to the government and the military in carrying out necessary measures that contribute to their ontological security. However, once the day-to-day routines are disrupted, people express their anxiety by blaming the securitising

[71]Hyun-jae Yoo, '민주 국방위원들, 미사일 낙탄사고 부대 방문…현장 확인 못 해 [Democratic Party National Defense Committee members visit accident site]', *Yonhap News* (7 October 2022), available at: {https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20221007160000062}.

and functional actors and may even more strongly express their anxiety by exercising their political agency.

The capturing of such discourse from across South Korea using social media demonstrates that latent anxiety is not localised to Gangneung residents, because the social media posts were being produced and shared nationwide in real time. The latent anxiety related to North Korea's attack and the Korean War is demonstrated in other instances as well. For example, the South Korean public complained after a nationwide emergency evacuation alert was sent in error on 31 May 2023, in response to a North Korean satellite launch. Many panicked in fear of a renewed outbreak of war.[72] While panicking is not an abnormal reaction to such alerts, it suggests the latent anxiety South Koreans have had regarding North Korea for more than seven decades. Yet South Korean people have been able to cope with infinite possibilities of insecurity associated with North Korea because of ontological agency that drives selective bracketing of sources of threats in their day-to-day life.

Conclusion

Despite the intellectual impact of the Copenhagen School's securitisation theory and its variants, the audience dimension remains under-theorised and under-analysed considering that securitisation processes potentially generate anxiety and disrupt ontological security. Existing works on audience agency conceptualise it as political, contingent upon the audience's capabilities to accept, reject, or contest securitising moves. This overlooks the psychological aspect of security as a lived experience for the audience, who, as security subjects, may prioritise what is more immediate to them despite the designation of existential threats that may pose physical and ontological threats. Drawing on the ontological security lens emphasising the importance of preserving day-to-day routines in reinforcing people's sense of stability and control, we argue that an audience in securitisation possesses and exercises ontological agency as a coping mechanism in the face of anxiety induced by securitising moves.

Our concept of ontological agency allows us to better understand and analyse how publics respond to securitising moves in more complicated ways than simply accepting or contesting. The case of South Korean state's securitisation of the Korean War and North Korea in the form of military practices and facilities in the city of Gangneung, a moderately militarised urban area formerly out of bounds to civilians, illustrates how civilians live and cope with everyday military practices that resecuritise North Korea as a threat. We show through in-person and virtual observations that South Koreans exercise ontological agency by wilfully choosing to go on with their daily lives despite the presence of everyday representations of North Korean threats that induce anxiety. This agency in choosing what to respond to outwardly results in inaction or the lack of outward action or reaction to securitising moves. On the occasion of the failed missile launch that resulted initially in a loud explosion and fire amid an information vacuum, the South Korean public's latent anxiety related to North Korea was expressed in finger-pointing at the government and the military, who function to assure the stability and continuity of the world such that people can attend to their day-to-day life.

We offer two implications for theoretical and empirical work on securitisation. First, the concept of ontological agency suggests conditions under which (de)securitisation could succeed or fail because of the audience. The vernacular dimension of security experiences hints at how ontological security needs may be prioritised by laypeople who may willingly choose not to see the securitising process as long as it does not undermine their everyday routines which make them feel grounded and anchored. At the same time, it is not security as an issue per se that drives people to act or react but rather anxiety about the potential ontological and physical security disruptions related to that issue that can trigger them to act as they seek ways to restore their sense of stability and a reassurance or confidence that the world will continue as it is.

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[72]Claire Lee, "'Boy who cried wolf'": Seoul residents panic after false rocket alarm', *ABS CBN News* (31 May 2023), available at: {https://news.abs-cbn.com/overseas/05/31/23/seoul-residents-panic-after-false-rocket-alarm}.

Second, securitisation often involves framing an issue as an existential threat which in turn can be framed as causing existential anxiety that can be debilitating to the extent that individuals lose the capacity to cope with it. The theoretical axiom of securitisation is the exigency of emergency measures because an issue had been designated and framed as an existential threat. That is, securitisation can be said to be associated with existential anxiety, or anxiety related to existentialism or the human condition or situation as it is lived. As Andrew Hom and Cian O'Driscoll point out, we are living through the 'Age of Anxiety', where people are confronted by existential situations and questions demanding answers or responses, or in our theoretical conception, exercising agency in deciding subjectively which security needs must be met or prioritised. The rise of the politics of existentialism shifts the focus to a greater need for a reflective understanding of people's experiences and their choice of response, which entails a complex struggle over what they are responsible for within their limited means.[73] Because this is a human condition afflicting all of us, it is a universal experience contextualised by the immediate questions being thrown at us every day.

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[73]Andrew R. Hom and Cian O'Driscoll, 'Existentialism and International Relations: In it up to our necks', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 783–94.