

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

TOP SECRET/SENSITIVE (XGDS)

MINUTES

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING

Date: Tuesday, May 13, 1975
Time: 10:22 a. m. to 11:17 a. m.
Place: Cabinet Room, The White House
Subject: Seizure of American Ship by Cambodian
Authorities

Principals

The President
The Vice President
Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Joseph Sisco
Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger
Acting Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff General David C. Jones
Director of Central Intelligence William Colby

Other Attendees

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

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E.O. 13526 Sec. 1.5 (4)(G)-(X)

MR 91-20 #2 NSC Dir. 3/19/96
By KAH NARA, Date 3/20/96

President: Bill, will you please bring us up to date.

Colby: The Mayaguez is at anchor just off Koh Tang Island, about 30 miles southwest of Kompong Som.

Until late yesterday evening, the ship was being held near where it was seized in the vicinity of Poulo Wei Island, about 40 miles further to the southwest.

Shortly after midnight, however, an American reconnaissance aircraft observed the ship at Koh Tang Island.

At least two U. S. reconnaissance aircraft have reported receiving small arms fire from a gunboat, and from the Mayaguez itself.

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The latest U. S. reconnaissance flights observed the crew being transferred from the ship via a tugboat to Koh Tang and then being led off toward the interior of the island.

Scowcroft: Do we know it is the crew?

Schlesinger: No.

Colby: Although the men could be moved to the mainland at any time, the Khmer Communists may intend to keep them on the island until some final decisions are made regarding the crew and vessel.

So far, the Khmer Communist government has not made a public statement regarding the Mayaguez, and Prince Sihanouk today in Peking denied any knowledge of the incident.

In the event of a U. S. military effort, the Cambodian Communists would have limited means of reacting.

They would attempt to resist a recapture of the ship, an attack on the accompanying patrol craft, or a landing on Koh Tang. They presumably have few troops or weapons to meet any such effort, however.

The Cambodian Communists have no capability to thwart a mining effort against Kompong Som, and the harbor defenses are not impressive. The port and military camp are exposed and separate from the town.

President: It looks like a very open port. Is that true?

Colby: There is an island off it.

President: Is it a very busy port? Are there any ships in it now?

Schlesinger: A recent photo of ours showed no ships at the dock. There may perhaps have been one vessel around.

Vice President: Is this the principal port of entry for Cambodia?

Schlesinger: There has been no action at this port for a considerable length of time. It was closed because the route to Phnom Penh was closed. For a long time, U. S. aircraft were delivering everything to Phnom Penh.

Vice President: But several years ago it was a principal port of entry. I remember there was some dispute about what was coming in through this port. The CIA said that there was not a great deal, but in fact it turned out that it was a principal port of supply for the Viet Cong. So it must be an important port to them.

Schlesinger: It is not very much used now.

Vice President: But this is their port of entry. It would be a major contact with the outer world, especially if they do not work with the Vietnamese; it was built originally in order to give them independence of the Mekong River which was patrolled by the Vietnamese.

President: We used to complain about supplies coming into Sihanoukville. One reason why Sihanouk was asked to leave in 1970 was because he turned his face away from the movement of supplies into that port.

One of the purposes of our entry into Cambodia was to get this material that had been delivered there.

Vice President: There is one thing that was a big mistake yesterday. You got the information that the American ship was already in the harbor in Kompong Som. This denied you one option, which would have been to try to prevent the ship from being taken into the harbor. But you were told that the ship was already in the port.

Schlesinger: I did not say that it was already in the port. I said it might be.

Vice President: I do not want to argue, but you said that it was known that when you left your department it was one hour away from the port and by the time you arrived here, it would already be in the port.

President: I do think we have to be certain of our facts. Overnight, Brent gave me a series of different reports that we were getting about the ship's location and about what was happening. We

President: Was all this in daylight?

Jones: This was just before it grew dark over there.
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..... This is the
sort of thing we use with our gunships and
we can get a lot of information from it.

The instructions we have to our commanders
are not to let the ship go to port. They are
to take any action not to include sinking. We
should know when it moves, when it raises
anchor, and when it raises the boiler.

We can, if necessary, disable the ship. We
can hit it abeam, just off the stern. We will
not hit people that way. We can do that with
pretty high confidence that we can stop the
ship from sailing under its own power. Of
course, if it is not sailing under its own
power, we would make the tug boat the target.

President: How big is the ship?

Jones: The ship is about 500 feet long. The tug boat,
of course, is rather small. But it would be
moving very slowly. It would be a very
vulnerable target.

Of course, we cannot guarantee that we could
stop it, but we think that there is a good
chance that we could keep it from going into
the harbor without sinking it. We would use
gunships. They are very precise.

Rumsfeld: Do we know where the crew, the Americans
and the Vietnamese, are?

Jones: We saw people coming off the ship. They had
been on the deck of the ship. We saw them go
to the island.

President: If they try to move the ship, we must take steps to stop it, without sinking it.

Jones: And with minimum loss of life. We would know in advance, when they are going to move the ship.

President: How would this information come to us? Whom does the plane contact?

Jones: The 7th Air Force Support Group at NKP. We would have a report in minutes.

President: So that, within 10 minutes, any movement would be detected and available to us here.

Jones: Of course, they can do things below the deck that we would not see, but we should know if anything important is going on. One problem, of course, is that if the weather turns bad, this would have some effect on our coverage.

President: And you have people on the ball in the Pentagon?

Jones: Quite a few.

President: How do you get the information to Brent and then to me?

Scowcroft: Last night, there were long time lags before we got the information, and there was a lot of confusion about its accuracy.

President: I am very concerned about the delay in reports. We must have the information immediately. There must be the quickest possible communication to me.

Colby:

President: We must get the information to the NSC and to me.

Jim, will you now please give us your report on the other options.

Schlesinger:

We have reviewed the options. The option to take Kompong Som requires many troops. There are about 1700 KC's in the area. So our first objective today is to keep the ship out.

If we want to take the ship, there are two options:

-- We can use the Marines and the choppers that are at Utapao. We can take off tomorrow.

-- Or, we can wait until the USS HOLT arrives, which should be around 8:00 p. m. tomorrow night, or about 12 hours later.

Jones:

It is arriving at 0530 our time. That is when the HOLT will get there.

Vice President:

That would make it the morning of our time, not the evening.

President:

I have a question about that from my World War II experience. That destroyer would have been operating at flank speed for about 36 hours. In those days it would not have much fuel left when it arrived at its destination. We would not want it to be dead in the water.

Schlesinger:

It will not be in that condition. In any case, the carrier will arrive the following morning and it will be able to refuel.

The Navy people are trained in boarding. It might be preferable to wait for the HOLT because it will be manned and able to do it. We will then have the dominant force in the area. But, of course, this may give the Cambodians time to change the situation or to try to prepare themselves. Therefore, it may be better to go by first light tomorrow.

Rumsfeld: That would be this evening, at 6:00 p.m., Washington time.

Schlesinger: It may be preferable to go in quickly. We have instructions to use gunfire to keep personnel away from the anchor chain on deck.

Vice President: Even if they are Americans?

Schlesinger: I do not think they have Americans on board except for people to man the boiler. I think they have the other Americans on the island.

Our force to take the island is now in Okinawa. In twelve hours, we can have the Marines there.

President: Twelve hours from now?

Schlesinger: Twelve hours from your order. We already have 125 Marines at Utapao.

President: They would be intended to take the ship. How about the Marines from Subic Bay? How soon can we get them there?

Jones: They are coming from Okinawa. They could go by 1844 or 1900 or the second light tonight. One day later, we could have the Marines at Utapao. We could use large choppers.

President: They could be used on the island.

Jones: This would be about 1,000. We do not know what is on the island.

Schlesinger: We asked a Cambodian defector and he told us there were about 60 troops on the island.

For the island operation, I think it is preferable to use the CORAL SEA. It gives us dominance

over the area. Also, we have its forces and helicopters.

The danger for the Americans on the island is that we do not know what the Cambodians would do. I think there is less danger if we have the dominant force. We will have Cambodians on the choppers who will be able to say that we can take the island unless they give us the Americans or the foreigners. This message would be bull-horned from the choppers at a time when we are ready to act.

Scowcroft: This means that the force of 1,000 Americans from Utapao would be for operation to take the island, not the ship.

Schlesinger: Right.

Colby: We should realize that the Cambodians are tough fellows. We know that they took a Vietnamese ship and killed seven people without thinking any more about it.

Schlesinger: When cornered, they could execute the Americans.

Hartmann: Do we know why they took off the Americans?

Jones:
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.....whether or not they actually did
and why they might have done it.

President: Are we keeping gunboats and other boats from the ship?

Jones: We have not opened fire on them. We have scared some of them away by making passes at them. One boat is tied alongside the ship.

President: Are there quite a number around?

Jones: We have had reports on boats, sometimes two or more. We hope to have better intelligence soon.

President: Isn't it dark now?

Jones: We can get the information from infra-red. We took a lot of pictures. We are now reading them out in Thailand. We hope to have a better readout after we have finished.

President: I would like to see the pictures.

Jones: They are processed there.

President: Anything on the diplomatic side?

Scowcroft: Not yet.

Vice President: May I say something?

President: Yes.

Vice President: I do not think the freighter is the issue. The issue is how we respond. Many are watching us, in Korea and elsewhere. The big question is whether or not we look silly. I think we need to respond quickly. The longer we wait, the more time they have to get ready. Why not sink their boats until they move? Once they have got hostages, they can twist our tails for months to come, and if you go ashore, we may lose more Marines trying to land than the Americans who were on the boat originally. Why not just sink their ships until they respond?

Schlesinger: We have several objectives.

First, to stop the boat from being taken into the port.

Second, to get our people back.

Third, to attack and sink the Cambodian Navy, later, after we have our ship and our people out, in order to maximize the punishment.

We do not know their motive. If we sink their vessels, it might precipitate sinking of the freighter and jeopardize getting the Americans out. It seems to me that that is the sequence of priorities. Starting that way, their reaction would be prudent.

Vice President:

I do not think the Communists respond this way. I remember the story by Mao Tse Tung about sticking a blade in until you hit steel and then you pull out your sword. If you do not meet steel, you go in further.

I think you should do everything you can as soon as possible. Later, you can destroy the port as retaliation.

Schlesinger:

I would prefer for us first to get the ship, and then to proceed against the island.

President:

Brent, what are your views?

Scowcroft:

I see two operations.

-- The first is against the ship.

-- The second is against the island.

The urgency of the island operation is to stop the Americans from going to the mainland. On the ship, it is to stop it from going to Kompong Som.

The optimum situation with the ship is to get the HOLT between that ship and Kompong Som. We cannot do that until tomorrow.

If we do not have that time, if they start to move, do we try to take the ship? Or do we wait until the HOLT gets there and we have things our way?

Jones: We have ways of stopping them from getting it into Kompong Som. But they can scuttle it. We have to judge this.

Rumsfeld: Can they get the Americans to the mainland?

President: They can be doing it tonight, their time.

Jones: As the Vice President said, if we wish to assure that the Americans are not taken to the mainland, we would have to knock out their boats.

President: Can we knock them out?

Jones: With gunships.

Vice President: The longer we take, the worse it gets. If the communists do not think that you will react strong and fast, they will keep on doing this. We must do it as the Israelis do; we need to respond fast.

Scowcroft: We must recognize that we have a problem with regard to Thailand.
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President: Are we running our reconnaissance and our freighters from Thailand?

Scowcroft: So far it has been OK. But if we use force, we may be in jeopardy.

Schlesinger: There is the possibility of the opposite reaction. If they see us acting, they may change their

attitude. Publicly, they may protest, but privately, they may agree. They have done this before.

Vice President: I agree with that.

Jones: Earlier, we had no forces to operate to free the ship. As we discussed yesterday, we had to get our assets into place. We have them.

President: Let me review the sequence:

-- First, we would use the aircraft to stop any boats leaving the island. You do not sink them, necessarily, but can you take some preventive action?

Jones: Probably. We also have searchlights and flares. We will want to see if there are any Americans on board. We will need to decide whether to fire across the bow or to sink it. We would have some time. They are slow boats. That is one point. We could, with some confidence, interdict the island.

President: -- Second, I think you should stop all boats coming to the island.

-- Third, I think we should be prepared to land on the ship tomorrow morning.

Jones: This is not an easy operation.

On a container ship, we can only land our helicopters one at a time. There is not much space. The containers are aluminum. They would not be strong enough to support the helicopters, so we would have to rope people down. They would come down three at a time

and they would have to drop 20 feet to the deck. Of course, we would have helicopters alongside to keep heads down as we land. Still, it would be very tricky.

President: But we could have gunships as well.

-- Fourth, to have the Marines from Utapao, 1,000 strong, go to the island. How soon could they get there?

Jones: They can launch within ten hours after I leave here. They could launch at the second light.

Rumsfeld: The President wanted it tonight.

Jones: Right.

President: So the landing on the ship can take place tonight. What about the island?

Jones: It could be 24 hours later. We would not have the force until then. They were not on alert. It would be some hours before the launch.

President: If they were to go on the island at dusk, tomorrow, you would have 18 hours.

Rumsfeld: Let's put all this on a piece of paper, with the exact times, so that we all know what we are talking about.

Jones: At the second light there?

Rumsfeld: That would be 7:00 p.m. D. C. time. I suggest we stick to one set of times.

President: When does the destroyer get there?

Schlesinger: Eight o'clock (p. m.)

President: Dusk, tomorrow night, their time?

Schlesinger: Yes.

President: Same time as the Marines?

Schlesinger: No.

Scowcroft: Let's use one time for all this.

Schlesinger: At 7:00 p.m. tonight, Washington time, we can have some Marines ready.

At 8:00 a.m. tomorrow, Washington time, the HOLT will be in position.

Somewhere between that time, the additional Marines will be in Utapao.

Rumsfeld: This is a different set of times from what we were given earlier.

Scowcroft: Right.

President: I have to go to meet with some Congressional people. Can somebody please put all this down so that we have it in writing?

(Schlesinger showed the schedule to the President.)

President: The CORAL SEA gets in at 8:00. What about the HOLT?

Jones: We are trying to speed it up.

President: I think the first two steps can be done. Let us take them. I would like to have the next steps written in sequence as to when they can take place.

Vice President: I think we have some questions about operating on land against the Cambodians.

Marsh: Also, there is a war powers requirement.

President: First, I want to know the times. There should be a logical sequence so we can have a chance to decide. Let us do it one and two and three, etc.

Scowcroft: I have reservations about landing^{on}the ship.

Jones: So do I.

Schlesinger: Landing on the ship is to send them a signal. If we start to hit the boats, they know we are up to something. They could kill the Americans, but I doubt it. We have the element of surprise.

President: But they can take the people out.

Vice President: I agree.

President: Let's get the facts on the times lined up.

Vice President: We do not want a land war in Cambodia.