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Source: *Asian Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (Mar., 1981), pp. 325-341

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2643728>

Accessed: 17-07-2018 14:56 UTC

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U.S. TROOP WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTH KOREA: PAST SHORTCOMINGS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Larry A. Niksch

ON JULY 20, 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Adviser to President Carter, read a White House statement to the press declaring that the president had given up plans to withdraw U.S. ground forces from South Korea by 1982. According to the announcement, withdrawals planned for 1979, 1980, and 1981, totaling over 20,000 men, were suspended. The White House statement also said that a reassessment of U.S. forces in South Korea would be conducted in 1981 based on two factors: (1) "the restoration of a satisfactory North-South military balance" and (2) "evidence of tangible progress toward a reduction of tensions on the peninsula."

The White House statement represented a major revision of President Carter's first significant foreign policy initiative. He had made the withdrawal of American ground troops from South Korea an important issue during the 1976 presidential campaign, and, after taking office in January 1977, had given the proposal close personal attention. During a press conference on March 9, 1977, he had declared his intention to withdraw ground forces in four to five years, adding that "I am very determined to take this action."

It is apparent that President Carter suspended withdrawals in 1979 with great reluctance. He did not comment publicly on the decision, in contrast to his personal role in introducing the plan in 1977, nor did he announce the suspension during his highly publicized visit to South Korea in early July 1979, despite numerous press reports citing high administration officials that the decision essentially had been reached.

Thus, one may ask: What went wrong? Why did President Carter have to abandon a commitment that seemed to have such personal conviction behind it? And what conditions are most likely to exist in 1981 and beyond under the new Reagan administration?

Most observers have cited a single factor in the troop withdrawal suspension: a new U.S. intelligence estimate of North Korean military strength which came to light in January 1979 showing North Korea to have stronger military forces than U.S. intelligence experts had previously believed. While there can be little doubt that the estimate marked a decisive turning point in the troop withdrawal issue, its significance did not lie in a vacuum but instead grew out of a set of conditions that preceded it and apparently influenced President Carter to react by suspending the withdrawals.

Rationale for the Plan

The Carter administration's rationales for the troop withdrawal plan provide a useful starting point to examine the emergence of these conditions. Of particular importance is the distinction between the stated and unstated rationales. The stated rationales, as enunciated by the president and his top advisers during the early months of 1977, had three basic elements: (1) that a satisfactory military balance existed between North and South Korea and that South Korea could defend against an attack without American ground forces, provided the U.S. committed logistics, air, and naval support; (2) that the Soviet Union and China shared Washington's interest in preserving stability in the peninsula, and, therefore, would restrain North Korea; and (3) that the United States would maintain a clear defense commitment to South Korea. In short, administration officials argued that these three elements would preserve deterrence against a North Korean invasion after ground forces were removed.¹ However, there is substantial evidence that the administration had other rationales for the withdrawal policy. These included specific policy objectives that the president and his advisers chose not to state publicly, broader regional considerations and assumptions regarding East Asia, and certain assumptions concerning domestic political attitudes toward Korea and East Asia.

Several unstated rationales appeared to flow from a broad view within the Carter administration that a central mission of its policy in East Asia should be to apply the "lessons" of the Vietnam War. Some observers have described the administration's foreign policy as a "post-Vietnam" policy heavily influenced by the effects of the communist victories in Indochina. Certainly, in the case of the Korean troop withdrawal, this theme is apparent.

The most specific unstated rationale was that withdrawal of ground forces would preclude or make less likely another American involvement in an Asian land war, an objective originally emphasized by an-

¹ For statements of these elements, see President Carter's news conferences of March 9 and May 26, 1977, and his interview with *U.S. News and World Report*, June 6, 1977. See also Under Secretary of State Philip Habib's statements before the Subcommittees for International Security and Scientific Affairs and Asian and Pacific Affairs, June 10, 1977.

alysts of the Brookings Institution, who discussed it with candidate Carter in 1975. This was "a significant development" in Carter's thinking, according to a later revelation by White House domestic affairs adviser Stuart Eizenstat.² Presidential Review Memorandum (PRM) 13, the administration's basic policy document on the withdrawal plan, incorporated Carter's view and stressed that removal of U.S. ground forces, especially the Second Infantry Division located just south of the demilitarized zone, would remove the "trip wire" of automatic American involvement in ground combat if North Korea attacked. PRM-13 stated that if U.S. air and naval forces became directly engaged in resisting a North Korean invasion, they would be reinforced only with weapons and ammunition and not with ground troops.³ A similar view was expressed in PRM-10, an administration assessment of U.S. global strategy, which stated that termination of a land-based military presence in Asia would provide the United States with "flexibility to determine at the time whether it should or should not get involved in a local war."

Related to this specific objective was a broader sentiment within the administration that the U.S. should give less attention to Asia and more to Europe in its foreign policy. This "Europe first" orientation was most graphically illustrated by the reemphasized "swing strategy" under which the U.S. would shift its Pacific naval forces to the European theatre in case of a general U.S.-Soviet war. Less well known was the serious debate and consideration in the administration during 1977 of several moves to reduce substantially American military power in East Asia. Contingency plans were drawn up for removing one of the two aircraft carriers forward deployed with the Seventh Fleet.⁴ A serious debate occurred over the future of the U.S. bases in the Philippines, and State Department professionals have related that many of the new Carter appointees questioned the need for these bases. Finally, there is some indication that the administration also considered withdrawing the Third Marine Division from Okinawa.

President Carter's personal foreign policy perspectives gave East Asia a relatively low priority. For example, this region was the last to receive a presidential overseas visit. But more telling was that Carter reportedly told his energy chief, James Schlesinger, that Presidents Truman, Johnson, and Nixon were all prevented from dealing with more important problems because of Asian wars in Korea and Vietnam and that he was determined to avoid their mistakes.⁵

The Vietnam War also influenced administration leaders' assumptions concerning Congress and the American people on the Korean

² *Washington Post*, June 12, 1977.

³ *Mainichi Shimbun*, March 7, 1977. The Japanese daily gave a detailed account of PRM-13.

⁴ *New York Times*, March 15, 1979.

⁵ Donald S. Zagoria, "Why We Can't Leave Korea," *New York Times Magazine*, October 2, 1977, p. 86.

question. Basically they assumed that the post-Vietnam mood of Congress and the public would assure domestic support of the troop withdrawal policy. The administration adopted the view that given the impact of Vietnam, the South Korean government's restrictions on civil and political liberties, and the unfolding "Koreagate" saga of Tongsun Park, Congress might legislate a troop pullout first.⁶ Japanese government officials disclosed to the author that administration officials emphasized this view of potential congressional initiative on the troop question during Prime Minister Fukuda's visit to Washington in March 1977. Finally, the administration appeared to believe that Japan would accept the withdrawal and that any "Japan problem" could be managed successfully. Thus, within ten days after President Carter took the oath of office, Vice President Mondale visited Tokyo and informed Japanese leaders that the administration would remove U.S. ground forces from South Korea.

This perception of the "Japan problem" probably had several sources. Brookings analysts believed that Japan could be reassured if Washington emphasized that the Korean withdrawal would not affect the U.S. defense commitment to Japan;⁷ this argument probably reinforced Carter's personal view. Administration officials, too, may have shared the attitude of previous administrations that the government of Japan would accept U.S. policy shifts presented as *fait accompli* or "shocks" because the United States possessed most of the "bargaining chips" in dealing with Japan. This was reflected early in one administration official's reported comment that if the Japanese government complained too loudly about the troop withdrawal, the administration might counter with pressure on Tokyo to increase its own military capabilities.⁸ The administration's early emphasis on trilateralism was another contributory factor, for the tone of this concept suggested that East Asian security issues outside of Japan would not play a dominant role in the U.S.-Japan dialogue but would be subordinate to cooperation among the United States, Japan, and Western Europe on global economic and energy problems.

The Key Critics: Congress and Japan

As early as the middle of 1977, it was clear that certain of the administration's assumptions were questionable, if not erroneous. Spurred by the expressed misgivings of U.S. military commanders in South Korea, the initial outcry in Congress and subsequent congressional ac-

⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Armed Services, Department of Defense Authorization for Appropriations for Fiscal Year 1980, Part 4: Manpower and Personnel. Hearings, 96th Congress, First Session, 1979, pp. 1454-1460. Testimony of Michael Armacost, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense.

⁷ Henry Owen and Charles Schultze, *Setting National Priorities: The Next Ten Years* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 1976), pp. 34, 73.

⁸ *Washington Star*, March 20, 1977.

tions showed important elements in the legislative branch doubted the wisdom of the plan. Throughout 1977 and 1978, congressional hearings, reports, and legislation increased the pressure on the administration to modify or terminate the withdrawal plan. Key among these were the report of Senators Humphrey and Glenn (January 1978) and the hearings and reports of the House Investigations Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee.

One result of these investigations was legislation which increasingly required the administration to justify withdrawals to Congress. The Fiscal Year (FY) 1978 Foreign Relations Authorization Act contained language stating that U.S. policy toward South Korea should be decided by both the president and Congress and that implementation of troop withdrawal was to be "carried out in regular consultation with Congress" with reference to U.S. interests in Korea and Japan. The following year, the International Security Assistance Act for FY 1979 contained a more specific requirement, directing the president to provide Congress with a detailed report on the effects of the withdrawal on the situation inside Korea and in the Northeast Asian region 120 days before each phase of the troop withdrawal.

In private, some executive branch officials have expressed a sense of "betrayal" by the Congress, pointing out that certain actions by Congress in 1974 and 1975, such as the August 1974 report of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, gave the impression that Congress favored a removal of ground forces from South Korea.⁹ This claim may have some validity, but it is also true that the administration adopted the withdrawal plan without first testing its assumption concerning congressional attitudes by means of thorough consultations with the Congress. That was a fundamental error.

The administration apparently also misread the mood of the American people. A CBS-*New York Times* poll of July 1977 showed that 52% of those surveyed favored retention of American ground forces in Korea, while 34% were in favor of removing them. One year later, a national public opinion poll conducted by Potomac Associates found that 55% favored keeping U.S. forces in Korea at their present level or increasing their size. The Potomac poll strongly suggested that, although the majority had deep misgivings about American involvement in another Korean War, they believed that retention of U.S. ground forces in Korea represented the best means of preventing another war from breaking out.

In short, the administration never had a strong political constituency in either the Congress or the public to support the policy. The president himself gave little public attention to the withdrawal plan after his initial announcement and thus really never tried to build up

⁹ The Subcommittee's report on the FY 1975 Department of Defense Appropriations bill recommended that a gradual withdrawal of the Second Infantry Division begin in FY 1976.

public and congressional support for it. This behavior undoubtedly reflected the overall low priority he assigned to East Asian issues, and was probably also due to his increasingly difficult relations with Congress on a number of domestic and foreign policy questions. Consequently, the administration soon found itself isolated in the face of growing criticism of its Korea policy.

It also appears that the administration underestimated the "Japan problem." At the Carter-Fukuda summit conference in March 1977, the administration gained from the Japanese a grudging acceptance of the withdrawal plan, although the Japanese government publicly cautioned that withdrawals should be carried out in a manner that would preserve stability on the Korean peninsula. In private, the attitude of the Japanese government was more critical. Japan's concern over the trend of U.S. policy in Asia had grown steadily since the collapse of South Vietnam in April 1975 and the Ford administration's decision in that year to remove one of the three aircraft carriers deployed with the Seventh Fleet in the Western Pacific. To many Japanese officials, these moves appeared to signal a diminution of the U.S. security role in the region. Thus Carter's troop withdrawal plan was viewed in Tokyo as an added signal, this time closer to home. When Prime Minister Fukuda visited Washington, he voiced these concerns not only for Japan but also on behalf of the governments of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The Japanese public, too, felt this apprehension, though in a more vague sense. A *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll in April 1978 found 38% of the respondents did not believe the United States would defend Japan in an emergency as compared to 21% who did believe it. This reversed a similar poll of 1969 which showed 37% expressing belief in the credibility of the U.S. defense commitment as against 29% who did not.

These sentiments, as related to the Korea issue, periodically filtered into the American press. For example, when Secretary of Defense Brown visited Tokyo in July 1977, the *New York Times* reported that Prime Minister Fukuda had "grave doubts" about the plan.¹⁰ More importantly, Japanese officials firmly expressed their misgivings to American Congressmen who visited Japan. Representative Stephen Solarz stated in his trip report of October 1977 that Japan was "skeptical, to put it mildly" about the plan.¹¹ Two months later, Senator Jacob Javits portrayed "considerable uneasiness" voiced privately by Japanese government officials.¹² Later reports by the House Armed Services Committee and the Pacific Study Group of the Senate Armed

¹⁰ *New York Times*, July 28, 1977.

¹¹ U.S. Congress, House, Committee on International Relations, Security Issues in the Far East. Report of a Fact-finding Mission to South Korea and Japan. 95th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: GPO, 1977), p. 6.

¹² U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, Study Mission to Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. 95th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: GPO, 1977), p. 6.

Services Committee described similar Japanese doubts. In hearings of the House Foreign Operations Subcommittee in February 1979, Representative Matthew McHugh related that Japanese officials he had met in Tokyo "were not favorable to that particular withdrawal."¹³

There can be little doubt that Japanese views had a significant influence on this issue, including an impact on congressional attitudes. Throughout the 1970s, the American perception of Japan's importance steadily increased as Americans saw that nation emerging as an economic superpower. A Potomac Associates nationwide poll in 1978 found that only Canada ranked ahead of Japan as a country with which it was "very important" or "fairly important" for the United States to get along well (Japan tied with the Soviet Union). A large plurality of the respondents listed Japan as the United States' most reliable friend in Asia, and 50% agreed that the United States should come to Japan's defense if it was attacked by the Soviet Union or China (compared to 37% in 1974).

These attitudes were reflected in the growing number of visits to Japan by congressional delegations in the second half of the 1970s. Increasingly, the perceptions of these groups and other Americans who observed Japan focused on broader issues in East Asia, as Japanese diplomacy in the region grew more assertive. Thus, these issues, including security in the Korean peninsula, gained prominence in U.S.-Japan relations, despite the Carter administration's early emphasis on tri-lateralism.

The Strategy of Reassurance

By the summer of 1977, as the errors in administration assumptions became evident, the Carter administration reacted with a "strategy of reassurance" that sought to provide additional assurances to Japan, South Korea, and critical elements within the American body politic that the troop withdrawal plan would not lessen the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea. South Korean and Japanese officials received verbal and written assurances from the administration that the United States would provide prompt and effective military support to South Korea in case of an attack. In early 1978, the administration gave a new assurance to these officials and in testimony before congressional committees that it would reconsider its withdrawal plan if the military balance in Korea became adverse to South Korea. Several other "compensatory measures" were also announced. These included a pledge to provide South Korea with about \$2 billion in arms and military equipment over the withdrawal period, including the transfer of \$800

¹³ U.S. Congress. House. Committee on Appropriations. Subcommittee on Foreign Operations and Related Programs. Foreign Assistance and Related Programs: Appropriations for 1980. Hearings. 96th Congress, 1st Session (Washington: GPO, 1979), p. 315.

million in weaponry from U.S. to South Korean forces; a promise to strengthen U.S. air power in Korea; an agreement to establish a combined U.S.-South Korean military command; and the holding of several joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises to demonstrate the capacity of the United States to commit substantial ground, sea, and air forces into Korea.

The Carter administration also halted its consideration of further military withdrawals from East Asia. Secretary Brown disclosed in August 1977 that the administration would seek an agreement with the Philippines that would allow the United States to retain bases there (an agreement was concluded in January 1979), and pledged in February 1978 in a Los Angeles speech that there would be no additional reductions of U.S. forces in the Western Pacific.

These measures were partially effective. Much of the open criticism abated in 1978, although the underlying doubts remained both in the U.S. and in Northeast Asia and created new difficulties for the administration in justifying its policy. The repeated assurances to Japan enhanced Korea as a factor in Japanese perceptions of the credibility of the U.S. security role in Northeast Asia. The Brookings Institution strategy of "separating" the U.S. defense commitments to Japan and South Korea was negated. The U.S.-South Korean military exercises also tended to invalidate the rationale of avoiding another Asian land war, since they emphasized the deployment into Korea of American ground forces from Okinawa, Hawaii, and the continental United States. One could ask: why withdraw ground forces if you intend to send them back in case of war?

The strategy of reassurance, moreover, did not prevent the growth of dissent within the administration itself. In 1978 reports appeared—most of which were accurate—that important civilian officials had begun to question the withdrawal policy, among them Ambassador Mansfield (Japan), Ambassador Woodcock (China), Assistant Secretary of State Holbrooke, and Michael Armacost (Northeast Asia officer on the National Security Council). They joined an increasingly oppositionist element in the Joint Chiefs of Staff and among U.S. commanders in Korea.

Response to the New Intelligence Estimate

Against this background, new intelligence estimates in January 1979, with subsequent refinements, placed North Korean ground forces at between 600,000 and 700,000 men rather than the 440,000 previously estimated. These forces are believed to be equivalent to over 40 combat divisions instead of the prior estimate of 29 divisions. In offensive weaponry, North Korea has 2,600 tanks (including approximately 300 T-62 tanks, the main battle tank of the Soviet Army until 1976),¹⁴

¹⁴ U.S. military officials in Korea believe that the North Korean-produced T-62 is similar in capabilities to the Soviet model.

1,000 armored personnel carriers, 1,500–2,000 multiple rocket launchers, 9,000 mortars, and 3,500–4,000 field artillery weapons. North Korean ground forces now outnumber the South Korean ground force of 560,000, organized into 22 combat divisions. Pyongyang's lead in weaponry is 3 to 1 in tanks, 2 to 1 in mortars, and nearly 2 to 1 in field artillery pieces.

The new estimate raised additional doubts about two of the three stated rationals of the administration: that a satisfactory military balance existed between North and South Korea and that the USSR and China could exercise effective restraint over North Korea. It was apparent that North Korea had a greater capability than previously believed to launch an invasion with the possible objective of seizing Seoul, 25 miles below the demilitarized zone. Even on the basis of older intelligence information, Carter administration studies in 1977, including PRM-10, had questioned the likelihood of a successful defense of Seoul in an initial attack. The new estimate also suggested that North Korea's indigenous arms industry was stronger than had been perceived, as Pyongyang was known to be manufacturing all of its ground weaponry. This industry, coupled with actual strength, appeared to make North Korea less dependent on the Soviet Union and China for arms in any preparation for an invasion.

The president essentially had three options for responding to the new intelligence estimate. One was to increase the "compensatory measures," which would have required additional security assistance to South Korea, including more modern weaponry, and undoubtedly would also have involved an increase in U.S. air and sea forces in Northeast Asia, such as additional tactical fighter squadrons to South Korea and the forward deployment of a third aircraft carrier to the Western Pacific.

Diplomacy was a second option, and statements by President Carter and other administration officials in January and February 1979 indicated that this was the president's preference. China was the key, for a prominent view in the administration was that improvement in U.S.-China relations would induce the Chinese to take positive steps to help reduce tensions in Korea. With the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States and China in December 1978 and Deng Xiao Ping's visit to Washington in February 1979, President Carter tried to play the "China card" on the Korean question. Shortly before Deng arrived in Washington, Carter called for "maximum Chinese influence" on North Korea to preserve stability. Administration officials disclosed that the president would give Korea priority in his talks with Deng and that he would suggest that China establish contacts with South Korea. In short, the president hoped for a breakthrough, aided by China, in the long-standing American proposal of cross-normalization: a process in which the four major powers would move simultaneously to normalize relations with the Koreans and, in doing so, build a new framework of restraint on North Korea.

Both options had drawbacks. Increased arms shipments to South

Korea probably would not have a significant impact on the North-South military balance until after all U.S. ground troops were removed in 1982, given the long lead time of several years in American arms transfer programs between contract and delivery. Shipments of more sophisticated weapons to South Korea also was contrary to the administration's "global" policy of limiting arms transfers in order not to exacerbate local arms races. As indicated previously, strengthening American air and naval forces in the Western Pacific ran strongly against administration inclination; and it would have created problems for worldwide force deployments (which subsequently have been produced by the crises in Iran and Afghanistan).

China effectively killed the diplomatic option when Deng Xiaoping told Carter that Beijing would not change its policy of total support for North Korea and would continue its refusal to have even low level, unofficial contacts with South Korea.

This left only a third option—to suspend the troop withdrawal plan. The case for this option was strengthened by the previous assurances the administration had given Japan, South Korea, and the Congress. Since the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a growing number of civilian officials favored this action and there was little overt opposition to it in Congress or among the American public, President Carter faced considerable pressure to suspend the withdrawals, which he did in July 1979.

The Outlook for 1981 and Beyond

The issue of U.S. troops in Korea now awaits a possible reassessment in 1981, since the new Reagan administration appears to have a different view from its predecessor. The reassessment, however, is likely to be a perfunctory exercise—if it takes place at all—and almost certainly will not result in a renewal of troop withdrawals since the Republican platform pledged that a Republican administration "will maintain American ground and air forces in South Korea, and will not reduce our presence further." Richard Allen, Ronald Reagan's chief foreign policy adviser, stated in an interview with the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* (June 19, 1980) that "there is no possibility at all of their [U.S. ground forces] being withdrawn during the four years of the term of office, in the case of a Reagan Administration being born."

The new administration's attitude raises several questions. Is it in line with the actual conditions in 1981 related to the two criteria set by President Carter, which nearly all observers of U.S. security policy toward Korea recognize as pertinent to the troop issue? Does it correspond with perceptions in the Congress and among the American public? Finally, what other factors could affect the troop issue beyond 1981?

First, what is the existing situation with regard to military bal-

ance and diplomacy? Despite the emphasis President Carter placed on restoring a satisfactory military balance between North and South Korea, executive branch officials acknowledge that there is no specific definition of a satisfactory balance but state that it involves South Korean ground force capabilities, including a "bean count" of each side's weapons. U.S. air and naval forces in and around Korea are also included in the equation. Most officials assert that the ability to defend Seoul is a factor in the context of the South Korean-U.S. forward defense strategy.

In interviews by the author with U.S. and South Korean officials in Korea in September 1979 and in follow-up interviews with U.S. executive branch officials in Washington, it is apparent that few if any officials of either government believed that a satisfactory military balance could be reestablished by 1981. Japanese officials in Tokyo interviewed in October 1979 were not as explicit, but seemed to share this assessment. Several individuals expressed the view that a satisfactory balance could be achieved around 1984–1985 if longer range plans went according to schedule. General John Wickham, commander of U.S. forces in Korea, stated in November 1980 that the overall military balance had not changed appreciably from earlier estimates.¹⁵

There appear to be a number of reasons why only a degree of progress could be made by 1981. The first is the nature of the FMS program in Korea and the general nature of arms transfers. As stated previously, these transfer programs usually have lead times of several years between contract and delivery, and lead times are longest for more sophisticated weaponry. Therefore, unless the United States sent weapons currently designated for other countries or from existing U.S. stocks, weapons transfers contracted now probably would not be delivered to South Korea until the 1983–1985 period. Furthermore, the cost of new U.S. weaponry is rising; and congressional cuts in the general security assistance budget have resulted in decreasing allotments for South Korea. Under the original withdrawal plan, South Korea was to receive FMS credits totaling \$275 million annually during the withdrawal period. For fiscal years 1979 and 1980, the actual amount budgeted for South Korea was \$225 million, and for fiscal year 1981, the Carter administration requested only \$175 million. Moreover, President Carter's suspension of the troop withdrawal resulted in cancellation of the \$800 million weapons transfer program, so South Korean forces will not receive the bulk of weapons and equipment originally promised under that program.

A somewhat similar situation seems to exist concerning South Korea's own defense spending. During his visit to Seoul in July 1979, President Carter urged the South Korean government to increase defense expenditures. The South Korean government later set a budget of \$4.47

¹⁵ *Army Times*, November 10, 1980.

billion for 1980, a 32% rise over the \$3.38 billion for 1979, but the effect of this will be felt mainly after 1981 because of lead times in weapons production and development.

Finally, in terms of numbers of heavy weapons, the gap between North Korea and South Korea has become considerable, and North Korea undoubtedly will expand its weapons output in the early 1980s. South Korean officials in Seoul stated in September 1979 that North Korea may have slowed the pace of its overall military buildup, but that it would continue to emphasize production of tanks and certain other categories of heavy arms.

But what of diplomatic prospects? Currently they do not appear good, but, unlike the military balance where elements are relatively fixed over the short term, diplomacy could be altered rapidly if any of the parties involved make a conscious decision to begin new, serious diplomatic approaches. This is especially true of the Korean situation, since there are several parties involved and several avenues of potential diplomatic progress.

The first avenue is that of direct South Korean-North Korean talks. New diplomatic activity on this front began in January 1980 when the two sides agreed to a meeting of their respective prime ministers—a meeting that would be unique in the various forms of diplomatic contacts Seoul and Pyongyang have had since the North-South communique of July 4, 1972, in which the two governments pledged to work for Korean reunification.

However, following the assumption of actual governmental power on May 17, 1980, by the South Korean Army under General Chun Doo Hwan, North Korea moved to downgrade working level “contacts.” Pyongyang sharply criticized alleged “atrocities” of the South Korean government; and after Chun Doo Hwan became president, the North Korean government declared in September 1980 that it would not negotiate with the “illegitimate” government in Seoul. In short, the climate for inter-Korean talks has deteriorated.

Since the original North-South talks broke down in 1974, the two sides have held widely differing views of the proper forum or body through which negotiations should be conducted as well as the issues to be negotiated. South Korea has insisted on direct government-to-government negotiations, but North Korea consistently has proposed talks among representatives of political and social organizations of the North and South, including an all-Korea political conference. Pyongyang's position has reflected its refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the South Korean state and government; formal government-to-government negotiations would symbolize such recognition.

North Korean statements suggested that Pyongyang did not view a meeting of the prime ministers as the beginning of substantive government-to-government negotiations, referring to the proposed meeting as a “contact.” The government in Pyongyang appeared to believe

that, in the unsettled political atmosphere in South Korea following the October 1979 assassination of President Park Chung Hee, it could have used such meetings to influence nongovernment groups in South Korea to pressure the Seoul government to accept a forum for negotiations similar to that advocated by North Korea.

The two sides have also fundamentally disagreed over what concrete issues negotiations should address. South Korea has advocated that negotiations deal first with nonmilitary and nonpolitical measures, such as the reunion of divided families, trade, and exchanges. North Korea, on the other hand, constantly has pressed for broad military and political accords in the first stage of the reunification process, including provisions for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces.

In the preliminary talks to prepare the way for a meeting of the prime ministers, the protracted negotiations over the agenda for the prime ministers pointed up these very different conceptual frameworks held by Seoul and Pyongyang. South Korea proposed a three-part agenda beginning with the promotion of mutual trust between North and South, followed by the settlement of peace in Korea, and, lastly, the question of reunification. In short, the Seoul government continued to give first priority to proposals for trade and exchanges. North Korea's agenda proposal was a single item: "Promoting the Independent and Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland Through Collaboration and Unity Between the North and South in all Fields." North Korean pronouncements indicated that this was meant to foster the concept of multiparty negotiations over broad political and military accords. Pyongyang accused Seoul of continuing to follow the approach of the late Park Chung Hee which emphasized gradual improvement of relations in stages aimed at creating a permanent "two Koreas" situation.

Since the July 4, 1972, communiqué, Pyongyang frequently has linked its willingness to negotiate to the internal political policies of the South Korean government and its current rejection of working level talks is in line with this approach. The newly imposed restrictions on political and civil liberties in the South probably led North Korea to conclude that dialogue with the Seoul government was no longer a fruitful means of exploiting the unsettled post-Park situation in South Korea. Consequently, the future outlook for this avenue of diplomacy is not promising.

A second avenue for negotiations is some form of talks between North Korea and the United States. The United States and South Korea have opposed bilateral Washington-Pyongyang negotiations without the full participation of Seoul, and Presidents Carter and Park formally proposed tripartite negotiations among the three governments in July 1979 after the two leaders agreed that South Korea would take the lead role in dealing with North Korea in three-party talks. But North Korea has consistently rejected tripartite talks and since 1974 has tried to induce the United States into bilateral negotiations for a

peace treaty without South Korean participation. North Korea used the visit of an American ping-pong team to Pyongyang in May 1979 as an occasion to reemphasize its proposal and this time offered as a prelude to bilateral talks the initiation of U.S.-North Korean cultural exchanges and visits to North Korea by members of Congress and other prominent Americans. Later in the year, Pyongyang extended secret invitations to several members of Congress. Representative Stephen Solarz (D-New York) visited Pyongyang in July 1980 and had discussions with Kim Il Sung and other North Korean officials. Tom Reston, who had recently resigned as a State Department press officer, traveled to the North Korean capital the following month.

The Carter administration began to move away from the traditional U.S. position that American contacts with North Korea should not take place until the North-South Korea relationship showed substantive movement towards a relaxation of tensions. Key Carter administration and U.S. diplomatic officials asserted that U.S. contacts with North Korea could have an educational value for both sides and would not produce political pressures in the United States for government-to-government negotiations with North Korea. These officials appeared to hope that, over time, contacts and exchanges would bring North Korea out of its isolation and influence the Pyongyang regime to moderate its objectives toward South Korea.

The Reagan administration, however, seems likely to favor a linkage of contacts with the status of the Seoul-Pyongyang relationship and, therefore, would not encourage the former. Initiatives for contacts may still occur and may have some support in Congress, but the new administration's apparent position and the experience of U.S.-China contacts in the early and mid-1970s suggests that such a process would be a long-term one before a regular political dialogue would begin. It is, to say the least, doubtful that the United States would ever agree to negotiate with North Korea on Korean security issues without South Korea's equal participation.

For its part, North Korea has given no sign that it would drop its opposition to tripartite talks, and it too is likely to be cautious in its approach to contacts and exchanges with the United States, since the regime would risk opening up the closed North Korean society to the outside world.

Cross-normalization is a third avenue for diplomatic progress, but Pyongyang has always adamantly opposed it. Because both the Soviet Union and China do not want North Korea to move into the other's camp, North Korea has been able to pressure both to refrain from overtures toward South Korea. China, as stated previously, rejects even the most informal of contacts with South Korea (although secret contacts probably have taken place), and Deng Xiao Ping strongly reiterated Beijing's position in two interviews with Japanese and American journalists in March and April 1980, declaring on one occasion that

"we are not interested" in trade with South Korea. In short, growing ties between the United States and China has not influenced the Chinese leadership to adopt a cross-normalization approach. The Soviet Union, for its part, confines its contacts with South Korea to multi-lateral forums and refuses to establish bilateral relationships. Soviet sources have implied that Moscow will go no further until China establishes contacts with South Korea.

After Deng's visit to Washinton, the Carter administration was unwilling to pressure China on the Korean question. Korea received a fairly low priority in Washington-Beijing discussions since the administration was apprehensive that intensive negotiations of the Korean problem could damage the improving U.S.-China relationship. The administration also preferred that North Korea "tilt" toward China rather than the Soviet Union and, accordingly, feared that Chinese contacts with South Korea, overtly inspired by the United States, would impair Beijing's apparent efforts to influence North Korea to exercise military restraint. Given these constraints, the administration essentially was left with the hope that Chinese influence and the growing cooperation among China, Japan, and the United States (including Japanese and American technological assistance to China's economy), would induce North Korea to conclude that its best interests lie in detente with South Korea and friendly relations with Tokyo and Washington.

It is uncertain how Korea will figure in the Reagan administration's policy toward China. Some of the president's pre-inaugural advisers on Asia believe that the administration should give closer consideration to China's attitude towards Korea before taking future steps to strengthen Sino-American relations, especially the sale of arms to China. On the other hand, Korea is only one of many issues in this equation, which may be debated actively during the first year of the new administration. One thing appears certain: the administration will face a difficult task if it attempts to draw China out of its present frozen position on Korea.

In short, the current status of the military balance and diplomatic prospects appear to support the new administration's inclination not to renew troop withdrawals in the early 1980s. Overall, Congress and the American public are inclined to support that position. Congressional initiatives towards the Carter withdrawal plan grew out of perceptions in the legislative branch that ran parallel to the views of Ronald Reagan and his advisers. The new Congress likely will favor a retention of U.S. ground forces even more strongly.

The American public continues to support the stationing of American ground forces; according to a Potomac Associates poll of September 1979 (conducted by the Gallup organization), 58% of the respondents favored retaining U.S. troops at their present level or increasing their number, despite continued misgivings about American involvement in another Korean War. Forty-eight percent approved of President Car-

ter's suspension of further withdrawals of ground troops, while 26% disapproved.

Beyond 1981, there are several factors besides the North-South military balance and diplomacy that could influence American attitudes towards the U.S. military presence in South Korea. Militarily, future changes in U.S. force deployments elsewhere in the Western Pacific could reinforce the view that the Second Division should remain in Korea. This is true with regard to both U.S. naval power and the U.S. Third Marine Division on Okinawa, the other major American ground combat unit in the Western Pacific. Withdrawal of additional naval units and/or the Third Division represents a real possibility, given the prospective U.S. force buildup in the Indian Ocean-Persian Gulf region.

U.S. military cooperation with Japan can be expected to expand over the next five years, as the two governments implement the guidelines on defense cooperation which they formulated in 1978. This will further enhance Japan's role in U.S. decision-making concerning forces in Korea.

Questions of human rights in South Korea could stimulate doubts about U.S. security support for South Korea. A continuation of the Chun Doo Hwan government's restrictions on civil and political liberties will undoubtedly draw attention from the Congress, the press, and political interest groups in the United States. More severe restrictions would unquestionably intensify an already unfavorable overall American public attitude toward South Korea, according to the Potomac Associates surveys. It is noteworthy that 49% of the poll respondents in 1979 favored making the U.S. security commitment to South Korea conditional upon an improvement in human rights there; 26% opposed such a linkage.

American attitudes on this issue apparently would have little impact on the status of U.S. forces in Korea, given the other factors discussed above, public support for the retention of ground forces, and the undoubted fact that Americans are not intense in their criticisms. All of this could change if tensions between North and South Korea escalated or if actual war broke out, however. A view held by some South Korean officials is that if North Korea attacked, the United States could sustain a combat involvement for no more than one year before it became enveloped by internal dissension. If that prediction should ever be realized, American perceptions of human rights conditions almost certainly would constitute a contributing factor.

Conclusions

Proposals to withdraw American ground forces from South Korea are not likely to receive favorable consideration from the U.S. government in the early 1980s unless conditions in Korea change substantially. Beyond that time, the issue could surface again if the Korean equation shifts or if a different political sentiment emerges in the United States.

The experience of the Carter plan and the current outlook in Korea suggest that U.S. interests would best be served if policy-makers considered several concepts in any review of the status of U.S. forces. First, a reassessment should analyze the impact that troop withdrawals would have on a broad range of American policy objectives in Korea and East Asia. Careful scrutiny should be given before attaching an exclusive priority to any single goal. Second, if stability in Korea and adequate security for South Korea remain as primary U.S. policy objectives, the North-South military balance and the overall state of North-South relations undoubtedly would continue as key criteria for reassessment. Policy-makers also would have to consider political and economic conditions in the South as important elements affecting stability. The role of China and the Soviet Union would constitute another factor, primarily with respect to the effect of their policies on North Korea's attitude toward South Korea. Third, the mechanics of a reassessment would be equal in importance to the substantive criteria. Policy-makers should seek the formulation of a number of options at the beginning of the reassessment process, and a wide range of both civilian and military experts on Korea in the executive branch should play a role in developing such options. The United States should conduct thorough consultations with the governments of South Korea and Japan prior to a decision. Finally, the executive branch needs to involve the Congress fully in the process to insure that it has accurate knowledge of congressional views.

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