

North Korea: The Perils of Ignoring the Good Problem

Written by Barry Stentiford

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BARRY STENTIFORD, FEB 13 2018

American military planners are by nature pessimists, and that is a good thing. They tend to think about what could go wrong in military operations and take steps to mitigate those potential problems. This inclination, however, often blinds them to strategic problems that might arise if operations go better than expected. Issues that arise when operations go faster than planned, or are cheaper in terms of lives, money, or time, are good problems, and thus do not grab the attention of strategic planners the way bad problems do. When operations go better than expected, strategic leaders often have to play catch-up as the situation moves beyond earlier assumptions, and leaders find themselves facing unexpected situations. This tendency often leads to unforeseen new problems following war, resulting in a post-war strategic situation with little advantage over the pre-war situation.

At the operational level, think of the logistics planner who in planning for the Normandy invasion, wondered how to keep the forces supplied with fuel, ammunition, and food if German resistance in France collapsed faster than expected. When most planners were worrying about a slaughter on the beaches and the failure of the invasion, the idea of the German Army moving eastward faster than allied armies could keep up seemed remote and the sort of good problem that prudent planners need not bother themselves with. When that did indeed happen after the Breakout, logisticians had to improvise and the results were less than satisfactory, and opportunities were lost.

On the strategic level, more serious examples abound. From roughly 1689 until 1763, New England saw New France as an existential threat and repeatedly called for its reduction. The almost constant warfare between New France and New England bound New England ever closer to Great Britain. British and colonial leaders apparently gave no thought to the impact of the altered strategic situation in the New World if New France was indeed eliminated. Once New France was no more, the strategic situation in British North America changed, and one could argue the War of American Independence was a result. Britain went from defending its mainland colonies from an attack from Canada, to defending Canada from an attack from its former mainland colonies. That Britain succeeded so totally over New France in 1763 hardly gave Britain a strategic advantage in North America. The pattern is not simply one from an increasingly distant past, but one that the twentieth century also gives ample examples, such as when United States went from helping China fight against Japan, and the USSR fight against Germany, to defending Japan and West Germany from China and the USSR.

Currently, the United States is moving toward an apparent crisis point with North Korea. Planners are rightfully concerned with the dire potential consequences of a full scale war. Planners seek to ensure none of North Korea's nuclear weapons hit South Korean, Japanese, or United States territory. They focus on the massive artillery barrage that could fall on Seoul. And they seek to find a way to bring down the regime without costing massive amounts of American and South Korean lives, or inflicting catastrophic damage on the South Korean economy. These are all proper areas of concern. However, strategic planners might also want to give some consideration to what the strategic situation in northeast Asia would look like without North Korea.

With Korea unified under Seoul, the relationship between Japan and Korea would change, as would the relationship between Korea and China. The mutual antipathy toward North Korea is one of the few issues that Japan and South Korea agree on. A united Korea under Seoul might decide that a closer relationship with China would be in its best interest and the United States was no longer welcome on the peninsula. Japan, with a united Korea next door, might feel increasingly threatened and either greatly build-up its defenses or cling closer to its alliance with the United

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States, or both.

Right now, to be planning for a world without the DPRK seems overly optimistic. The destruction of the North Korean state will usher in a period lasting many difficult decades as Seoul attempts to integrate its population and territory into a single nation. We worry about the dangerous problems we face and not the “good problem” of a future without the DPRK. But strategic leaders need to remember that the elimination of one strategic problem does not necessarily lead to a better world that was like the old one but with the problem removed. Instead, the elimination of a strategic problem usually leads to a different world with its own unintended and undesired problems. War is complex, and war changes the strategic environment in unpredictable ways. Without grappling with the potential “good problem” of the collapse of the DPRK, the United States could find itself winning a war but losing the peace.

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