

Something to Think About



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I have recently written about the potential for some form of consolidated government in the Birmingham metropolitan area. For those not in the know, many, if not most, of our suburbs have incorporated themselves over the last 70+ years. The endgame has been a relatively diminished ‘center city’ surrounded by fully functioning municipalities with their own unique identities. Tens of thousands of people, if not hundreds of thousands, in the metro area might not even step foot anywhere in the City of Birmingham in any given week, if not month, such is the fragmentation.

As a result, I would argue there really isn’t a strong unifying factor when it comes to the metropolitan area as a whole, as compared to some other cities. Essentially, what is it other than proximity which makes us “Birmingham”? What difference does the, say, ongoing revitalization of the Avondale neighborhood mean to someone from, say, Argo, Trafford, West Jefferson, Lipscomb, or even Hoover? I can’t answer this question, and that is big part of the problem with the ideal of a Greater Birmingham.

However, knowing, or admitting, there isn’t a definitive common community thread in our area is also the biggest argument in favor of creating one.

This week, I had a couple of conversations with various people about North Korea. To a person, they were scared about Pyongyang’s potential to upset the global economy, let alone rain down nuclear death & destruction with what one would assume to be its increased missile technology. Clearly, the Kim family is getting more ink in the US press than it has in some time.

But what is the real likelihood North Korea will start an unprovoked (depending on your definition of the word) war, nuclear or conventional, against South Korea and the United States? Also, what is the purpose of these displays of military strength? What is the definition of success here?

Obviously, I am not an academic expert on the subject, and have not devoted my life analyzing every move the North Koreans take. However, I have read a lot on the subject matter, a strange amount even, at least 7 books....3 of them more appropriately described as textbooks. I have also stayed at a Holiday Inn Express in the past. So, I have that going for me.

The heart of the matter is simple: Pyongyang knows it has fallen woefully behind China and, more importantly, South Korea. The country’s overall performance since the days of disco has been absolutely disastrous, and I mean horrible. Prior to that, believe it or not, North Korea’s economy was stronger than China’s, on a per capita basis, throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and most of the 1970s. It was only in the 1980s when the great Middle Kingdom began to fully shake off Mao’s multitude of economic idiocies, and actually have a true great leap forward.

Further, there wasn’t much of a difference in per capita GDP between the two Koreas until roughly 1974 or 1975. Prior to that point, the difference between the two economies would have been somewhat analogous to the contemporary differences between Alabama and Tennessee. However, during the mid-70s, Kim Il Sung decided to basically bet the farm, and leveraged the country in order to build out its mining capacity (significant natural resources) AND greatly increase Pyongyang’s military capacity. This was undoubtedly due in no small part to megalomania, but it was also an effort to allow the country to stand on its own outside of the shadow of its much larger

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**The most important thing in our war preparations
is to teach all our people to hate U.S. imperialism.**

Kim Il-sung

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communist neighbors, China and the USSR. In no uncertain terms, this was a gamble that didn't pay off, and Pyongyang was forced to default on its international debt during the early 1980s. Now, without **the same amount** of outright aid from Beijing and Moscow; without access to international capital, and by adopting an even more strict adherence to somewhat bewildering self-reliance policy called Juche, the North Korean economy essentially stood still from the mid-70s to the mid-90s.

Then in the 1990s, the country took a double whammy with the end of the Cold War and disastrous flooding. The former meant the end of subsidized crude oil from the Soviet Union, which crippled the electrical grid and left tractors idle. The latter washed away precious topsoil and flooded the mines which were the best source of foreign currency. Everything stopped working and stopped growing, resulting in a massive famine and the complete breakdown of the country's inefficient, centrally controlled distribution system. To this day, no one, not even the North Koreans, know how many starved to death, although the estimates are as high as 3.5 million. It was so awful, horrific, even Pyongyang refers the period between 1994-1998 as The Arduous March (konanŭi haenggun).

As you can imagine, as the North was, quite literally, starving, the South Koreans and the Chinese were vaulting forward. Any hopes the North might have had of ultimately controlling a unified Korea were dashed forever. By forever, I mean forever.

Many countries would have completely disintegrated at this point. All sectors of the formal economy were mostly in tatters or complete ruins. Public services were virtually non-existent throughout much of the country. Things were incredibly bleak by just about every measure. However, the North Koreans had unifying factors: 1) their collective hatred for 3 countries in particular (the US, South Korea, and Japan), and; 2) their military.

While the armed forces had always been a preoccupation for Pyongyang, they became even more so during The Arduous March because that is all the Kim family had which, well, still kind of worked. The North Korean military was still a formidable force, although maybe not up to the standards of western powers. Bizarrely, in our way of thinking, North Korea placed more emphasis on its military first "songun" policy during this period of collapse. From Pyongyang's point of view, by keeping its military strong during economic upheaval, it was able to: 1) provide a unifying distraction, and; 2) thwart any ideas the South Koreans and Americans might have had of intervening during its period of great weakness. To that end, songun achieved its objective(s), and the government continued it after the worst was over.

Obviously, we can't understand this. However, the Koreans have had a long history of either occupation or submissive fealty to foreign powers. By maintaining its identity during a period of great, unspeakable hardship, the Kim family was able to do something Korean leaders had never really been able to do in the past: maintain sovereignty.

Therefore, at the start of the 21st Century, North Korea was still in tact. However, its economy and technology had fallen ridiculously behind its traditional rivals after 25 years of stagnation. The only thing it had which made it relevant was, and you guessed it, its relative military strength and military complex. Seriously, what could Pyongyang provide the global economy which others couldn't get elsewhere at a better price and of higher quality? Phony \$100 bills? Fair enough. Methamphetamines? Apparently so. To that end, from what I have read, the North Korean's counterfeit currency and dope are top notch. However, you can't run an entire country on such things.

Now, no one in Pyongyang is stupid enough to believe it can win a war against the United States, let alone the combined might of the US and South Korea. The latter has a pretty well-developed military complex as well. But what else do the North Koreans have in order to get aid or, shucks, get other powers to notice them but belligerence? How else can the Kim family keep the country together but to continually play to the traditional unifying factors, military and hatred?

So, despite the fact the North Koreans current problems might be largely due to their own failings, they are simply playing the only card(s) they have. Who would care about them otherwise? How would the country stay together if they didn't? Again, this makes no sense to us, but the mindset over there has been 60+ years in the making. The indoctrination into Juche and songun starts at birth and ends at death.

Understandably, it makes people nervous when people with completely different worldviews start lobbing missiles around and make threats involving nuclear weapons. That type of stuff ain't cool. However, what happens to North Ko-

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rea IF it decides to: 1) open a massive artillery barrage at South Korea (which it can do tomorrow if it so desired), or; 2) put a nuclear device on the end of one of their mediocre missiles and lob it somewhere? Well, first things first, a lot of people would die, a lot. Second, the North Korean military would cease to exist, as well as Pyongyang. The country would be completely and utterly defeated, and then occupied by a foreign power...be it either South Korea or the US. The death toll would be in millions.

THAT would completely go against the very core of North Korean thought: Juche....nationalist self-reliance.

With this all said, I have mentioned North Korea wants relevance, and it does. It is the dictionary's definition of irrelevant without its large army and nuclear capability. But what does it hope to achieve with its relevance? Ah, that is a good question. Perhaps foreign aid. Maybe access to greater technology. Maybe assurances the governing elite will be given immunity or something. Perhaps it wants the US out of South Korea. Perhaps it doesn't really even know, as its definition of success is just to be on equal footing with the great regional powers in some capacity, and this is how to do it.

If the latter is the truth, perhaps you could argue Pyongyang's belligerence is simply a means for it to save the all important Asian concept of "face" with its population, and this is the only way it can do it after literally decades of mismanagement.

Again, I am not an academic expert on North Korean, but this is kind of what I told those folks who asked about North Korean....but, obviously, not in anywhere near as great a detail. What I didn't tell them is unifying factors can make people work together for a common goal, regardless of its merits.

Going back to the first couple of paragraphs, if Greater Birmingham can figure out those unifying factors, it will be able to march forward to an agreeable common goal.

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