



Explaining the Persistence of North Korea's Missile Strategy: A Comparative IR Perspective

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Abstract

North Korea's investment in nuclear and missile capabilities despite sanctions and diplomacy presents a puzzle in international relations. This research note compares seven perspectives—Realism, Neorealism, Liberalism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, International Political Economy, the English School, and Constructivism—to examine North Korea's missile behavior and responses. The comparison shows that persistence cannot be explained by security incentives alone. Material and structural conditions establish incentives for military development; institutions and economic networks mediate external pressure; and identities and norms shape its political interpretation. Realism and Neorealism best explain strategic pressures, while Liberalism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and IPE clarify the limits of sanctions and diplomatic cooperation. The English School and Constructivism illuminate how sovereignty, international order, and political identity give military capabilities broader meaning. The note argues that these perspectives are most useful when treated as analytically distinct. Their comparison shows how security incentives, institutional constraints, and political meanings sustain North Korea's missile strategy.

Keywords: *North Korea; Missile Threat; International Relations Theory; Realism; Liberalism; Constructivism; International Security*

1. Introduction: From the 2023 Missile Alert to a Theoretical Puzzle

On May 31, 2023, South Korean authorities issued an emergency missile alert following North Korea's attempted launch of a space launch vehicle. The alert was lifted shortly afterward after authorities determined that the launch did not pose an immediate threat to South Korean territory. The episode lasted only a short time, yet the speed with which a military development outside South Korea was transformed into a matter of public warning illustrated the unusually compressed relationship between North Korea's military activities and perceptions of security on the Korean Peninsula (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2023; Yonhap News Agency, 2023).

The incident points to a larger analytical problem central to the study of North Korea's security behavior. The puzzle is not simply why North Korea develops missile capabilities, but why it continues to pursue them despite sustained sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and the security costs associated with escalation. The existing literature on North Korea tends to emphasize specific dimensions of this problem—such as deterrence logic, nuclear strategy, sanctions evasion, or great-power competition (Lee, 2016; Kim 2021). While each provides crucial insights, they are rarely connected into a single analytical sequence. Consequently, explanations centered purely on military balance or regime survival struggle to fully account for why this strategy persists under complex institutional constraints and economic isolation.

To address this gap, this research note argues that the persistence of North Korea's missile strategy cannot be adequately explained by security incentives alone. Rather, material and structural pressures are mediated through international institutions and economic networks, while political identities and normative interpretations shape how those pressures are understood and translated into strategic behavior. Crucially, this note does not propose a new IR theory.

Instead, it demonstrates how the explanatory limits of individual perspectives become analytically useful when they are treated as complementary lenses on different mechanisms of persistence.

The analysis examines this problem through seven major perspectives in international relations: Realism, Neorealism, Liberalism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, International Political Economy (IPE), the English School, and Constructivism. Together, these perspectives allow the analysis to examine security incentives, institutional and economic constraints, international order, and political identity as distinct dimensions of North Korea's missile strategy.

The analysis proceeds from material and structural explanations to cooperation, institutions, and economic constraints, before turning to international society and identity. It concludes by comparing what each perspective contributes to explaining persistence.

2. Analytical Framework and Comparative Approach

This problem-driven approach is consistent with the logic of analytic eclecticism, which encourages the selective use of insights and mechanisms from different theoretical traditions to address complex substantive problems (Sil & Katzenstein, 2010). The North Korean missile issue is particularly useful for theoretical comparison because its strategic significance cannot be separated easily from its institutional, economic, and ideational dimensions. Missile capabilities require technological resources, organizational capacity, and strategic planning, but their political significance also depends on how North Korea understands sovereignty and security and how other states interpret and respond to its actions. The same missile development can therefore be understood as a security instrument, a response to regional power asymmetries, a challenge to international institutions, an economic burden, or a symbol of national sovereignty.

This article treats the seven perspectives not as competing theories that must produce a single definitive explanation, but as distinct analytical lenses. Each perspective is assigned a specific explanatory question concerning North Korea's missile behavior and the international responses surrounding it. This allows the analysis to distinguish what each perspective explains particularly well from what remains outside its analytical scope.

The comparison is organized around three questions. First, what mechanism does each perspective identify as central to North Korea's behavior? Second, what aspects of the case does that perspective explain less effectively? Third, what analytical contribution does it make that becomes less visible from the other perspectives? These questions prevent the theories from being treated as interchangeable explanations operating at the same analytical level.

The comparison therefore focuses on analytical differentiation rather than theoretical synthesis. The following sections apply these lenses sequentially before bringing their contributions together in a comparative assessment.



Figure 1: Analytical Framework: Seven Perspectives on North Korea's Missile Behavior

3. Material and Structural Explanations: Realism and Neorealism

3.1 Realism and the Security Logic of North Korea

North Korea's pursuit of nuclear and missile capabilities is difficult to understand without taking security seriously. The country faces a profound conventional and economic asymmetry vis-à-vis the United States and its regional allies. The presence of U.S. forces in South Korea and Japan, the history of military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula, and Pyongyang's perception of external threats create conditions in which regime survival becomes closely connected to military capability (Hong et al., 2023; Lee, 2016).

From a realist perspective, the appeal of nuclear weapons is therefore relatively straightforward. They offer a means of compensating for conventional weakness and raising the potential costs of external intervention. North Korea does not possess the economic resources or conventional military capabilities of the United States or the combined strength of the U.S.–South Korean alliance. Nuclear weapons and increasingly sophisticated delivery systems consequently provide an asymmetric means of deterrence (Lee, 2016; Kim, 2021).

This logic also helps explain why economic pressure alone has not necessarily altered North Korea's strategic priorities. If the leadership perceives the survival of the regime as being at stake, the costs associated with sanctions can be judged less important than the security benefits of maintaining a credible deterrent. In this sense, what appears externally as an economically irrational allocation of scarce resources can look considerably more rational when viewed through the hierarchy of priorities assumed by Realism.

Mearsheimer's offensive realism adds a further consideration. States operating under uncertainty cannot be certain about the future intentions of other states and therefore have incentives to maximize their relative power where possible (Mearsheimer, 2001). North Korea cannot plausibly seek regional hegemony in East Asia (Tasic, 2019), but this does not make its missile strategy strategically irrelevant. Missile tests can strengthen bargaining leverage, demonstrate capabilities, raise the costs of military action, and force other states to take North Korean preferences into account.

The strategic value of missile activity is also visible in its effects on the U.S.–South Korea alliance. Missile launches can generate domestic political pressure, trigger military responses, and test perceptions of extended deterrence (Lee, 2016). From a realist perspective, these consequences form part of the strategic value of military signaling.

The realist explanation becomes less satisfactory, however, once the question shifts from what military capabilities do to what they mean. Material power does not by itself explain why North Korea repeatedly associates military capabilities with sovereignty, independence, and national survival. The emphasis on self-reliance embedded in Juche ideology gives military development a political significance that cannot be derived simply from the distribution of capabilities. Realism consequently provides a strong account of the security logic behind missile development, while leaving open the question of how these security concerns are politically constructed and how external economic and institutional constraints shape the choices available to Pyongyang.

3.2 Neorealism and the Structure of the East Asian System

Waltz's Neorealism directs attention away from the internal characteristics of individual states and toward the structure of the international system (Waltz, 1979). Under anarchy, states cannot rely on a central authority for their survival. Their strategic choices are consequently shaped by the distribution of capabilities around them.

Viewed from this angle, North Korea occupies an unusually vulnerable structural position. The United States retains a central position in the regional security architecture, while South Korea and Japan possess substantial economic and technological capabilities (Lee, 2016). China's rise and Russia's involvement further complicate the regional balance

(Kim, 2016; Lee, 2016). North Korea's nuclear and missile programs can thus be interpreted as an attempt to reduce the strategic consequences of its conventional inferiority.

The security dilemma is particularly relevant here. South Korea and the United States may regard missile defense and military exercises as defensive measures, yet North Korea can interpret these actions as evidence of hostile intentions. The deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system illustrates this dynamic: an effort by one side to increase security can alter the threat perceptions of another (Lee, 2016).

The regional balance also creates opportunities for Pyongyang. Competition among larger powers can provide North Korea with diplomatic space, particularly when China, Russia, and the United States do not share identical strategic interests (Kim, 2016). Relations with China and Russia can provide political and economic opportunities even when multilateral sanctions remain in place (Sun, 2018; Haggard & Noland, 2017).

Neorealism is especially useful because it explains why North Korea's strategic environment continues to generate incentives for self-help. The country's relative weakness does not eliminate the importance of power; it arguably makes the search for an asymmetric form of power more urgent. At the same time, structural pressure does not determine a single response. States facing similar structural conditions can make different choices. North Korea's particular interpretation of threats, the priorities of its leadership, and the ideological significance attached to strategic autonomy affect how systemic pressures are translated into policy. The structure constrains North Korea, but it does not speak for North Korea.

3.3 Comparing Realism and Neorealism

Realism and Neorealism converge on the importance of survival and insecurity but locate the source of strategic behavior differently. Realism allows greater attention to state interests and power, whereas Neorealism places the distribution of capabilities and the anarchic structure of the international system at the center.

The distinction matters in the North Korean case. Realism helps explain the political attraction of military strength to a regime concerned with survival and strategic autonomy. Neorealism explains why those concerns remain persistent given North Korea's position within the East Asian balance of power.

A missile can change the strategic balance, but its significance is not exhausted by its material function.

4. Cooperation, Institutions, and Economic Constraints

4.1 Liberalism and Neoliberal Institutionalism

The international response to North Korea presents a problem that Realism alone does not fully capture. States facing a serious security challenge have repeatedly chosen sanctions, negotiations, diplomatic initiatives, and institutional coordination rather than relying exclusively on military force. Liberal approaches provide a useful starting point for understanding that choice.

Liberalism emphasizes the possibility of cooperation even under anarchy, particularly when institutions and economic relationships create incentives for states to coordinate their behavior (Oye, 1986). In the North Korean case, sanctions are one of the clearest examples. Rather than immediately using military force, states have attempted to impose economic and political costs intended to alter Pyongyang's calculations.

United Nations Security Council resolutions are particularly important because they transform individual state preferences into collectively recognized measures. Resolution 2375, adopted on September 11, 2017 following North Korea's nuclear test, strengthened restrictions on trade and energy and represented a significant attempt to increase multilateral pressure (United Nations Security Council, 2017). The difficulty, however, lies in implementation rather than simply in the existence of rules. Sanctions require states to enforce them, and the interests of those states do not always

coincide. China and Russia, for example, have had to balance pressure on North Korea with their own regional and strategic priorities (Haggard & Noland, 2017; Kim, 2016). North Korea, meanwhile, has sought alternative economic relationships and mechanisms for mitigating external pressure.

Liberalism therefore helps explain why states continue to pursue diplomatic and institutional alternatives to military confrontation even when previous efforts have produced limited results. Russett's Democratic Peace Theory offers a more limited contribution to the case because North Korea does not possess the democratic institutional characteristics central to the theory (Russett, 1993).

Keohane and Nye's concept of interdependence faces a different problem. Economic interdependence can create incentives for restraint, but North Korea's relatively limited integration into the global economy reduces the leverage that extensive interdependence would otherwise provide (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

Neoliberal Institutionalism approaches the same problem from a somewhat different position. It accepts anarchy rather than assuming that international politics can become fully cooperative, but argues that institutions can make cooperation possible by reducing uncertainty, providing information, establishing expectations, and lowering the costs of coordination. The United Nations Security Council illustrates this institutional function. Resolutions create a common framework for sanctions and establish expectations regarding prohibited behavior. In this sense, institutions remain relevant even when compliance is imperfect.

The North Korean case also reveals the limits of institutional autonomy. The effectiveness of international institutions depends heavily on the willingness of powerful states to cooperate. When the United States, China, and Russia hold different assessments of the strategic environment, the institutional mechanism does not disappear, but its capacity to produce coordinated action becomes more limited. The repeated difficulty of enforcing sanctions does not demonstrate that institutions are irrelevant. Rather, it shows that institutions operate within a political environment shaped by state interests. Institutional cooperation does not amount to autonomous institutional power.

This distinction is important for understanding the persistence of international pressure on North Korea. Liberalism explains why states continue to seek cooperation, while Neoliberal Institutionalism explains how institutions can facilitate that cooperation under anarchy. Neither, however, fully explains how institutional measures are transmitted through economic relationships or why their effects vary according to the interests and networks of the states involved.

4.2 International Political Economy: Sanctions, Economic Networks, and Regime Survival

Sanctions reveal a dimension that is easily obscured when the North Korean issue is treated solely as a security problem. Economic pressure does not occur outside politics. Its effects depend on trade routes, financial networks, state interests, and the ability of the target regime to reorganize economic relationships. Wallerstein's World-Systems perspective provides one way of situating North Korea within the wider global economy (Wallerstein, 1984). North Korea occupies a marginal position in global economic networks and remains substantially isolated from international markets. Yet marginality is not equivalent to complete disconnection. Economic relations with China, Russia, and other external actors provide channels through which the effects of sanctions can be absorbed or circumvented (Haggard & Noland, 2017).

This point matters because the effectiveness of sanctions depends not simply on how severe they appear on paper but on the economic networks through which they are implemented. A restriction imposed by one group of states can have a different effect when alternative suppliers, markets, or political partners remain available. Sanctions are therefore not simply costs imposed on a target state; their effects are transmitted through networks governed by political and economic interests, which can alter the intensity and distribution of economic pressure.

Gilpin's state-centric approach to IPE reinforces this point by treating economic relations as closely connected to political power and national security (Gilpin, 1981). States do not pursue economic efficiency in isolation from questions of sovereignty and strategic autonomy. North Korea's economic behavior is therefore difficult to interpret through a purely market-based framework. Its external economic relationships are shaped not only by commercial considerations but also by the strategic interests of its external partners.

Cox's Critical Theory adds a further dimension by asking how economic structures distribute power and costs (Cox, 1981). Sanctions designed to pressure a regime can have consequences beyond the leadership itself, raising questions about who bears the costs of economic coercion and how international economic arrangements reproduce existing power relationships. The North Korean case thus complicates a simple assumption that increasing economic pressure will necessarily generate political change. Its effects depend on the structure of external economic relationships, the interests of states implementing them, and the priorities of the target regime.

The IPE perspective consequently adds an important qualification to the institutional and security explanations considered above. The practical effects of sanctions depend on the economic networks through which they are implemented and on the interests of the states involved.

Taken together, Liberalism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, and IPE show that the international response to North Korea operates through more than one mechanism. States seek cooperation, institutions provide a framework for coordination, and economic networks shape the effects of those measures. External pressure can therefore remain substantial without necessarily producing a corresponding transformation in North Korea's strategic behavior. The remaining question is how North Korea's position within international society and its political understanding of sovereignty, legitimacy, and strategic autonomy shape the meaning of these pressures.

5. International Society, Norms, and Identity

5.1 The English School: International Society, Order, and Normative Conflict

The North Korean case becomes more difficult to understand once the question shifts from whether a state possesses military power to whether its behavior is regarded as legitimate within international society. Bull's concept of anarchical society is useful here because it starts from a paradox: states exist without a central world government, yet they remain connected through rules, institutions, diplomatic practices, and shared expectations (Bull, 1977). International order therefore does not require the absence of conflict. It depends on a degree of agreement about the rules through which conflict is managed.

North Korea's missile and nuclear activities challenge this order in several ways. They raise questions about non-proliferation, the authority of international institutions, the limits of sovereign choice, and the circumstances under which collective security measures are considered legitimate. From this perspective, United Nations sanctions do more than impose economic costs. They also express a collective judgment about acceptable state behavior. Resolution 2375, for example, can be understood not only as an instrument of coercion but also as an institutional statement concerning the relationship between North Korea's military activities and the rules of international society.

At the same time, North Korea does not simply exist outside international society. It participates in diplomacy, negotiates with other governments, and responds strategically to international institutions. Its behavior therefore contains elements of both engagement with and resistance to the existing order. This creates a tension among sovereignty, security, and international responsibility. North Korea invokes sovereign independence to defend its strategic choices, while other states invoke international security and collectively established rules to justify restrictions on those choices.

The English School is particularly useful because it makes this normative conflict visible. It also raises a difficult humanitarian question: how should international society balance the maintenance of security order with the consequences that coercive measures may have for civilian populations? Historical experience adds another layer. North Korea's political understanding of external pressure has been shaped by colonial history, the Korean War, confrontation with the United States, and the development of Juche ideology (Kim, 2021; Myers, 2010). These experiences contribute to a narrative in which foreign pressure can be interpreted as a threat to sovereign independence rather than simply as an enforcement mechanism.

The English School therefore broadens the analysis beyond material power. It shows that the North Korean missile issue is also a dispute over the meaning and maintenance of international order. Yet an emphasis on international society and normative conflict does not by itself explain how North Korea comes to attach particular meanings to sovereignty, resistance, and military capability. To understand that process, the analysis must turn from the rules of international society to the identities and ideas through which those rules and external pressures are interpreted.

5.2 Constructivism: Identity, Norms, and the Meaning of Missile Power

A missile has a measurable range, payload, and technical capability. Its political meaning is considerably less measurable. This distinction is where Constructivism becomes particularly useful. Wendt argues that international politics is socially constructed through identities, ideas, norms, and interaction, rather than being determined solely by material capabilities (Wendt, 1999). Building on this, constructivist approaches emphasize how social knowledge and shared meanings fundamentally shape states' security calculations and international relations (Adler, 2002).

Applied to North Korea, this suggests that nuclear and missile capabilities should not be viewed only as instruments of deterrence. They are embedded in a political narrative concerning sovereignty, independence, resistance, and national survival. Juche is central to that narrative. The regime's emphasis on self-reliance provides an ideological framework through which external pressure can be interpreted (Myers, 2010). A sanction is therefore not necessarily understood simply as an economic measure designed to change behavior. It can also be represented domestically as evidence of hostile external efforts to undermine North Korean sovereignty.

This helps explain an apparent paradox in the sanctions regime. External pressure may simultaneously raise the material costs of strategic behavior and reinforce the identity narratives through which that behavior is justified. The material effect and the ideational effect of the same policy therefore need not point in the same direction. A policy intended to constrain military development can impose economic costs while also strengthening narratives of resistance, sovereignty, and strategic autonomy.

Missile tests have a similar dual character. A successful test demonstrates technical and military capability, but it can also communicate national strength, political resilience, and defiance. The 2022 Hwasong-17 test, for instance, can be read not only in terms of its military implications but also as a political performance of technological competence and autonomy (Lee, 2023; Panda, 2020). Political language matters for the same reason. North Korean discourse frequently portrays the state as responding to aggression and defending itself against external threats. Such narratives provide a framework through which military development becomes consistent with the regime's understanding of its own identity.

The comparison with Vietnam is useful because it shows that national identity and strategic orientation are not permanently fixed. Vietnam gradually expanded its engagement with international institutions and the global economy while modifying aspects of its external orientation (Panda, 2019; The Global Observatory, 2019). The comparison does not imply that North Korea will follow the same path, but it illustrates why material isolation alone cannot explain different patterns of international engagement.

Qin's relational approach further emphasizes that identities develop through relationships rather than in complete isolation (Qin, 2018). Andrew L. Oros's work likewise demonstrates the importance of political identities in shaping

national security practices (Oros, 2008). North Korea's understanding of itself is shaped not only internally but also through its relationships with the United States, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia.

Constructivism therefore contributes something distinct to the analysis: it explains how material capabilities acquire political meaning. A missile can simultaneously be a deterrent to one actor, a provocation to another, and a symbol of sovereignty to the state possessing it.

This explanation nevertheless has limits. Identity alone does not manufacture missiles. Technological resources, organizational capacity, economic inputs, and strategic calculations remain necessary conditions for their development. Constructivism is therefore most useful when placed alongside, rather than substituted for, material and structural explanations. Its contribution lies in showing how material pressures and capabilities are interpreted, narrated, and given political meaning.

5.3 Comparative Assessment: Order, Identity, and the Meaning of Pressure

The English School and Constructivism address different but connected dimensions of the North Korean case. Taken together, these approaches clarify why material pressure does not necessarily produce a straightforward change in strategic behavior. North Korea's missile strategy is sustained not by a single logic but through the interaction of material constraints, institutional pressures, economic networks, international order, and political identity.

6. Comparative Discussion: Toward a Multidimensional Explanation

The comparison reveals an important point that can easily disappear when theories are presented separately: the seven perspectives do not necessarily compete to explain precisely the same dimension of North Korea's missile behavior. Their differences become most visible when the analytical question shifts from why North Korea values military capability to how external pressure is transmitted and interpreted.

The differences can be represented as follows.

Perspective	Primary explanatory strength	Major limitation in the North Korean case
Realism	Survival, power, deterrence, strategic competition	Understates identity and norms
Neorealism	Anarchy, polarity, distribution of capabilities	Understates domestic and ideational variables
Liberalism	Cooperation, sanctions, diplomacy, shared rules	Limited by divergent state interests
Neoliberal Institutionalism	International institutions and cooperation under anarchy	Institutions depend on major-power interests
IPE	Sanctions, trade networks, economic power	Cannot fully explain ideological commitment
English School	International society, order, norms, humanitarian concerns	Limited enforcement capacity
Constructivism	Identity, norms, ideology, language, symbolic behavior	Understates material capabilities and economic constraints

Source: Author's synthesis based on Realism, Neorealism, Liberalism, Neoliberal Institutionalism, International Political Economy, the English School, and Constructivism.

Table 1: Comparative Assessment of IR Perspectives in Explaining North Korea's Missile Behavior

The comparison should not therefore end with a simple ranking. Realism and Neorealism appear strongest when the question is why North Korea continues to value military capabilities under severe external pressure. That conclusion does

not make them universally superior, since the explanatory balance changes when the question shifts to how sanctions or other external pressures produce particular political responses.

The 2023 missile alert provides a useful illustration. A realist reading emphasizes the security implications of North Korean military development, while Neorealism situates the event within the distribution of power in Northeast Asia. Liberalism and Neoliberal Institutionalism draw attention to the institutional mechanisms through which states attempt to manage risks, while IPE asks how economic pressure shapes incentives. The English School and Constructivism, in turn, draw attention to international order, political narratives, and the meanings attached to the missile program.

The same point becomes clearer in relation to sanctions. Their effects are unlikely to be adequately captured by a simple cost-benefit model in which greater economic pressure automatically produces greater willingness to compromise. Liberalism and Neoliberal Institutionalism draw attention to the use and coordination of sanctions, while IPE highlights the economic networks through which they operate. Realism emphasizes that a regime may accept substantial economic costs when survival is prioritized, while Constructivism suggests that sanctions can also be interpreted as evidence of external hostility and reinforce an existing identity of resistance. The English School adds the normative tension between international order, sovereignty, and humanitarian consequences.

This does not mean that sanctions inevitably strengthen North Korea's strategic resolve. Rather, it means that their effects are unlikely to be adequately captured by a simple cost-benefit model in which greater economic pressure automatically produces greater willingness to compromise. External pressure may simultaneously raise the material costs of strategic behavior and reinforce the identity narratives through which that behavior is justified. The material effect and the ideational effect of the same policy therefore need not point in the same direction.

This interaction is particularly important for understanding persistence. North Korea's continued investment in military capabilities cannot be reduced to a single decision made in response to a single external threat. Material insecurity creates incentives for strategic development, but those incentives operate within a regional structure of unequal capabilities. External actors respond through institutions and sanctions, while economic networks shape the constraints and opportunities surrounding those responses. At the same time, these pressures are interpreted through political narratives concerning sovereignty, independence, resistance, and national survival.

Figure 2 summarizes this multidimensional relationship.

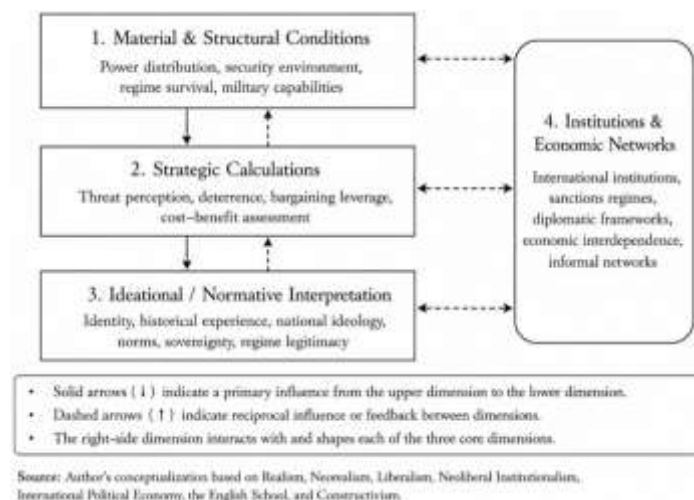


Figure 2: A Multidimensional Framework for Explaining the Persistence of North Korea's Missile Strategy

The relationships represented in Figure 2 should not be interpreted as a linear causal chain. The framework is instead intended to identify analytical relationships among material conditions, structural incentives, institutions, economic networks, international norms, and political identities.

This is where the comparative approach provides its main analytical payoff. The North Korean missile problem is not simply a case in which one theory has “the answer” and the others fail. Different theories illuminate different mechanisms operating simultaneously.

The contribution of this research note is to conceptualize persistence as a multidimensional outcome rather than as a single-theory prediction. Consistent with the problem-driven logic of analytic eclecticism, the analysis distinguishes rather than collapses the mechanisms emphasized by different IR perspectives. The result is not theoretical fusion. It is analytical differentiation. The seven perspectives do not need to produce one unified causal model to be theoretically useful; their value lies in specifying distinct mechanisms through which the same political phenomenon can be understood.

The strongest explanation of North Korea’s continued military investment is therefore not a generic claim that “everything matters.” Such an argument would risk becoming unfalsifiable. A more precise conclusion is possible: material and structural conditions establish the strategic incentives; institutions and economic networks shape the external constraints placed on North Korea; and identities and norms influence how those conditions are interpreted and justified.

7. Conclusion

The North Korean missile issue is often presented as a problem of deterrence, proliferation, or sanctions. Those descriptions are not wrong, but they capture only particular dimensions of a much larger political problem. The 2023 emergency missile alert in South Korea illustrated how quickly developments in North Korea’s military program can become matters of public security, alliance politics, and international concern. Understanding why the problem persists requires more than identifying the existence of a military threat.

The comparison of these theoretical perspectives demonstrates that North Korea’s missile strategy cannot be adequately understood through a single analytical lens. Rather than making a generic claim that “all theories are useful,” the analysis specifies what different perspectives contribute. Security-oriented approaches clarify the strategic incentives created by material weakness and regional power asymmetries, while institutional and IPE perspectives show how international responses are coordinated and how their effects are mediated through economic relationships. Approaches centered on international society and identity, meanwhile, draw attention to why the conflict is repeatedly framed in terms of sovereignty, legitimacy, resistance, and order. Consequently, the persistence of the missile problem is better understood through the interaction of these dimensions, in which one mechanism—such as economic pressure—may be altered or redirected by another, such as political identity.

This multidimensional perspective is particularly important for understanding the meaning attached to military power. North Korea’s missiles are not merely objects with technical specifications; within the regime’s political discourse, they can signify independence, resistance, technological achievement, and national strength. At the same time, the material character of these capabilities cannot be wished away. A political symbol still requires technological resources, organizational capacity, economic inputs, and strategic calculation.

This observation has direct implications for policy. Military deterrence remains necessary because the strategic environment creates genuine security risks. Sanctions remain relevant because international institutions require mechanisms for responding to prohibited behavior. Neither approach, however, is likely to be sufficient by itself. Economic pressure can be weakened by alternative networks, institutions can be constrained by great-power rivalry, and military measures can intensify threat perceptions when they are interpreted through existing narratives of hostility.

This research note identifies these intersecting mechanisms, but future research could examine more systematically how specific combinations of external pressure, diplomatic engagement, and domestic political narratives alter North Korea's strategic calculus over time.

The broader lesson is therefore not that one should replace Realism with Constructivism, or sanctions with diplomacy. It is that the North Korean missile problem operates across several analytical dimensions at once. Rather than reducing North Korea's missile strategy to either rational security-seeking or ideological resistance, the analysis shows how strategic calculation, structural pressure, institutional responses, economic relationships, and political meaning coexist. The persistence of the North Korean missile problem is therefore not evidence that one theory has failed, but that the problem itself is more multidimensional than any single theoretical perspective can capture.

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