

Posting of U.S. Intelligence Ship Off Korea Believed Under Study

Some Pentagon Officials Are Reported to Feel Task Force Could Protect a Mission Like the Pueblo's

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WASHINGTON, April 23—The Nixon Administration is reported to be studying the possibility of sending an electronics intelligence ship, with air and sea escort, to patrol in international waters off North Korea.

Administration sources say that while no decision has been made, some officials, particularly at the Pentagon, believe that with a fleet of warships in the Sea of Japan to protect resumed reconnaissance flights, it might also be a good time to re-establish American intelligence ships off North Korea.

There has been no such activity in the 15 months since North Korea seized the intelligence ship Pueblo. The Pueblo's sister ship, the Banner, is in port in Yokosuka, Japan, within easy steaming distance of North Korea.

Close to 40 Vessels

Officials said that Task Force 71, originally announced as comprising 23 warships, actually numbers close to 40 vessels. These include 3 attack aircraft carriers, one anti-submarine carrier, 3 cruisers, 22 destroyers, at least 5 submarines, and 4 to 6 oilers, ammunition and provision ships.

This force, the officials said, is large enough not only to protect resumed intelligence flights but also to provide air cover and destroyer escort for a resumption of intelligence-gathering by a vessel such as the Banner, which would cruise outside the 12-mile limit claimed by North Korea.

Opponents of such a plan in the Pentagon and State Department say the dispatch of the Banner might tend to "diffuse" the impact of the demonstration called for by the President after North Korea downed a Navy EC-121 aircraft with 31 men aboard April 15.

And, the opponents add, it might unduly risk a fight that could grow out of control.

They argue that should North Korean planes or warships attack a slow-moving intelligence ship and cause some damage, the incident could lead to irresistible demands in the United States for retaliation. That, in turn, could result in North Korean retaliation against air bases and other military installations in South Korea and

risk a war.

The State Department said today that American officials answered Soviet complaints against the naval build-up in the Sea of Japan by suggesting that the complaints "might better be addressed to North Korea, which is responsible for the tensions."

The State Department press officer, Robert J. McCloskey, said that the American answer was made Monday in Moscow and in Washington.

Word reached here today of a statement from Pyongyang suggesting that North Korea might shoot down United States reconnaissance planes in the future. Pentagon analysts say they believe Russia "probably" has warned North Korea against a repetition of either the Pueblo-type seizure or the

shooting down of the Navy plane.

They believe, further, that the Russians have warned that they would not support North Korea with either war supplies or forces should a future attack lead to hostilities with the United States.

Chinese Aid Possible

But the same analysts wonder whether North Korea may brush aside such warnings, feeling that if war actually breaks out, the Soviet Union will have to give support to the North Koreans or face the prospect of such support coming from Communist China, bringing with it greater Chinese influence.

"They see how that kind of competition has resulted in substantial aid from both countries to North Vietnam," one official pointed out.

Pentagon spokesmen refused to say whether reconnaissance flights in international air space off the North Korean shore have been resumed. They continued to say only that "the President's orders are being carried out." Japanese reports yesterday said that an EC-121 reconnaissance plane had taken off from a base near Tokyo.

Since North Korean radar cannot always distinguish between intelligence flights and other flights, sources here said, there is a disinclination to provide North Korea with information that might aid in plans

to attack intelligence aircraft.

One Administration source noted that "a lot of problems have to be sorted out" before flights can be resumed on anything like a regular basis. Before the April 15 downing, EC-121's were averaging two flights a day.

As for the cost of the task force in the Sea of Japan, Navy sources said that, while it was expensive, all the ships had been operating in the Pacific and the only extra cost was for the fuel oil consumed in moving to a new station.

Greater Cost Cited

"If some of those carrier aircraft were continuing bombing missions in South Vietnam and Laos," one Pentagon official said, "we'd probably lose one or two multi-million-dollar planes to ground fire. That would pay for an awful lot of fuel oil."

The principal strain, sources said, is on the men who are missing leave time. "We're working them longer and harder than we'd like, but we pay no overtime in the Navy."

Representative L. Mendel Rivers, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, called today for a Congressional investigation of the downing of the Navy plane.

The South Carolina Democrat said he had instructed Representative Otis G. Pike, Democrat of Long Island, to expand the scope of his investigation into the loss of the Pueblo to include the latest incident. He also said the inquiry should "ascertain the mission and the rules of engagement" of the naval task force.