



## Centering Korea in the Undergraduate International Relations Curriculum

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Undergraduate courses on the Korean Peninsula often rely on US-centered frameworks that depict North Korea as irrational and South Korea as reactive, limiting students' ability to recognize Korean agency and internal diversity. This article presents a Korea-centered pedagogical model built around two strategies: comparative media analysis and a foreign policy simulation grounded in Korean-authored scholarship and regional perspectives. By analyzing South Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and North Korean news coverage of identical events, students learn how ideology, national identity, and historical memory shape contrasting narratives. The simulation then requires students to apply these perspectives in negotiation and crisis decision-making. Student reflections demonstrate shifts in assumptions about North Korean rationality, recognition of South Korea's ideological divides, and greater awareness of regional security logics. This approach centers Korea as a site of knowledge production and offers an adaptable model for Asia-centered international relations (IR) pedagogy in the liberal arts.

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## Introduction

Peace and conflict on the Korean Peninsula are crucial topics for international relations (IR) students, given the region's strategic importance and long history of division, war, and diplomatic tension. Yet in North American universities, discussions of Korea often rely on Western-centered analytical frameworks that oversimplify the Peninsula and position North Korea as irrational or rogue (Cha 2012; Ling 2013, 98; Barkawi and Laffey 2006, 332). These frameworks tend to focus on unpredictability or leader psychology (Oh and Hassig 2004, 91; Park and Snyder 2015, 6), reducing Korea's complex historical and geopolitical realities to narrow strategic narratives. As scholars of media framing and security discourse have shown, these patterns are reinforced through long-standing Cold War tropes in US political and journalistic discourse (Bleiker 2003). As Lee (2024, 1071) argues, dominant IR paradigms frequently trivialize non-Western experiences and limit the conceptual space for Korean agency.

Despite strong student interest in the Korean Peninsula, undergraduate IR courses often reinforce these Western-centered tendencies. Studies of IR syllabi show that Korea is typically introduced only in relation to US strategy or the Korean War, rather than as a site of its own political thought, historical agency, and scholarly debate (Sondarjee 2023). This curricular pattern conditions students to interpret Korean politics through Western media narratives that portray North Korea as unpredictable and South Korea as reactive. Scholars such as Cumings (2005) and Smith (2015) have shown how these portrayals obscure historical context and limit understanding of Korean strategic behavior. These limitations mirror broader critiques within IR about the marginalization of Asian perspectives, including those raised by Acharya and Buzan (2017), who argue for a more inclusive, regionally grounded approach to global IR.

This article examines two integrated teaching strategies that address this pedagogical gap: comparative media analysis and a Korea-centered foreign policy simulation. In the media analysis component, students compare news coverage from outlets across the ideological spectrum such as *Hankyoreh* and *Chosun Ilbo* from South Korea, *Asahi Shimbun* and *Sankei Shimbun* from Japan, and Chinese and North Korean state media. These comparisons reveal differences in how inter-Korean relations, nuclear politics, and security dilemmas are framed across national contexts. The foreign policy simulation requires students to embody the decision-making logics of Korean and regional actors, grounding their strategies in local histories, political debates, and competing national priorities. These strategies have been implemented in several course settings but remain iterative and evolving, shaped through ongoing classroom experimentation, adaptation, and student feedback, particularly given constraints on in-person simulation during periods of remote instruction.

Together, these strategies show how centering Korean-authored texts and regionally grounded narratives can broaden students' analytical frameworks and foster pluralistic interpretations of the Peninsula. Rather than treating Korea as an extension of great-power politics, the course presents it as an active site of political agency. This pedagogical approach supports recent calls within Asian studies and IR pedagogy for more contextually grounded, experiential learning models (Asal and Blake 2006; Smith and Boyer 1996).

In this article, a "Korea-centered approach" refers both to privileging Korean-authored analyses and to analytically prioritizing Korean agency, debates, and historical experiences, rather than treating the Peninsula merely as an arena of great-power rivalry. Japanese and Chinese perspectives are incorporated not to displace this focus but to situate Korean agency within a contested regional environment, illustrating how Korean actors both shape and are shaped by regional dynamics. The goal is therefore not simply to diversify sources but to situate Korea more centrally within regional and global interactions. The next section outlines the pedagogical rationale for centering Korea in undergraduate IR teaching.

### **Reframing IR Pedagogy Through Korean Perspectives**

This pedagogical framework builds on approaches that foreground local perspectives and challenge inherited assumptions in IR (Freire 2020; Said 1978; Ling 2014; Shahjahan et al. 2022). Although the broader field of IR often relies on binary distinctions, such as civilized versus barbaric or rational versus emotional, that cast North Korea as abnormal or dependent, Korean scholarship presents a more complex picture. Lee (2024) notes that such binaries obscure Korean agency and silence diverse interpretations within both Koreas. Similar arguments have been advanced in analyses of Korean security dynamics by Haggard and Noland (2011) and Smith (2015), who emphasize the importance of historical memory, domestic structures, and regime survival logics in shaping North Korean behavior.

The pedagogical orientation guiding this teaching approach emphasizes both structural and interpretive dimensions of power. While students learn traditional IR theories, including realism, this approach encourages them to treat these theories as historically situated perspectives rather than universal explanatory models (Acharya and Buzan 2017). This provides a foundation for examining how strategic behavior on the Peninsula is shaped by historical memory, ideological debates, domestic politics, and regional dynamics. As a result, students are better equipped to analyze Korean politics on its own terms. This approach aligns with calls within the global IR literature to integrate regionally grounded epistemologies (Tickner and Blaney 2012).

This analytical framework supports the two central pedagogical strategies examined in this article: comparative media analysis and a Korea-centered foreign policy simulation. These strategies serve as the structural foundation for student learning and are reinforced by supporting activities such as film analysis, positionality discussions, and curated case studies (Freire 2020; Brookfield 2017). Although these supplemental components deepen engagement with Korean perspectives, they remain secondary to the two core analytical tools that anchor the course. The following sections detail why centering Korea is pedagogically necessary and how each strategy functions in practice.

### **Why Center Korea in the Undergraduate Curriculum?**

Despite its geopolitical significance, Korea is often marginalized in undergraduate IR curricula. Studies of North American IR syllabi show that the Peninsula appears primarily in discussions of the Korean War or US strategy, with Korea framed as passive or reactive rather than as a site of its own political thought and agency (Kim 2004, 54; Sondarjee 2023, 705). This reflects a broader pattern in which East, Southeast, and Central Asia together constitute only a small fraction of course content, reinforcing what Sondarjee (2023) calls a persistent “Western gaze” in IR. Even scholarly research mirrors this imbalance: although many US IR scholars consider East Asia strategically central, only a small minority focus on the region, and leading IR journals rarely publish East Asian cases (He 2015, 163). At the same time, more recent scholarship notes growing attention to East Asian international order, particularly in analyses of China’s regional role and Asian contributions to global IR debates, even as publication patterns favor Western-centered cases (e.g., Acharya and Buzan 2019; Shambaugh 2020; Weiss and Wallace 2021). Students thus often rely on Western media narratives that portray North Korea as irrational and South Korea as structurally dependent, flattening internal diversity and obscuring local debates (Cumings 2005; Snyder 1999, 5; Suh 2014, 128–29; Smith 2015; Apple 2014).

Centering Korea in the undergraduate curriculum provides a necessary corrective to these tendencies by foregrounding Korean-authored interpretations of security, identity, and inter-Korean relations. Korean scholars and journalists offer analyses grounded in historical memory, colonial legacies, domestic partisanship, and regional strategic culture. For example, Lee (2024, 1072) critiques the normalization of division in Western accounts of the Peninsula, while Choi (2010) and Jo (2022) highlight the contested nature of unification politics and Korea-Japan relations. Chung (2015; 2022) further shows how nationally inward-looking identity-affirmation across Korea and neighboring states shapes regional international relations beyond Western frames

of reference. Engaging these perspectives expands students' understanding of the Peninsula beyond nuclear non-proliferation and great-power strategy, enabling them to interpret Korean politics through a more contextually grounded and pluralistic lens.

These goals guide the design of the article's two central pedagogical strategies: comparative media analysis and a Korea-centered foreign policy simulation. Both methods require students to read Korean and regional sources closely, compare how narratives differ across ideological and national contexts, and apply these perspectives in structured decision-making tasks. By integrating materials such as Korean newspapers, translated scholarship, memoirs, and historical accounts, students encounter the Peninsula as a site of active knowledge production rather than a passive object of external analysis (Hwang 2011; Kang and Rigoulot 2005). This Korea-centered framing provides the analytical foundation for the pedagogical strategies examined in the sections that follow.

### **Comparative media analysis as a Korea-centered pedagogical tool**

Comparative media analysis provides a structured method for analyzing how narratives about the Korean Peninsula are constructed across national contexts. This approach moves students beyond familiar Western framings by placing Korean and Asian media at the center of inquiry. Through guided comparisons, students analyze how different outlets explain inter-Korean relations, portray North Korean behavior, interpret diplomatic shifts, and frame regional security concerns.

In a typical semester, this exercise is conducted in courses enrolling between 20 and 50 students. Students work in groups of three to five, with each session lasting approximately 75 minutes. The activity unfolds in two stages: approximately 30 to 40 minutes of small-group analysis followed by 30 to 40 minutes of class-wide comparison across groups. Students receive guiding prompts such as: (1) How do the articles explain the causes and implications of the event? (2) Which actors are portrayed as responsible or legitimate? (3) What historical or ideological context is invoked? and (4) What policy responses are implied or recommended? These prompts structure comparison, helping students identify the ideological elements that structures the reporting of facts.

In this exercise, students analyze coverage from outlets such as *Hankyoreh* (left-leaning) and *Chosun Ilbo* (right-leaning) from South Korea, *Asahi Shimbun* (liberal) and *Japan Forward* (Sankei Digital's conservative English-language outlet) from Japan, and state media from North Korea (*Korean Central News Agency, KCNA*) and China (*Global Times*). Analyzing these sources together helps students see how narratives about Korea differ sharply based on ideology, national identity, and policy priorities.

### **A. Korean media: Domestic debate and competing national priorities**

To introduce students to Korea's internal ideological diversity, the course compares two articles covering missile launches and security tensions on the Peninsula. These pieces illustrate how progressive and conservative outlets frame identical events in markedly different ways.

1. *Hankyoreh*, "S. Korea Was Unable to Detect North's Unprecedented SLBM Launch from Reservoir" (October 11, 2022).

The article highlights how North Korea's inland submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) test exposes limits in South Korea's preemptive "kill chain" strategy, underscoring the risks of escalating, technology-driven deterrence (Kwon 2022).

2. *Chosun Ilbo*, "N.Korean Warplanes Stage Show of Force" (October 7, 2022).

In contrast, this article underscores North Korea's escalating military provocations, highlighting its coordinated warplane display and missile launches while emphasizing South Korea's decisive show of superior airpower and the government's commitment to a tougher response (Roh 2022).

Through these examples, students learn that "Korean perspectives" are politically plural rather than monolithic. These contrasts highlight how domestic politics shape national security narratives in ways that Western media typically overlook.

### **B. Japanese media: Regional interests and threat construction**

Students analyze two Japanese articles on North Korean missile tests:

3. *Asahi Shimbun*, "North Korea Launches Ballistic Missile with Reconnaissance Satellite; Expert Says 'The Resolution is Worse than Google Earth'" (May 31, 2023).

*Asahi* presents the launch primarily through event-focused reporting and expert analysis, emphasizing technical details and the sequence of events rather than solely framing the launch as a national security threat (Makino 2023).

4. *Japan Forward (Sankei Digital)*, "A New North Korean Missile Threat Faces Japan" (May 31, 2023).

This conservative outlet adopts an alarmist tone, emphasizing the threat from North Korea's planned satellite-missile launch and underscoring Japan's need for vigilance, strong missile defenses, and firm resolve against Pyongyang's escalating provocations.

Students observe that Japanese media also reflect deep ideological divides over security. They see how Japan's coverage is shaped by historical memory, including concerns about abductions, missile overflights, and alliance politics (Bartlett 2023).

### **C. Chinese and North Korean media: Strategic messaging and ideological framing**

Students further examine coverage from regional state media:

5. *Global Times*, "US Warned over Provocative Drills as Enhanced Military Ties with Seoul During Incheon Landing Anniversary 'Poses Threats to Peace'" (September 15, 2023).

This article warns that enhanced US–South Korea military drills around the Incheon Landing anniversary, including joint exercises and arms sales, escalate tensions with North Korea, heighten the risk of conflict on the Korean Peninsula, and provoke regional instability, according to Chinese experts (Wang and Liu 2023).

6. *KCNA*, "Respected Comrade Kim Jong Un Guides Military Drills of KPA Units for Operation of Tactical Nukes" (October 10, 2022).

*KCNA* presents North Korea's missile drills as essential for national sovereignty and deterrence, using ideological rhetoric to portray the US and South Korea as hostile aggressors (*KCNA* 2022).

Analyzing these narratives helps students understand propaganda as strategic communication. They see ideological framing as a tool of domestic legitimation and international signaling.

### **D. What students learn across these comparisons**

Across all examples, students see how narratives about identical events vary across ideological and national boundaries. They develop the ability to:

1. Identify domestic pluralism within Korean and Japanese political discourse
2. Understand how regional security logics differ across Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Pyongyang
3. Recognize how "threats" are constructed through narrative and historical memory
4. Develop awareness of what becomes invisible in Western media when Korean and regional perspectives are not centered

This analytical foundation prepares students for the simulation by grounding their diplomatic strategies in the narrative realities that shape how various actors perceive events and justify political choices. It also helps them understand how states interpret events differently and how media framing influences possibilities for diplomacy.

Each learning objective corresponds to specific instructional mechanisms: comparative media analysis trains students to identify narrative framing and ideological assumptions, while later simulation activities require them to apply these interpretations to actor-specific strategies and operationalize them under strategic and time constraints. Evidence of these competencies appears in student reflections reproduced below.

### **Korea-Centered Foreign Policy Simulation**

The second pedagogical exercise uses a Korea-centered foreign policy simulation for its experiential learning strategy. The simulation is designed to immerse students in the political, historical, and ideological complexities of the Korean Peninsula by requiring them to adopt the perspectives of state governments, NGOs, and international institutions. Through role-based engagement, students confront contested narratives, domestic constraints, and the strategic logics that shape diplomacy in Northeast Asia.

The simulation is anchored in an interdisciplinary foundation that draws on history, psychology, and politics. Lectures and discussions introduce students to Korea's long historical trajectory, including its premodern political institutions, the legacies of Japanese colonial rule, national division, authoritarianism and democratization, North Korea's evolving strategic doctrine, and the enduring dilemmas of alliance politics in the region. These preparatory components establish the context needed for students to participate meaningfully in the simulation and to approach Korean politics as a site of lived experience rather than an abstraction.

#### ***A. Simulation rationale and design***

The simulation centers on epistemic multiplicity: students integrate Western IR theories with Korean-authored texts, regional media narratives, and cultural interpretations. This design intentionally challenges students to question inherited assumptions about rationality, security, and legitimacy.

North Korean teams analyze *KCNA* statements, defector testimonies, and works such as Cumings (2005) and Kang and Rigoulot (2005), examining propaganda, regime ideology, and historical trauma. South Korean teams engage with Jo (2022), Choi (2010), and Suh (2014) to understand domestic debates over unification, alliance dependence, and democratic contestation. Chinese and Japanese teams draw on official statements,

policy papers, and scholarship that capture how external actors interpret the Peninsula and how their strategic priorities diverge.

By grounding each delegation's strategy in regional sources, the simulation corrects the common misassumption that Korean international relations can be understood only through Western strategic frameworks.

### ***B. Domestic politics and divergent actor logics***

The simulation integrates regime type and internal political complexity into the decision-making process. South Korean teams consider how administrations such as Kim Dae-jung's and Moon Jae-in's pursued engagement while others like Lee Myung-bak and Yoon Suk-yeol adopted hardline positions (Choi 2010; Jo 2022).<sup>1</sup> Japanese teams explore how the leadership of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), pacifist opposition, and historical memory shape regional strategy.

This component emphasizes that democratic foreign policy is shaped not only by external pressures but also by domestic factionalism, electoral incentives, and ideological divides. In contrast, North Korean and Chinese teams simulate more centralized decision-making, allowing students to explore how authoritarian systems shape information flow, threat perception, and strategic signaling.

### ***C. Phases of the simulation***

Phase 1: Foundations and strategic preparation

Students begin with seminars on Korean history, North Korea's nuclear program, and inter-Korean relations. Assigned readings include Korean and non-Korean scholarship on colonial memory (Jo 2022), engagement strategies (Choi 2010), and critiques of foreign policy traditions (Suh 2014). North Korean perspectives are introduced through memoirs such as *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* (Kang and Rigoulot 2005) and psychological analyses of nuclear decision-making (Hymans 2008).

To deepen their understanding of lived experience, students analyze selected clips from documentaries and films such as *Seoul Train* (2004), *Beyond Utopia* (2023), *The Propaganda Game* (2015), and *JSA* (2000). These audiovisual materials are used sparingly and analytically as cultural texts that illuminate humanitarian realities, competing representations of state legitimacy, and the human dimensions of inter-Korean relations.

Teams then develop internal strategies using policy papers, speeches by Kim Jong Un, South Korean presidential statements, UN documents, and NGO reports. This stage ensures that students enter the negotiation phase grounded in Korean perspectives rather than generic IR theory.

### Phase 2: Role assignment and multilevel engagement

Students are divided into delegations representing South Korea, North Korea, China, Japan, the UN, and humanitarian NGOs. Using mission reports, official statements, and briefings, each group constructs a policy agenda grounded in national and organizational priorities.

To expand beyond state-centric IR, the simulation incorporates IGOs and NGOs such as the UN, Liberty in North Korea, and South Korean civil society groups such as Good Friends.

This broad representation helps students understand Korea not only as a site of formal state-to-state negotiations and elite diplomatic decision-making but as a contested humanitarian and transnational space shaped by diverse actors. Civil society and NGO teams operate independently rather than being subsumed under state delegations. However, they engage with state actors through advocacy briefings and negotiation interventions, creating influence rather than formal decision authority. This arrangement generates distinct dynamics within the simulation, reflecting real-world patterns, as NGOs frequently pressure state delegations or reframe negotiations around humanitarian concerns.

Supporting exercises include:

- Citizen interviews: Students analyze interviews and defector testimonies (e.g., Kang Chun-hyok's artistic activism, which addresses human rights abuses in North Korea through rap, drawing, and painting) to humanize political narratives.
- Debates: Teams debate sanctions, reunification pathways, and humanitarian interventions, practicing argumentation grounded in Korean-authored sources.
- Case studies: Students interpret events such as the 1994 Agreed Framework and the 2018–19 North Korea–US summits to identify strategic turning points.
- Policy briefs: Delegations produce briefs articulating national strategies, constraints, and projected outcomes.

These embedded components are part of the simulation rather than separate pedagogical activities.

### Phase 3: Negotiation, crisis management, and strategic adaptation

The main simulation stage consists of multi-day negotiations modeled on UN, bilateral, and multilateral summits. The scenarios students confront include nuclear tests, missile launches, border incidents, or humanitarian emergencies. Backchannel communications are allowed, encouraging realism and strategic improvisation.

Delegations begin by presenting their positions on nuclear doctrine, inter-Korean relations, humanitarian needs, and regional security. These presentations draw heavily on Korean-authored sources, domestic political debates, and culturally grounded rationales.

As crises unfold, students must reconcile long-term diplomatic goals with immediate pressures, evaluate intelligence of varying reliability, and manage audience costs within democratic settings. Teams navigate competing pressures from alliances, domestic constituencies, economic considerations, and ideological commitments.

Through these exchanges, students repeatedly challenge Western-centric narratives. South Korean teams wrestle with tensions between alliance obligations and domestic peace movements. North Korean teams articulate a regime logic rooted in survival, sovereignty, and historical memory rather than irrational aggression. Delegations representing China and NGOs frequently critique Western framings and legitimacy claims, prompting shifts in alliance patterns.

#### Phase 4: Resolution and reflection

The simulation concludes with delegations drafting a joint communiqué or agreement. In a final debriefing, students analyze negotiation strategies, trust-building efforts, and the role of communication in mitigating conflict. For instance, one simulation's final communiqué included the following statement:

All parties agree to pursue phased deescalation measures, including conditional sanctions relief tied to verifiable steps toward denuclearization, alongside expanded humanitarian cooperation.

Such negotiated language reflects students' attempts to reconcile competing domestic, alliance, and humanitarian priorities, demonstrating applied strategic reasoning rather than merely expressing personal reflections. Students compare their negotiated outcomes to historical cases such as the 2018 Panmunjom summit, examining how leadership, context, and narrative framing affect diplomacy.

Reflection essays reveal that students frequently revise earlier assumptions about North Korean irrationality, South Korean passivity, and US strategic centrality. Many report developing greater empathy, deeper appreciation for ideological diversity, and recognition of the limits of purely strategic reasoning.

#### ***D. Pedagogical value***

By centering Korean perspectives and integrating students into a dynamic decision-making environment, the simulation enables them to grapple with the peninsula's complexity in ways that lectures alone cannot achieve. It complements the comparative

media analysis by requiring students to actively apply insights from local Korean sources, anticipate actor-specific interpretations, and negotiate outcomes in real time. Together, these experiences cultivate a more nuanced, Korea-centered understanding of IR and prepare students for the broader pedagogical implications discussed in the following section.

## **I. Illustrative Student Learning Evidence**

Combining comparative media analysis and a Korea-centered foreign policy simulation has produced observable shifts in how students understand the Korean Peninsula and its regional dynamics. This section presents examples of student work and reflections that demonstrate concrete changes in analytical reasoning. These examples illustrate how the course's two central pedagogical strategies reshape students' assumptions, interpretive frameworks, and understanding of Korean agency.

### ***A. Reframing Assumptions About North Korean Rationality***

Several students entered the course assuming that North Korean behavior was unpredictable or irrational. After analyzing South Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and North Korean media framings, and later negotiating as North Korean representatives in the simulation, many revised these assumptions. One student wrote in a reflection assignment:

At the beginning of the semester, I wanted to lead the North Korean team and basically model myself on Kim Jong Un, who I thought was crazy and unpredictable. I also thought acting over-the-top would not only be hilarious but effective, like a chicken game where if I sounded extreme enough other countries would feel threatened, take me seriously and give in.

So when I first heard we were doing a simulation, I excitedly wrote a speech I intended to give to the whole class where I said I was the president of Candyland (imaginary country) and that Willy Wonka had come to me in a dream last night like a prophet and told me to bomb every other country.

Looking back, embarrassing, but that was genuinely how I thought North Korea operated. But after reading North Korean sources along with South Korean and Japanese news, and having to negotiate as North Korea myself, I realized their behavior follows a pretty consistent strategic logic focused on regime survival. Once I had to defend those choices, it stopped seeming random and actually made more sense.

Another student similarly reflected after participating in negotiations:

Once we had to justify North Korea's decisions strategically rather than mock them, it became clear that their actions followed recognizable security logic rather than random aggression.

More broadly, the simulation allowed students to temporarily step outside of US-centered perspectives and into foreign policy decision-making roles. By having to articulate interests, anticipate reactions, and weigh costs and benefits from non-US standpoints, students moved beyond extreme forms of othering common in Western portrayals of North Korea. Rather than viewing Korean actors as irrational or devoid of agency, students were compelled to grapple with strategic tradeoffs as those actors understand them. This process of perspective-taking enabled students to move away from dehumanized or caricatured images and toward a recognition of intentionality, constraint, and agency operating within different political and ideological contexts.

Such shifts demonstrate the value of combining media analysis with experiential role-based learning.

### ***B. Recognizing Domestic Pluralism Within South Korea***

Comparing *Hankyoreh* and *Chosun Ilbo* helps students recognize that South Korea's internal debates are essential for understanding its foreign policy. This is reinforced when South Korea delegations in the simulation have been required to articulate positions reflecting progressive and conservative viewpoints. As one participant noted:

I hadn't realized how much disagreement there is inside South Korea about how to deal with North Korea. Our group kept going back and forth over whether alliance coordination or inter-Korean dialogue should come first, and it felt like we were replaying the same ideological divide we saw in the newspapers.

Students' policy briefs and negotiation strategies revealed greater attention to domestic political constraints, an understanding often absent from Western-authored depictions of Korean security issues. For example, one South Korean delegation brief argued:

If tensions rise, any government could face backlash at home because the public remains split between engagement vs deterrence. Some voters support approaches like Kim's Sunshine policy, while others prefer tougher positions. Our delegation therefore concluded that combining humanitarian cooperation with credible deterrence is the most politically workable option.

Such excerpts demonstrate how students incorporated domestic constraints into strategic reasoning.

### ***C. Understanding Regional Security Logics Beyond US-centered Frameworks***

Students frequently commented on how Japanese and Chinese sources reframed their understanding of regional politics. The contrast between *Asahi Shimbun* and *Japan Forward* showed them that Japanese perspectives are also internally contested. Meanwhile, *Global Times* helped them see how Chinese narratives emphasize US provocation and Chinese stabilization. These insights translated into more sophisticated strategic reasoning during the simulation. One student explained:

Once I started reading how Japan and China each frame North Korea, I realized that the US perspective is just one view among many! In the simulation, I learned to factor in how other actors interpreted the same missile test completely differently.

Such reflections demonstrate that students developed a multi-perspectival understanding of security discourses in Northeast Asia.

### ***D. Developing Empathy and Context-Sensitive Analysis***

Encountering personal narratives, including defector testimonies, interviews, and films, prompted students to approach diplomatic problems with greater empathy and nuance. This emerged clearly in discussions about sanctions, humanitarian aid, and nuclear negotiations. One student wrote:

Before the class, I saw sanctions as straightforward pressure. But hearing defectors' stories and playing the role of an NGO made me think about the human costs in a new way.

These insights illustrate how multimodal sources reinforce students' ethical and analytical capacities and highlight the human dimensions that are often absent in state-centric IR frameworks.

### ***E. Integrating Korean Authored Sources into Strategic Reasoning***

A consistent outcome was students' increased reliance on Korean-authored scholarship and media to justify decisions during the simulation. Policy briefs incorporated arguments from Jo (2022), Choi (2010), and South Korean presidential statements, demonstrating the ability to apply Korean perspectives to problem-solving tasks. One student reflected:

To be honest in most other IR classes, we read almost no Korean authors. Here, the Korean sources were real helpful for explaining our positions. They changed how I understood the causes of tension and what realistic solutions looked like.

Such evidence underscores the effectiveness of centering Korean sources rather than treating them as supplementary.

#### ***F. Summary of Learning Evidence***

Together, these examples demonstrate measurable changes in students' analytical approaches, moving them toward more contextualized, Korea-centered interpretations of regional politics. The combination of comparative media analysis and simulation-based learning not only exposed students to competing narratives but also required them to apply these narratives in decision-making environments. These learning shifts provide empirical support for the pedagogical effectiveness of the two strategies and illustrate their broader implications for teaching IR through localized, non-Western perspectives.

Running the simulation also suggested areas for future modification. In subsequent iterations, more structured intelligence updates and clearer briefing deadlines will be introduced to reduce uneven preparation levels across delegations. Additional preparatory workshops will also help students better distinguish propaganda narratives from strategic signaling, which will further improve analytical consistency.

## **II. Implications for Teaching Korea in IR**

This article has examined how two integrated pedagogical strategies, comparative media analysis and a Korea-centered foreign policy simulation, can strengthen undergraduate teaching about the Korean Peninsula. Together, these approaches highlight Korea as a dynamic actor shaped by its debates, histories, and strategic priorities. Rather than presenting the Peninsula as a passive object of great-power rivalry, the course model encourages students to analyze Korean politics through locally grounded perspectives informed by Korean-authored sources, regional media, and primary materials.

The model begins by pointing out the limited, Western-centered ways Korea appears in IR curricula. By incorporating a structured media comparison, students critically assess how Korean, Japanese, and Chinese outlets frame identical events differently. This work helps students recognize domestic pluralism within and surrounding Korea, competing regional narratives, and the importance of understanding security politics through multiple national lenses.

The simulation extends this foundation by requiring students to translate these perspectives into strategic decision-making. As delegations representing the Koreas and regional actors, students negotiate crises, develop policy positions, and respond to rapid developments. Their learning demonstrates a consistent shift away from reductive portrayals of North Korea as irrational and South Korea as reactive (Park 2010; Kim 2010; Yoon 2011), and toward a nuanced appreciation of domestic constraints, historical memory, and strategic logic (Hymans 2008; Byman and Lind 2010; Solingen 2009). Engagement with Korean-authored and primary media sources encourages students to understand Korean agency within IR and apply these insights in collaborative settings.

Crucially, the simulation component requires students to inhabit the perspectives of foreign policy decision-makers and international actors operating outside a US-centric framework. By reasoning through interests, constraints, and cost-benefit calculations from these alternative vantage points, students move beyond simplified or dehumanized portrayals of regional actors and develop a more agency-centered understanding of political behavior.

Student reflections show that this approach fosters analytical growth. Many observed that Korean materials challenged assumptions shaped by Western media and helped them appreciate the complexities of alliance politics, humanitarian challenges, and lived experiences on the Peninsula. These findings align with research demonstrating the value of experiential and perspective-taking pedagogies in IR (Smith and Boyer 1996; Asal and Blake 2006). By situating Korea's political landscape within its own historical and social contexts, students develop more informed and empathetic interpretations of regional security issues.

Although the present case focuses on Korea, the framework is adaptable to other Asian contexts and global politics courses. Combining comparative media analysis with simulation-based learning offers a flexible and theoretically informed model for teaching marginalized regions through locally grounded perspectives. It supports broader aims within IR and Asian studies to diversify epistemologies, integrate underrepresented voices, and cultivate students' capacity to interpret global issues with greater nuance.

By centering Korean perspectives and integrating them into structured experiential activities, this approach contributes a practical, evidence-based model for teaching the international relations of Asia. It demonstrates how Korea can serve not only as a case study but also as a site of conceptual insight for students learning to navigate complex political narratives and global power dynamics.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> For example, handouts may instruct students from democratic countries to model internal political divisions. South Korean teams represent both ruling and opposition views, while Japanese teams assign roles to key stakeholders (e.g., LDP vs. opposition) and simulate domestic debates shaping foreign policy.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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