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Vietnam's 'Korean Solution'

The Administration's much-bruited concept of a possible "Korean solution" for Vietnam appears to be taking on a new meaning.

The old concept—long-term retention in South Vietnam (as earlier in South Korea) of a residual force of American troops—was stated by President Nixon last month to be an essential ingredient of his Vietnamization policy. But in addition, it seems that a substantial force of South Korean ground troops is being encouraged by the United States to remain in South Vietnam to insure an anti-Communist Saigon regime. Among the inducements for President Park, who is anxious to keep American troops in South Korea, is Mr. Nixon's postponement of any major reductions in the 43,000 American troops still there. And the United States is reported to have promised to continue to provide the ROK troops in Vietnam with virtually all their supplies and combat pay if they remain.

Serious talk in Seoul of withdrawing ROK troops from Vietnam began only after the Nixon Administration last year revealed plans to withdraw American troops from South Korea over a five-year period as ROK forces were modernized with American military aid. President Park, arguing vehemently against withdrawals before the five-year modernization was completed, threatened to pull all ROK forces out of Vietnam by the end of 1972.

The linkage between American troops in South Korea and Korean troops in South Vietnam dates back to a power play by President Johnson in 1965. At a time when all Asian allies were being urged to aid South Vietnam, South Korea was notified of a tentative American plan to withdraw the two American divisions there from forward positions. They were to be based, instead, near the southern port of Pusan as a "strategic reserve" for Asia as a whole. President Park, seeing the handwriting on the wall, offered to send equivalent Korean forces to Vietnam if the two American divisions would remain in place near the North Korean border.

One of these American divisions was removed from Korea early this year and inactivated. The other was moved back some miles to a tactical reserve posture. Proposals to bring it home and inactivate it for budget reasons in the fiscal year beginning next July have been vetoed by President Nixon. But the proposals had more impact in Seoul than the veto. They have been cited, along with impending Congressional cutbacks in military aid, among President Park's reasons this week for declaring a state of national emergency.

This Korean reaction undoubtedly was foreseen in Washington. Mr. Nixon was reported to be influenced by the argument that too-rapid American withdrawal from South Korea would damage morale there and in Japan. But Vietnamese considerations undoubtedly have been dominant. In the decision he soon must make on the size of the American residual force to remain in South Vietnam after next summer, Mr. Nixon reportedly confronts options ranging from 30,000 to 90,000 troops. If 38,000 Korean troops are still on hand, it will be easier to opt for the lower end of the spectrum—a course which offers greater assurance of keeping the Vietnam issue out of the Presidential campaign.

The danger is that the United States will emerge from next year's election to find itself locked in, not only in Vietnam but in Korea as well, by a "Korean solution" for Vietnam that neither ends the war nor the American involvement, but continues both indefinitely.