

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE

MINUTES

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING

Date: Monday, May 12, 1975
Time: 12:05 p. m. to 12:50 p. m.
Place: Cabinet Room, The White House
Subject: Seizure of American Ship by Cambodian
Authorities

Principals

The President
The Vice President
Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger
Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger
Acting Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff General David C. Jones
Director of Central Intelligence William Colby

Other Attendees

State: Deputy Secretary of State Robert Ingersoll
DOD: Deputy Secretary of Defense William Clements
WH: Donald Rumsfeld
NSC: Lt. General Brent Scowcroft
W. R. Smyser

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DECLASSIFIED - E.O. 12958 Sec. 3.8
With PORTIONS EXEMPTED
E.O. 12958 Sec. 1.5 (a)(6)

NSC Ex. 3/19/96 MR 91-20 #1

By KBH NARA, Date 3/20/96

President:

Please go ahead, Bill, and bring us up-to-date.

Colby:

The US Seatrain container ship MAYAGUEZ was seized by the Khmer Communists about 3:15 p. m. local time about seven or eight miles from the Cambodian Island of Pulo Wei in the Gulf of Thailand. The ship was able to transmit at least two messages picked up in Jakarta and Manila after the boarding but communications from the ship were quickly broken off.

The ship was enroute to a Thai port from Hong Kong.

At last report the ship was being taken to the port of Kompong Son, about sixty miles away, under escort by a Khmer Communist gun boat.

The Island of Pulo Wei has been claimed by both Phnom Penh and Saigon although it has long been occupied by the Cambodians.
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Khmer Communists were planning to occupy Cambodian offshore islands, probably to reiterate the Cambodian claim vis-a-vis the Vietnamese Communists. The occupation may provide an early test for future relations between the Khmer and Vietnamese Communists.

A major factor behind the territorial dispute in the area is the potential of rich oil deposits in this area at the Gulf.

The former governments in Saigon and Phnom Penh clashed over oil exploration rights in this area last fall.

We have no hard information on why the Khmer Communists seized the ship as it was en route from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand.

The ship was some 60 miles southwest of Kompong Som, but within 8 miles of the island of Pulo Wei, claimed by the Khmer Communists.

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A Panamanian charter vessel was seized by the Khmer Communists last week in roughly the same area, but was subsequently released

President: When?

Colby: We are not sure.

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..... There is evidence that some forces landed on at least one of these islands.

President: What is the best estimate of where the ship is now?

Colby: It was proceeding under its own steam at what we estimate to be about 10 miles an hour. Considering when it was picked up, it would be in or near the port now.

Schlesinger: When I left the Pentagon, the ship was already only about 10 miles out.

President: What are our options?

Schlesinger: We can have a passive stance or we can be active. We can do such things as seizing Cambodian assets. We can assemble forces.

We could seize a small island as a hostage.
We might also consider a blockade.

All these options would have to be scrutinized by the Congress because, while you have inherent rights to protect American citizens, you would soon run into the CRA.

We do not have much information on the actual situation. Such information as we have indicates that the main purpose of the Cambodian forces in occupying the islands may have been to keep them from their brethren in South Vietnam. It could be a bureaucratic misjudgment or a bi-product of an action against South Vietnam.

The Cambodians have already seized three ships: a Panamanian, a Philippine and now an American. They did release the first two ships. We do not know, in handling this sort of thing, how good their communication is.

Kissinger: How far from the islands was the ship when it was picked up?

Colby: About 7 to 8 miles.

Schlesinger: In some information we picked up, they appeared to be claiming 30 miles.

Rumsfeld: Isn't this piracy?

Schlesinger: Yes.

Kissinger: As I see it, Mr. President, we have two problems:

-- The first problem is how to get the ship back.

-- The second problem is how the U.S. appears at this time.

Actions that ^{we}would take to deal with one of these problems may not help to deal with the other. For example, I think that if they can get us into a negotiation, even if we get the ship back, it is not to our advantage. I think we should make a strong statement and give a note to the Cambodians, via the Chinese, so that we can get some credit if the boat is released. I also suggest some show of force.

What do we have in the neighborhood of the incident?

Schlesinger: We have the CORAL SEA, which is now on its way to Australia for ceremonies.

President: How long would it take to get there?

Schlesinger: About two to three days.

President: Do we have anything at Subic?

General Jones: We have the HANCOCK and other vessels, but it would take about a day and a half at least to get them down there.

Kissinger: We may not be able to accomplish much by seizing their assets, since they are already blocked. Perhaps we can seize a Cambodian ship on the high seas. But I think that what we need for the next 48 hours is a strong statement, a strong note and a show of force.

Schlesinger: That would mean turning around the CORAL SEA.

Kissinger: Can we use any aircraft?

Schlesinger: We will have aircraft over the island to see what kind of forces there are.

Kissinger: Can we find out where Cambodian ships are around the world?

Clements: Admiral Holloway says he is not sure there are any.

Kissinger: Are there any merchant ships?

Schlesinger: We doubt it.

Colby: They may have some coastal stuff, some small vessels and the like. But that is it.

Clements: We should not forget that there is a real chance that this is an in-house spat. In that area there have been two discovery wells, drilled by Shell and Mobil. One made a significant discovery. We are talking about 600-700 million barrels and perhaps even 1 or 1 1/2 million barrels. I think that is what this fuss is all about.

President: That is interesting, but it does not solve our problem. I think we should have a strong public statement and a strong note. We should also issue orders to get the carrier turned around.

Kissinger: I think we should brief that this is an outrage. Even if they quarrel with each other, they cannot use us.

President: We should get the demand and our objection to what has happened out to the press before they get the story from elsewhere.

Ingersoll: They may want to hold the ship as a hostage to our equipment.

Schlesinger: That was our first thought, before we looked into it further.

Kissinger: Does the CORAL SEA have mines aboard?

General Jones: I do not believe it has any now, but we can make arrangements to get them there.

Kissinger: What is the minimum period for which mines can be set? I recall during the bombing of Haiphong mines were set for 30 days. But I wonder if they can be set for shorter periods.

Schlesinger: We can get the mines in within 24 hours.

Kissinger: Can we then have them set for a short time?

Schlesinger: We can look into that.

President: We should be prepared to do this, using the HANCOCK. Do you believe the CORAL SEA cannot do it?

General Jones: I doubt it. Different types of equipment and different types of mines are involved. I suggest that we get our contingency plans together as soon as possible and start assembling a task force to go in that direction.

Of course, we have other means. We have the B-52's that could do it.

Schlesinger: The mines are at Subic; the B-52's are in Thailand.

President: I think we should turn the CORAL SEA around. We should get everything organized in Subic Bay. We should make a strong statement at once before the news hits from other sources. We should also get a full photo run of the island and of the harbor where the ship is.

Vice President: May I say something?

President: Please.

Vice President: I think this will be seen as a test case. I think it will be judged in South Korea. I remember the PUEBLO case. I think we need something strong soon. Getting out a message and getting people ready will not do it.

I think a violent response is in order. The world should know that we will act and that we will act quickly. We should have an immediate response in terms of action. I do not know if we have any targets that we can strike, but we should certainly consider this. If they get any hostages, this can go on forever.

Schlesinger: They have 39.

Rumsfeld: Americans?

Schlesinger: We think so.

Vice President: Now you can take action before you begin to get protests. I believe the authorities there only understand force. There is an old Chinese saying about a dagger hitting steel and withdrawing when it hits steel, and that is the impression that we should convey.

President: I think that that is what we will do. We will turn around the CORAL SEA. We will get the mining ready. We will take action.

Kissinger: If it is not released by Wednesday, we will mine.

Vice President: Public opinion will be against it in order to save lives. Is there anything we can do now?

Schlesinger: We could sink the Cambodian Navy.

Clements: We could hit the patrol ship.

Vice President: Or we could seize the island.

Rumsfeld: When did we get word of this?

Ingersoll: At 5:15 at the National Military Command Center.

Kissinger: I agree with the Vice President that we should show a strong position. We should also know what we are doing so that it does not look as though we want to pop somebody. We could mine their harbors. This will not get the ship. Or we could take the ship, or we could scuttle it.

Schlesinger: They will have the ship already. It is like the PUEBLO. Once it got to Wonsan it was hard to bring it back.

Kissinger: In Korea, some things might be possible, but with this new group it is very uncertain what will happen.

President: How soon could we take the island?

General Jones: We have helicopters in Thailand and we could do it fairly quickly.

Kissinger: We cannot do it from Thailand.

Schlesinger: You know that the reconnaissance missions are being flown from Thailand.

Kissinger: That we can get away with, but I do not believe we can run military operations from there.

Vice President: What if we had a series of escalating actions? Some we would take now, others later. We have to show that we will not tolerate this kind of thing. It is a pattern. If we do not respond violently, we will get nibbled to death. We can announce these things to make clear what we are doing.

Schlesinger: The trouble with an announcement of future steps is on the Hill. Anything that we announce, Congress will need to be briefed.

President: We have now looked at the options. We will issue a statement and we will send a message. We will turn around the CORAL SEA. We will get a task force assembled at Subic and maybe get it underway. Perhaps we will scramble a force to take the island.

I would like to get something straight now. Brent told me at 7:45 that the ship had been seized, but there should be a quicker way to let us know this.

Scowcroft: I agree. That is when I heard of it.

Rumsfeld: I also.

Kissinger: I was not told until my regular staff meeting this morning, and then it was mentioned as an aside.

Schlesinger: This is a bureaucratic issue. The NMCC did not become alarmed because it was not a U. S. Navy vessel.

President: This would be alright in ordinary times but not now.

Colby: I will get a wrap-up of the sequence of notification.

Rumsfeld: Can we notify merchant ships of the danger?

General Jones: We will see.

Rumsfeld: I do not see the advantage of announcing the warning. We could make a case on either side. To the extent we want to be forceful, we do not need to make it public.

Vice President: I do not think turning the carriers around is action. Congress will get into the act. The doves will start talking. But, unless the Cambodians are hurt, this pattern will not be broken.

Kissinger: The main purpose of using a statement is that we have no choice. We have to have a reaction. But the statement should be very strong. It should demand the immediate release of the ship, and it should say that the failure to do so could have serious consequences.

President: It should point out that this is a clear act of piracy.

Kissinger: Then we should get our military actions lined up. My expectation is that we should do it on a large scale. We should not look as though we want to pop somebody, but we should give the impression that we are not to be trifled with.

If we say that it should be released, then we can state that the release is in response to our statement.

I would relate what we do to the ship, rather than to seize an island.

Colby: We may wish to point out that they released other ships. This gives them a way out.

Rumsfeld: They can figure out their own way out.

President: But, if you take strong action, let us say nothing first. I would like to get the DOD options by this afternoon.

Schlesinger: The actions should put them under pressure. If we mine the harbor, they will simply sit. We have got to do something that embarrasses them.

Rumsfeld: That is why I think we should look at other options.

President: We should have some options today.

Clements: We should keep the oil in mind. That is an asset.

Kissinger: I see a lot of advantage in taking the island rather than in mining the port. Let us find out what is on the island, how big a battle it would be, and other relevant factors.

Schlesinger: We will have a reconnaissance report by this evening. I am sure it would not take a large force.

What kind of clarification would you want us to use regarding the authority and your relation with the Congress?

President: There are two problems:

- First, the provisions of summer, 1973.
- Second, the war powers.

Regarding the military options, I would like to know how they would be hamstrung and what we want to do. I can assure you that, irrespective of the Congress, we will move.

Kissinger: There are three things we need to know:

- First, what force is required to take the island.
- Second, what force is required to take Kompong Som, and to take the ship and the people. On the whole, I would prefer this.
- Third, what it would take to mine the harbor.

Vice President: Does it make sense to do this if the boat is in it?

Schlesinger: You can perhaps accomplish the same thing by quarantine as by mining.

Kissinger: I doubt it. We learned in North Vietnam that mines work better. With a quarantine, you have a confrontation and a crisis regarding every ship.

Schlesinger: We would have to be tough in such confrontations.

Vice President: I agree with Rumsfeld.

Why should we warn them? There must be plans that we can use, out of Thailand.

Kissinger: If we bomb out of Thailand, we would be out of there within a month.

President: Let us review it again. Within an hour or so, there will be a public statement. Let us make an announcement ahead of time, and a tough one so that we get the initiative. Let us not tell Congress that we will do anything militarily since we have not decided. I think that it is important to make a strong statement publicly before the news gets out otherwise.

Kissinger: We will be pressed this afternoon.

Rumsfeld: How about a statement that gives the facts, states that this is an act of piracy, and says that we expect the release. We will not say that we demand the release, because that will activate the Congress. I think you get the same thing without speaking of a demand. Moreover, to demand seems weaker.

Schlesinger: It is not weak to say that we demand the release.

Kissinger: I would demand.

Rumsfeld: Perhaps not publicly, but privately.

Kissinger: If Congress takes us on, I think we have a good case.

President: With the military appropriations bill coming up, they would not want to give a picture of running out.

Kissinger: Then we should keep quiet. Let them explain about the three ships.

Vice President: How long does it take to get the carriers there?

Schlesinger: About 1 1/2 days.

Kissinger: I would overfly with reconnaissance.

President: It should be visible.

Kissinger: That we can get away with, but not bombing.

Vice President: Aren't those bases being closed anyway?

Kissinger: Not necessarily.

President: Alright. Let us get a message to the Chinese Government as soon as possible.

Vice President: Could we not ask Thai permission to use the bases?

Kissinger: No.

Schlesinger: Only reconnaissance is possible, but if we ask, they will refuse everything.

Kissinger: Lee Kuan Yew has asked us to stay in Thailand as long as possible to give him time to work on getting the defenses of Malaysia ready. Bombing from Thailand will get us out quickly.

President: How far away is Subic?

Kissinger:

To bomb, even from Clark, we would be in trouble. This is a symptom of Vietnam. We can bomb from Guam with B-52's or from the carriers. But we should know what we are doing. I am more in favor of seizing something, be it the island, the ship, or Kompong Som.

President:

This has been a useful discussion. Thank you. I will look forward to seeing the options.