

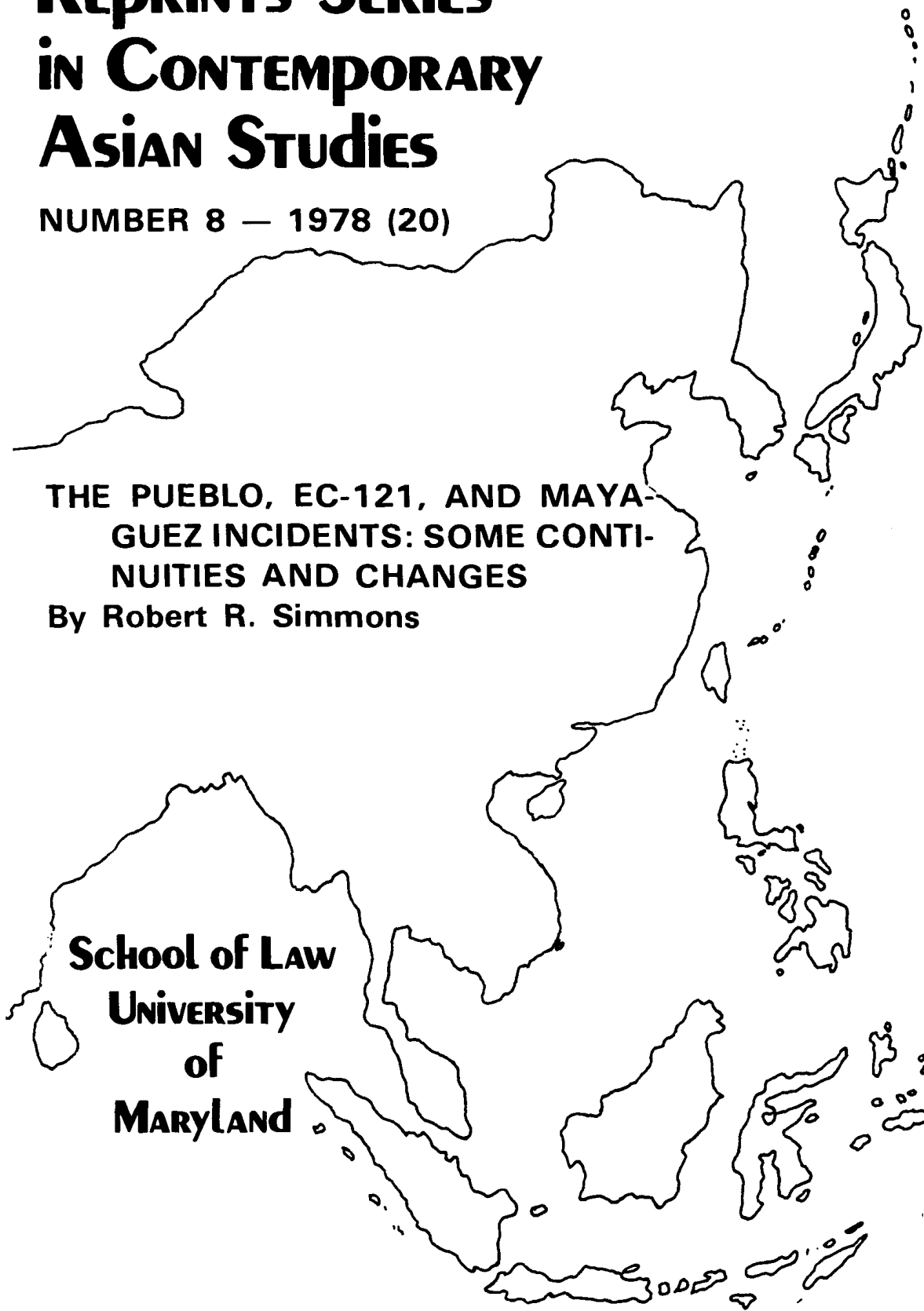
OCCASIONAL PAPERS/ REPRINTS SERIES IN CONTEMPORARY ASIAN STUDIES

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**THE PUEBLO, EC-121, AND MAYA-
GUEZ INCIDENTS: SOME CONTI-
NUITIES AND CHANGES**

By Robert R. Simmons

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of
MARYLAND**



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THE PUEBLO, EC-121, AND MAYAGUEZ INCIDENTS: SOME CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

ROBERT R. SIMMONS*

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THE PUEBLO, EC-121 AND MAYAGUEZ INCIDENTS: SOME CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

ROBERT R. SIMMONS

I. INTRODUCTION

The military response of the United States to the Pueblo, EC-121 and Mayaguez crisis reflected less the severity of each crisis than the military capability available at the time of each incident.

In 1968 and 1969, North Korea staged spectacular acts of violence against U.S. military craft. On January 23, 1968, it seized the U.S.S. Pueblo, an electronic surveillance ship, then in international waters. The crew of eighty-three, which suffered one fatality during the capture, was released after eleven months. The ship itself was never returned. On April 15, 1969, North Korea shot down an unarmed U.S. Navy EC-121 electronic surveillance aircraft over international waters. The entire crew of thirty-one was killed.

The U.S. military reactions to each of these provocations included demonstrations of military capabilities, but retaliatory military violence was not used in either of them. In both cases, firm words and naval task forces were dispatched rapidly to the scene, but armed retaliation was not undertaken. In contrast, Cambodia's seizure of the U.S. merchant ship Mayaguez on May 12, 1975 prompted a quick and violent military reaction.

This paper examines some of the continuities and differences among these incidents in terms of causes, U.S. responses and the impact of the military responses on the outcomes. Available sources indicated that one factor dominated these differences — the war in Indochina. Heavily engaged in Southeast Asia in 1968 and 1969, U.S. armed forces imply were not prepared to risk a simultaneous war over either the Pueblo or the EC-121. Political and public enthusiasm for a possible additional struggle in Korea, moreover, was low. These constraints were not operable at the time of the Mayaguez crisis when both military forces and political support were available for a limited action. Indeed, political sentiment seemed to favor a violent response that might redress, in some measure, the recent U.S. defeats in Indochina.

The curious thing is that, regardless of these differences, the U.S. military response in each of these three crises apparently had little impact on the immediate outcome, but was perhaps of greater significance for later incidents. The crew of the Pueblo was not returned any earlier in 1968 because of the U.S. show of force. The lack of a violent response to the seizure of the Pueblo

may, in turn, have contributed to North Korea's willingness to take risks (such as shooting down the EC-121) but it did not seem to affect the negotiations over the Pueblo itself. The EC-121 crisis was essentially over immediately, for the crew died during the plane's destruction. The only option then open to the United States — an option it did not exercise — was a military retaliation. The lack of a violent response this time did not seem to affect the North one way or another. The U.S. response to the seizure of the Mayaguez was violent, out of all proportion to the incident itself. The ship and its crew would have been returned without this demonstration of military might. As suggested below, however, one benefit emerged, perhaps unintended, from this use of violence. The U.S. action was viewed by decision-makers around the world as irrational — an advantage for a state dealing with erratic foes, such as North Korea, that otherwise wish to foment crises. An illustration of a later outcome of the 1975 Mayaguez crisis is the murder by North Korean soldiers of two U.S. soldiers at Panmunjon in August 1976 (the first Asian crisis after the Mayaguez episode). It seems possible that the demonstrative U.S. action following that incident achieved added credibility because of the violent U.S. response to the seizure of the Mayaguez.

II. THE PUEBLO

The United States and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) waged a bitter war between 1950 and 1953. Since then, each side has feared and suspected the other. Premier Kim Il Sung, an intense nationalist, has stridently proclaimed his anti-United States foreign policy goals and proudly built his authority on the slogan of "chuch'e": autonomy and self-reliance. After 1953, North Korea continued to proclaim its intention to liberate South Korea from the grasp of U.S. imperialism. For its part, the United States maintained a defense treaty with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and this relationship appeared threatening to North Korea.

This mutual apprehension increased during the Vietnam war because each saw that conflict as a reflection of the shared hostilities. In October 1966, Kim Il Sung delivered an uncompromising speech reaffirming his intention to reunify the peninsula. This speech ("Let Us Defend Independence") condemned both "modern revisionism" (the USSR) and "left opportunism" (China). Shortly thereafter, President Lyndon B. Johnson visited Seoul to declare his solidarity with South Korea. These reciprocal warn-

ings were underscored by an increase in armed incidents in the Demilitarized Zone and by subversive activities directed against South Korea. In 1966, there had been 50 incidents; in 1967, 729; in 1968, 761.¹ In 1967, more than 1,500 U.S. reconnaissance flights flew near the borders of North Korea. A "senior advisor for national security" said that the number of these flights during the preceding two years had "just increased and increased."²

The DPRK experienced a rapid increase in its defense budget as it dramatically increased the number of incursions into the South. Moreover, it had staged a purge which had the effect of promoting professional military men interested in armed conflict with the South. The typically fervent anti-United States, anti-South Korea rhetoric became even harsher. Meanwhile, relations with the People's Republic of China (PRC) turned frigid, with Red Guard Posters in the spring of 1967 calling Kim Il Sung a "fat revisionist". There were even reports of "shooting incidents" on the China-North Korea border.³ Ties with the USSR were correct but apparently not warm. The North was embarking on a hard, independent course. By the end of 1967, with this background of military tension, it was evident that Korea had the potential to test the U.S. ability to react decisively in more than one military crisis at the same time.

On November 17, 1967, Pyongyang radio announced that it had "taken measures" against a group of more than one hundred fishing vessels that entered North Korean territorial waters. It made a similar broadcast, charging another incursion, on December 8 and reported on December 22 that North Korea seized "armed espionage boats disguised as fishing boats" during another mass "infiltration" into its waters by a South Korean fishing fleet. On January 6, 1968, Pyongyang radio announced:

The U.S. imperialist aggressor army, which has been incessantly committing provocative acts lately on the sea off of the eastern coast, from 0600 hours this morning again dispatched many armed boats, mingled with fishing boats, under the escort of armed warships into the coastal waters of our side.

1. Ralph N. Clough, *East Asia and U.S. Security* (Brookings Institution, 1975), p. 163.

2. Trevor Armbrister, *A Matter of Accountability: The Truth of the Pueblo Affair* (Corward-McCann, 1970), p. 183.

3. *New York Times*, November 23, 1970.

The broadcast concluded that the continuation of such "reckless aggression" would result in "100-fold" retaliation by North Korea.⁴ Seoul radio reported on the same day that the North had seized five of seventy ships in a fishing fleet during this incident.

The *Pueblo* was preparing to sail from Japan for its mission on January 8. It was unlikely that this particular news would have halted the *Pueblo's* sailing, however, because only South Korean ships had previously been bothered.

The attack on the *Pueblo* began at approximately 11:30 P.M. (EDT) on January 22. The *Pueblo* initially encountered one Soviet-style SO-1 subchaser which carried a nineteen-man crew and mounted a fifty-seven-millimeter canon. The subchaser was soon joined by another subchaser of the same type, four motor torpedo boats and two North Korean MIGs which patrolled the operating area. After it was seized, the *Pueblo* was escorted to Wonsan Harbor (North Korea) where it arrived at 6:30 A.M. (EDT) on January 23.⁵

An attack on the *Pueblo* had been unexpected for three reasons:

1. The *Pueblo's* sister ship, the *USS Banner*, had sailed along the coast of China, the USSR and North Korea since 1965 without being fired upon. The *Banner* had operated off the coast of Wonsan in January 1967 for about thirty-six hours and on one other occasion in the same year for eleven hours in the same general area where the *Pueblo* was later captured. In fact, when the *Pueblo* was seized, the *Banner* was on its way to patrol off Siberia. Infrequently harassed, it had not had to fire a single shot during its missions. Based on this precedent, there was no adequate military backup. The U.S. Fifth Air Force was to be kept informed about the *Pueblo* and a number of its F-105s were on two-hour alert on Okinawa, approximately 850 miles from Wonsan, but no naval units were allocated to these missions. A further intangible, but salient factor that contributed to the lack of close and constant awareness of the *Pueblo's* potential danger was summarized at 1969 Congressional Hearings by Rear Admiral Frank L. Johnson, commander of the U.S. Naval Forces in Japan at the time of the crisis. "[H]ad there

4. British Broadcasting Corporation, *Summary of World Broadcasts* (January 8, 1968), FE/2663/A3/6.

5. Commander Lloyd M. Bucher, *Bucher: My Story* (Doubleday & Co., 1970), pp. 178-83.

been any reason to suspect an unlawful seizure after 150 years or more of no such seizures, I would not have ordered an unescorted AGER (auxiliary general environmental research) on the mission.”⁶ The Banner had received naval support on only two of its sixteen missions. The Pueblo traveled alone as well.

2. It was also presumed that North Korea’s foreign policies were under the strong influence of the USSR. The USSR operated its own intelligence ships and had not seized any U.S. intelligence vessels. U.S. Admiral Thomas H. Moorer reported that the USSR at this time employed forty unarmed intelligence collection ships. Some, he said,

occasionally have violated our territorial waters, but none has been attacked or fired upon by our forces nor has any of their crew been seized or killed. In fact, when these ships had been notified that they were in U.S. territorial waters and, in accordance with international law, were requested to leave, they did so.⁷

It was, therefore, considered unlikely that a Soviet ally would violate a tacit naval agreement with the United States. Consequently, the captain and crew of the Pueblo, as well as superior U.S. command authorities, were surprised when the ship was seized.

3. Since Premier Kim’s October 1966 speech, the North’s accusations had increased in ferocity and in frequency. Hence, they had lost much of their impact. Radio Pyongyang elaborated on the charges on January 8. “This once again proves that the U.S. imperialist aggressors are further aggravating tension in Korea and running wild to provoke a new war . . . thus causing a grave situation in which a war may break out at any moment.”⁸ The North Korean signals of willingness for action had been misread by Washington. Rear Admiral John Victor Smith, the senior negotiator for the UN command in Panmunjon, for example, had labeled these warlike messages “the usual communist garbage”. Rear Admiral Thomas H. Moorer, then Chief of Naval

6. *Inquiry Into the U.S.S. Pueblo and EC-121 Plane Incidents*, House of Representatives, Committee on Armed Services (GPO, 1969), p. 735.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 635-36.

8. British Broadcasting Corporation, *Summary of World Broadcasts* (January 9, 1968), FE/2664/A3/16.

Operations, later explained Admiral Smith's remark on the grounds that "similar warnings had been issued on prior occasions and there was nothing to indicate that the North Koreans were referring to anything other than fishing vessels."⁹ This evaluation, however, ignored the seizure of South Korean fishing boats in increasing numbers, the rapid increase of incursions into the South and the raid by a team of North Korean commandos on the South Korean presidential mansion just before the seizure of the *Pueblo*.

A. *The U.S. Military Response*

The United States, almost totally preoccupied with the burdens of Vietnam, was not prepared to cope quickly with a second conflict. At the time of the seizure of the *Pueblo*, the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier *Enterprise* and the frigate *Truxton* were 510 miles southwest of the port of Wonsan where the *Pueblo* was taken. Although there were fifty-nine fighter aircraft aboard the *Enterprise*, only thirty-five were operational. Four F-4B Phantoms with a speed of Mach 2 and a range of more than 1,500 miles were on five-minute "alert". The alert F-4Bs, however, were intended to defend the carriers from air attack and so were equipped with air-to-air "Sparrow" and "Sidewinder" missiles. It was estimated that it would have taken approximately three hours to refit these aircraft with air-to-surface missiles and send them off to the *Pueblo*; by that time dusk would have fallen.¹⁰

Two A-4 and F-4 Marine squadrons based in Japan were then receiving air-to-surface attack training with non-nuclear weaponry. It is conceivable that they could have reached the *Pueblo* during the two hours before it arrived at Wonsan, but these squadrons were not informed about the *Pueblo* until the next morning.¹¹ At the time of the *Pueblo*'s capture, there had not been a "strip alert" by U.S. Air Force fighters which would have provided the capability of a quick nonnuclear armed response. Similarly, they were unprepared to fight off the 450 Mig defenders. By contrast, in mid-January 1968, readily available (but nuclear-armed) U.S. land-based military aircraft in the immediate region were seven fighter-bombers in Korea, eighteen on Okinawa and sixteen in Japan.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 638.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 896.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 900.

Brigadier General John W. Harrell, commander of the U.S. Air Force in the Republic of Korea, stated a few days after the seizure that he had received "no instructions to prevent its capture or come to its rescue,"¹² apparently because the forces under his command were not conventionally armed.

Because the U.S. planes on alert in South Korea itself were equipped with nuclear weapons, aircraft were requested from Okinawa. By the time these aircraft reached South Korea, darkness was about to fall, so the aircraft were not dispatched to the scene. South Korean aircraft, under UN and not U.S. command, were not asked to assist. Moreover, South Korean planes were not equipped with delivery capabilities adequate to the rapid response the situation called for. Furthermore, Washington was probably reluctant to risk Seoul becoming as adventure-some as Pyongyang if encouraged to liberate the Pueblo.

Even if aircraft armed with conventional air-to-surface weapons had been available for use over the Pueblo before dusk, a question would be, what would be gained by the use of military power? A *New York Times* editorial of January 24, 1968 appreciated the risks of a military reaction when it warned, "Whatever the facts may prove to be, the incident does present, as the White House has observed, 'a very serious situation.' Such a situation must not be dealt with in passion, for it could lead to a sharp and dangerous new escalation of the Asian war." President Johnson himself recalled, "We know that if we wanted our men to return home alive we had to use diplomacy. If we resorted to military means, we could expect dead bodies. And we almost might start a war." Similarly, the Pacific Command believed that "use of our aircraft, instead of saving our men, would endanger their lives, and they conclude that the pilots of the aircraft would be taking an unacceptable risk, in view of the large number of North Korean jet fighters massed in the area around Wonsan, North Korea."¹³

The President's stress on diplomacy reflected an acknowledgment of the pressures already bearing on U.S. military response capabilities. The difficulty of mounting a swift response, the shortage of appropriate military force and uncertainty about a North Korean reaction to a U.S. military strike were joined to another factor: Was the seizure of the Pueblo signaling an imminent invasion of the South?

12. *Washington Post*, January 29, 1968.

13. Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point* (Popular Library, 1970), p. 536.

Almost immediately, Washington ordered the dispatch of a large task force (77) to approach Wonsan. These ships were to include three cruisers (Providence, Canberra and Chicago), five carriers (Enterprise, Ranger, Yorktown, Kearsage and Coral Sea) and eighteen destroyers. As this task force moved into the Sea of Japan, the USSR positioned a squadron of about a dozen vessels close to the U.S. ships; specifically, Kotlin and Kashin class destroyers, tankers and the trowler *Gidrolog*, equipped with Pueblo-type electronic devices to intercept communications and radar.¹⁴

Because of this Soviet naval presence, the involvement of the USSR in the Pueblo crisis remained for the moment unclear. Although the purpose of the Soviet ships was uncertain to Washington, the United States noted with dismay that its requests to the USSR (transmitted by U.S. Ambassador Lewellyn Thompson) to intercede with North Korea were quickly turned aside.

In the first half day after the seizure, Washington was aware of two developments. Conventionally armed planes could not reach the Pueblo before dark and U.S. naval vessels were proceeding toward Korea. But the question of whether North Korea had acted without Soviet encouragement remained for the moment unanswered. Another factor under consideration was potential intensification of the fighting in Vietnam which would place additional heavy demands upon the U.S. military.

In this context, President Johnson and the National Security Council had evaluated the options for military retaliation. After much discussion, the possibilities were reduced to: (1) an attempt to storm Wonsan Harbor and retrieve the ship by force; (2) seizure or destruction of one or more North Korean ships in retaliation or for potential bargaining power; (3) aerial bombing and sinking of the Pueblo at the Wonsan docks to deny to the Communists access to the intelligence gathering equipment on board; and (4) a naval blockade of Wonsan and perhaps other North Korean ports.¹⁵

Faced with the continual drain caused by Vietnam and a growing loss of support in the public and in Congress, the President was not willing to run the risk of increasing incidents and violence with North Korea (and perhaps, by extension, of gambling with the developing detente with the USSR). Nonethe-

14. *New York Times*, January 25, February 8, 1968.

15. *Ibid.*, January 25, 1968.

less, Johnson decided to transmit a signal of warning to North Korea.

He wanted to do something pretty quick, another former White House aide says, but he was in the position of not knowing, not finding anything that looked like a very good thing to do. He talked to McNamara, Rusk, Rostow, Clifford. He telephoned Sam Berger, (Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs), in the middle of the night. His message: Give us more ideas, more alternatives; think them out.¹⁶

The essence of these consultations, along with individual comments by important U.S. leaders, was widely publicized by means of official or "leaked" observations, a mechanism that allowed both the domestic audience and the targets (Pyongyang and its anticipated instructor, Moscow) to appreciate the range of choices available. The main thrust of those signals was that Washington would prefer a negotiated settlement to the incident but did not totally rule out the use of force.

Viewing this crisis as a square in a larger chess board, President Johnson dramatically signaled U.S. determination to rely on a mixture of force and diplomacy for the Pueblo situation. He ruled out military power to retrieve the Pueblo because it ran a high risk of unacceptable consequences. His reluctance to use the military was reinforced by the expectation that heavy demands would shortly be placed on the U.S. military in Vietnam. A specific indication that Task Force 77 was not to be used with an operation connected with freeing the Pueblo was sent by General Earle Wheeler on January 24:

10:25 A.M.: It is desired that no show of force be deployed in area of Pueblo incident. Hold all forces south of 36-OON until further advised . . . 12:25 P.M.: JCS had directed . . . proceed no further north than present positions. Higbee remain in company of Enterprise and Truxton. Do not, repeat, do not, send Higbee to take position off Wonsan.¹⁷

General Wheeler's direction that "no show of force be deployed in area of Pueblo incident" was perhaps the most concise description of the objective assigned to Task Force 77 — to

16. Armbrister, *A Matter of Accountability*, p. 259-61.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 239. Armbrister previously recounts that the destroyer *Higbee* was to have been assigned to enter Wonsan Harbor and retrieve the *Pueblo* crew.

demonstrate military capabilities, but not to use violence. The last part of this message referred to the first of the four military options which had envisioned storming Wonsan harbor to bring out the *Pueblo*. Within half a day of the ship's capture, this option and the other military options that risked a possible second front had been ruled out because of stretched military capabilities and the anticipation of an enemy offensive in Vietnam. Once the crew of the *Pueblo* had arrived in North Korea, moreover, it was not known either where they were or precisely how North Korea would respond. As Undersecretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach noted, "The crew is expendable, but you don't want to expend the lives of 82 men and still not accomplish anything. That would be a disaster."¹⁸ In short, the administration publicly underlined a prudent approach to the *Pueblo* crisis, combined with a demonstration of military strength.

This approach was highlighted when the President mobilized 14,787 Air Force and Navy reservists on January 25. This was done without prior consultation with the Congress whose leaders, agreeing that a rapid, firm stance must be taken, expressed surprise but no open irritation.

The military mobilization, however, did not affect the resolution of the *Pueblo* crisis. The troops mobilized were neither ordered overseas immediately nor even moved to bases for eventual deployment. Rear Admiral Frederick H. Michaelis would assert, "Our units were recalled without deployable equipment. They were not in a position to be immediately responsive."¹⁹ In other words, these recently recalled reservists could not have gone to war. The mobilization was intended chiefly as a demonstrative military action. In part, the mobilization signaled the U.S. determination to both allies and adversaries (there were shudders of apprehension that the *Pueblo* incident might trigger a new war; in Paris the volume of gold trading quickly nearly doubled). The mobilization also signaled to the American audience the administration's concern about developments in Asia and its willingness to take serious measures to rectify the situation. There was also some suspicion that the *Pueblo* crisis simply provided an excuse for the first military mobilization during the Vietnam war, just before an anticipated enemy offensive in Vietnam. In short, the prime military concern remained Southeast Asia.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 263.

B. Domestic Restraints

The declarations from Washington emphasized restraint but did not preclude the possibility of violence. Clark M. Clifford, the President's nominee for Secretary of Defense, summarized the administration's position in a widely reported testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee. He testified that "[t]he President would like very much to get these 83 Americans out of the hands of the North Koreans and get them back. And I believe that he will make every effort along the diplomatic front to achieve that purpose."²⁰ On January 26, after the option of a retaliatory strike had been rejected, President Johnson spoke on national television:

We shall continue to use every means available to find a proper and peaceful solution. . . . We have taken and are continuing taking certain precautionary measures to make sure that our military forces are prepared for any contingency. . . . I hope that North Korea will recognize the gravity of the situation they have created. . . . I am confident that the American people will exhibit in this crisis, as they have in other crises, determination and sanity.²¹

On the same day, Ambassador Arthur Goldberg spoke before the United Nations Security Council. "It is imperative that the Security Council act with the greatest urgency. This course is far more preferable to the remedies which the Charter reserves to member states."²² This was a reference to Article 51 of the UN Charter which permits self-defense for unilateral military actions. It was a calm warning that the United States had not entirely ruled out the option of violence. This verbal caution, however, was given *after* the administration had rejected the use of force to free the Pueblo. The demonstration of the availability of a military option at this time apparently was intended to encourage Moscow to serve as a mediator in the crisis. The State Department had announced on January 23 that an "urgent request" for the release of the Pueblo had been sent to North Korea through the USSR.

Opinion in the United States was divided, but the balance seemed to favor the doves over the hawks. Senator Richard B. Russell, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee,

20. *New York Times*, January 26, 1968.

21. *New York Times*, January 27, 1968.

22. *Ibid.*

assessed the Pueblo capture as "amounting to an act of war." Secretary of State Dean Rusk agreed, saying that the seizure was "in the category of actions to be considered as an act of war." The House Republican minority leader, Gerald R. Ford, declared that if diplomacy fails, "the United States must take whatever military action is necessary" to recover the vessel and crew.²³

More moderate voices were heard as well. Senator Mike Mansfield cautioned, "We should keep our shirts on We should not let our emotions take over. . . . We should not take military action now. . . . The government should make the necessary protests and objections through China and the Soviet Union."²⁴ Senator J. William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, urged, "We should be very careful in this instance not to jump to conclusions until we know all the facts."²⁵ "All the facts" apparently referred to the U.S. military experience in the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident. Fulbright also continued to hope that the USSR would persuade North Korea to return the Pueblo. The Pueblo had been seized while the Foreign Relations Committee was trying to decide whether to conduct a formal hearing on the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Senator Fulbright declared that the government had "deceived" the public about ships in the 1964 incident, in that they were engaged in electronic intelligence work, as, admittedly, was the Pueblo. Another member of this committee, Senator Wayne Morse, pursued the comparison between 1964 and 1968. "The Maddox was a spy ship under instruction to stimulate the electronic instruments of North Vietnam, they were carrying out a spying activity."²⁶

This cloud of gathering suspicion about the 1964 incident inhibited an unambiguously forceful response in 1968. Moreover, in 1968, North Korea had seized a functioning electronic intelligence ship while a draining war continued in nearby Indochina. The willingness of the American people, therefore (as expressed by their elected representatives), to support a military reaction was diluted because of gathering doubts about the causes of the Gulf of Tonkin incident. The question was whether the capture of the Pueblo would duplicate the Gulf of Tonkin incident which had led to the intense involvement in Vietnam.

23. *New York Times*, January 24, January 25, 1968; *Washington Post*, January 25, 1968.

24. *New York Times*, January 25, 1968.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *New York Times*, February 22, 1968.

The American public was willing to use force to regain the Pueblo's crew but opposed to a prolonged conflict on a second front in Asia. The first Gallup Poll after the seizure of the Pueblo (February 1, 1968) showed that forty percent of those responding to the poll favored using force to regain the Pueblo; only three percent felt that the United States should declare war against North Korea. The Harris Poll in the first week of February 1968 summarized its findings on the public attitude toward the crisis: "It is clear that the American people are prepared to back military action in Korea, but they do not feel the Pueblo incident justifies another war."²⁷

C. Negotiations

At first, Moscow refused to help gain the release of the Pueblo or its crew. President Johnson had been surprised by Moscow's brusque rejection of the request, particularly since the USSR had itself frequently deployed such ships on similar missions.

For years both the United States and the Soviet Union had been employing intelligence-gathering ships, as well as planes, and the ships occasionally wandered off course. In 1965 there were two separate incidents of Soviet vessels entering U.S. waters. We did not make a big issue of the infringements. We merely ordered them to leave.²⁸

Despite the initial rebuff, Washington continued to request Moscow's assistance. Meanwhile, several factors worked together to create a climate for more favorable response: the decision not to retaliate, the demonstrations of U.S. military preparedness and appeals to the USSR as a partner in the use of unarmed naval intelligence collectors. At the same time, Washington realized that Moscow did not completely control Pyongyang's decisions and was displeased with the North Korean action.

At the same time, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin had been visiting India for talks with Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. On January 26, an Indian spokesman reporting on the talks stated, "Mr. Kosygin described the Pueblo incident as a routine matter of one country's ship straying in the territorial waters of

27. Cited in *New York Times*, February 11, 1968.

28. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p. 534. The captains of these two ships appeared in an Alaskan court and pleaded "no contest" to the charge of violating U. S. territorial waters. In these unrelated trials, one ship paid a fine of \$5,000, the other, a fine of \$10,000.

another country and said that it should be treated as such. . . . The Soviet position is to defuse the matter and not to attach great importance to it."²⁹ Reporters attached to Premier Kosygin's delegation wrote, "Russian officials in Premier Kosygin's entourage indicated today that the Soviet Union is interested in freeing the U.S.S. Pueblo despite the negative signals Moscow has been transmitting . . . there is a gap between Soviet actions and Moscow's first response to American requests for help."³⁰

On January 28, 1968, *The Washington Post*, again in a dispatch from New Delhi, reported that "well-placed Russian sources" suggested that the ship could be traded for confessions from the crew and an exchange of prisoners between North and South Korea. If these were accurate sentiments voiced by Soviet officials in an effort to mediate, they would have been beneficial. It should be noted, however, that the USSR quickly denied the validity of these stories. The Soviet position was repeated publicly in *Pravda's* authoritative "Observer" column on February 4:

It is clear that attempts to achieve something from a sovereign Socialist state, the Korean People's Democratic Republic, can have no chance of success if accompanied by threat and pressure. Now it is especially important that the United States take no rash steps that would further complicate the situation.

Interestingly, three days after the ship's capture, the North Korean negotiator at the Mixed Armistice Commission at Panmunjom stated, "All you have to do is to admit military provocations and aggressive acts committed by your side, apologize for them and assure (this Conference) table that you will not re-commit such criminal acts."³¹ While this speech was vague and did not promise release of the crew, it did suggest some flexibility. This less than rigid posture was again implied when Jun Im Chol, Vice President of the Korean Red Cross, predicated that the Pueblo would not be returned "under any circumstances."³² Again, no mention of the crew was made; reference had been made to the ship but not the crew.

29. *Washington Post*, January 27, 1968.

30. *Ibid.*

31. British Broadcasting Corporation, *Summary of World Broadcasts* (January 31, 1968), FE/2685/A3/7.

32. *Washington Post*, February 1, 1968. This statement was made in Colombo, Ceylon.

Among other things, this delicate Soviet stance indicated to Washington that part of the reason for the seizure of the *Pueblo* had been Korea's wish to demonstrate an activist stance distinct from those of the USSR and China. Commander Bucher's "confession," for example, issued shortly after the ship's capture, acknowledged that U.S. intelligence vessels had also sailed off of the coasts of China and the USSR. This statement allowed North Korea to portray itself as being in the vanguard of the anti-imperialist struggle. Recognizing intrabloc disagreement on tactics, Washington avoided harsh verbal attacks on the USSR and continued to seek its assistance as a mediator for the crew's release. President Johnson commented that, after a few days, "in spite of their initial rebuff of Ambassador Thompson's request, the Russians were now urging us to act with restraint and we believe that they could be helpful."³³

Interestingly, there had been an analogous situation less than half a decade before the seizure of the *Pueblo*. A U.S. military helicopter with two pilots had been downed just north of the 38th Parallel on the Korean peninsula on May 17, 1963. In March 1964, the United States apologized, claiming that the violation had been caused by navigational error, but Washington refused to admit spying. On May 16, 1964, the pilots were released when the United States signed a statement prepared by North Korea acknowledging espionage. It declared that the helicopter had been "captured by the self-defense measures of the People's Army while committing military espionage acts after deliberately intruding."³⁴ Immediately after the pilots were freed, the United States denounced the signed document as "meaningless".

The helicopter case provided a model of an incident in which retaliatory force was withheld over a time span about the same as the detention of the *Pueblo*. As in the *Pueblo* episode five years later, North Korea had demanded an admission of spying by the United States. In each case, after almost a year's refusal, Washington signed a paper of acknowledgment which it immediately declared to be false. Therefore, during the 1968 negotiations over the release of the *Pueblo*, both Pyongyang and Washington had a precedent to pursue, one that was haltingly but closely followed. It is interesting that the experience of the

33. Johnson, *The Vantage Point*, p. 536.

34. *New York Times*, May 17, 1964.

helicopter's capture and release was recalled almost immediately after the Pueblo's seizure.³⁵

In a public speech a week after the seizure, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Korean Worker's Party rejected a military solution for the release of the Pueblo crew, but referred to "the method of previous practice." Washington responded quickly. Thereupon, Pyongyang agreed to hold private talks. A statement was drafted by Ambassador Berger, Undersecretary Katzenbach and Secretary of State Rusk.³⁶ These sequestered discussions were more restrained than the vitriolic, open diatribes that usually characterized U.S.-Korean negotiations. The private meetings began on February 2 at Panmunjom. North Korea insisted that the United States had committed the "criminal act of espionage" and demanded that the United States admit the correctness of this charge, apologize for the intrusion and promise not to repeat this criminal action. This acknowledgment, roughly parallel to both the 1964 concessions and the demands of North Korea throughout 1968, was largely the agreement that did accompany the freeing of the crew eleven months later.

North Korea's implied call for talks based on the 1963-64 pattern came one day after the beginning of the Tet Offensive. A "second front" seemed even less desirable to both sides — the United States because of the intensified involvement in Southeast Asia and North Korea because of its fear of a U.S. military strike. More than a year after the release of the Pueblo crew, the senior North Korean delegate at Panmunjom commented on North Korea's fear of an attack shortly after the Pueblo's seizure. "We came near to it . . . for a period of two or three months, the entire people of the southern part (of North Korea) lived in a state of constant alert. . . ."³⁷

In February, it appeared that fruitful negotiations were developing. Republican Leader Gerald R. Ford regretted that:

The Johnson Administration apparently is getting ready to "confess" to North Korea. This comes as a shock to members of Congress who have relied upon earlier statements by the Administration and by our Ambassador to the UN, Arthur T.

35. *Washington Post*, January 24, 1968.

36. Armbrister, *A Matter of Accountability*, p. 274.

37. Robert A. Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea* (University of California Press, 1973), p. 985.

Goldberg, flatly asserting that the Pueblo had not intruded upon the territorial water of North Korea.³⁸

To some degree, this limited progress was aided by military actions. On February 2, 1968, Hungary had advised the United States that if it wanted the Pueblo negotiations to succeed, it must move the nuclear powered aircraft carrier Enterprise farther out to sea. The value of stationing the Enterprise off the Korean coast lay ultimately less in its ability to carry out shelling and bombing of North Korea and more in the opportunity to withdraw it in a negotiating exchange. After the private talks began between North Korea and the United States, the United States agreed to withdraw the huge aircraft carrier as a symbol of its earnest desire for the success of the talks. In this situation, the "show of force" operated two ways. It is probable that North Korea understood the symbolism of both emplacing, and then withdrawing, units of the armed forces as evidence of U.S. willingness to make concessions. The ship moved on February 7, but the Pentagon specifically said the carrier was not moved back to a station off Vietnam. For North Korea, fearful of a possible U.S.-ROK military strike, the request for the removal of the Enterprise was logical. Even after the Enterprise pulled back, the remaining U.S. naval presence was still impressive. It included the Yorktown (CVA), Ranger (CVA) and the cruisers Canberra and Chicago. Moreover, the Enterprise had not actually been near North Korea but had cruised between Japan and South Korea. By February 20, the Enterprise was in Subic Bay, the Philippines.

In the first week of February 1968, as North Korean and U.S. representatives met at Panmunjom, Seoul worried about an agreement being reached without its knowledge or consultation because it had been excluded from the talks. On February 11, 1968, the major Seoul newspaper, *Dong-A Ilbo*, stated:

The United States must realize that connivance with the Communists over the recent intrusion of a North Korean commando unit into Seoul in exchange for the release of the U.S. prestige as well as the loss of confidence by Koreans in the U.S.

The South Korean National Assembly then adopted a strong resolution condemning private negotiations between the United States and North Korea. South Korean Premier Chung Il Kwon met with U.S. Ambassador William J. Porter and General Charles

38. *New York Times*, February 6, 1968.

Bonesteel, commander of U.S. forces. Premier Chung's demands were that the problem of infiltration from North Korea take precedence over the Pueblo, that South Korea be included in all negotiations and that there be an increase in U.S. aid to Seoul. At this time, South Korea announced a military mobilization of its own. In addition to its potential defensive function, the mobilization served as a signal to Washington. Beginning in 1965, South Korea had sent more than 47,000 troops to Vietnam to support the U.S. position. South Korean on-line capabilities were therefore limited. Would the United States fulfill its treaty obligations to its loyal ally? Or should South Korea withdraw its troops from Vietnam to prepare its own defense?

On February 11, Deputy Secretary of Defense, Cyrus R. Vance, President Johnson's special envoy, arrived in Seoul to explain the U.S. position on the Pueblo negotiations. The communique issued at the end of the talks said that North Korean actions "seriously jeopardize the security of this area and if persisted in, can lead to renewed hostilities in Korea." If such aggressions were to continue, "the two countries would promptly determine what action should be taken under the Mutual Security Treaty between the Republic of Korea and the United States." This diluted the earlier South Korean request for an automatic military response to any North Korean infiltration. On the other hand, Vance agreed that U.S. military assistance to South Korea should increase markedly while private negotiations and priority to the Pueblo continued.³⁹

The North Koreans had put up an intriguing photo display in Panmunjom in the first half of February. Alongside pictures of the Pueblo crew were photographs of the two U.S. helicopter pilots who had been shot down in 1963 with their letter of apology and the acknowledgment from the U.S. government that they had been "spying".⁴⁰ This could be seen as a hint of the solution to the negotiations, the one that was eventually adopted.

On February 19, Washington publicly acknowledged that two U.S. planes had violated China's airspace. This unusual statement could be interpreted as a further indication of willingness to bargain. At the end of February, the United States suggested submitting the dispute to the International Court of Justice at the Hague. North Korea rejected this proposal in early March because the United States would not first admit "espionage".

39. *New York Times*, March 20, 1969.

40. *Christian Science Monitor*, February 16, 1968.

On May 8, at Washington's request, Pyongyang presented a long written list of accusations concerning both the Pueblo and U.S. foreign policies. U.S. leaders were divided about its acceptance. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul Warnke felt that it "was so outrageous that you could sign it. I felt that we were taking a worse beating by keeping those men over there than we would by signing something right away, undergoing some momentary pain and getting them back." Others, such as Undersecretary of State Katzenbach, agreed that the North Korean statement could and should be signed.⁴¹

North Korea had said, however, that agreement to its document would not be sufficient to secure release of the crew. Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Walt Rostow therefore advised against signing the document. Moreover, South Korea implicitly exercised an inhibiting influence through its obvious bitterness at the prospect of a "deal" between Washington and Pyongyang.

On May 28, the U.S. negotiator and Panmunjom offered a partial repeat of the device that had resolved the 1964 crisis — signing a "receipt" (a technique called an "overwrite") once the men were produced. North Korea rejected this because the United States would not admit that the Pueblo had been on an espionage mission. About six months later, as noted above, North Korea accepted a compromise. The United States would sign the North Korean document acknowledging spying and simultaneously issue a statement denying the same charges.

Each participant wished to end the negotiations successfully. Pyongyang wanted this result because it realized that it might not be able to depend on Soviet military support. Furthermore, as the United States explicitly reminded it, if the talks were not successfully concluded by the end of December, North Korea would then have to negotiate with a new and perhaps tougher opponent — President Richard M. Nixon.

At the Panmunjom meeting on December 17, the United States presented two alternate positions; an "overwrite" and a "prior repudiation" scheme. In both, the United States would have signed the document. One would include the denial in the document and the other would involve refuting the paper after release of the crew. The U.S. negotiator threatened that the United States would be forced to withdraw from the negotiations if North Korea did not agree to one of these proposals. "There would be no

41. Armbrister, *A Matter of Accountability*, p. 298.

further meetings. The North Koreans would have to deal with the Nixon Administration."⁴²

Mr. Nixon himself had signaled a rigid image, and this point of view had been beamed to Korea in the Korean language. Part of his acceptance speech at the Republican Convention in May 1968, for example, read, "When respect for the United States of America falls so low that a fourth rate military power like North Korea will seize an American naval vessel in the high seas, it is time for new leadership to restore respect for the United States of America."⁴³ Later in the presidential campaign, Nixon said of the *Pueblo*, "What we should have done was to bring in the power to defend that ship or get it out of those waters."

The crew of the *Pueblo* was released on December 23.

D. *Evaluation*

The deployment of a task force in the Sea of Japan did not persuade North Korea to release the *Pueblo's* crew at an early date. Indeed, the reverse may have been the case. The deployment of the force without an actual strike at North Korean targets proved that the strongest power in the world could be successfully challenged. North Korea viewed the fact that it had seized the *Pueblo* and suffered no retaliation as a victory. Secretary of State Dean Rusk had declared that the abduction was "an act of war."⁴⁴ President Johnson had quickly sent a sizeable naval force toward the crisis area. But U.S. bombs were not dropped, neither landing nor invading forces were dispatched, and the naval forces did not closely approach the coastal waters of North Korea. The United States' "bluff" had been called. The threat of using military force was conveyed by harsh verbal demand and the movement of military forces. But as it became evident that violence was not to be used, North Korea — which at first had expected an attack — became more confident during the negotiations. These negotiations began and ended with the same North Korean demands, demands that were eventually met. This lesson, moreover, that the U.S. show of force was only demonstrative, was most probably an important factor in North Korean planning for its next confronta-

42. *Ibid.*, p. 335. According to Armbrister, this emphatic position was suggested by Nicholas Katzenbach, and sent to the U. S. negotiating team at Panmunjom and then presented to the Koreans.

43. *New York Times*, August 8, 1968.

44. *New York Times*, January 25, 1968.

tion with the United States. This same example was undoubtedly appreciated by the Communist military in Southeast Asia.

This is not to say that a more satisfactory outcome from the U.S. perspective would have resulted from the use of violence against North Korea. The probable results of a retaliatory strike were grim: death of the crew, continued conflict of an indeterminate nature between the United States and North Korea and increased hostilities by the North against South Korea.

On the positive side, the incident did strengthen communications and tacit understanding between Moscow and Washington. Moscow was reassured when the United States did not lash out militarily at North Korea, even as Washington demonstrated that it had the capability to do so. At the same time, as a consequence of the Pueblo episode, both superpowers came to understand the USSR was not responsible for the military adventures of North Korea. Pyongyang learned that it could not depend on either China or the USSR for automatic military assistance.

III. THE EC-121

President Johnson's initial reaction to the Pueblo's capture had been to search for a response in proportion to the provocation. Similarly, when North Korea shot down an unarmed U.S. Navy reconnaissance plane with thirty-one men and six tons of electronic equipment on board about ninety miles off the North Korean coastline on April 15, 1969, President Nixon's first inclination was a "quick, clean" military retaliation. There had been 190 similar missions in the same area in the three months before this crisis. All of these flights took place without threats from North Korea.⁴⁵ Consequently, the destruction of the EC-121 was unexpected and sudden. According to those who were with him at the time, the President "fumed when his military advisors failed to come up with what he considered practical ways to retaliate."⁴⁶ An unnamed administration official commented at the time, "Had sufficient force been available to stage the raids after the President tentatively made up his mind to respond, I believe the attacks would have been ordered."⁴⁷

In sum, the "lessons" of the Pueblo had not been implemented. There had not been an escort for the EC-121 intelligence

45. Transcript of President Nixon's Press Conference of April 18, 1969, *New York Times*, April 19, 1969.

46. *Ibid.*, May 6, 1969.

47. *Ibid.*

plane (again, because similar U.S. missions in the same area had not been fired upon), and there had not been enough conventionally armed aircraft on "strip-alert" to come to the EC-121's assistance even if there had been adequate warning.

The puzzling problem for Washington was: If other planes had not been fired upon, why was *this* plane shot down without warning? The event occurred on Premier Kim Il Sung's fifty-seventh birthday, perhaps not a coincidence, but certainly not the sole cause. Another reason for this incident may have been the airlifting of 1,200 United States combat troops from North Carolina to South Korea in mid-March. The operation, called "Focus Retina," transported this force to participate with South Korean soldiers against a "surprise attack from a third country". Everyone undoubtedly understood that the "third country" was North Korea.

North Korea was likely to have understood the swift transfer of U.S. troops to South Korea as a threat. In the week preceding the arrival of the 1,200 U.S. soldiers, there were three armed clashes, initiated by the North, in the demilitarized zone. Interestingly, the North Korean media did not mention "Focus Retina" until after the shooting down of the EC-121. But then, a month after the operation, it referred to the U.S. airlift as "very provocative".⁴⁸ It is conceivable that the attack on the EC-121 in April was the North Korean response to the U.S. operation in mid-March. Pyongyang may well have thought that the risk of a violent U.S. military response, given U.S. behavior following the Pueblo, was not very great.

President Johnson did not have a familiar precedent upon which to base his response. President Nixon, on the other hand, did have an analogy from which to work, one in which both the parallels and the differences were clear. Nixon drew on the Pueblo mainly as a lesson of what not to do. His moves and speeches indicate that the response to the Pueblo incident convinced Nixon not to bluster without action. Nixon thus avoided saber rattling, concentrating instead on diplomacy. As Henry Gimmel of the *Wall Street Journal* noted:

The big difference is that the previous Administration initially huffed and puffed up its crisis as if it intended to do something; it then appeared genuinely astonished at discov-

48. British Broadcasting Corporation, *Summary of World Broadcasts* (April 17, 1969), FE/3052/A3/1.

ering it dared not. This Administration's initial reactions have exhibited no such illusions. . . . The reality, as the Nixon team judges it, is that popular toleration of even one war is in remarkably delicate condition.⁴⁹

There was another vital difference between the two Korean crises. In the case of the *Pueblo*, the lives of the crew were still at stake. In the EC-121 incident, it soon became apparent that the lives of the crew were no longer a consideration. Rather, minimizing the consequences of the crisis through diplomatic channels was the central feature.

It seems evident that the failure of the United States to retaliate militarily following the seizure of the *Pueblo* strengthened the militant policy line of the more "hawkish" group within the North Korean leadership. Between 1967 and 1969, many leaders of the (relatively) "moderate" leadership were purged. The militants had argued for a closer alliance with the USSR, combined with an independent, highly nationalistic foreign policy. These two goals came into some friction when the USSR endeavored to remain apart from the *Pueblo* crisis. These more radical leaders, however, whatever the degree of help that the USSR had provided, could persuasively argue that the United States probably would not retaliate if there were another incident. After all, the same factors that restrained the United States in 1968 still obtained in 1969. The outcome of the second incident was less to the liking of North Korea, however. A dramatic demonstration of U.S. military capability (in the form of a massive naval exercise), combined with a blatant lack of support from the USSR, weakened the position of the militants favoring additional challenges to the United States.

In fact, Moscow publicly criticized the shooting down of the EC-121. Soviet President Nikolai V. Podgorny, visiting Pyongyang shortly after the plane was shot down, said that "collective action" was necessary to repel U.S. warships and planes. Diplomatic observers in Moscow read this as a reproach to North Korea.

Senior diplomats believe that the single-handed challenges by North Korea to the United States have caused profound doubts among Soviet leaders. While loyally supporting its ally in public, Moscow has also given signals that it does not

49. *Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 1969.

want the incidents to lead to a confrontation with the United States in the Far East.⁵⁰

Pentagon analysts said they believe that the USSR had probably warned the North Koreans against a repetition of the Pueblo and EC-121 incidents. These analysts also thought that the USSR would not support North Korea in future incidents. While no one wished to force a test of this hypothesis, it did encourage detente between the United States and the USSR because Washington now had somewhat more cause to trust the peaceful intentions of Soviet leaders.⁵¹

A. *The U.S. Response*

President Nixon's initial reaction to the shooting down of the EC-121 was to seek military options. Several sources suggest that he quickly started the machinery of government moving toward development and execution of such a response. Two North Korean targets were selected and a speech had been prepared to explain the retaliation to the public. The President believed that a "quick, clean" retaliatory blow might signal both Hanoi and Pyongyang that they were dealing now with a "tougher" administration in Washington, a signal that was particularly desirable because of the administration's plans to withdraw troops slowly from Vietnam.⁵²

Before retaliation, however, military force had to be available. In response to this need, Task Force 71 was assembled. With 256 war planes, it was able to muster more firepower than the U.S. Mediterranean Sixth Fleet. Task Force 71 included four carriers (Enterprise, Ticonderoga, Ranger and Hornet), three cruisers (Chicago, Oklahoma City and St. Paul) and fifteen destroyers.⁵³

50. *New York Times*, May 15, 1969.

51. *Ibid.*, April 24, 1969.

52. *New York Times*, May 6, 1969; Marvin and Bernard Kalb, *Kissinger* (Little, Brown and Company, 1974), p. 94. This source says that both President Nixon and National Security Adviser Kissinger initially agreed with the military recommendation. President Nixon requested that Kissinger ask for the suggestion of each member of the National Security Council. The Kalbs believe that Secretary of State William Rogers' position — a cautious, non-military retaliation — was shared by most of the advisers, and eventually accepted by Nixon and Kissinger.

53. *New York Times*, April 24, April 26, 1969. Task Force 71 was originally intended to include twenty-three warships; General Wheeler's April 25th testimony gave the figure as twenty-nine. Pentagon information sources placed the goal at forty vessels, to include at least three attack aircraft carriers, one antisubmarine carrier, three cruisers, twenty-two destroyers and at least five submarines. The

On April 16, U.S. forces in and near Korea were placed on alert and readied for the contingency of any further incidents. At the same time, however, U.S. reconnaissance air activity was suspended until North Korea's military intentions could be clarified. The official U.S. negotiator at Panmunjom demanded neither an apology nor reparations. The United States did, however, ask North Korea to "take appropriate measures to prevent similar incidents in the future," and urged it to "acknowledge the true facts of the case."⁵⁴

A fate similar to that of Task Force 77, formed during the Pueblo crisis, now befell Task Force 71. By the time it had been formed and entered the Sea of Japan on April 21, the original plan for retaliation against North Korea had been reversed. As it had in 1968, Washington decided to risk neither a military struggle with North Korea nor the developing detente with the USSR. The rapid appearance of the fleet off the Korean coast did, however, vividly demonstrate U.S. military capabilities. Thus, it would appear that both task forces minimized the risk of weakness to North Korea which saw that it could initiate crises and even kill Americans without retaliation.

Following this decision, the deployment was soon drawn down. The Pentagon had attempted to minimize the additional cost that such a large task force would incur by explaining that many of the same vessels had operated off Vietnam and, therefore, that the cost to move and operate them off of Korea was about the same. Within a week of its dispatch, Task Force 71 was reportedly reduced to the Enterprise and seven destroyers. Senator Henry Jackson later stated that the withdrawal of the task force was caused by "cost effectiveness since [i]t doesn't make much sense over a long term to require a whole fleet . . . to support air reconnaissance."⁵⁵

B. *Why Restraint?*

Arguing against a military reprisal was the time needed to mobilize the necessary force. President Nixon also was concerned that the U.S. public might view a military retaliation for the EC-121 as hauntingly parallel to the air strikes that followed the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident and led to the large-scale involvement in

actual deployed task force consisted of four carriers, three cruisers and fourteen destroyers.

54. *New York Times*, April 18, 1969.

55. *Ibid.*, April 28, 1969.

the Vietnam war. This same factor had argued against a military retaliation during the Pueblo crisis.

The major military options presented to the President were: (1) a limited air strike on the North Korean bases that had sent up the planes responsible for shooting down the EC-121; (2) a blockade of the North Korean coast; (3) an air strike on all North Korean air bases; and (4) an attempt to lure a North Korean ship or plane outside of its territorial waters and then destroy it.⁵⁶ Each of these possibilities ran the hazard of provoking a secondary reaction from North Korea, China, the USSR or a combination of these adversaries. This was considered less of a risk, however, after Moscow and Peking failed to demonstrate active military support for North Korea during the Pueblo crisis. The USSR, for example, could have sent additional military assistance in a noticeable manner to signal its active support for North Korea. It did not send such signals.

The President's military advisors, while in favor of some form of a tough response, were well aware of the attendant risks which could result in another war. The President's civilian advisors also cautioned a restrained reaction. Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird, for example, was described as "not enthusiastic" about air strikes. Secretary of State William P. Rogers who had argued for a course short of retaliation met half a day after the attack for a fifteen-minute talk with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin. The State Department said that the meeting was "not in any way a protest," but rather an appeal for assistance. Secretary Rogers, in a careful speech (similar to the Johnson Administration statements of a year earlier which were meant to signal cautious intent to various audiences) before the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 16, declared, "The weak can be rash; the powerful must be more restrained. Complexity in affairs should teach us the need to act responsibly, to constitute cooperation for coercion and to move from confrontation to negotiation on the issues that divide nations."⁵⁷ This statement was an indication of Washington's recognition that apart from a military strike, which ran the risk of a larger war, there was little it could do to influence or punish North Korea directly.

The administration was impressed by the strongly favorable response that followed the delay in retaliation, and each

56. Ibid., April 17, 1969.

57. Ibid.

statement urging restraint reinforced the view the President had reached after careful deliberation (the reverse of his initial visceral reaction) that the moderate stance was the correct one. Senator Everett M. Dirksen, a Republican who had been even more critical of President Johnson's handling of the Pueblo than had been Mr. Nixon, commented on possible reaction to the EC-121. "I don't like to see the blood lust come so quickly." Senator Gale McGee of Wyoming, a Democratic conservative on foreign policy said, "In our world today, with electronic spying, there are bound to be such cases. It is essential in this case, as in the Pueblo case, that we don't lose our cool and set in motion irretrievable action which could heighten the crisis." (It is noteworthy that both Dirksen and McGee were "hawks" in the context of the Vietnam war). Perhaps the major exception to the general call for caution was Representative L. Mendel Rivers, Democratic chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, who said, "There can be only one answer for America: retaliation — retaliation — retaliation."⁵⁸

The balance of public opinion favored restraint, however. On April 18, a *New York Times* editorial summarized this popular support for a policy of military caution:

When President Nixon speaks out for the first time at a news conference today on North Korea's shooting down of an American intelligence plane, he will be under no serious public pressures to alter his policy of prudent restraint. Most Americans appear convinced that ill-considered military reprisal will merely make a tragic situation much worse. . . .

What the nation does expect of Mr. Nixon — and will incessantly demand — is immediate presidential action to fulfill his campaign promise that: "What happened to the Pueblo should and will be avoided in the future."⁵⁹

At his nationally televised press conference of the 18th, President Nixon stated:

I have today ordered that these flights be continued. They will be protected. This is not a threat. It is simply a matter of fact . . . Looking to the future, as far as what we do will depend upon the circumstances. It will depend upon what is done as far as North Korea is concerned, its reaction to the

58. Ibid., April 16, 1969.

59. Ibid., April 19, 1969.

protest and also any other developments that occur as we continue these flights.⁶⁰

Although it did not directly say so, this statement reflected Washington's changed perception of the USSR's role in Korea's crises. After Secretary of State Rogers met with Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin at noon on the 15th, the USSR had offered naval assistance in searching for possible EC-121 survivors. At his press conference, the President described the U.S. military action as "restrained" because of the possibility that "other parties might be involved." This apparently was a reference to the defense treaties North Korea shared with China and the USSR, a factor that had also constrained President Johnson's employment of force in the Pueblo crisis.

There appeared to be little parallel between Washington's implicit suspicion that the USSR had been somehow involved in the Pueblo incident and any Soviet role in the EC-121 situation. In a dramatic departure from the reticent stance of the USSR during the Pueblo incident, two Soviet destroyers on April 17th quickly began to help in the search for the wreckage of the EC-121, at the same time as U.S. planes and ships. One Soviet destroyer retrieved a wheel and ladder from the EC-121 and laid them out on the deck. The debris was described by radio to a low-flying U.S. Hercules C-130, and the plane was invited to photograph the remnants of the EC-121. At the conclusion of this vivid demonstration of cooperation, the Soviet vessel radioed to the departing U.S. plane. "Soviet Destroyer, Red Banner Pacific Fleet, sends condolences in connection with the loss of your aircraft."⁶¹

At his press conference of April 18, President Nixon emphasized the nature of this cooperation and removed any thought that he blamed the USSR for the EC-121. Again, this was in marked contrast to the early suspicion that the USSR was involved in the Pueblo crisis.

The President described the Soviet role in the plane incident as first

one of being of assistance to the United States in recovering the debris and looking for survivors. And we are most grateful to the Soviet Union for helping us in this report. Our intelligence — and of course no one can be sure here — indicates that the Soviet Union was not aware that this

60. Ibid.

61. Ibid., April 20, 1969.

attack was to be made. North Korea is not a nation that is predictable in terms of its actions. It is perhaps more than any other nation in the Communist bloc completely out of control of either the Soviet Union, or for that matter, Communist China. . . . It was completely a surprise attack in every sense of the word and, therefore, did not give us the opportunity for protective actions that I would have taken had it been threatened.⁶²

This spoke simultaneously to various audiences. With the recognition that the USSR had not been the antagonist and the suggestion that perhaps it had been saddled with an irrational Korean ally, a signal had been dispatched suggesting that cooperation in analogous situations in the future would be welcome. North Korea was warned not to attempt to repeat its action because U.S. military power, represented by Task Force 71, would be prepared for a quick response. However, considering that North Korea had now successfully challenged the United States twice within fifteen months, this was a rather weak threat. A subdued, brief phrase told China that it was understood that Peking had not engineered the crisis. And finally, a message of reassurance was sent to domestic audiences that U.S. military forces would be protected in the future.

On April 22, the New China News Agency (NCNA) quoted a senior U.S. Defense Department official. "Russian willingness to render assistance has been astonishing. From the way they are doing things at present, they look like allies instead of opponents in the cold war."⁶³ NCNA then condemned the "servile compliance" of the USSR. It should be noted, however, that in 1969 China was emerging from the cultural revolution which had intensified Chinese doubts about both Soviet and U.S. aggressive intentions. The Ussuri River crisis of March 1969 over the Soviet-Chinese border had also amplified China's fear of the USSR. An opportunity to encourage some change in Peking's foreign policy perceptions seemed more possible now than it had. Consequently, the President's recognition that neither China nor the USSR had investigated the incident provided a basis for further contacts with both countries.

62. *Ibid.*, April 19, 1976.

63. British Broadcasting Corporation, *Summary of World Broadcasts* (April 23, 1969), FE/3055/A2/1.

The Nixon administration continued to balance adroitly the demonstration of its military capabilities with an improvement in several bilateral relationships. On April 17, Japanese Foreign Minister Kiichi Aichi had urged the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo not to embark on a retaliatory action. On April 17, Japanese Premier Eisaku Sato commended the United States for responding to the EC-121 incident in a "cool, quiet and serious way".⁶⁴ On April 21, Washington officially notified the Japanese government that it would not use Japanese bases to protect U.S. reconnaissance planes. Tokyo then asked to have Task Force 71 moved from the Sea of Japan. Japan worried that it might be drawn into the hostilities if a crisis such as the EC-121 should occur in that area at some time in the future.

With a similar concern of becoming involved in a Korean-U.S. conflict, the USSR publicly requested on April 20 the removal of the naval fleet from an area south of its major port city of Vladivostok. The U.S. response was to explain that the reinstated reconnaissance flights needed protection and emphasize that it was Korea, not the USSR, that had been responsible for the downing of the EC-121.⁶⁵

The now smaller fleet was then moved to the Yellow Sea on April 26, and part of the protection for the reconnaissance planes was taken over by forces based in South Korea. However, the promise to South Korea of military aid of \$100 million, made at the time of the Pueblo crisis in January 1968, had been only half fulfilled by late April 1969. The F-4 fighters the United States agreed to make available in February 1968 were now scheduled for delivery in August 1969. Therefore, in order both to reassure its South Korean ally, nervous about conflict with North Korea and to provide security for its own reconnaissance flights, Washington was prompted to move rapidly on the year-old arms agreements. Twenty U.S. Air Force F-4 jets were added at this time to the 128 U.S. planes already in South Korea. Two more F-4 squadrons were also scheduled to replace the Air National Guard F-100 squadrons that had been mobilized after the Pueblo. These had been promised in 1968; the second Korean crisis assured their delivery.

A *New York Times* editorial provided a strong endorsement of the administration's overall policies toward the EC-121 crisis while also questioning the degree of force used.

64. *Facts on File*, April 17-23, 1969, p. 235.

65. *New York Times*, April 27, 1969.

The withdrawal of Task Force 71 from the Sea of Japan and the deployment of a much smaller force southwest of Korea reflects prudent second thoughts in Washington. . . . [T]he original fleet of 29 vessels was far out of proportion to the requirements of its mission of protecting United States reconnaissance planes. Although this "surge" operation perhaps served a useful purpose in demonstrating how much American power used to be put into the area, on short notice, the long-term presence of such a formidable fleet would have been far too expensive and would have risked provoking the kind of confrontation it was designed to discourage.

. . . It should be possible to provide adequate cover for essential reconnaissance missions less provocatively and more cheaply, using land-based planes from augmented squadrons in South Vietnam. The North Koreans, after all, were brazen, but not necessarily brash in attacking an unarmed, unprotected American plane off their coast two weeks ago. They had good reason, especially after the Pueblo affair, to believe that the United States would be cautious. . . .

If American forces should violate North Korean territory, the Koreans might very well react in a way that would precipitate a wider war. President Nixon's withdrawal of Task Force 71 indicated that he is keenly aware of this danger.⁶⁶

IV. RESULTS OF THE TWO KOREAN CRISES

The 1968 Pueblo and 1969 EC-121 crises may be viewed as separate acts in the same drama. In each, North Korea sought to demonstrate its ability to challenge U.S. military credibility apart from Soviet direction. It assumed that the achievement of this goal could be more easily attained because the United States had committed much of its military, economic and public support to the Vietnam war. Particularly in 1968, Pyongyang expected that it could rely on the USSR for firm support. As a corollary of establishing its own autonomous, intensely nationalistic identity, North Korea sought to indicate to South Korea that it could not depend on the United States for continued military assistance. North Korea had mixed success with these ambitions in 1968. The United States did not go to war over the seizure of the Pueblo. It

66. Ibid., May 1, 1969.

did, however, give to South Korea large-scale military aid and assurances of its support against threats from the North. Rather than undermining the alliance between the United States and South Korea, the two crises provoked by North Korea seemed to inject further life into the coalition.

At the same time, the USSR failed to use even symbolic military levers on North Korea's behalf. Nonetheless, North Korea had encountered only a demonstration of force by the United States. North Korea had affirmed an independent policy and the United States had not responded violently. This gain had been offset, however, by North Korea's appreciation of an increasing lack of military support from China and the USSR.

These impressions were reinforced during the 1969 crisis. U.S.-Soviet cooperation developed into a dramatic, concrete reality. The United States, for example, did not propose a formal debate in the United Nations which might have embarrassed the USSR by forcing it to defend the shooting down of the EC-121. Meanwhile, the USSR criticized North Korea for its lack of "collective action". Moreover, negotiations and political agreements between the United States and the USSR continued to progress. These developments gave North Korea cause to worry about the reliability of its Soviet ally.

Both Washington and Moscow appeared satisfied that the ambiguity suggested by the mobilization and movement of armed force inhibited a confrontation into which each could conceivably have been drawn. An example of the unfulfilled possibilities of Washington's responses was given by President Nixon at his press conference on April 18, 1969. "I do not want to leave the impression that the announcement of the renewal of, and the continuation of, reconnaissance flights is the final action that can or will be taken here. Our action in this matter will be determined by what happens in the future."⁶⁷

The demonstration of the *potential* use of military force in the 1968 and 1969 crises allowed two advantages. First, if it had any such thoughts previous to the incidents (which seems unlikely), North Korea was deterred from expanding them. Second, the incidents provided a "learning experience" for the USSR and the United States of how they could control the consequences of incidents neither of them wanted. This message was particularly noteworthy in view of concurrent events in Europe.

67. Ibid., April 19, 1969.

It was a curious coincidence that the EC-121 crisis took place at the same moment that Alexander Dubcek was ousted from the leadership of Czechoslovakia under Soviet pressure. The United States had announced that it would not stand aside for another armed intervention in Czechoslovakia.⁶⁸ It would appear that, to some extent, the EC-121 provided an opportunity for both states to reassure the other that they could cooperate.

A major negative consequence of not using military force in the Pueblo crisis was that it did provide an example that would not inhibit the Communist states in Southeast Asia from future uses of force. It may even have encouraged North Korea to take another strong step. The lack of retaliation in 1968 apparently encouraged North Korea to try again in 1969. The absence of violence in 1969, however, had quite the opposite effect. The incidence of subversion and violence across the demilitarized zone initiated by North Korea fell from 761 in 1968 to 134 in 1969.⁶⁹ Violence in Korea further diminished in the 1970s. It is not clear why these incidents diminished, but one suspects that Soviet behavior was crucial.

V. THE MAYAGUEZ

On April 17, 1975, all remaining U.S. personnel had left Phnom Penh just in advance of the victorious Cambodian revolutionaries; the same pattern was repeated in Saigon on April 30. Because of these two spectacular U.S. foreign policy defeats, U.S. decisionmakers came to fear that trust in its commitments to its allies had weakened. The USSR, China and revolutionary movements of smaller countries envisaged a total U.S. withdrawal from Asia, while the confidence of the American public in its nation's foreign policy goals faltered.

The U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez* was seized on May 12 by Cambodian gunboats while in a well-traveled shipping lane in the Gulf of Siam on a voyage from Hong Kong to Sattahip, Thailand. It had a crew of thirty-nine, and it carried a cargo of both military and commercial goods. Of the 184 containers the *Mayaguez* carried, 107 contained nonmilitary material and 77 held such "military" items as clothing, furniture and small arms destined for U.S. installations in Thailand. Almost immediately after the

68. "The Nixon Administration has warned the Soviet Union that any violent repression by Soviet troops in Czechoslovakia will once again interrupt progress toward strategic arms limitation talks, diplomatic sources said today." *Ibid.*

69. Clough, *East Asia and U. S. Security*, pp. 163-64.

incident, President Gerald Ford announced that he "considered the seizure an act of piracy," and added that a failure to release the ship "would have the most serious consequences."⁷⁰ These phrases contained two familiar echoes: The emotional word "piracy" had been the term used by Washington to describe the seizure of the *Pueblo* and it recalled the value of ambiguous threats employed by Presidents Johnson and Nixon during the two Korean crises. But this time the threat was not to be idle. After the loss of Saigon, President Ford was quoted as saying, "I have to show some strength in order to help us . . . with our credibility in the world."⁷¹ The day after the incident, "high ranking sources" told the *New York Times* that "the seizure of the vessel might provide the test of determination in Southeast Asia . . . the United States had been seeking since the collapse of allied governments in South Vietnam and Cambodia."⁷² These brief quotations do not "prove" a cause and effect relationship between a worry about the loss of U.S. reliability and the nature of the response in the Mayaguez incident, but they certainly provide strong reason to suspect such a relationship. Moreover, regardless of its genesis it was anticipated that the firm response to this crisis would warn adversaries and reassure allies and U.S. citizens as to the stability of U.S. commitments.

Placing the capture in a historical perspective, since 1950, 123 U.S. commercial vessels had been fired upon and seized by Ecuador. Fines were paid to gain the ships' release. The pattern followed in these cases was described proudly by the U.S. Counsel General in Ecuador in the Department of State's *Newsletter* of April 4, 1974, as having "centered on negotiations rather than retaliation."⁷³

A. *The U.S. Response*

The U.S. government contacted China's liaison office in Washington and the Royal Cambodian Embassy in Peking asking for help. Prince Sihanouk and the Chinese Foreign Ministry returned the notes, as did the Cambodian Embassy. When asked about what China would do during this crisis, First

70. *New York Times*, May 13, 1975.

71. *Washington Post*, May 26, 1975.

72. *New York Times*, May 14, 1975.

73. U. S. Department of State, *Newsletter*, April 4, 1974.

Deputy Premier Teng Hsiao-p'ing, in Paris at the time on a state visit, responded, "There is nothing we can do."⁷⁴

This was a parallel to the Pueblo incident. In each situation, the United States had sought assistance from what was considered to be the major backer of the target state — a supporter which, presumably, should be able to control its "weaker" ally. In the Pueblo crisis, the USSR had not actively supported North Korea's position because of a distrust and displeasure with Korea's "adventure" undertaken without coordination with Moscow. These same elements were present in the relationships among China, Cambodia and the United States, and may have hindered the developing "understandings" between Washington and Peking.

In 1968 the judgment had been to rely on Soviet and not Chinese intercession; in 1975 the decision of whom to ask for assistance was reversed. This seemed a logical choice. Phnom Penh Radio, in celebrating the Communist victory on May 12, 1975, for example, declared, "The victory of the Cambodian people is the victory of the Chinese people. The strategic unity between Cambodia and China which is the base of our friendship will last forever." As in most such broadcasts, there was no mention of the USSR, and accounts by Western observers reported that the Soviet Embassy had been sacked by the revolutionaries. Consequently, it was reasonable for Washington to seek communication with Phnom Penh through Peking.

No casualties had been reported by the Mayaguez. While he was investigating diplomatic channels, President Ford also ordered surveillance of the ship. During this aerial observation, a P-3 Orion was hit by fire as it flew over the Mayaguez (considering that the Khmer Rouge had previously been the targets of U.S. aircraft, they now probably did not take the time to determine that the P-3 was only an observer plane, nor would they necessarily have been able to ascertain that fact). Surveillance established that the ship was anchored about a mile off Koh Tang Island, about thirty miles from the coast of Cambodia. The aircraft also reported seeing some of the crew being off-loaded onto small Cambodian boats. Efforts were made to stop these boats, because Washington feared that the crew might be taken to the mainland, where Cambodia would recreate the Pueblo situation, a lengthy detention with the seamen pictured in

74. *New York Times*, May 16, 1975.

Cambodia's propaganda as "aggressors and spies". To prevent the transfer of the crew to the mainland, U.S. A-7 aircraft fired alongside and in front of, but not directly at the small boats. Still, three Cambodian boats were sunk and several others were damaged. A problem, however, was to decide which Cambodian vessels had Americans aboard. "Every effort was made and in one case the ship that got in was allowed to go in because it appeared there were some Caucasians on board."⁷⁵ It should be noted that this demonstrated the constraints placed on violence, similar to the cautious U.S. military response to the Pueblo situation.

The Coral Sea, an aircraft carrier then on its way to Australia, and several destroyers were ordered to the area. In addition, 1,100 Marines were airlifted into Bangkok, Thailand. Based on Okinawa, they were moved to Nakhon Phanom Air Base in Thailand in preparation for possible action. This move caused a very heated reaction by the Thais, who not only demanded that the United States not use Thai territory as a base of operations, but that the recently arrived Marines be withdrawn.

Two days after the ship's seizure, the destroyer Holt entered the area, followed by the Coral Sea, the destroyers Baussell and Wilson, the guided missile frigate Gridley and the supply ship Vega. The aircraft carrier Midway was also ordered to the general area. The President, still not having received word of the crew's release, took two steps to set in motion further military action. He discussed the situation with the National Security Council for the fourth time in just over two days, and he met with bipartisan leaders of both parties in Congress to tell them of his plans.

At 7:15 P.M., Phnom Penh sent its first message agreeing to release the ship, stating that the Cambodian government "will order the ship to withdraw from Cambodian water." The message was sent over Phnom Penh Radio, but in the Khmer language, which in Washington apparently raised some question as to whether it represented a definitive governmental position. This message was monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, translated, and then relayed to Washington. The translation was delivered by Defense Secretary James Schlesinger to the President at 8:15 P.M.⁷⁶ It was later learned that the crew

75. "Seizure of the *Mayaguez*," *Hearings Before the Committee on International Relations and Its Subcommittee on International Political and Military Affairs* (GPO, 1975), p. 9.

76. *Ibid.*, p. 37. These are Washington D. C. times given in the Congressional testimony.

had been freed by the Cambodians before the attacks on Koh Tang Island, placed on a previously captured Thai boat, and told to return to the Mayaguez. Cambodian Deputy Premier Ieng Sary declared in September that Cambodia had decided to release the Mayaguez and crew after calling local commanders to Phnom Penh, but did not broadcast the decision until the following morning. Later that morning, the United States bombed Ream and Sihanoukville.⁷⁷ If this is an accurate recounting, the bloodshed that followed was not necessary to secure the Mayaguez's release. The release of the crew occurred about 8:00 P.M. on May 14.

A helicopter assault by approximately 200 Marines was begun on Koh Tang Island. Three of the helicopters involved were shot down, one on the beach, one just off shore and the last, involving the loss of thirteen lives, several miles out to sea. The Marines encountered much stiffer resistance than they had expected and were unable to make the sweep of the island they had originally planned. Although there were only an estimated 150 Cambodians on the island, they were armed with 75 mm. recoilless rifles, Claymore mines and rockets, in addition to small arms. The Marines received heavy air support, with anywhere between twelve and twenty U.S. planes over Koh Tang at any given time during the incident. In fact, 479 sorties by both helicopter and fixed wing aircraft were flown during the crisis, of which 300 were of a tactical nature, as opposed to surveillance or rescue. At 9:00 P.M., Marines from aboard the destroyer Holt boarded the Mayaguez with no resistance and searched the ship. They found no one. The official U.S. answer to the Cambodian offer to free the ship was that the United States would stop military action when the crew was free, since the ship had already been recaptured.

While the Marines were occupying both the Mayaguez and Koh Tang Island, the crew members were on their way toward the destroyer Wilson which reported spotting them about 10:45 P.M. Thirty crew members were on board by 10:53 P.M. As was later discovered, the crew had been held on Rong Sam Lem Island, about twenty nautical miles from Koh Tang. In short, U.S. intelligence had not been strong, it had not been aware of the precise movements of the crew between the ship, Koh Tang, the mainland, and Rong Sam Lem Island, nor of the size of the force on Koh Tang Island.

77. *New York Times*, September 9, 1975.

It was not until 11:45 P.M. that Schlesinger reported the retrieval of the crew to the President. The aircraft from the Coral Sea had already begun taking off to carry out strikes on the mainland, although they did not begin to attack until about 11:00 P.M. In short, the attacks began after the crew was safely returned. The aircraft attacked in three waves, the first not dropping any ordnance, but "buzzing" Sihanoukville, the second attacking Ream airbase, destroying seventeen planes on the ground, damaging a hanger and making craters in the runway. The third wave attacked a petroleum, oil and lubricant installation near Sihanoukville at 11:50 P.M., thirty-four minutes after the President had called for a cessation of operations. These raids were later justified as necessary to prevent reinforcement of Koh Tang and to deter the Cambodians from launching air strikes against the Marines on the island, in addition to proving that the United States was serious in its demands. Another important justification for the raids was the support and pride now being revived among the American people after the dual losses in the same area earlier in the year.

With the crew rescued, all that remained was to extricate the Marines from the island and go home. It was not until just after 7:00 A.M. the next morning that the Marines began to leave Koh Tang, and by 9:20 A.M. they were clear of the island and on board the Coral Sea. The entire incident, from the time the ship was seized until the Marines left, took only seventy-eight hours. The total number of American deaths was forty-one.⁷⁸ The Cambodians lost a total of eight boats, seventeen aircraft, the air field and the installation (the casualties from bombings and strafing are unknown).

B. *Domestic Pressures*

The 1975 Appropriations Act for the Department of Defense contained a provision prohibiting the use of U.S. military forces in Indochina. It provided that "[n]one of the funds herein appropriated may be obligated or expended to finance directly or indirectly combat activities by U.S. military forces in or over or from the shores of North Viet Nam, Laos, or Cambodia."

This would appear to be an explicit denial of the use of military force. But before the U.S. evacuation of Saigon in April 1975, State Department legal advisors reportedly told the White

78. "Seizure of the *Mayaguez*," pp. 127, 129 and 131.

House that such provisions did not specifically prevent the inherent right to protect American lives. They cited such precedents as the Boxer Rebellion in China in 1900 and the Dominican Republic in 1965.⁷⁹

Because American lives were thought to be threatened, the President was able to respond under the War Powers Resolution of 1973. This act directs the President to "consult" with Congress "in every possible instance — before committing armed forces to hostilities or to situations where hostilities may be imminent." He must then report to the Congress in writing forty hours before initiating the action. Consultation is not "synonymous with merely being informed." Rather,

consultation in this provision means that a decision is pending on a problem and that Members of Congress are being asked by the President for their advice . . . and . . . their approval of action contemplated. For consultation to be meaningful, the President himself must participate, and all information relevant to the situation must be made available.⁸⁰

It later became a question whether or not the President had "consulted" with Congress about his Mayaguez decisions. Regardless, during the week of the crisis, the sense of Congress supported the ship's retrieval and the crew's release, even if the use of force was necessary. "Members of Congress generally expressed approval of the President's action and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee adopted a strong resolution of support this evening acknowledging the President's constitutional right to order military operations."⁸¹

Conservative members were the most outspoken in favor of violent retaliation. Senator John Sparkman, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee commented, "We should retrieve the vessel any way we can." Senator James B. Allen: "I don't favor precipitate action, but it's a question of national honor . . . and if force is necessary, then force should be used." Senator John Stennis, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee

79. *New York Times*, May 14, 1975.

80. "War Powers: A Test of Compliance," *Hearings Before the Subcommittee on International Security and Scientific Affairs of the Committee on International Relations*, 94 Cong. 1 sess. (May 7, and June 4, 1975); "Legislative History of the Consultation Provision of the War Powers Resolution," pp. 46-47.

81. *New York Times*, May 15, 1975.

said, "The attack and seizure cannot be tolerated. . . . We must be as firm and as severe as necessary to protect Americans on board and to assure their safe return as well as the recovery of the ship . . . as well as the honor of our country." Senator James Buckley suggested that "failure by the United States to react swiftly and clinically will only invite further outrages against personnel and property of U.S. citizens. I therefore urge the President to order immediate punitive air and naval attacks on appropriate targets in Cambodia."⁸²

On May 12, Senator Jacob Javits counseled patience with Cambodia, suggesting that it "may not realize what is involved in their reaction." There were several congressional protests, moreover, advanced by "moderates," that the President had not fulfilled the directives of the War Powers Resolution. Senator Hubert Humphrey, a sponsor of the 1973 Act, on May 14 (while military action was in progress), endorsed the use of force "if necessary," but added that "we want consultation," not merely to be informed after an act is taken. Senator Mike Mansfield stated on the same day, "I was not briefed . . . nor was I consulted before the fact about what the Administration had already decided to do. I did not give my approval or disapproval because the decision had already been made in both cases."⁸³ House Republican Leader Hugh Scott also said on May 14 that he had only been "advised," not "consulted". But support was widespread in the Congress for the strong measures taken by the President.

It was apparent, therefore, that domestic pressure for some form of military action was greater in response to the seizure of the Mayaguez than to the shooting down of the EC-121. In the final hours of the Indochina war, even congressional doves seemed to feel the necessity to reassert U.S. prerogatives in an area of the world where only recently U.S. prestige had suffered such a severe setback. The call for an armed response to the Mayaguez was overwhelming, reflecting, perhaps, ten years of frustration and ultimately defeat in Southeast Asia, defeats that a nation unused to losing found hard to understand. Thus, the incentive to strike out with even so flimsy an excuse as the Mayaguez.

82. *Ibid.*, May 13, 1975.

83. *Ibid.*, May 16, 1975.

C. Related Events

As it had in the Pueblo crisis, Washington charged that the Mayaguez had been seized without any warning. Only in the narrowest of definitions, however, was this accurate. The Cambodian coast had recently seen similar incidents. On May 2, seven Thai fishing boats had been fired upon. The Korean Transportation Ministry then cautioned ships to avoid the area around Poulo Wai and Koh Tang islands. This warning had been passed on to the U.S. State Department. On May 7, a Panamanian freighter had been detained for one day. On May 13, another Panamanian vessel had been fired on and detained for two hours. At about this same time, the Swedish vessel Hirado was also fired upon, seized and held briefly. None of these cases, however, caused the U.S. government to issue warnings to U.S. merchant vessels in the area.⁸⁴

The U.S. Defense Hydrographic Center had not issued a warning about the waters off Cambodia before the seizure of the Mayaguez because, as Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained at a press conference on May 12, insurance companies had the responsibility to provide information about potential conflict situations on the seas or in shipping lanes. Carl McDowell, President of the American Institute of Marine Underwriters, replied that insurance firms had not received any information about the troubled Gulf of Siam.⁸⁵ However, within five hours of the seizure of the Mayaguez, the Center issued the following:

Special Warning: Shipping is advised until further notice to remain more than 35 nautical miles off the coast of Cambodia and more than 20 nautical miles off the coast of Vietnam including off-lying islands. Recent incidents have been reported of firing on, stopping and detention of ships within waters claimed by Cambodia, particularly in the vicinity of Poulo Wai Island.⁸⁶

84. For the Department of State's explanation of why these warnings were not sent, see *System to Warn U. S. Mariners of Potential Political/Military Hazards: S. S. Mayaguez, A Case Study* (Department of State, Defense, and Commerce, February 11, 1976), p. 11.

85. James A. Nathan and James K. Oliver, *United States Foreign Policy and World Order* (Little, Brown and Company, 1976), p. 540, Fn. 132.

86. The conflict between Cambodia and Vietnam has been long standing. For an example of a battle over these same islands, see *New York Times*, March 2, 1956. For an assessment of the oil deposits in this area, see the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (September 20, 1974).

Three additional factors may have helped to explain the seizure. First, Cambodia seemed to believe that the Mayaguez had a hostile intent. Cambodia's use of force against a ship sailing in waters that it claimed were its own territorial waters is easier to understand in this light.

Second, there is the likelihood that the seizure was conceived and executed by local authorities. Cambodian Deputy Premier Ieng Sary, in a September 1975 interview, claimed that Phnom Penh learned of the attack "through American broadcasts, because the American technology is able to convey information much faster than our armed forces can." The seizure, Sary said, occurred without prior order. After the event became known, the commander in Sihanoukville was ordered to Phnom Penh, where he was told to release the Mayaguez. Moreover, Secretary of State Kissinger stated at his press conference on May 13 that he was aware that the seizure might have been "the isolated act of a local commander." Thus, both sides were aware of the possibility of local causation.⁸⁷

Information Minister Hoa Nim stated on Phnom Penh Radio on May 17 that the ship had been captured only to examine the cargo and crew. Because there were precedents of foreign ships being seized, searched and released, the Cambodians looked upon the U.S. military action not even as a heavy-handed attempt to free the crew, but as an excuse to do further damage to Cambodian territory and possibly to destroy the new state.

Third, the most intriguing, one month after the capture of the Mayaguez, Vietnam seized Poulo Wai Island from Cambodia. This area had been contested by the two countries since before the Second World War. The continental shelf from which the island rises is thought to be rich in oil. With this knowledge, it is also possible to view Cambodia's activities in the Gulf of Siam in the spring of 1975 as an attempt — at least in part — to demonstrate its own independence from Vietnamese territorial demands.⁸⁸

87. Ieng Sary's quotation is in *Newsweek*, Far East edition (September 8, 1975). Secretary Kissinger, at his May 13, 1975, Press Conference, also commented: "I am not inclined to believe that this was a carefully planned operation on the part of the Cambodian authorities."

88. Cited in James Nathan, "The *Mayaguez*, Presidential War, and Congressional Senescence," *Intellect* (February 1976), p. 361. Also see Nathan and Oliver, *United States Foreign Policy*, pp. 527-32. A factor not clear when this paper was originally written has since become more evident: the already (1974-1975) fierce border conflicts between Cambodia and Vietnam. This historical and present situation may have given further rise to the active hostility and suspicion of a

D. Outcome

On May 17, at the conclusion of the crisis, Kissinger declared that the event reminds the world that:

There are limits beyond which the United States cannot be pushed. . . . We believed that we had to draw a line against illegal actions and secondly, against situations where the United States might be forced into a humiliating discussion about the ransom of innocent merchant seamen for a very extended period of time . . . make clear that the United States is prepared to defend these interests, and that it can get public support and congressional support for these actions.⁸⁹

This provided an implicit reminder that an incident such as the *Pueblo* would not be allowed to recur. It communicated this message to the American people and to an international audience of friends and adversaries. It emphasized that the dramatic losses in Southeast Asia would not be permitted to weaken U.S. determination to protect its nationals and their property.

The next day, Kissinger left for a round of conferences in Europe. President Ford was scheduled to visit these same allies shortly thereafter. These were to be the first high-level meetings with the European allies after the Communist victories in South Vietnam and Cambodia. The rapid, intense military response to the seizure of the *Mayaguez* preceded the Kissinger and Ford trips as a demonstration of the will and strength of the United States.

The President, appearing on both American and British television on May 24, 1975, emphasized this message. The U.S. response to the *Mayaguez* crisis "should be a firm assurance that the United States is capable and has the willingness to act in emergencies, in challenges. I think this is a clear indication that we are not only strong, but we have the will and the capability of moving."⁹⁰

Secretary of Defense Schlesinger echoed the theme that the U.S. response in the *Mayaguez* event would signal continuing American self-confidence:

American action must be firm when necessary and when important issues of principle are involved . . . in all

U.S. vessel sailing close to Cambodia's shore after leaving Saigon. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, April 21 and June 9, 1978.

89. *New York Times*, May 18, 1975.

90. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1975.

likelihood the U.S. commitments to Northeast Asia, to Korea as well as to Japan, will be perceived as something no one should challenge As long as we are bound by the treaty, of course, it would include Taiwan.⁹¹

These clear statements by the President and the secretaries of State and Defense provided evidence to allies — particularly those in Asia (Taiwan and South Korea) which feared a repeat of the U.S. military withdrawal from Indochina — that U.S. will and capabilities could be relied upon.

This signal had also been sent to opponents. The administration's domestic popularity rose moderately as the general public felt relief that after the long "tunnel" of Vietnam, an American victory of sorts, had been won. The Gallup polls of June 1975, for example, indicated support for the Mayaguez action; 51 percent approved, 33 percent disapproved and 16 percent had no opinion.⁹² On April 16, at the end of the crisis, Senator Barry Goldwater seemed to have summarized this sense of catharsis:

This one act of Ford could be the act that elects him. You know I haven't always been solidly with him, and I've opposed him as much as I've backed him, and I've had serious doubts about his leadership, and they were dispelled. It was the kind of decision it takes a strong man to make.⁹³

An ironic example of the "ripple-effect" of this crisis was that it assisted the establishment of relations between Thailand and the People's Republic of China. The Thai ambassador to the United States, Anand Panyarachun, had been recalled to Bangkok as a protest against the U.S. use of the air base at Utapao to support the Mayaguez. He subsequently headed a delegation to Peking to "lay down all necessary ground work" for the establishment of diplomatic relations.

At least in the short run, however, the Mayaguez itself could only serve as a symbol to Thailand, not as the single cause for a basic change in policy. Anand, for instance, was careful to explain:

I don't think that the basic agreements that we have entered into with the United States need to be changed. . . . I think that in this country there is a very large reservoir of goodwill

91. *U. S. News and World Report* (May 26, 1975).

92. *The Gallup Opinion Index*, June 1975, p. 2.

93. *New York Times*, April 17, 1975.

and friendship toward the people of the United States and toward the American nation. . . and these basic points will not be affected by a review.⁹⁴

He emphasized that the Thai diplomatic move was intended to fit Thailand in with the rapidly changing circumstances in the region. "We are not deserting one friend in order to have new friends. We are not deserting anybody and we are not going to undermine any old friendship," he declared. The current review is to "remove some of the fat without affecting the meat," he said, "and I think that if the United States looks at our review questions in this light it will see that this is not an anti-American measure nor is it an attempt either by the government or by the people to raise any sort of anti-American storm."⁹⁵ It would appear that the Mayaguez incident, with its apparent gains in credibility for the United States and the concomitant flexibility of Thailand, encouraged a more flexible arrangement in East Asia.

Washington apparently thought that Thailand could now open relations with China, while still maintaining confidence in its U.S. military alliance. It also might seem, however, that the intense and abundant use of military force was in the long run counterproductive. The massive use of power against a weak country may have reinforced the image of an arrogant United States. This, in turn, might conceivably raise doubts about the value of U.S. commitments. Thailand's reaction may serve as an example. An unnamed Thai "Foreign Ministry official" called the U.S. sinking of the Cambodian gun boats "an act of madness . . . taken with no thought for the consequences to Thailand."⁹⁶

Messages of congratulations from other allies were couched in cautious terms. The West German Foreign Ministry noted that it had "a certain interest in seeing the American trend to dejection and discouragement in foreign affairs come to an end." The Japanese deputy foreign affairs minister said that the U.S. operation was a "joint action for the rescue of Americans from piracy". The public reaction in the United Kingdom was generally favorable, but some officials had privately expressed disquiet over what they considered a precipitate use of force.⁹⁷

94. *Bangkok Post*, June 9, 1975.

95. *Ibid.*

96. *Washington Post*, May 15, 1975.

97. *Facts on File*, May 17, 1975.

In summary, the expense, both in terms of lives lost and the finances necessary to mount the military forces, the weak intelligence (not learning where the crew was held) and the inordinate use of power added up to a bottom line of mixed gains and losses. Domestically, this use of force was popular and it was viewed as a partial vindication for the earlier losses in Indochina. In terms of the credibility of U.S. foreign policy among American allies, however, this intense application of military force probably has been appreciated externally as a spasmodic reaction born of failure. Consequently, trust in U.S. commitments may have been strained, rather than advanced. The question among allies may have been, "Is it necessary for one of my neighbors — or myself — to suffer severe losses before the United States will honor its commitments."

VI. EVALUATION

In these three cases, U.S. options, particularly those involving the use of military force, were limited. In 1968, conventionally armed forces needed for an immediate response were not available. This physical limitation was reinforced by the fact that energies and attention were directed toward Vietnam. These physical restraints were also present during the EC-121 crisis, and indeed were strengthened by the desire to avoid a wider incident that might have affected the improving U.S. relations with China or the USSR. Improving relations with both states, of course, was a key feature of the new Nixon foreign policy. Residual domestic opposition to the U.S. involvement in Vietnam also restrained the President's choices.

In 1969, as the USSR readily responded to Washington's request for assistance in searching for the EC-121 debris, the presence of U.S. force in the area encouraged the two major countries to speak to each other as "military equals". Each shared the problem of a highly nationalistic and headstrong ally, each sought to assure the other of its own desire to avoid war. The presence of a U.S. fleet in the area, which was moved away from the coast of the USSR, apparently at Soviet request, provided a new step in the great powers' "learning process". In this sense, the U.S. Fleet — and the accompanying Soviet ships and planes — was highly functional.

The later Mayaguez crisis was at the other end of the continuum. It appears likely that the crew would have been released without the degree of military force that was used. This

dramatic use of U.S. military power seems to have been motivated mainly to signal audiences beyond Phnom Penh of U.S. will and military strength.

The results of each of the first two crises served as lessons learned for the next two. A lesson from the Pueblo was not to allow the crew onto the mainland. Once the crew of the Pueblo was removed, military action was useless. President Ford was well aware of this. The Pueblo was also a lesson in the frustration that results from not being able to mobilize force quickly during a crisis.

In contrast to the Pueblo and the EC-121 crises, the Mayaguez incident occurred at a time when Washington could call on much of the military establishment, if need be, without worrying about diverting resources from a second crisis. Presidents Johnson and Nixon, on the other hand, had only limited men and material available, and had serious concerns about beginning a new war, when large numbers of U.S. military personnel were still involved in Southeast Asia. U.S. options and tactical machines were taxed to the fullest as a result of the Vietnam war.

The Pueblo and EC-121 incidents both occurred close to shore and close to Korean air bases. Furthermore, they occurred in an area very close to the USSR, China and Japan, an area fraught with political tension. The Mayaguez occurred in the Indochina area, a region where there was considerable residual U.S. military strength (especially in Thailand). The Vietnamese, although noting the U.S. "imperialism" of the act, did not become involved. Thus, President Ford was acting in a region in which the United States could use quick and effective force without the threat of massive retaliation. Johnson and Nixon were caught in an area that was politically volatile (Korea) and had the potential to create a major outbreak of violence. The Mayaguez concerned Cambodia, where a new regime was not prepared to respond rapidly to the U.S. retaliation. The Pueblo and EC-121 involved North Korea, a stable Communist regime that was technologically and politically capable of quick reaction to U.S. pressure. Ford's Cambodian adversaries were weak. Johnson's and Nixon's Korean adversaries were strong. In none of these three crises did the USSR or China give military assistance. But this "lesson" was evident only after the Pueblo crisis.

The Pueblo was much closer to the coast than the Mayaguez, which meant that there was more time to do something about the Mayaguez before it reached the coast after being seized. The Pueblo proceeded to Wonsan at approximately 15 knots. As such,

with the few stops that Commander Bucher made, it could have taken some two hours to reach Wonsan, or longer. Had conventionally armed aircraft been on "alert," it is conceivable that the Pueblo could have been helped.

The Mayaguez originally seemed to be heading for Sihanoukville, but stopped short of the coast at Koh Tang Island. This allowed the United States enough time to get aircraft into the air and strafe the ship to keep it stationary. Both incidents occurred at about the same time of day, yet the reconnaissance flights over the Mayaguez continued despite the darkness. It might be suggested that the United States responded to the Mayaguez incident with greater efficiency. It might be the case, however, that the military, or Washington, was simply more determined to act.

It is noteworthy that there had been a conspicuous lack of protection in each of these cases. The Pueblo sailed alone, with neither an escort, nor readily available, conventional armed planes on "alert" in a nearby location. The EC-121 had been in the similar situation of lacking a guard. Also paralleling the reason for the Pueblo's lack of an escort, in the three months before the shooting down of the EC-121, 190 similar flights had flown in the same general area without a shooting incident. Therefore, it was felt that this EC-121 did not need protection. The Mayaguez, a commercial ship following a normal sea lane of transport, did not consider itself in need of protection. However, it was in an area that had witnessed contest and seizures.

After the Pueblo crisis Washington's fear of Soviet or Chinese intervention in support of North Korea was lessened as neither offered help during the Pueblo or EC-121 crises. During the Mayaguez crisis, neither China nor the USSR offered military assistance to Cambodia.

The U.S. military reaction to all three crises demonstrated the inapplicability of the concept of proportional response to aggressive acts.⁹⁸ During the 1968 Korean crisis, Washington did not have the available conventional force needed to alter the target's immediate behavior. In 1969, it similarly lacked a conventional nearby force for instant response. The pause caused by this unavailability allowed time for both the Johnson and Nixon

98. *New York Times*, April 17, 1969; Michael Hamm, "The Pueblo and Mayaguez: A Study of Flexible-Response Decision-Making," *Asian Survey*, (June 1977).

administrations to be praised for their "restraint". Consequently, the longer the hesitation before military retaliation, and the more the U.S. government was assured by its allies and public that it had taken the proper course of patience, the less likely a military response became in both incidents.

In the Mayaguez situation, the proportionality principle was discarded altogether. It would appear that force well beyond that which was needed was employed. Domestically, this led to an infusion of confidence (though perhaps only temporary). Of more importance in foreign policy, the failure to utilize flexible response had other, apparently beneficial, results. The People's Republic of China saw evidence that even as the U.S. armies were leaving Southeast Asia, U.S. military power would be available to help balance Soviet power in the area. At the same time, the USSR may have been assured that the United States could be relied upon to counter China's plans to dominate its southern flank.

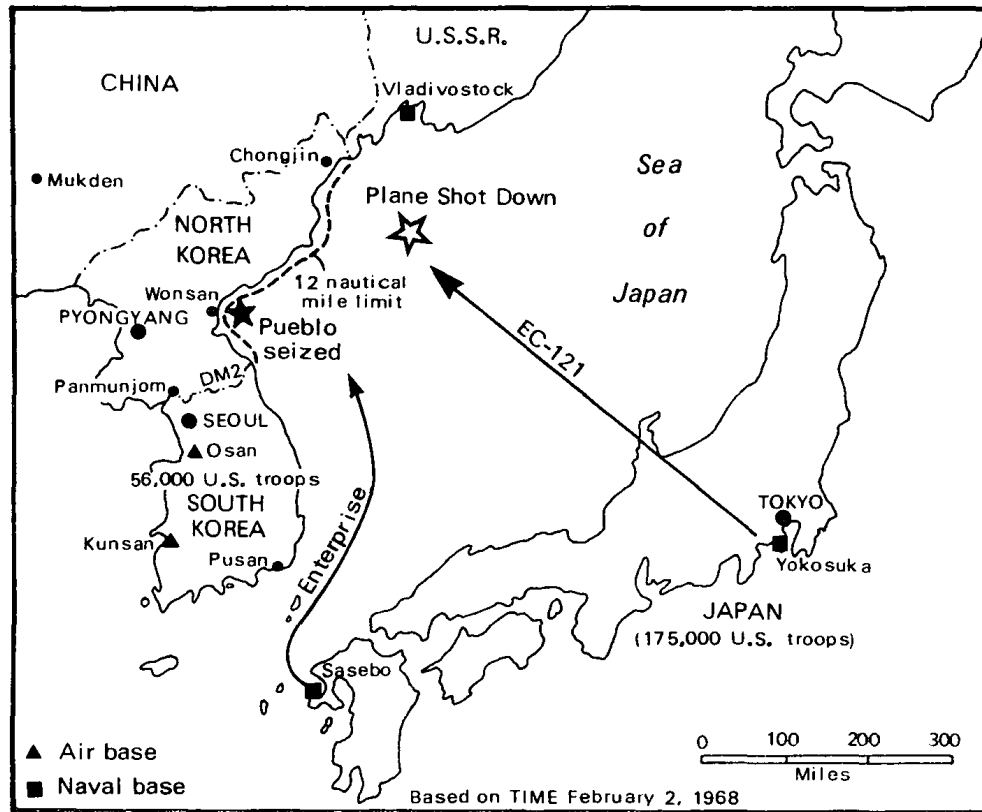
The smaller countries in Asia, however, may have felt unsettled by what could be considered the United States' hasty resolution of a minor situation. Would the United States turn 180 degrees in another crisis affecting Taiwan or South Korea and refuse to become involved militarily?

A partial answer may have been provided in August 1976, when North Korea challenged the United States with a violent attack on its soldiers at Panmunjom. North Korea did not suffer military retaliation, although force was available for this purpose. The United States did show force, but did not use military violence. President Kim Il Sung, however, in his first direct message to the United States since 1953, avoided the intense rancor usually present in North Korean propaganda. The retaliation by the United States for the seizure of the Mayaguez did not prevent the 1976 incident, but it apparently helped to prompt a conciliatory North Korean response soon after, such as proposals of private talks with the United States and division of the Panmunjom negotiating site, which had previously been proposed by the United States.

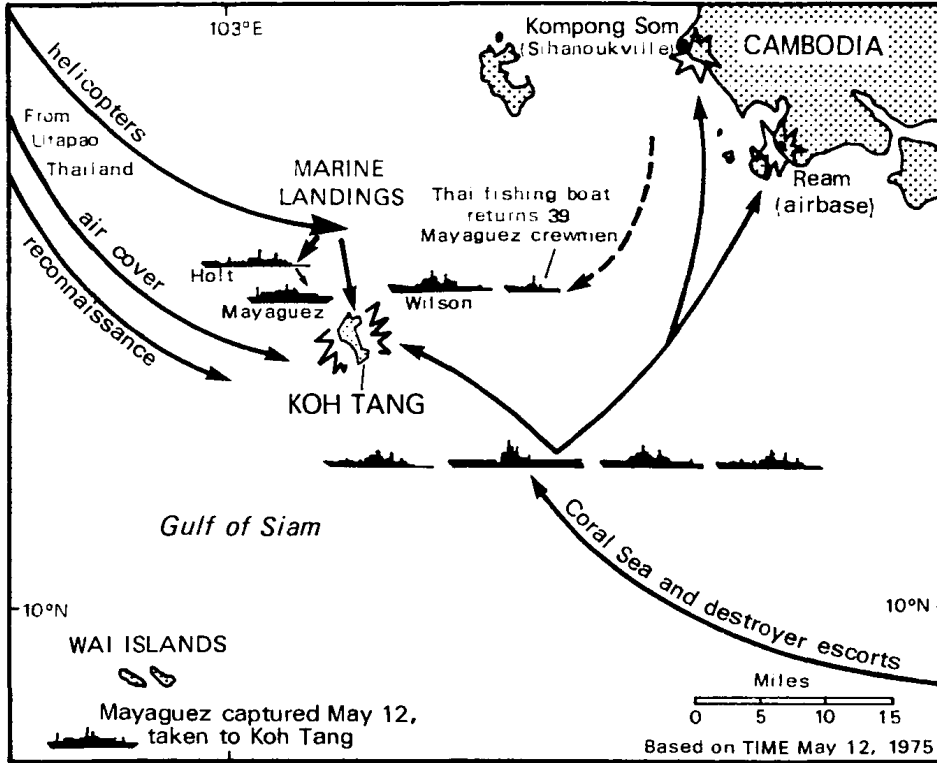
Violence had not been used by the United States during the Pueblo and EC-121 incidents. It had been used abundantly in the Mayaguez crisis. Perhaps the 1976 Korean event suggests the ineffectiveness of the 1968 and 1969 responses — lack of military retaliation accompanied by military movements. While it is to be hoped that the Mayaguez reaction can be avoided in the future, it should be recognized that a benefit of that reaction was to bolster the credibility of U.S. alliance commitments to Japan, South

Korea and Taiwan, each of which maintains defense agreements with the United States and to caution potential U.S. adversaries.

1968, 1969 Korean Crises



Seizure of the Mayaguez



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