Marines storm SS *Mayaguez* to recover ship (DOD/Michael Chan)

Abandon Ship

Interagency Decisionmaking During the *Mayaguez* Incident

By Richard B. Hughes

The struggle on Koh Tang was, in a sense, a metaphor of the entire Vietnam War: an action begun for what seemed a good and noble purpose, which quickly degenerated into an ugly, desperate fight, micromanaged from no less than the office of the President of the United States.

—Ralph Wetterhahn
The Last Battle: The Mayaguez Incident and the End of the Vietnam War

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In the spring of 1975, Cambodia's communist Khmer Rouge government seized a U.S. merchant ship, the SS *Mayaguez*, leading the United States to mount a joint operation to rescue the ship and its crew. The focus of this effort became an assault on Koh Tang, a small island in the Gulf of Thailand approximately 30 miles from the Cambodian mainland.[1] Despite the notable evolu-

tions in joint and interagency doctrine in the more than 40 years since this incident, it remains strikingly relevant because of the nature of the challenges it presented to interagency decisionmakers: a short timeline, limited intelligence, forces not tailored to the mission, an unpredictable opponent, and fevered public interest. At the time, the "*Mayaguez* Incident" was generally viewed as a success.[2] A more sober review, however, shows that the military operation nearly ended in disaster. A close examination of interagency decisionmaking reveals a series of pitfalls, including intelligence failures, poor interagency communication, and incomplete assessment of risk. These factors led the National Security Council (NSC) to make decisions that had little chance of furthering President Gerald Ford's foreign policy objectives and that placed U.S. forces at grave risk. Military and civilian leaders would do well to review the lessons of this crisis, lest they make the same mistakes in the future.

The Incident

It was only 12 days after the fall of Saigon, the sobering end to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. Confidence in U.S. military power was at a low ebb and the Watergate scandal had propelled Gerald Ford into the White House.[3] In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge, a murderous new anti-American communist government, had come into power in Phnom Penh less than a month earlier. On May 12, 1975, at 4:03 P.M. local time, the U.S. Defense Attaché in Jakarta, Indonesia, after consulting with the U.S. Ambassador, dashed off an intelligence message to Washington. The message relayed a Mayday call from a privately owned cargo vessel of U.S. registry that had initially been received by an affiliated company in Indonesia: "Have been fired upon and boarded by Cambodian armed forces at 9 degrees 48 min. N/102 degrees 53 min. E. Ship being towed to unknown Cambodian port."[4]

The Cambodians, after initially taking the vessel to the nearby island of Poulo Wai, then moved it to Koh Tang on May 13. The crew was initially moved there as well, but the following day they were taken by fishing boat to the port of Kompong Som on the Cambodian mainland.[5] By this time, some 12 hours after the Mayday call, U.S. P-3 Orion surveillance aircraft were already keeping the SS *Mayaguez* under observation.

President Ford initially learned of the seizure at his morning briefing on May 12 (it was already evening in Cambodia), and the NSC met at approximately noon that same day. Because the United States had no diplomatic relationship with the Khmer Rouge government, overtures were made to try and contact them via China.[6] The NSC reconvened at 10:30 A.M. on May 13. During this meeting, the President was informed that the SS *Mayaguez* was anchored at Koh Tang and that a military aircraft had observed what were thought to be at least some members of the crew being moved to the island itself.[7] Following this meeting, the President directed the U.S. military to intercept any vessels approaching or leaving Koh Tang. Various military assets were moved closer to the area, including the aircraft carrier USS *Coral Sea* and the destroyer USS *Harold E. Holt*. In addition, U.S. Marines stationed in the Philippines and U.S. Air Force helicopters from Nakom Phanom, Thailand, converged on Utapao, the closest Thai base to Koh Tang.[8]

Late that evening (now the morning of May 14 in Cambodia), a third NSC meeting was convened. At the same time, U.S. aircraft attempted to stop the fishing vessel, which was moving the crew to Kompong Som. Although orders were to sink such vessels if they did not turn around, the U.S. pilots had spotted "Caucasian faces" on board and held their fire.[9] After warning shots and even tear gas were unable to make the boat reverse course, real-time communications allowed President Ford to make the decision whether to sink the vessel or allow it to proceed. He elected to let it move inside the 12-mile boundary of Cambodian territorial waters and proceed to the mainland.[10] Still convinced that at least some of the crew was on Koh Tang or still aboard the SS *Mayaguez*, the NSC discussed military options, coalescing on a plan to seize the island and retake the U.S. vessel. They also authorized U.S. aircraft to sink any Cambodian gunboats in and around the island.[11] On the afternoon of May 14, a fourth NSC meeting was held and a military plan approved.[12]

Less than 5 hours later (now the morning of May 15 in Cambodia), a force consisting of 170 U.S. Marines, transported via eight U.S. Air Force helicopters, launched from Utapao to assault Koh Tang, with the intent of recovering the SS *Mayaguez* and its crew. Based on his intelligence briefing at Utapao, the commander of the assault force believed that 18 to 20 Khmer irregulars and their families were garrisoned on Koh Tang, with less than 100 total people on the island.[13] The Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), however, believed that "[p]ossibly 150 to 200 Khmer Communists were on the island, armed with 82mm mortars; 75mm recoilless rifles; 30-caliber, 7.62-mm, and 12.7-mm machineguns; and B4W41 rocket[-]propelled grenade launchers."[14] The first helicopters crossed the beach shortly after dawn local time and immediately received heavy fire from prepared positions. Of the first wave of eight helicopters, three were shot down and the other five received heavy battle damage. (Two never returned to base and none participated in subsequent operations.) While the original plan envisioned that all U.S. forces would land within 10 minutes, only 131 Marines landed during the course of 17 insertion attempts made over 3 hours. Even more troubling, they found themselves in isolated and compromised positions.[15]

Minutes after the assault began, the USS *Holt* pulled alongside the SS *Mayaguez* and placed a security force on board, but found no one there. At almost the same time—and perhaps spooked by the flurry of American air activity and the loss of a number of patrol boats—the Cambodian government in Phnom Penh ordered the crew of the SS *Mayaguez* released. At approximately 10:00 A.M. Cambodian time, the USS *Wilson*, another destroyer that had just arrived on the scene, intercepted a Thai fishing vessel with the entire crew of the SS *Mayaguez* onboard.[16]

Marine and Air Force pararescueman of 40th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Squadron (in wet suit) run for Air Force helicopter during assault on Koh Tang Island to rescue U.S. merchant ship SS *Mayaguez* and crew, May 15, 1975 (DOD)

The crew's recovery, in some sense, brought the crisis to an end, but the assault on Koh Tang was now unfortunately a pitched battle. A second wave of 100 Marines from Utapao was landed around noon local time as the force attempted to consolidate its precarious positions. Shortly thereafter, they were advised to disengage and prepare for extraction. What followed was a desperate effort to retrieve all the Marines before nightfall. Only through the extraordinary heroism of the Marines, U.S. Air Force, and U.S. Navy close air support, naval gunfire support (including machine gun fire from the gig of the USS *Wilson*), and astonishing flying by the U.S. Air Force H-53 helicopter crews was this accomplished. The final account of the attack on Koh Tang was sobering: 15 killed in action, with 3 missing and 49 wounded. These numbers do not include an additional 23 Air Force personnel killed in a May 13 helicopter crash during preparations for the attack.[17] The three Marines missing in action were initially believed to have been on the helicopters; their absence was discovered only after a full headcount was taken following evacuation. How they died will likely never be fully known, although author Ralph Wetterhahn makes a convincing case that they survived on the island, only to be later captured and executed by Khmer forces there.[18]

Analysis of Interagency Decisionmaking

At the time, the Ford administration's actions during the *Mayaguez* Incident were seen as broadly successful: the crew was returned safely, no protracted hostage situation ensued, and it appeared that the U.S. military had cowed the Cambodian communists.[19] Hindsight paints a different picture, however. Although the low-risk air attacks on Kompong Som and Cambodian naval vessels were effective in influencing the Cambodians, the U.S. ground assault was ill advised, a risky insertion of poorly prepared troops on an island where none of the crew was *ever* located. The crew's release was made in spite of, not because of, the island assault.[20] The costs of attacking Koh Tang were significant, with a total of 68 casualties.[21] In fact, this could have been much worse, since, as described above, the evacuation of the Marines nearly ended in complete disaster. How did this happen? Certainly there were errors in tactics and execution, but the errors by strategic leadership were much more telling.[22]

To better consider how this decisionmaking evolved, it is useful to consider the perspectives and contributions of some of the key players at the NSC level. These include the Department of Defense (DOD), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Intelligence Community broadly, and Department of State. We must also determine whether their contributions coalesced into a well-integrated strategic perspective that balanced risk to and reward for the national interest.

Department of Defense

DOD, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the commander in chief of Pacific Command (CINCPAC), had a

critical role to play during *Mayaguez* decisionmaking. They had to plan for and prepare to execute operations as well as advise President Ford of his options and their military viability and risk as the NSC process evolved. In the first area, DOD acquitted itself well. Assets were moved into the area quickly and a true joint effort was made to coordinate U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps forces to respond to the crisis. On May 13, 1975, the day following the seizure of the ship, DOD provided an options paper to the President, showing three scenarios for recovery of the SS *Mayaguez* and its crew.[23] This paper provided reasonable advice about the timing of any attack on Koh Tang and/or the *Mayaguez*, appearing to favor waiting until at least the morning of May 16 for any assault. It noted that with such a delay, "[h]elicopter-borne assault operations could be conducted from the deck of the [USS] *Coral Sea*," by then expected to be within miles of Koh Tang, thus significantly lowering the risk of conducting operations from Thailand, 190 nautical miles distant. It also advised that the operation "be given additional time for the working of the diplomatic process."[24]

Unfortunately, because the DOD paper was provided to the NSC *before* the sighting of crewmembers headed for the Cambodian mainland, it assumed the crew was either aboard the *Mayaguez* or on Koh Tang. There is no evidence that the paper was ever updated in light of this new information. Likewise, the discussions at the NSC on the evening of May 13 (after "Caucasians" had been spotted being transferred to Kompong Som) took no notice of the crew's location, focusing instead on how soon an assault on Koh Tang could be launched.[25] By the time of the NSC meeting on May 14, CIA Director William Colby provided the best update available on the crew's whereabouts, advising the President that "the Cambodians have apparently transported at least some of the American Crew from Koh Tang Island to the mainland, putting them ashore at Kompong Som port at about 11:00 last night, Washington time."[26] David Mets, a C-130 pilot during the operation, later stated, "On Wednesday (*early morning, May 14th DC time*), I knew, or thought I knew, from the intelligence brought back by our A-7 pilot that the *Mayaguez* crew was not on Koh Tang. But this was not so clear back in Washington."[27] Despite this new and important information, the focus remained on Koh Tang.

Regarding the timing of operations, Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger initially reflected the cautions articulated in the paper, informing the President that "we need the morning of the 16th for a coordinated assault." When Secretary of State Henry Kissinger proposed an assault on the morning of May 15, Schlesinger noted, "the problem with that is that the *Coral Sea* will not be there." But as Colby and others urged quicker action, Schlesinger changed course, stating, "We will be prepared to go on the morning of the 15th."[28] By the time of the NSC meeting on May 14, the acting head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David C. Jones, was committed to an assault that evening (the following morning, Cambodian time).[29] This advancement in the timeline created significant new risks for the operation, robbing the Marines of an extra day to plan, forcing the helicopters to operate from Utapao (a 1.5-hour flight from Koh Tang) rather than the USS *Coral Sea*, and restricting the tactical air support available in the initial phases of the operation.

The Intelligence Community

These risks were amplified because CIA Director Colby and others did not articulate the full extent of the threat during the NSC meetings. U.S. intelligence produced three estimates of military strength in the course of the crisis. An initial Intelligence Pacific (IPAC) estimate severely underestimated Khmer Rouge strength on Koh Tang at only 10 to 20 soldiers. A May 13 IPAC assessment was closer, estimating 100 soldiers, with 75mm recoilless rifles, machine guns, and rocket launchers. A May 12 DIA estimate was almost perfect, estimating that there was a total of 150 to 200 soldiers armed with 82mm mortars, 75mm recoilless rifles, machine guns, and rocket-propelled grenades. Although neither of the more accurate estimates ever reached the operational commander, at least the IPAC estimate was available to the NSC.[30] Colby often characterized 100 troops as the upper end of enemy strength. During the NSC meeting on May 13, he noted, "Our estimate was that there were 2,000 in Kompong Som. There is not a large force on the island [Koh Tang]." When President Ford responded, "Do you think we can figure with 100?" Colby replied, "Yes. The KC [Khmer Communists] have just arrived in power. They probably have not had time to man the island more fully." The director's written update, provided to the President (and briefed verbally) to the NSC on May 14, did not provide any substantial update on the Cambodian forces on Koh Tang itself, focusing instead on the Cambodian order of battle at Kompong Som.[31] This was in spite of a request at the Director of Central Intelligence morning meeting on May 14 for a full update of the Cambodian order of battle, which certainly should have alerted Colby to the more accurate DIA estimate.[32] In aggregate, the CIA director's briefs to the NSC left the impression that the Marines would encounter only token resistance. General Jones also seemed unconcerned when briefing the proposed action on the afternoon of May 14, either unaware or unconcerned that his assault force would be taking on heavy weapons–capable forces that would leave it outgunned.[33] The Joint Chiefs of Staff certainly mirrored the confidence of on-scene commanders, who still had access only to the earlier estimates of 20 soldiers with no heavy weapons.[34] Even the earliest analyses of the operation concluded that intelligence failures occurred at all levels.[35]

The State Department

The State Department also had a role to play during NSC meetings and was ably (or at least powerfully) represented by Secretary Kissinger.[36] Yet Kissinger seemed to focus more on military rather than diplomatic options,[37] leaving this

Marine captain prepares to fire on and destroy important equipment on disabled HH-53 to prevent its capture by Cambodians (U.S. Air Force/Ronald T. Rand)

key aspect of national power unexplored. The only efforts by the State Department to use diplomacy consisted of providing a message to the Khmer Rouge via the People's Republic of China, both in Washington and in Beijing.[38] Although diplomatic communications with the new (and decidedly anti-American) government in Phnom Penh were extraordinarily difficult, there were potential avenues, including Voice of America broadcasts in Khmer and Cambodian representatives in Paris and Moscow. State, however, did not pursue either of these avenues.[39] During the initial NSC meeting, virtually all of Secretary Kissinger's comments related to which, not whether, military actions needed to be taken.[40] At the next day's meeting, Kissinger was absent, and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Joseph Sisco represented the State Department. Sisco did not utter a word during the 45-minute meeting, and no diplomatic options were discussed.[41]

State also had indications that the Cambodians were wavering and that more time might be useful. A cable sent by the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on May 14 (addressed to the State Department and CINCPAC Hawaii, among others) titled "Chinese Embassy Tehran believes *Mayaguez* to be freed soon" provided evidence that the Chinese were pressuring the Khmer Rouge to release the vessel and crew.[42] Just before the American helicopters lifted off to assault Koh Tang, the U.S. Foreign Broadcast Information Service monitored a domestic radio broadcast by the Cambodian minister of information indicating they would release the SS *Mayaguez* and order the ship to depart Cambodian waters.[43] Neither of these nascent indications that there might be room for a repatriation of hostages without military action was ever discussed at the NSC. The role of State in the NSC was to serve as the subject matter expert on and advocate for diplomacy, yet the record shows they did neither of these particularly well during this crisis. Indeed, Secretary Kissinger was the biggest advocate for the use of force, so much so that Christopher J. Lamb believes that he was aware of the U.S. Embassy Tehran's cable and made a conscious decision not to share it with his NSC colleagues.[44]

Strategic Perspective

If strategy is balancing ends, ways, means, and risk, then the *Mayaguez* Incident is a stark example of how these can become unbalanced. By failing to properly account for risk, senior leaders jeopardized a serious strategic setback. The desired (and achieved) result of having the vessel and crew returned was certainly critical to the United States, reeling from geopolitical setbacks in Vietnam and a general public perception that U.S. military power was at low ebb. But the President should have known that the military plan presented to him had huge risks for the American forces and presented little to no chance

of recovering the entire crew. The plan, as drawn up, called for assaulting Koh Tang in spite of the fact that no one knew the location of the hostages with any certainty. Indeed, the evidence that did exist suggested that the crew was not on Koh Tang, a fact perhaps explained by the strong focus of the decisionmakers on recovering the ship itself.[45] They may also have been focused on avoiding a repeat of the 1968 *Pueblo* Incident, a significant black eye for American prestige.[46] In any event, not carefully accounting for the crew's whereabouts introduced serious risks to U.S. foreign policy. If the crew had not been released, the costly assault on Koh Tang would certainly have been perceived by many as foolish and ineffective, recovering only an empty ship and leaving the Khmer Rouge still in possession of the crew. The crew likely would have made for useful hostages for the Cambodians, even had the empty ship been recaptured.[47]

Perhaps more importantly, senior decisionmakers poorly understood the military risks of the assault.[48] The helicopter assault by lightly armed Marines with no combat experience into well-defended landing zones against a battle-hardened and determined foe with heavy weaponry went in many ways better than it should have. It could just as easily have ended with the Marines being completely overrun.[49] Although the evacuation efforts avoided this grim turn of events, the Marines left behind on Koh Tang (assuming they did survive and were captured by the Cambodians, as noted above) still could have been exploited as hostages and propaganda tools.[50] In short, the military assault on Koh Tang incurred risk that was not justified to achieve the ends desired. This is especially true since a more nuanced approach might have yielded the same result; especially telling is that a more multifaceted approach was not even considered.[51]

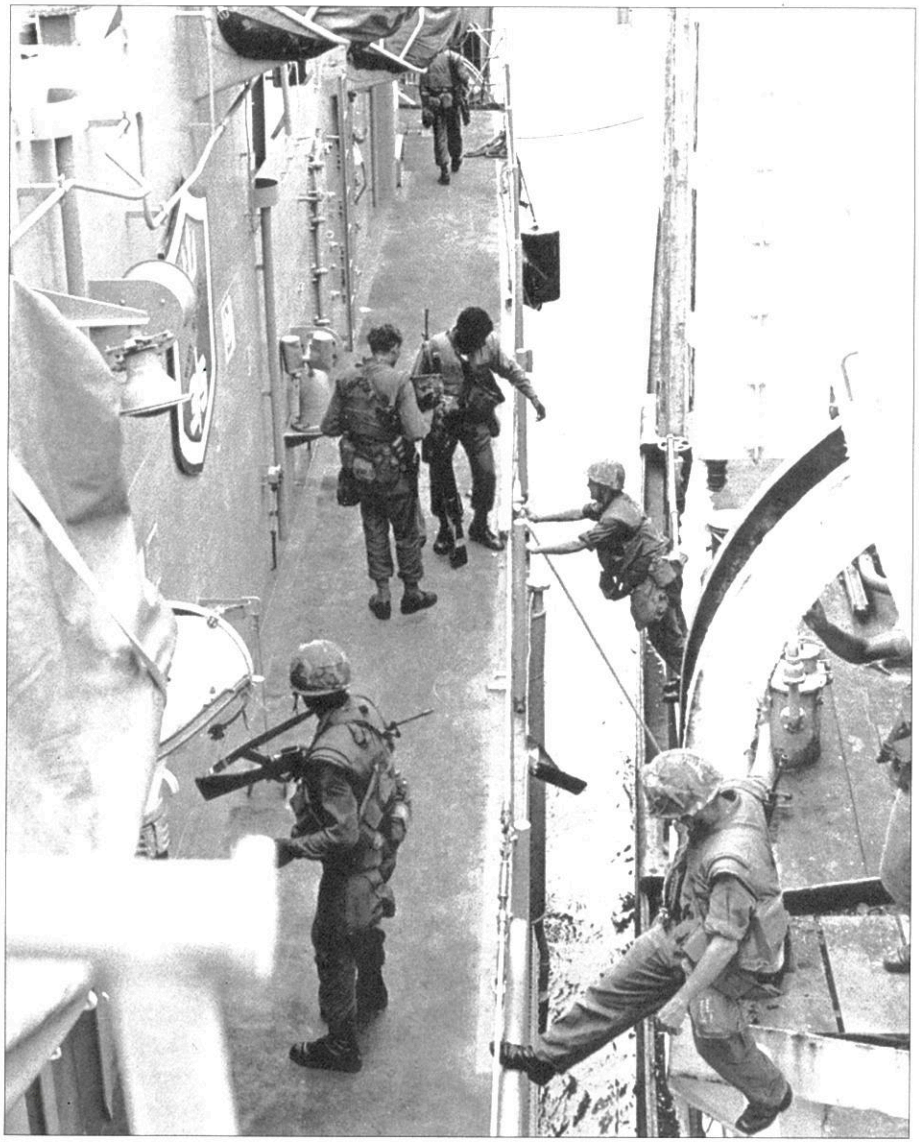
Conclusions

One can be forgiven for viewing the *Mayaguez* Incident as a relic of a bygone era; after all, it occurred nearly 40 years ago, before the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the consequent successful joint operations of the past several decades. Yet the issues that plagued national leadership during the *Mayaguez* Incident do not seem so antiquated when viewed alongside those that have confronted more recent U.S. administrations: intelligence not reaching the correct decisionmakers, the failure of policymakers to discuss critical information at the NSC, policy and operational risks that seem foolish in hindsight, and an imbalanced focus on one instrument of national power.

Could the same mistakes be made again? Certainly the current emphasis on joint doctrine and joint education is of some help. The plans presented by DOD during the *Mayaguez* Incident were the result of an embryonic joint planning process that unraveled under the stress of short-fused planning efforts. My own experiences as a planner at the International Security Force Headquarters and Interim Joint Command in Afghanistan would lead me to believe that we could do better, especially at the tactical level. Likewise, important changes within the Intelligence Community have occurred in the past 35 years. Intelligence support to operations has certainly improved, and lessons learned from the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, among others, has led to community-wide efforts to break down interagency stovepipes.[52] Likewise, the 1987 standup and subsequent evolution of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), which had its origins in the disastrous Operation *Eagle Claw* mission to rescue American hostages held in Iran in April 1980, has significantly enhanced the military's ability to rapidly and effectively plan such operations. In recent years, USSOCOM and the Joint Special Operations Command have shown an ability to quickly assimilate intelligence and manage risk to execute short-fused operations, such as the much publicized Operation *Neptune Spear*, which resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. The actions against the Somali pirates who hijacked the MV *Maersk Alabama* in 2009 also demonstrate that the employment of special operations forces alongside regular naval forces has come a long way. In light of these successes, it is hard to imagine an operation as chaotic as the *Mayaguez* Incident in the current joint environment.[53]

Yet perhaps the most enduring lessons of *Mayaguez* are those related to the ability of the NSC to rapidly and effectively synthesize the collective knowledge of the various stakeholder agencies into a truly national perspective. Especially during crises that occur in the "gray area" between war and peace, the NSC must formulate and realistically evaluate approaches that utilize all the instruments of national power to resolve a crisis. I argue that it is in this area that the biggest failures of *Mayaguez* occurred. Issues that were known inside each agency (for example, the actual location of the hostages or that a hastily assembled force of Marines would be attacking a well-defended island) were never substantially discussed at the highest levels. The plan to end the crisis was focused exclusively on the military instrument of national power, despite indications that diplomacy might have a role to play. Risks to mission and negative policy implications of mission failure were never articulated and evaluated by the NSC.

Is the current interagency decisionmaking environment substantially changed from that of 40 years ago? Without the congressional pressure that led to Goldwater-Nichols, USSOCOM and other military reforms, the NSC role in the interagency decisionmaking process has remained advisory rather than directive, creating an environment in which individual agencies may be more worried about protecting their equities than working toward a common objective. In this environment, synthesis of information and the instruments of national power must occur on an ad hoc basis. Equally troubling, such disconnects at the strategic level also create obstacles to collaboration in the field. Recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan bear witness to the ongoing challenges in getting the State Department and military staffs to work together effectively to integrate the instruments of national power, leading some to say that "the time



Marines reboard USS *Harold E. Holt* (DE-1974) from SS *Mayaguez* after merchant ship's recovery, Koh Tang Island, Cambodia, May 14, 1975 (DOD/Michael Chan)

has come to look to a new, more effective operational model."[54] While the NSC has certainly contributed to unity of perspective at the strategic level, it continues to fall well short of unity of effort among agencies, which is essential to effective strategy and decisionmaking. Instead, we rely on "lead-follow" relationships between agencies, often leading to strategic solutions dominated by one instrument of power. Until we have a reliable framework that integrates the resources each element of government brings to bear, we will continue to have strategic blind spots. These can lead national decisionmakers, like those in the Ford administration during the *Mayaguez* crisis, to focus on singular solutions (military or otherwise) that do not take into account all aspects of complex policy challenges.

In the interim, joint leaders would be well advised to ensure that interagency stakeholders are present, critical, and vocal in planning efforts, and that advice provided to national leadership reflects a whole-of-government perspective. During *Mayaguez*, agencies were certainly present at NSC discussions, but they fell short in the critical and vocal categories; diplomatic cables were not evaluated, the whereabouts of hostages and enemies' dispositions were not fully discussed, and perilous military plans were left unquestioned. Likewise, even the most seasoned joint planner or commander needs to check his assumptions and ensure that new data do not conflict with the underpinnings of their operational design. Since the SS *Mayaguez* crisis, the need for carefully integrated interagency operations that balance all elements of national power and judiciously assess risk on an ongoing basis has only increased. However, many national leaders believe we are no better at meeting such demands today than we were 40 years ago. As former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Richard Myers argues, we "have to realize that the United States' interagency and national security apparatus, as currently organized, can't deal effectively with the threats of the twenty-first century."[55] Perhaps, then, what the *Mayaguez* Incident teaches us—and we have been slow to learn—is that better national security decisionmaking will not occur simply by electing more talented leaders. It requires serious organizational reforms similar to those that have served to improve joint planning and special operations. **JFQ**

Notes

[1] *Koh* is Khmer for *island*, so the article avoids the redundant construction *Koh Tang Island*.

[2] The American public and press generally approved of the operation, and President Ford's rating in the Gallup Poll increased from 39 to 51 percent. See The Kennedy School of Government, *The Mayaguez Incident* (Boston: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1983), 22.

[3] President Gerald Ford's pardon of former President Richard Nixon in September 1974, along with a poor economy and foreign policy setbacks, had made him an unpopular President. Ford's approval rating was only 39 percent in May 1975, and Americans did not generally view him as the solution to the Nation's woes. See Robert J. Mahoney, *The Mayaguez Incident: Testing America's Resolve in the Post-Vietnam Era* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2011), 3–5.

[4] The Kennedy School of Government, 1.

[5] Government Accountability Office (GAO), *The Seizure of the Mayaguez: A Case Study in Crisis Managment* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 63–64.

[6] These efforts at least appeared unsuccessful as the Chinese returned diplomatic notes, but some scholars speculate that some of these

communications may have reached the Khmer government, possibly via its embassy in Beijing. See Richard G. Head, Frisco W. Short, and Robert C. McFarlane, *Crisis Resolution: Presidential Decision Making in the Mayaguez and Korean Confrontations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1978), 145; see also Mahoney, 216.

[7] Gerald R. Ford, *National Security Council* [NSC] *Minutes, May 13th, 10:22am, 1975* (Washington, DC: The White House, 1975), 2.

[8] GAO, 115–126.

[9] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 13th 10:40pm*, 2. For specifics of the aircraft and pilots' observations, see also Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command Headquarters (CINCPAC HQ), Command History Branch, *CINCPAC Command History, 1975, Appendix VI*, Top Secret, Declassified May 8, 1980 (San Francisco: CINCPAC HQ, 1976), 17. Hereafter, *CINCPAC Command History*.

[10] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 13th 10:40pm*, 2–5. The boat in question was a Thai fishing vessel with Cambodian guards; the terrified Thais wanted to turn around, but were forced on at gunpoint by their Cambodian captors. See Ralph Wetterhahn, *The Last Battle: The Mayaguez Incident and the End of the Vietnam War* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 2001), 104–106.

[11] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 13th, 10:40pm*, 5–23.

[12] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 14th, 3:52pm*, 1–27.

[13] *CINCPAC Command History*, 19.

[14] GAO, 89–92.

[15] Urey W. Patrick, *The Mayaguez Operation* (Washington, DC: Center for Naval Analysis–Marine Corps Operational Analysis Group, April 1977), 10–13.

[16] GAO, 125

[17] *CINCPAC Command History*, 19.

[18] Wetterhahn believes, based on interviews with a Cambodian who commanded the Khmer troops at Koh Tang, that Lance Corporal Joseph N. Hargrove was wounded, captured shortly after the initial battle, and then executed by gunshot. According to the same source, Private First Class Gary Hall and Private Danny G. Marshall were captured by a Khmer patrol on the island some days after the battle and transported to Kompong Som where, a week later, on orders from Phnom Penh, they were beaten to death with a B40 grenade launcher. See Wetterhahn, 277–289.

[19] Head, Short, and McFarlane, 147–148.

[20] On the other hand, air attacks, both on Cambodian naval vessels and on Kompong Som by the *Coral Sea*, did appear to influence Cambodian decisionmakers. See Mahoney, 157.

[21] Eighteen Marines, Sailors, and Airmen were killed in the attack on Koh Tang, although three Marines were initially listed as MIA, with 50 wounded. See *After Action Report: Rescue of the SS* Mayaguez *and Its Crew* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, May 19, 1975), 21.

[22] A poor command and control structure; unreliable tactical communications (especially across Service lines); inadequate pre-mission planning; employment of forces outside of their training and doctrine; chaotic and incomplete intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and poor plans for supporting fires were noted in several immediate reviews of the action. See GAO, 59–61; *CINCPAC Command History*, 10–20; and Patrick, 21–22.

[23] Department of Defense, *Possible Scenarios for Recovery of Ship and Crew*, Options Paper (Quantico, VA: Ford Library, 1975), 2.

[24] Ibid., 2.

[25] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 13th, 10:40pm*, 1–23.

[26] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 14th, 3:52pm*, 3.

[27] David A. Mets, "Last Flight from Koh Tang: The *Mayaguez* Incident a Generation Later," *Joint Force Quarterly* 45 (2nd Quarter 2007), 112.

[28] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 13th, 10:40pm*, 12–14.

[29] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 14th*, 3:52pm, 7–9.

[30] Christopher J. Lamb, *Belief Systems and Decision Making in the Mayaguez Crisis* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989), 129–130. For additional details on intelligence messages at the CINCPAC level, see also Mahoney, 251–255.

[31] Director of Central Intelligence, National Security Council Intelligence Briefing, "Cambodian Forces during Mayaguez Incident," U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), 1975.

[32] Director of Central Intelligence, Memorandum, "The Rescue of SS *Mayaguez* and Its Crew," NARA, 1975, 12.

[33] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 14th, 3:52pm*, 7–9.

[34] In addition to multiple intelligence estimates, a hastily organized command and control structure contributed to poor situational awareness. In at least one instance, an Air Force intelligence officer who had access to higher enemy troop strength numbers was rebuffed when he attempted to provide them to those planning the assault. See Mahoney, 251–255.

[35] Patrick, 21.

[36] "It is not surprising to find that Ford, pushed into office by the Watergate scandal, relied heavily on Kissinger to formulate foreign policy. . . he was undoubtedly strongly influenced by Kissinger's opinion." See Lamb, 63.

[37] Lamb notes, "A diplomatic settlement rated a very poor second on the list of American priorities, especially for the Secretary of State, who headed off such a development as best he could." Lamb, 246. See also Mahoney, 25.

[38] GAO, 66.

[39] Ibid., 67–68.

[40] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 12th, 12:05pm*.

[41] Ford, *NSC Minutes, May 13th, 10:22am*.

[42] Although the cable's insight came via a Pakistani diplomat, it still should have given decisionmakers some degree of pause. Department of State, U.S. Embassy Tehran Cable 14MAY750856GMT: "Chinese Embassy Tehran Believes Mayaguez to Be Freed Soon," Digital National Security Archive, 1975.

[43] GAO, 124.

[44] Lamb, 123. See also Christopher J. Lamb and Alexandra A. Singer, *The Mayaguez Crisis Mini Case Study* (Washington, DC: Project on National Security Reform Case Study, 2009), 4–7.

[45] Lamb, 81. For a more detailed analysis of the tension between the objectives of ship and crew, see also Lamb and Singer, 5–7.

[46] Lamb, 202. See also Lucien S. Vandenbrouke, *Perilous Options* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 83–84.

[47] Vandenbrouke makes a strong case that President Ford and others were clearly aware that this was a real, perhaps even likely, outcome. Vandenbrouke, 83.

[48] Vandenbrouke notes that "[u]nder the best of circumstances, the difficulty of conducting a successful operation with units that have never worked together, drawn from services that never train together, is great." He goes on to detail the NSC's poor understanding of these risks. Ibid., 88–90.

[49] The Joint Chiefs, *After Action Report*, 19.

[50] These Marines were initially listed as MIA, and their status was later changed to KIA. Ibid., 21. See also GAO, 65. When they were initially discovered missing, a search by the crew of the USS *Wilson* was unsuccessful. A proposed SEAL Team insertion to search further was considered but voted down. Mahoney, 179–180.

[51] While decisionmakers during the *Mayaguez* Incident were justifiably concerned about a long-lasting hostage standoff such as had occurred with the USS *Pueblo* in 1968, a more recent example, the 2001 Hainan Incident, in which a U.S. EP-3 ARIES II crew was held by the People's Republic of China, demonstrates that a "pause" for diplomacy can be more effective than a purely military solution, especially when backed by a credible military response.

[52] Nancy Bernkopf Tucker, "The Cultural Revolution in Intelligence: Interim Report," *Washington Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2008), 47–61.

[53] Sean D. Naylor, "A Triumph for JSOC," *Defense News*, May 9, 2011, 11.

[54] Dennis Blair, Ronald Neumann, Eric Olsen, "Fixing Fragile States," *The National Interest*, September–October 2014. See also B. Baylor, J. Burington, B. Davis, R. Goehring, "Iraq: A Case Study in Building Civil-Military Capacity, 2007–2010," *Prism* 1, no. 3 (2011), 137–138; Rudra Chaudhuri and Theo Farrell, "Campaign Disconnect: Operational Progress and Strategic Obstacles in Afghanistan 2009–2011," *International Affairs* 87, no. 2 (2011), 284–287.

[55] Richard B. Myers, *Eyes on the Horizon: Serving on the Front Lines of National Security* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 301.