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Demystifying North Korea by Teaching It in a Comparative Perspective

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Despite frequent mentions of North Korea in the media and foreign policy discussions, the American public has an extremely limited and one-sided understanding of North Korea. Most information about the country focuses solely on the Kim family's authoritarian regime, cases of human rights abuses, and threats posed by its nuclear weapons development toward the US and its allies, often lacking broader historical and political contexts. The way the American public and policymakers perceive North Korea exemplifies "Orientalism," which is a counterpart to "American exceptionalism." The absence of a holistic and balanced understanding of the country complicates efforts to establish realistic and pragmatic foreign policies to improve US–DPRK relations. This paper explores the benefits of comparative approaches, drawing from my experience teaching the country's history and politics within the context of a comparative East Asian politics class. This course examines the political development of five East Asian countries (mainland China, Taiwan, Japan, and the two Koreas) across four stages: regime formation, political integration, resource expansion, and conflict resolution. By teaching North Korea within its historical and East Asian regional contexts using a comparative perspective, this course demonstrates how the country's legitimacy stems from its unique historical and political experiences. It explains why North Korea maintains legitimacy among its people, with its focus on national security, survival, and political ideology, despite its lack of economic development and democracy. This approach encourages students to analyze North Korea beyond narrow American perspectives and to see the country as it is.



Introduction

North Korea is frequently mentioned in the American media and US foreign policy discussions. However, the American public has an extremely limited and one-sided understanding of the country. Most information focuses on the Kim family's authoritarian regime, human rights abuses, and the threat posed by its nuclear weapons to the United States and its allies, often without broader historical and political contexts. American mass media usually portray the country as a global villain and its leaders as irrational and unpredictable. People in North Korea are seldom shown as ordinary human beings (Wit 2016). Information about North Korea is highly selective and lacks historical context. For instance, while the US highlights its role in defending South Korea during the Korean War and criticizes North Korea's lack of democracy, it rarely mentions that the war stemmed from the artificial division of the Korean Peninsula by Washington and Moscow or the US support for South Korea's military dictatorship during the Cold War (Oh 1999, 48–97). The real history is complex and nuanced, yet Korean issues are often presented in stark black-and-white terms.

The way the American public and policymakers perceive North Korea exemplifies “Orientalism” (Said 1979) and “American exceptionalism.” Countries in the West have viewed themselves as developed, rational, and superior, in contrast with non-Western societies as underdeveloped, irrational, and threatening. The US often positions itself as a “beacon of hope,” a “city upon a hill” with a “manifest destiny” to spread democracy and capitalism, in contrast to enemies like the “Axis of Evil” (Iraq, Iran, and North Korea) (Nayak and Malone 2009).

I was born and raised in South Korea, and both sides of my family endured significant hardships during the Korean War. I grew up under a military dictatorship that emphasized the threat from North Korea and instilled strong anti-communist sentiment to consolidate its power. While suppressing demands for democratization, the regime pursued rapid economic development to legitimize itself. However, economic and social changes, combined with the Korean people's courageous struggle for democracy, ultimately transformed the country into one of the most democratic and advanced nations of the twenty-first century. My generation in Korea witnessed all these stages of political development within just a few decades. Through my experiences, I also came to understand that North Korean issues are far more complex than they are often perceived by outside observers. While North Korea has many internal problems, today's North Korea is the result of a complex history and the ongoing confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. Reflecting on Korean history from various angles, I pursued a career as a political science professor, specializing in international relations, US foreign policy, and East Asian politics. Drawing from my own experiences, I found that human needs theory, developed by my thesis advisor, Dr. Han Park, provides a

valuable framework for understanding different stages of political development. I have incorporated this theory into my East Asian Politics course, using it as a foundation for a comparative analysis of five East Asian countries. I believe this course can offer American students a more holistic and contextualized understanding of North Korea. This approach highlights that throughout its history, North Korea shares similarities, not just differences, with other Asian countries, particularly in its early stages. North Korea is not an extreme outlier or inherently evil but rather the result of specific circumstances, such as the division of the peninsula and the Korean War, alongside nearly seven decades of intense confrontation with the US.

The next section of this paper will introduce human needs theory as our theoretical framework. We will then explore each stage in detail, demonstrating how a comparative perspective can enhance our understanding and demystify North Korea.

Theoretical framework

“Human needs theory,” the theoretical framework for my class, posits that “man conscientiously and constantly pursues the optimum satisfaction of his needs” (Park 1984, 59). It identifies a hierarchical structure of four needs: (1) survival, (2) belongingness, (3) leisure, and (4) control, ranked based on urgency and desirability. The theory links these human needs to stages of political development, asserting that the legitimacy of government is grounded in its ability to meet the then-dominant needs of its members.

Park (1984) explains that these four human needs correspond to the following stages of political development: (1) regime formation, focused on “security”; (2) political integration, emphasizing “ideology”; (3) resource expansion, targeting “economic development”; and (4) conflict management, centered on “political reform” (Park 1984, 60–63). In the first stage (regime formation), governments must prioritize providing basic security, addressing foreign invasions, civil unrest, or extreme poverty, while establishing law and order. During stage 2 (political integration), governments promote a sense of belongingness through political ideology and socialization, often involving the identification or creation of national enemies. This stage is crucial in societies that may remain underdeveloped and struggle to progress to stage 3. In stage 3 (resource expansion), governments focus on increasing production and consumption more than basic survival (i.e., leisure). Economic success in this stage often serves to legitimize authoritarian regimes. In stage 4 (conflict management), political reforms are necessary to manage and distribute resources. Governments must address corruption and resolve conflicts from diverse societal demands, or at least appear responsive to their populace.

The theory posits that human needs are hierarchically structured, with higher stages dependent on a sustained foundation of lower stages. Political development

entails transitioning from lower to higher stages while continuing to satisfy needs from previous stages. Human needs theory can relate to other political science theories. For instance, its assertion that survival is the most basic human need and that a state should legitimize itself with national security in the first stage of political development aligns with the assumptions of neo-realist theory in international relations (Waltz 1979). Neo-realist theory posits that states are rational actors prioritizing their national survival in an anarchical world, while human needs theory asserts that the desire for regime survival through national security is more fundamental than higher-stage needs such as ideology, economic development, or political reform. For example, offering economic incentives to dissuade North Korea from developing nuclear weapons is unlikely to succeed unless the US addresses North Korea's existential fears regarding its national security. Modernization theory (Lipset 1959) links economic development with democratization, also paralleling this framework's expectations of transition from stage 3 (resource expansion) to stage 4 (conflict management with political reforms). While the theory has merit, critics may find it descriptive and question the universal applicability of its four human needs and political stages. Defining these stages based on dominant human needs and objectively measuring their variables presents challenges. Additionally, the theory does not clarify the tipping point where regimes lose legitimacy and face crises (Lum 1986, 1053–54). Nevertheless, I find the theory valuable as a framework for analyzing Asian countries. It organizes human needs and sources of legitimacy hierarchically, facilitating comparisons across countries in similar development stages. This framework proves instrumental in explaining how regimes like North Korea maintain legitimacy amid significant challenges. Hence, this class incorporates insights from human needs theory. **Table 1** summarizes how each political stage is connected to human needs and sources of legitimacy. In the following sections, I will discuss how to analyze North Korea from a comparative perspective within each political development stage. I have also included discussion questions for each stage. Those questions are addressed in my lectures and designed to encourage students to participate in class discussion and critical reflection. I will also demonstrate how these questions have effectively helped students demystify North Korea by analyzing it through comparative and developmental frameworks.

Stages	Human Needs	Political Development	Source of legitimacy
1	Survival	Regime formation	Security
2	Belongingness	Political integration	Ideology
3	Leisure	Resource expansion	Economic development
4	Control	Conflict management	Political reform

Table 1: Summary of human needs theory.

Stage 1: Regime Formation

1: Discussion Questions

What similarities exist in the regime formation stages of East Asian countries? How did experiences of colonialism, the Korean War, and Cold War confrontations shape the nature of the North Korean regime?

2: Lecture and Discussion

The class compares East Asian countries during their regime formation stages. The histories of East Asian countries are deeply interconnected, and we cannot fully understand their history by examining individual countries in isolation. Western imperialism and its intervention in Asia peaked in the mid-nineteenth century, disrupting the traditional Sino-centric order. Colonial powers carved up China, and the country experienced the Century of Humiliation, symbolized by the Opium War (1839–42) and the Nanking Massacre (1937). Subsequently, the rising Japanese empire colonized and invaded most Asian countries. Taiwan was ceded to Japan for fifty years following the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), and Japan colonized Korea after the Russo-Japanese War (1904–05) (Callahan 2004). While outside observers often view North Korea as an extreme outlier from the beginning, the country shares very similar historical and political backgrounds with other countries. For example, China, Vietnam, and North Korea all experienced colonialism, national division, and intense civil wars. Consequently, the people in these countries had a strong desire for national independence (Lee 2019, 102–3). The communist leaders in these countries became successful by being “nationalists” and fulfilling the people’s desire for an independent nation to end foreign interference and internal division. Mao Zedong, Ho Chi Minh, and Kim Il-sung led struggles against foreign aggressors and fought civil wars. Kim was a guerrilla fighter in Manchuria, combating the Japanese military. His military achievement was excessively overstated in North Korea, but his background in the independence movement legitimized his leadership among North Koreans (French 2007, 50–51). The establishment of an independent regime was great news, since the reference point for the people was the period of colonialism and civil war. An imperfect government with some level of law and order and security is better than no government, which leads to anarchic situations involving foreign aggression, civil war, famine, and death.

It should also be noted that the North Korean regime began with a variety of leaders initially. Diverse independence movements during the colonial period evolved into political factions within the newly established government, such as the pro-China faction (Yanan faction), pro-Soviet faction, *Kapsan* faction, and the Workers Party members from the south. Kim Il-sung initially emerged as a figurehead representing a diverse

group of communists rather than as a dictator with absolute power. It was during and after the Korean War that Kim purged his competitors and other factions (Person 2013).

At the end of the Pacific War, Washington and Moscow divided the peninsula in August 1945 against the will of its people, setting the stage for the conflict. The division was arbitrary, disregarding geographical, cultural, and historical factors, and resulted in the two separate regimes. The USSR backed the communists led by Kim Il-sung, establishing a communist regime in the North, while the US supported a pro-American capitalist regime in the South, selecting Rhee Syngman as its leader. The establishment of these new regimes led to political persecution, triggering massive movements of refugees and violence. When communist regimes emerged in mainland China and North Korea, the US adopted a policy known as the “Reverse Course” in Japan in 1947. This policy shifted focus from “demilitarization and democratization” to the “economic reconstruction and remilitarization” of Japan to support US Cold War objectives in Asia, involving minimal punishments on and the reintroduction of wartime leaders into politics. Similarly, the US supported Rhee Syngman, who formed alliances with former collaborators under Japanese colonialism. The US utilized them in the governing of South Korea in part to combat leftists. Progressives in the South were disillusioned by such policies, and North Korea criticized the US and South Korea for failing to purge Japanese collaborators (Ahn 2002, 7–17; Ku et al. 2018, 13–26).

The Korean War had a profound impact on North Korea’s politics and psyche. Lacking a strong air force, it suffered extensive damage from US bombing throughout the conflict. Over three years, the war caused approximately three million deaths in the country, amounting to 10% of the entire population, with 85% of casualties being civilians. US bombing also destroyed 80% of the country’s infrastructure and 50% of its cities. Such experiences fostered a deep-seated anti-American sentiment (Cumings 2004, 1–42).

3: Reflections on How to Demystify North Korea

In stage 1 of the course, students begin to demystify North Korea by exploring how the country’s early development shares important similarities with its regional counterparts. Rather than viewing North Korea as an extreme outlier or inherent evil, students come to understand it as a product of specific historical forces—colonialism, national division, the Korean War, and Cold War confrontations.

Stage 2: Political Integration

1) Discussion Questions

How did the regimes in East Asian countries utilize political ideologies and the presence of enemies to consolidate their domestic political power? What are the origins of Juche ideology, and how has it justified the monolithic dictatorship in North Korea?

2) Lecture and Discussion

The second stage (political integration) focuses on the promotion of a sense of community by providing political “ideology” through political socialization to meet people’s needs of belongingness. North Korea is certainly an extreme case in terms of ideological rigidity, monolithic dictatorship, cult of personality, and family succession. But comparative study shows that those elements are not unique to North Korea.

After the Korean War, North Korea transitioned from the regime formation to the political integration stage. The painful memories of Japanese colonialism and the Korean War, coupled with ongoing confrontations with the US and South Korea, clearly defined North Korea’s identity and promoted the rally-’round-the-flag effect. Kim Il-sung capitalized on these memories and the environment to purge his competitors and establish a dictatorship. While Kim himself bore ultimate responsibility as the top decision-maker during the Korean War, he eliminated his competitors, accusing them of failed policies during the war. Between 1956 and 1967, Kim also purged most factions that challenged his authority or criticized his policies (Person 2013). Consequently, North Korea became a country under a single faction—the Kim Il-sung faction—and Kim occupied all three main governmental positions (General Secretary of the Party, Commander-in-Chief, and President). North Korea also promoted the “*Juche* ideology” (Park 2002, 17–50), *Juche* meaning “self-reliance.” It encompasses various aspects such as anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-American sentiment and justifies an “equidistant policy” between the USSR and China. Above all, it legitimized Kim’s absolute power and cult of personality by portraying the Great Leader as the brain, the party as the nervous system, and the people as parts of the body. Kim Jong-il further promoted his father’s personality cult to gain favor. Upon becoming successor, Kim Jong-il introduced the “Ten Principles for the Establishment of a Monolithic Ideological System,” superseding the country’s constitution. This transformed North Korea into a country devoid of checks and balances, culminating in an unprecedented three-generational family succession. North Korea’s monolithic power structure is the result of the long history of the Korean War and domestic politics rather than something predetermined from the outset.

The political integration stage in mainland China was as extreme as in North Korea. Mao Zedong established the People’s Republic of China (PRC), ending colonialism and the civil war. However, he aimed to implement more thorough communist policies. The Great Leap Forward (1958–62) exemplifies Mao’s unrealistic economic policies driven by fanaticism and resulted in 15 to 55 million deaths. Mao also launched the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) to eliminate opposition and strengthen his power after the disastrous Great Leap Forward. This period saw Red Guards attacking anyone labeled as enemies of communism, promoting Mao’s cult of personality and

leading to the persecution and deaths of tens of millions. Mao wielded absolute power until his death in 1976, holding the positions of Chairman of the Communist Party of China, Chairman of the People's Republic of China, and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (Lieberthal 2003, 59–121).

Chiang Kai-shek and his Nationalist Party (KMT) were defeated in mainland China and retreated to Taiwan in 1949, establishing a military dictatorship under a one-party system with no meaningful opposition. The KMT had massacred civilians during the February 28 Incident in 1947 and suppressed political dissent. Chiang abolished term limits and served as president for life (1949–75), implementing martial law (1949–87) and the White Terror under the pretext of communist threats. Chiang exercised almost absolute power, occupying the three main positions of head of state, Commander of the ROC military, and Chairman of the ruling party (KMT). He promoted a personality cult and instituted a family succession by passing power to his son Chiang Ching-kuo (1978–88) (Roy 2003, 55–105).

South Korea also endured military dictatorships under Park Chung-hee (1961–79) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980–87). Park seized power through a military coup (1961) and repealed term limits (1969). He finally implemented the Yushin Constitution (1972), dissolving the National Assembly and suspending the constitution for lifetime rule. After Park's assassination, Chun seized power in another coup (1979) and brutally suppressed the Gwangju Democratic Uprising (1980), resulting in hundreds of civilian deaths (Oh 1999, 48–97). Those dictators justified authoritarian rule and suppressed democracy in the name of North Korean threats and anti-communism.

3) Reflections on How to Demystify North Korea

Students begin to demystify North Korea when they realize that extreme ideology, monolithic rule, and even dynastic succession were not unique to the North. North Korea developed the Juche ideology—emphasizing anti-colonialism, Cold War tensions, and national division—to legitimize Kim Il-sung's absolute rule and eliminate rivals. This ideology elevated the leader as the “brain” of the nation and deepened the cult of personality under Kim Jong-il. Similar patterns appeared in Mao's China, Chiang Kai-shek's Taiwan, and South Korea under Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, where authoritarianism was justified by ideology and security threats. The essential question is not why North Korea embraced extreme ideology—since others did too at certain points—but why North Korea failed to transition to next stages: economic development (stage 3) and democratization (stage 4), as South Korea and Taiwan did. Even China entered stage 3 by reforming its economy and improving relations with the West.

Stage 3: Resource Expansion

1: Discussion Questions

What were the sources of rapid economic development in Japan, Taiwan and South Korea? How did China and Vietnam, as communist countries, initiate economic reforms? Why has North Korea been unable to follow the paths of China or Vietnam?

2: Lecture and Discussion

Stage 3 (resource expansion) discusses how East Asian countries achieved economic development when governments aimed to boost production and consumption beyond mere survival needs. After ensuring basic survival and national security (stage 1) and politically integrating their populations (stage 2), governments aimed to boost production and consumption beyond mere survival needs. This part of the course explores how Asian nations achieved economic growth and reforms, contrasting with North Korea's divergent path.

Japan pioneered rapid economic development in post-World War II Asia with the success of an export-oriented, developmental state model (Johnson 1982) and with US support. Japan, under the Peace Constitution (Article 9), eschewed military dictatorship but maintained long-term economic policies led by the dominant Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). South Korea and Taiwan similarly adopted this model, with authoritarian governments directing economies toward export-oriented industrialization.

Communist countries like China and Vietnam also undertook economic reforms, experiencing rapid growth (Ho 2004, 75–126). Though their developmental paths differed from the capitalist states, they also maintained one-party systems with strong political control, fostering export-oriented industries through government initiatives. In this stage, my class explores how these countries achieved reforms and economic growth and how North Korea could not follow the same path. The main differences are in leadership succession (domestic factor), as well as security conditions (international factor).

Mao Zedong wielded absolute power but refrained from family succession. After Mao's death, Deng Xiaoping rose to power and launched economic reforms. He was a pragmatic reformer purged during the Cultural Revolution and learned from Mao's errors. He also established stable succession mechanisms through informal rules like a staggered appointment system and retirement policies, along with term limits. The Chinese Communist Party, despite having a one-party system, maintains some diversity through major factions like the elitist Shanghai Gang and the populist

Communist Youth League (Li 2005). This system at least functioned until Xi Jinping abolished term limits in 2018. Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh eschewed cults of personality and family succession, fostering a tradition of collective leadership and power-sharing among leaders. Leaders from the south such as Nguyen Van Linh were exposed to capitalism pre-unification and recognized the need for economic reforms. Linh finally became general secretary in 1986 and initiated the Doi Moi Reforms (Lee 2019, 103). In contrast, North Korea transitioned from diverse communist factions to Kim Il-sung's dictatorship and lost the sort of leadership diversity essential for reform policies.

Besides these domestic factors, changes in international security conditions were crucial for economic transitions. The US improved relations with China to isolate the USSR in the early 1970s, and the two countries normalized relations in 1979. The end of hostility reduced fears of China's Open Door Policy. Deng could ease domestic controls and reallocate resources from the military to economy. The US lifted economic sanctions on China, granting it access to global markets, foreign direct investments, and international economic organizations. The Chinese economy began to thrive after this shift in external relations. Similarly, Vietnam's reform efforts, starting in 1986, had limited success until the country normalized relations with the US in 1994. The US lifted economic sanctions, granting access to major international organizations, global trade partners, and financial investment. Finally, the country could significantly reduce its military budget and initiate radical reforms such as privatization, price reforms, and its own open-door policy. These examples illustrate that successful reform policies require favorable changes in security conditions (Lee 2019, 107–12). The Korean War, however, ended with an armistice agreement without a peace treaty. North Korea has confronted stronger US forces for seven decades. Following the Cold War, the balance of power shifted against North Korea. With allies and security assurances gone, and South Korea surpassing North Korea economically and diplomatically, Pyongyang sought to bridge the gap through nuclear weapons development (Cha and Kang 2003, 41–69).

Kim Jong-il and Kim Jong-un have experimented with limited economic reforms at times, but these efforts were eventually reversed or had minimal impact (Lee 2019, 118–22). The country's priority remains national survival under stringent security conditions. Pyongyang fears losing domestic control were radical reform policies to be implemented and hesitates to reallocate resources from the military to the economy. Enduring US economic sanctions, North Korea has been isolated from global trade, foreign investments, and international economic organizations.

3: Reflections on How to Demystify North Korea

Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan achieved rapid economic growth through export-oriented industrialization and state-led development, supported by strong US ties that ensured national security and access to the global economy. Similarly, China and Vietnam launched market reforms while maintaining one-party control, made possible by leadership transitions, policy flexibility, and improved relations with the US, which opened doors to trade and investment. In contrast, North Korea could not follow these paths. Students begin to demystify North Korea when they understand that its lack of reform stems from both domestic political rigidity as well as hostile security conditions. Domestically, it entrenched monolithic leadership through dynastic succession, eliminating the internal diversity necessary for reform. Internationally, hostile security conditions and unresolved conflict with the US have blocked development with the country isolated under sanctions, thus making the regime prioritize its survival over reform. Meaningful economic change depends on Pyongyang achieving a breakthrough in national security by improving relations with Washington, as China and Vietnam once did.

Stage 4: Conflict Resolution

1: Discussion Questions

How did South Korea and Taiwan achieve successful democratization? Will China and Vietnam, which have experienced rapid economic development under authoritarian rule, eventually transition to democracy as predicted by modernization theory, following the paths of South Korea and Taiwan? How can the US and North Korea resolve the nuclear crisis and improve their relations?

2: Lecture and Discussion

Finally, stage 4 (conflict management) involves political reforms to distribute economic, social, and political resources fairly. As discussed in stage 3, South Korea and Taiwan achieved rapid economic development under authoritarian regimes that found economic success crucial in legitimizing themselves. However, sociopolitical changes following development—the rise of the middle class, urbanization, and globalization—facilitated democratization, as predicted by modernization theory (Lipset 1959). Most of all, citizens in South Korea and Taiwan paid a price, struggling against authoritarian regimes, and both countries gradually transitioned to democracy in the 1980s and 1990s (Wakabayashi 1997, 422–39; Koo 2002, 40–45).

Might China and Vietnam, which achieved rapid economic development under authoritarian rule, eventually transition to democracy, akin to South Korea and Taiwan, as modernization theory predicts? It remains uncertain whether these

regimes can combat corruption and distribute resources fairly under a single-party system. Xi Jinping's recent moves, such as abolishing term limits and consolidating near-absolute power, indicate that China's path diverges from those of South Korea and Taiwan. Scholars have explored how China prevents democratic transition through social control technologies, censorship, nationalist education, and media campaigns (Chen 2007, 146–165; Mesquita and Downs 2005, 77–86).

What about North Korea? It is difficult to expect political reforms in North Korea, let alone serious economic reforms under authoritarian rule. Due to its dictatorship, with its three-generation family succession, human rights abuses, and nuclear weapons development, many American analysts have predicted North Korea's collapse since the 1990s or have advocated for military or economic pressure. They have believed that such measures would lead to collapse or surrender and that negotiating with North Korea would be futile (Bolton and Eberstadt 2008; Cha 2011). However, these predictions have never materialized, and such policies have backfired, as Pyongyang has continued to advance its nuclear and missile technologies rather than collapse (Lee 2022, 47–73).

Countries like the US and South Korea do not worry about their very survival, and their citizens enjoy democracy and prosperity. North Korea, however, operates in a fundamentally different environment. It perceives existential threats to its survival, and its political ideology tightly integrates society. Regime legitimacy stems from national security and survival affirmed by nuclear weapons development (stage 1) and a strong political ideology (stage 2), rather than economic prosperity (stage 3) or Western-style democracy and political participation (stage 4). Therefore, exacerbating economic hardships through more sanctions or condemning the lack of democracy will not significantly delegitimize the regime among its people. Moreover, expecting North Korea's denuclearization or collapse solely through military pressure, economic sanctions, or international isolation is unrealistic. Such measures often strengthen the regime through the rally-'round-the-flag effect and a siege mentality (Lee 2022). A realistic and pragmatic approach to induce positive changes in North Korea involves improving diplomatic relations, akin to the US approach toward China and Vietnam, and exchanging its nuclear program for diplomatic normalization and a peace treaty.

3: Reflections on How to Demystify North Korea

There is a common misconception that North Korea lacks legitimacy entirely due to its absence of economic development (stage 3) and democracy and human rights (stage 4). As a result, US policymakers often assume the regime will collapse or surrender if subjected to increased military pressure and economic sanctions. However, students come to understand that North Korea's legitimacy is rooted in national security (stage 1) and ideological unity (stage 2),

rather than in economic prosperity or political participation. Additional external pressure is likely to intensify Pyongyang's fixation on survival, and the regime is unlikely to trade its nuclear weapons for economic incentives alone unless its security concerns are addressed. A more pragmatic path involves a step-by-step process that exchanges North Korea's nuclear program for diplomatic normalization and a peace treaty to reduce existential fears and open the door to gradual change.

Conclusion

I have taught this course for several semesters and found its theoretical framework and design to be highly effective in educating undergraduate students in the US and broadening their perspectives. As mentioned, the media and political environment often exhibit strong tendencies toward “American exceptionalism” and “Orientalism.” Consequently, American students often possess a limited, one-sided view of North Korea, imagining it as inherently evil with no legitimacy. Educating American students raised in such environments to broaden their perspectives proves challenging. Without a holistic and balanced understanding of North Korea, it is difficult to grasp the country's true nature and adopt more realistic and pragmatic approaches to improve US–DPRK relations. The American public and policymakers often believe negotiating with North Korea is futile, favoring military and economic pressure to force surrender or collapse. Consequently, the US has struggled to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis despite decades of negotiations, while North Korea continues to advance its missile and nuclear technology. Overall, US policy toward North Korea has failed to effectively serve American national interests due to its failure to comprehend the country as it truly exists (Lee 2022, 47–73).

A key lesson from the history of negotiations between the US and North Korea is that, whether the US likes it or not, North Korea exists as a sovereign state with its own sense of legitimacy—rooted in the regime's provision of national security and political ideology. Policies such as those that neglect North Korea in hopes of its eventual collapse, threaten military action, or impose additional economic sanctions have rarely been effective in curbing its nuclear weapons development or improving its political and human rights conditions. Likewise, all-or-nothing approaches—such as demanding complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) as a precondition for any US action—have also failed. As President Trump begins his second term in 2025 and signals interest in reengaging with Kim Jong-un to revive the negotiations attempted in 2018 and 2019, it would be valuable to incorporate insights from a comparative analysis of the North Korean regime (Choe 2025). Significant progress in denuclearization and North Korea's transition to economic reforms—similar to those of China or

Vietnam—may only be possible if the US simultaneously improves relations with the country and addresses its security concerns.

By teaching North Korea within its historical and East Asian regional context using a comparative perspective, this course demonstrates how the country's legitimacy stems from its unique historical and political experiences. It explains why North Korea became a country entrenched in its concerns with national security, survival, and political ideology. This approach encourages students to see the country as it is rather than through the lens of American desires. This course also identifies similar patterns in the political and economic development of Asian countries. I believe the course's design, theoretical framework, and the resources cited in this article could be helpful to educators in the US who teach courses on North Korea and East Asia to students with little or no prior background.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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