DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND SOCIAL-POLITICAL CLEAVAGE IN SOUTH KOREA
Frame, Threat and Securitization in Policymaking

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary policy debates, the people often know very little about important issues such as pandemics, nuclear energy, and several developmental policies that are decided without adequate participation or clear validation. To make matters worse, the adequacy of knowledge and information provided by experts is often debatable. Previously, decision-makers used to successfully frame policy issues with unsound information, stressing specific perspectives and ignoring others. However, in the age of democratic governance, the cascading flow of government-friendly information often faces counter-framing from below and policy discussions often face seemingly irresolvable controversies. I argue that both proponents and opponents of issues try to frame a ‘normal’ issue as an ‘abnormal’ one through ‘threat’ and ‘securitization.’ Policies causing social conflicts are often shaped by the securitization process through which intersubjective understanding is constructed within the government or by civil society to treat policy issues as external threats to our daily lives and environment, for justifying extraordinary measures or fast responses.

Keywords: Policy Framing, Threat, Securitization
UNCERTAINTY AND IRRESOLVABLE POLICY CONFLICTS

During most of the post-democratization era, South Korea (hereafter Korea) has witnessed political cleavage and social conflicts over such policy issues as beef imports from U.S., welfare expansion, free trade agreements, pandemics, nuclear plant construction and so forth, which have been quite expensive for the Korean economy and the society. According to a think tank’s reports on social conflicts and their economic costs, Korea has experienced very high levels of social conflicts which translate into economic costs of about 250 billion US dollars per year, or about 25% of the national economy.¹ Despite the end of the Cold War and the grand democratization in 1987, Korea has been socially fragmented and politically divided, resulting in difficulties in ‘peacefully resolving’ social and political problems. Ha et al. (2009: 650) noted that the Korean society lacks an “effective decision-making system” for peaceful resolution of social problems and issues. After a decade of democratic politics, with much social change, how Korea resolves social conflicts and political cleavage will be critical for the country to maintain its economic growth and prosperity (Ha et al., 2009; Heo and Roehrig, 2010).

One might argue that the increasing trend of social disagreement or conflicts is a natural corollary of democratization and the consolidation process. In the Federalist Papers (#51), America’s Founding Fathers (in particular, James Madison) argued that many different factions having different stands on different issues would be good for general interests and protection of liberty. Many democratic thinkers such as Jon Elster and Jürgen Habermas also noted that democratic citizens come up to a solution through deliberation. Indeed, many policy problems have been resolved by majoritarian (legislative) politics in democratic societies. Yet, unlike this premise of democratic politics, contemporary policymaking in Korea often faces deadlocks because of lack of social engineering. Normal political issues are, more often than not, converted into abnormal, unusual, or sometimes lift-threatening problems.

One of the common features of the aforementioned policy problems is that ‘information’ about the problems is not clear enough to ensure policy compliance. For example, in the context of policymaking, ‘messy policy problems’ and emergence of unprecedented policy issues such as the stagflation in the 1970’s, climate change, new pandemics (e.g. H1N1, SARS), aging problems (e.g., pension crisis) and globalization (FTA) have changed the traditional rules and space of policymaking. In the past, governmental institutions were supposed to provide appropriate interpretation and solutions for policy problems, but due to increased uncertainty and ambiguity, the institutions are unable to properly handle current policy problems and often cause policy conflicts stemming from incommensurable world views (Campbell, 2004; Schwarz and Thompson, 1990). Governance networks for problem solving have become diversified as many policy problems span several spheres. Against this backdrop, decision makers in governments are unable to estimate policy effects with greater accuracy or find like-type policy precedents under uncertainty (Beckert, 1996). They need to keep finding new favorable solutions and develop new rules or norms for policymaking at the same time (Hajer, 2003; Bevir, 2010).²

In fact, the problem of uncertainty in policymaking is nothing new. In the classic literature, thinkers in areas of policy and administration have discussed uncertainty and considered it as an attribute of public policy (Jones and Baumgartner, 2008). Cyert and March (1963) mentioned that uncertainty is an unavoidable aspect
in organizational decision making process. From their perspective, policy making is a process of eliminating any uncertainty in governmental organizations. For this purpose, decision makers often use ‘heuristics’ or specialized knowledge to reduce uncertainty (Haas, 1992; Weyland, 2006). Alternately, uncertainty can be reduced through competitive debates and discussions. When there is a sharp division among different groups of decision makers, the top leadership resolves the deadlock by using its hierarchical superiority.

However, this organization-based discussion in the classical literature did not adequately address a rather unique feature of contemporary political developments: growth of civil society and non-profit organizations. When state or governmental agencies possessed exclusive decisional authority, various strategies for elimination of uncertainty – for example, procrastination strategy, hierarchical decision and ignorance, etc. – worked relatively well and could easily ensure public compliance. Struggles stemming from uncertainty could be resolved at the organizational level. Yet, as new forms of governance, such as democratic governance, are emerging, civic organizations and opposition parties have become important participants in the policy making process. They often have different alternative perspectives and advance arguments incompatible with or contrary to the government’s dominant interpretation of policy issues (Bevir, 2010; Ney, 2009). Under new democratic governance, many public policies that reduce some individuals’ or one group’s uncertainty may create a burden or greater uncertainty for others. In this context, governmental decision-makers cannot make public policies without considering citizens views or preferences any more. These days ability of the civil society and the general public (through education, networks and information technology) to affect policy making has reversed the one-sided flow of government-friendly information, often scuppering governmental plans.³

This paper aims to theoretically explain complex policy issues and problems that cannot be understood by policy institution-based classical policy making theories. In order to explain how government prioritizes certain policy issues over others and how governments shape public attention and opinion, political communication theorists have employed the concept of frames (Druckman, 2001; Gamson, 1996). In political debates involving ambiguous information, decision-makers used to ‘frame’ public discourse on certain issues by stressing specific perspectives and ignoring others. The framing theory shows how framing alters an individual’s preference very well but it provides little information about what the frame is.⁴ This paper argues that both proponents and opponents of a policy issue employ ‘threat’ and ‘securitization’ strategy in the process of argumentation. As is explored below, public policies that cause social conflicts are often shaped by a securitization process through which, within the government, intersubjective understanding is constructed to treat the issue supposedly being addressed as an external (or internal) threat to our daily lives and environment. This justifies a call for extraordinary measures or fast responses to deal with the threats.

THE PROCESS OF ISSUE PRIORITIZATION IN POLICYMAKING: FRAMING AND COUNTER-FRAMING

Framing and Hegemony of Government

A day after the terrorist attack on 11 September 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush repeatedly invoked terms such as ‘war on terror,’ ‘axis of evil,’ and ‘enemy.’
While information about the attack itself was extremely unclear and limited, Bush administration’s ‘emotionally compelling’ interpretation was delivered clearly to the general public through mass media. Entman (2004) noted that the administration’s framing strategy successfully led to media organizations’ unilateral support and the public’s endorsement of the need for security measures against international terrorist threats. As a result of this framing effect, President Bush enjoyed extraordinary power and was able to unite the country for a while. At the same time, the administration was also able to impose several unpopular contradicts uniting costs on citizens, such as strict security check processes at airports and several additional regulations on immigrants, by calling for sacrifices for national security.

As such, exercise of political power associated with the ability to mobilize information has been critical in shaping public preference and opinion. In the literature on democracy and policy process, competition among different interest groups for gaining control of information has been treated as an obstacle to the formation of a dominant faction or elite-centered politics (Bimber, 2003: 41-3). Dahl (1989) identified mobilization of information by the ruling elites on one hand and the public on the other as the key to evolution of democracy in modern states. In a similar vein, Madison also believed that information-poor environment contributes to flourishing of passions and the rise of demagogic politics, which are great threats to justice (Federalist Papers, #64).

However, unlike the democratic thinkers’ premises, the government’s mobilization of bias by asymmetric distribution of information is quite common even in democratic countries like the United States. In order to explain this kind of information asymmetry between the government and the public (mass media), students of political communication have employed the theory of ‘hegemony of framing,’ arguing that the general public and mass media are too subservient to holders of relevant information in governmental organizations (Entman, 2004). By definition, frames give stakeholders of public policies the normative and cognitive directions to interpret and understand policy problems and solutions (Rein and Schön, 1994), and the hegemony model most precisely describes political activities during the Cold War period, when the government (e.g., the White House) dominated interpretations with ease. Indeed, the government often impeded independent flow of information from mass media to the general public and produced pro-government propaganda. Newspapers and TV channels merely reflected the elites’ perspectives and did not provide critical perspectives (Entman, 2004).

Undeniably, this pattern has been common in many developing countries as well, including East Asian countries under either the umbrella of the Cold War system or authoritarianism (Ha et al., 2009). Even in successfully democratized countries, such as Taiwan and South Korea, governments’ framing has been prevalent. Being located at the border of the anti-communist bloc, the authoritarian Korean regime effectively employed the frame of ‘security situation’ for pursuing what the government and the business leaders wanted, without much consideration of the society at large and the citizens. Of course citizens, dependent on others for news about inevitably complex national and world events, were supposed to construct their own understanding of political realities. Yet, more often than not, identifying and defining an issue is likely done by those who have real interests at stake, i.e. political power holders. No doubt, the government’s framing strategies not only continue but are used quite widely even today. The government’s approach to structural reform and mega development projects, such as radioactive waste
disposal, nuclear plants construction, reclamation projects, and so forth, has been evidently successful. There are several identifiable steps routinely followed in the process of framing, such as use of carefully coined phrases that cause individuals or groups to change their preferences: 6

- The government defines social issue A as problematic
- The government identifies causes and diagnoses issue A
- The government conveys legitimate and moral judgments
- The government suggests remedies or solutions to issue A

As Dryzek (1993: 222) puts, a specific frame employed by the government treats some policy problems or issues as more salient than others and puts forward a ‘specific lens’ for interpreting social reality in a particular manner. For example, the frame defining individual attitudes toward welfare programs may include considerations of costs, humanitarian concerns or individual choice. However, under the East Asian developmental state, people under poverty and government pressure were supposed to have chosen a set of attitudes or preferences toward economic development. This is because the general public often falls a step behind the government in gaining parallel information on policy issues (Ha et al., 2009). With occasional exceptions, the government’s unique interpretation usually becomes legitimate and the framing effects constitute one of the most stunning and influential demonstrations of effectiveness of governmental propaganda.

Reframing: Counter-framing, Heterogeneous Discussion, and Credibility

According to the aforementioned steps involved in policy framing, the general public is left with only a limited set of choices and coalesces into groups around a particular governmental frame. For example, when a serious outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) occurred in Korea in late 2010 and early 2011, the general public (in particular, livestock farmers) did not have many choices since, at the initial stage, they had little information about how the deadly virus had spread across the country and how to prevent it from spreading further; they depended upon the information and solutions provided by the government (i.e. Ministry of Food, Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries). By looking at the issue through their own ‘perceptual lens’ (frame), policy makers tried to win over others and suggested two options for the farmers: a. vaccination of all cloven-footed animals; and b. slaughter of infected animals. Given the government framed interpretations and solutions, the choice was the slaughter of 1.7 million farm animals (Choi, 2011). 7 As such, cascading flow of information from the government thoroughly spreads to the public via other political actors and mass media and narrows down available choices. In many respects, this cascading flow (framing) reduces cognition costs and dissonance and motivates citizens to participate in policy processes (Entman, 2004: 6-7).

Interestingly, however, governmental frames are not always successful. Students of political communication have raised the question why some frames seem to be very effective in mobilizing people, while others are not. Benford and Snow (2000: 619-620) argued that the degree of ‘credibility of the frame’ can cause variation in the degree of reaction or mobilization. 8 Credibility, according to them, depends on three factors. First, a culturally consistent (or congruent) frame may lead to successful mobilization of citizens. Some governmental interpretations and frames
strenuously and repeatedly resonate familiar concepts. Second, whether a frame is empirically feasible is an important indicator of its credibility. According to Zuo and Benford (1995), Chinese students were influenced by the example of Soviet Union’s political reform under Gorbachev when they targeted democratization of China in 1989 because a successful transition in a similar communist country appealed to the student groups. Finally, frames designed or articulated by reliable leaders are in general more persuasive. Reliability depends on the articulator’s expertise and perceived status. As such, when governmental frames lose credibility, feasibility and reliability, a growing trend of the contestation process sets in.

Unlike the earlier government-dominated policy processes, government’s framing often faces ‘framing fight’ or ‘counter framing’ today. When explaining development and generation and elaboration of frames, Benford and Snow (2000) argued that framing as a dynamic process amplifies or elaborates through contestation. In the past, the government’s framing used to be elevated to the dominant agenda without much resistance. However, once interest groups, citizens, or civic organizations form strong opposition groups and the government’s hidden preference becomes clear, the opposition groups generate contending frames or incompatible arguments about the same policy problems (Ney, 2009: 31) and question the adequacy and necessity of governmental decisions (Ha et al., 2009). Therefore, in the argumentation process, any particular governmental framing of outstanding policy issues is likely to be contested by people who use counter-frames, which stem from cultural incongruence and block the dominant idea from spreading. This is why policy conflicts or cleavage persist in our society. As Ney (2009: 32) puts it:

“Policy actors need to use their frame-based judgment to make sense of these facts and fashion them into policy arguments. In an attempt to strengthen the legitimacy of their policy position, parties to a controversy will pit these policy arguments against one another in the policy subsystem.”

In the process of argumentation, policy actors need to learn and gain information as they try to make sense of complicated policy issues and problems. Policy actors – both government and opposition, or other policy stakeholders – use knowledge, information, or ideas to make sense of policy problems in political debates. In several policymaking theories such as epistemic community model (Haas, 1992), discourse coalition (Hajer, 2003), and advocacy coalition (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993), individuals form groups around shared ideas, norms or beliefs to make sense of the problems, to attain their original intention. Policy stakeholders employ policy-relevant information and knowledge and apply their respective frames to convince hostile, skeptical or indifferent groups.

The framing –counter framing process often leads to continuously renewed rounds of controversy or dissonance because of complexity and unfamiliarity, irrelevance, ambiguity and uncertainty. Under uncertainty, the government’s is not the only legitimate interpretation anymore. In case of construction of a radioactive waste disposal facility (decided in 2005) in Korea, the government’s typical frame, using scientific evidence and statistics, emphasized the importance of nuclear electricity as one of the clean and safe sources of energy and the urgency of the construction. On the contrary, skeptics (environmental activists and residents)
interpreted the same issue quite differently. They argued that shortage of waste disposal facilities stems from usage of dangerous nuclear energy whose safety was not completely proven. According to the framing theory, both parties (the government and the opposition) have to reframe their discourses on the issue and eventually reach a compromise (Figure 1). Yet, in a considerable number of cases, such as import of US beef, North Korean attack on the Cheonan battleship, and response to influenza A, the contests ended in a deadlock or took too much time to be resolved.

Jones and Baumgartner (2008: 13-14) pointed out that ‘ambiguity’ and ‘uncertainty’ are the main causes of collapse of dominant schema in our society. In the case of radioactive waste disposal facility, the government could not completely verify its safety. By the same token, the opposition could not fully refute the government’s frame. To top it all, scientific knowledge is also less certain and is often used as strategic and tactical resources by both proponents and opponents, in policy debates (Pielke, 2008: 62-3). In a natural way, to defend their position, both parties cite information, counter examples and theories, but in many cases information is subject to different interpretation these days.

In addition to ambiguity and uncertainty, inadequate trust in government and the society being divided are also critical factors in Korea. Compared with other advanced countries, Korea’s level of social trust, as well as trust in government, is considerably low, which makes the government’s frames unacceptable or unreliable. As a survey by the East Asian Institute in 2005 suggested, the general public in Korea commonly recognizes that top political leadership such as the President and the National Assembly enjoy political power exclusively but are in general untrustworthy (Figure 2).

Despite its relevance to social and policy conflicts, the framing theory equivocates in answering the question how the different interpretations are overcome and what the final outcome is. When processing unlimited information on certain issues, decision-makers are unable to pay attention to all possible perspectives and, therefore, they define policy problems and make decisions through ‘disproportionate information processing’ or ‘selective attention’ (Jones and Baumgartner, 2008; Weyland, 2006). Citizens and the opponents also pay attention to certain select aspects of policy issues and discount other possibilities (Koch, 1998). Cultural theory is also useful to understand how cultural biases cause irresolvable social conflicts over policy issues (Ney, 2009: 43). Yet, these prior studies have been theoretically silent on the conditions under which many important decisions have been made in Korea. Ha et al. (2009) argued that ineffective communication and weak coordination between the government and citizens, but the core question, how, is still unanswered.
While it is true that decision makers intentionally or unintentionally miss out several issues and problems, they cannot completely ignore voices of the opposition in the context of sharp divisions between the government and the opposition. In deciding developmental and welfare policies, decision makers must develop their own justifications for choosing specific options. In the process of defending their framing, at least in democratic countries, governments have to collect relevant information and work out a way to persuade the opposition. As Jones and Baumgartner (2008: 13) put it, “the probable gain from a choice must be weighed against the risks associated with the choice.” Since governmental reframing focuses attention on the contested area, where social actors compete for supporting their preferred frames, the government needs to have more convincing evidence.

In reality, however, reframing often faces strong resistance, due to two factors. First, in many cases, the government’s prescription for policy problems is often uncertain. Foreign exchange crisis, H1N1 and climate change issues were obviously riddled with uncertainty. For example, in case of global climate change, the government, as well as the international society, perceive greenhouse gases as one of the main causes of climate change. Decision makers also seek scientific evidence from scientists (climatologists) and international institutions such as European Commission and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change of the UN (IPCC) that link greenhouse gases and global warming. Unfortunately, however, those who object to the global warming thesis framed by the government and the international scientific community refute the dominant frame. Although the skeptics haven’t obtained much of a hearing so far, they are right in saying that decision makers in the government invoke global climate change as if it explains every abnormal change of weather (Giddens, 2009). The evidence and arguments provided by the government and supporting political actors are insufficient to defend their dominant position.

Second, the growth of civic organizations and global social movements has an important implication for the politics of framing. In the area of environmental politics, civic organizations in many developed countries are now highly professionalized and often provide counter examples and new evidence to question the dominant schema. Global civil society organizations such as Green Peace and Friends of Earth annually or monthly publish their reports on global environmental issues and lend domestic environmental groups a hand with their experience, testimony and new ideas. In case of Korea, transnational environmental cooperation in domestic environmental disputes such as Saemangeum Reclamation has become routinized (Bae et al., 2011).

In this situation, where no policy actors are willing to concede an inch to break the deadlock, what policy actors often do is pose a ‘threat’ to the subject of the policy frame. In traditional international relations literature, the concept of ‘security’ was originally referred to as a threat to national sovereignty or military safety of the country, but the concept has been expanded to ‘non-military’ issues, such as human rights, environment, welfare, health and so forth (Ullman, 1983). In the situation of conflict between the government (business) and the environmentalists, where the effort to reduce environmental risks may conflict with other social values such as economic growth, neither is willing to yield to the other. In these cases, the
construction of perceived threats shows strong motivation for behavioral change of policy actors. Threat on A should be shared by the targeted group. When, the government or other policy actors define A as a threat, citizens must also recognize it as a threat. In the international relations literature, A is called the “referent object” which can be national sovereignty from the traditional security concept, environmental degradation from the environmental perspective, or health risk of individuals (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). In case of Korea, the government could successfully construct the ‘Peace Dam’ in 1986 by portraying the possibility of flood attack by North Korea as a threat. As such, by highlighting a threat to the survival of some referent objects (nation, health and environment, etc.), the government (as well as the opponents) have frequently used ‘threat and securitization tactics’ in policymaking.

From Normal to Abnormal Politics: Threat and Securitization

A group of European international relations scholars (the Copenhagen School), with emphasis on speech or discourse, has argued that the traditional security concept is more than mere ‘military relations’ among countries. Through the process of articulating ‘threat’ and ‘security,’ decision makers claim that something is about to pose a threat to our lives and immediate action or extraordinary measures are necessary to deal with the problem (Stritzel, 2007).

In the context of non-security agenda, the key feature of ‘threat-securitization’ theory is that decision makers of the government attempt to move an issue from the ‘normal’ to ‘abnormal agenda.’ This threat-securitization process is usually used when the decision makers in the government expect that some controversial policy issues are not likely to be acceptable under normal political situation. In Korea, construction of the Peace Dam would have been impossible without moving from a simple flood control issue to the notion of a national security issue. As such, public policies causing social conflicts are often shaped by the securitization process, through which intersubjective understanding is constructed within the government to treat policy problems as an external threat to our daily lives and environment, and to enable a call for extraordinary measures, urgent action, or fast responses to deal with the threats (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). In sum there are several common steps of securitization:

1. Decision makers securitize an issue, using words such as ‘security’ or ‘crisis’ in reference to policy problems.

2. The word becomes a threat to the survival of the ‘referent object,’ such as loss of competitiveness, extinction of animals, depletion of wetland, increase of fatality, depletion of pension, as well as the state.

3. Claim that it would be too late, unless an extraordinary measure is taken / the general public accepts the validity of the threat.

4. Adopt extraordinary measures: increase of taxes, impose legal controls and regulations, and so forth.

As such, when decision makers, who are capable of making a securitization move, use the word security while addressing political problems face serious
resistance. James Q. Wilson (1995) proposed policy typology based on costs and benefits where those who would bear the costs and are likely to strenuously resist are threatened by the word ‘security’ in a certain situation. They are forced to accept the government’s extraordinary measures. The securitized issues are perceived to be much more important than others, according to articulators of security, and the issue should take absolute priority over others. In this context, the Copenhagen school’s interpretation of September 11 was a bit different from the policy framing theory. Before 2001, terrorist attacks were treated as criminal acts but the U.S. government elevated this attack from a normal criminal act to one inimical to its national security. Successful securitization by Bush administration gave the president exceptional power over military affairs which would not have been acceptable in a normal situation (Emmers, 2002).

In general policy areas, the word security is not merely limited to traditional security agenda. While, the word ‘security’ is considered as only an indicator of the securitization process in international relations literature, other terms such as depletion, extinction, fatality, emergency and crisis can also pose a similar threat to the general public. Therefore, the threat is a politically and socially constructed notion.

Many of policy problems in Korea have been securitized by convincing the public of existence of ‘perceived threat.’ For example, in case of the National Pension program, the Kim Dae Jung administration had a plan to make people mandatorily join the National Pension Program in 1998, which was unpopular and caused social controversy. However, the Kim administration successfully achieved its original goal and increased individual contribution rate from 3% to 9% in 1998 by securitizing the prospects of a pitiable future without an appropriate retirement plan during the period of economic crisis. Moreover, since the early 2000s, government agencies and research institutes have published various reports declaring that the ‘national pension fund is on the verge of being exhausted.’ Ministry of Health and Welfare under Roh Moo-Hyun government announced that the national pension fund would be depleted by 2047 and then citizens’ contribution would increase from 9% of income to more than 30% by 2050-60s. Korea Development Institute (KDI), one of the prestigious government-funded think tanks in Korea, also announced similar estimates. These official estimations still prevail under the Lee Byeong Bak administration. Almost every year, relevant reports are released, and the mass media amplifies the perception of pension funds crisis by using terms such as ‘time bomb’ (The Hankyung, June 17th, 2011) or ‘festered fund’ (Dong-A Ilbo, February 13th, 2006). For general citizens, cutting down the benefit (e.g., from 70% to 60% of income) and increasing their contribution (e.g., from 9% to 30%) pose a serious threat. Indeed, the Roh administration tried to increase individual contribution rate from 9% to 12.9% (MK News, February 4, 2007). The increase of rates could be seen as a normal policy change but since the increase was extremely unpopular and entailed political cost, imposing a higher payment burden on citizens was impossible in a normal situation.

In other policy cases, as seen in Table 1, the ‘threat and securitization’ strategy is easily observed. Besides traditional security related cases, many policy issues such as development, capital relocation, nuclear plants and economic and administrative reforms have been resolved through the ‘securitization’ process, though sometimes such attempts have failed. In the age of global competition and energy crisis, Korean citizens have been threatened by the fact that Korea would
face a serious shortage of gas and other sources of energy. The construction of nuclear plants and waste disposal facility has been achieved by securitization process from a broader perspective. When Lee Myung-Bak administration faced serious criticism of and resistance against his presidential campaign pledge, the Korean Grand Canal, his government raised the issue of provision of clean water in the near future. In the earlier stage of the four river reclamation project, Lee government tried to legitimize the project by securitizing ‘the shortage of water,’ which has been frequently used by previous administrations for justifying dams’ construction.

As such, the concept of security and threat (crisis and depletion, etc.) is much more widely used in policymaking. In particular, when the information or knowledge about referent objects is not clear, the articulator of securitization borrows ideas and information from the epistemic community to validate decisions. Sensitive information is often provided by government-funded think tanks, not by bureaucratic organizations, and that is why securitization process is useful in the first place, when the general public suffers information asymmetry.

Of course, securitization process is not always successful and the general public does not always accept the validity of the threat (Buzan and Wæver, 2003). Interestingly, the opposition and civic organizations also use securitization strategy in the process of resistance. In response to Lee administration’s four river reclamation project, the civil society also accumulated many counter-examples and foreign countries’ experiences to defend their position. Their speeches basically securitized endangered species and natural environment near the reclaimed land and the river. Environmental groups and progressive newspapers, as well as opposition parties, frequently used the term ‘environmental disaster,’ ‘extinction,’ or ‘unrecoverable’ to mobilize sympathetic citizens and pose a threat to the government. Thus, the use of securitization strategy in policy process often creates unbreakable deadlocks.

**CONCLUSION**

This conceptual paper argues that ‘securitization’ and ‘threat’ are being used much more widely in the age of uncertainty. This paper does not purport to offer a new theory of policymaking, but the concept of securitization and threat, which have been mainly used by IR scholars, and is quite useful in understanding complex policy problems in contemporary world. Since the general public is unaware of specific policy problems and their outcomes, threat and securitization are quite effective in transforming normal politics into abnormal political situations. When the government was the only articulator of the security issue, it was easier to make unpopular policies or use extraordinary measures. The policy framing theory has explained this cascading structure of information flow very well, but the securitization thesis provides what the frame itself is: ‘threat.’ If a normal policy issue becomes a security issue, which concerns one’s survival, the tactic can easily obtain public support and compliance. However, use of securitization as a major policymaking tactic under uncertainty is clearly an issue of democratic governance. In democratic governance, the growth of civil society can deter the one-sided flow of information from the top and contribute to more democratic decision making.
When we extend the concept of securitization to other words, such as crisis and emergency, one might criticize the concepts saying that securitization can be applied to every policy problem and issue. However, it seems clear that in a highly divided society like Korea, the concept gives a clearer explanation of why there are many policy debates and irresolvable conflicts in the Korean society. The ‘securitization-threat’ thesis implies that the one way communication from above – i.e. top-down flow of information with proper consultation – can be an immediate reason of policy conflicts. While the cultural theory shows much deeper roots of social cleavage, the argument in this paper suggests that more democratic communication between government and the public, which is a basic requirement of democracy, is the required solution in contemporary Korea.
NOTES

1 Samsung Economic Research Institute (2009) came up with the social conflict index that compiles the degree of democratic maturity, income equality, government effectiveness and so forth. Korea’s index was 0.71 and ranked 4th among 27 OECD countries. Only Turkey (1.2), Poland (0.76) and Slovakia (0.72) were above Korea.

2 Hajer (2003: 175-6) used the term ‘institutional void’ in order to highlight the fact that classical constitutional institutions and agencies are not able to properly address current policy problems. From a governance perspective, Bevir (2010: 27) also mentioned that quest for governance originates from the crisis of state facing new and complex demands from society.

3 For example, mega-policy projects such as Saemangeum Reclamation in Korea could have been completed without serious resistance from the citizens. Yet, the growth of civil society’s capacity for information processing (adoption and utilization of information) effectively frustrated government-dominated decision making (Bae et al., 2011).

4 Jones and Song (2011) similarly argue that what the framing theory misses is ‘content’ and ‘story’ of the frame itself.

5 For example, abuse of human rights, delay of direct elections and local democracy, and so forth. In this regard, the ‘hegemonic’ theory of framing under authoritarian regime is not that different from the traditional political power theory (i.e. the elitist view).


7 The government’s treatment of the disease was substantially delayed because it had to consider economic costs (cost of vaccination and loss of the status of ‘foot-and-mouth disease free state’ (Chosun Ilbo, January 3, 2011).

8 Because of the multidisciplinary nature, credibility of the frame is interchangeable with ‘cultural congruence’ (Entman, 2004; Ney and Thompson, 2000).

9 The IPCC was first established in 1988 and has had a huge influence on thinking about global climate change.

10 While the unit of analysis in traditional security studies is the ‘state’, the Copenhagen School required examination of state, society and individuals.
<Figure 1> Framing and Counter-Framing

Framing Process

Government Decisionmakers → Interpret Issue A → Diagnosis Prescription

Political Elites Mass Media

Uncertainty

Framing vs. Counter-framing

Compromise or Policy Conflicts

Counter-Framing

Growth of opposition Civil Society

Perceived by the General Public
Figure 2. Social Trust in South Korea

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Threatening Words</th>
<th>Securitization Abnormal Politics (Logic)</th>
<th>Recognized Policy Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. National Pension (2000 – Present)</td>
<td>“Depletion of Pension funds Crisis” “Time Bomb”</td>
<td>Government-funded think tanks' Reports &amp; Mass media coverage “Urgent Reform (increase of insurance rate) is required”</td>
<td>Succeeded Proposed reform since the early 2000s Increase of insurance rate / Reduce of annuity</td>
</tr>
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Note: Shindong-A (June, 2010: 88-95), Special Report: Evaluation of Reorganization of Lee Myung-Bak Government. Examples are selected by author.
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