

Secret arms pullout was plan for Korea

By William Beecher
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WASHINGTON—Shortly after President Jimmy Carter took office, the White House asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to draw up a plan to take all tactical nuclear weapons out of South Korea surreptitiously and substitute dummy weapons.

The aim, sources say, was to remove the nuclear weapons without the knowledge of the government of South Korea or of any other nation.

But career officials in the Pentagon and State Department warned that information on such a move was bound to be leaked. This would severely undermine US credibility, they said, not only with South Korea, but also with Western Europe and Japan and anyone else who depends on the American nuclear umbrella.

So the covert pullout was dropped. Instead, 25 years after the armistice was signed in the Korean war, the Carter Administration is in the process of taking out nuclear weapons with the full knowledge of the Seoul government.

Sources say that about two-thirds of the several hundred weapons in Korea at the start of 1977 have been removed. Current plans call for pulling out the rest — primarily bombs for US F4 fighter-bombers — over the next four years.

But since the last of the weapons are not due out until 1982, two years after the next US presidential election, some career officials point out that the question could be raised again if Carter does not win another term.

South Korean President Park
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Chung Hee, in a position privately supported by a number of US officials, has argued that deterrence of a possible assault from North Korea would be undermined by the removal of all nuclear weapons. He has urged that at least a token number be retained.

The internal debate over the wisdom of Carter's plan to withdraw from South Korea all 30,000 American ground troops and all nuclear weapons has been one of the most persistent in his Administration.

At first, the concept was to withdraw all three US Army brigades in three more-or-less equal phases over a four-to-five-year period as South Korea's conventional forces were strengthened with modern planes, tanks and artillery.

The weapons part of the plan was not made public because, as a matter of policy, Washington does not discuss deployment of its tactical nuclear weapons abroad.

But internal dissent was bolstered by complaints from Japan and even China that so sweeping a withdrawal could send the wrong signal to North Korea of a significant diminution of American resolve to defend the Seoul regime, the mutual security treaty between the two countries not withstanding.

So Carter sharply modified his plan. Under the first phase, which will end sometime next year, 6000 Army combat and support troops will be removed. The size of the second phase, which will be completed by mid-1980, has not yet been determined. The final phase, involving the bulk of the remaining two brigades, is due to be carried out by 1982.

Still, there remains some concern. The Senate, in a nonbinding resolution passed 81-7 Wednesday night as part of the foreign security assistance bill, warned the President that further troop withdrawal might upset the military balance in the region.

Those Administration officials anxious to get nuclear weapons out of

South Korea have a number of arguments. If in another war the South cannot stem an invasion, they say, the President might have a hard time avoiding the use of nuclear weapons to prevent a defeat. There also might be temptation to use the weapons rather than see them destroyed or captured, they say.

The officials insist that deterrence would be better served by strengthening South Korea's ability to defend itself and by letting it be known that nuclear weapons are readily available nearby — on Seventh Fleet aircraft carriers and in Guam and the Philippines.

Other officials counter that the name of the game is deterrence, not war. If all nuclear weapons are removed, along with all GIs, they say, the remaining US F4 jets would not look that awesome to the North, which has preponderant air power. Pyongyang, they say, might be tempted to think that an armored blitzkrieg might succeed while Washington officials were debating whether to move up nuclear weapons for use on the gattleground or against key targets in the north.

"If we had gone forward with the secret pullout," one official said, "one can imagine a private writing home about how he was standing guard in freezing weather protecting ostensible nuclear weapons which actually were sacks of sand. What would have happened to deterrence, and our credibility, then?"

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CORONADO, Calif. — Defense Secretary Harold Brown said yesterday that the Carter Administration still plans to pull US ground troops from South Korea in five years despite a Senate demand for consultation on the withdrawals.

The Senate, in an 81-7 vote Wednesday, called on the President to consult with Congress before withdrawing any more troops from South Korea.

"We see no reason at this time to change our overall schedule," Brown told reporters at the end of a two-day meeting between top US and South Korean military officials.