
Defense Report

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The Troop Withdrawal From Korea— An Issue that Won't Fade Away

The House of Representatives and the Senate have each approved amendments to a foreign assistance bill that instructs the President to consult with them before making any additional troop withdrawals from Korea. The Senate amendment is more specific than the one approved by the House but neither of them is a very strong statement of policy.

To live up to one of his many campaign promises President Carter wants to bring home the Army's 2nd Infantry Division, thus eliminating the last U.S. contribution to the ground combat defense of the Republic of Korea. There has been debate about whether or not the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been given adequate opportunity to contribute to the President's decision. An even greater furor began over the propriety of public military criticism of a commander-in-chief's decision after it had been made. For several months these side issues obstructed clear consideration of the basic issue—the likely result of upsetting the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

In a feeble attempt to inject itself into the decision-making process Congress considered hanging its hat on its Constitutional role to "raise and support armies." Some members of the House claimed that the President's intention to transfer much of the weaponry to be left behind by the U.S. 2nd Division to the Korean forces impinged on their prerogatives. Congress, they said, had authorized the purchase of the equipment and appropriated the funds for it, so it should be involved in any decision to dispose of it.

As public concern and press criticism mounted, the President modified his plan somewhat, saying that only 6000 troops would be pulled out for the time being. A decision would be made later, he said, on the balance of the withdrawal. The change in plans seemed to be an admission that although the whole idea was wrong the Administration would not back down completely.

None of the facts that existed when the original decision was made has changed. The North Koreans continue to build up their armed forces, to increase their superiority in tanks and artillery firepower and to behave in their usual truculent manner. Nothing in their demeanor has indicated any lessening of their stated intent to "re-unify" the two Koreas. Japan has become concerned that the United States treaty commitment to defend Northeast Asia means less and less as the U.S. military presence in the area has become smaller and smaller.

The congressional request that the President consult with the legislative body before making further withdrawals is a very tentative step in the right direction. But if our lawmakers are convinced the withdrawal is wrong they should say so—collectively, and unequivocally.