

U.S. Sees Foray for Ship As Signal to Communists

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WASHINGTON, May 15—Leading Administration officials said today that the Gulf of Siam military operation to recover the container ship Mayagüez and her crew had been undertaken in part to alert North Korea and other Communist countries that the United States was ready to meet force with force to protect its interests.

Conversations with top officials involved in the diplomatic aspects of the operation showed that Secretary of State Kissinger, in particular, argued within the National Security Council that the United States might face worse crises if the Cambodian Communists were permitted to keep the crew members of the Mayagüez and to try to strike a deal for their release.

But there were officials who challenged the view of Mr. Kissinger and others that the outcome of the Mayagüez incident would have a long-range positive effect for the United States.

One of Mr. Kissinger's close aides said he thought that not much had really changed—that the United States was still in a weakened position in Asia and that the support of Congress in the incident was probably temporary and would not necessarily extend to other areas of difference.

A Korean Crisis Feared

Although there have been no overt signs that North Korea is preparing to attack South Korea, administration officials have said for some time that the next major trouble spot in Asia would probably be the Korean Peninsula.

About 38,000 American soldiers are deployed in South Korea.

Speaking of the recovery of the Mayagüez and the ship's crew, one top official said, "This whole operation will have a salutary effect on our position in Asia."

He said he believed the North Koreans, at the least would have to consider more seriously the American commitment to South Korea than they might have immediately after the fall of South Viet-

nam to the Communists in April.

Kim Il Sung, the North Korean leader, went to China to seek support for an invasion of South Korea but apparently did not receive it.

In terms of the immediate future, Mr. Kissinger will meet with the Soviet Foreign Minister, Andrei A. Gromyko, in Vienna next week at a time when Soviet-American relations have taken a somewhat chilly turn.

He believes that the demonstration of American determination in the Mayartüz incident will have at least a marginal impact on the Russians. Mr. Kissinger has consistently worried that if the Soviet Union perceived the United States as indecisive or weak it would be tempted to take risks that

could worsen the international situation.

China, which was asked by Mr. Kissinger to act as an intermediary with the Cambodian Communists in the Mayagüez incident, was thought likely to respect the American determination to use force, even if Peking had little choice but to publicly criticize the operation itself.

Mr. Kissinger and his aides have believed for some time that Peking was interested in

ties with the United States only so long as China thought Washington would stand up militarily to Moscow if necessary.

The country most upset by the Gulf of Siam operation has been Thailand, which was not informed ahead of time that 1,100 marines were being airlifted to Thailand for use in the rescue.

Some State Department officials said today that relations with Thailand might deteriorate in coming weeks as a result of the embarrassment to the Government of Premier Kukrit Prannoj.

But Mr. Kissinger believes that over the long run, the Thais, who are nervous about their security now that Cambodia and South Vietnam have fallen to the Communists will appreciate the American action as demonstrating a willingness to act firmly.

The State Department promised Thailand today that marines remaining there would be removed "as soon as possible."

For Mr. Kissinger, who views confrontation like the seizure of the Mayagüez in sweeping terms, the question that had to be asked at all times was the alternative to not using force, when it seemed as if diplomatic efforts had not proven successful and the crew members might be moved to the mainland Cambodia.

He insisted in the National Security Council that the United States could not afford another "Pueblo"—a reference to North Korea's seizure in 1968 of the Pueblo, an electronic surveillance ship.

The Pueblo's crew members were tortured and held for almost a year until the United States signed a statement—later retracted—admitting illegal activities.

A Blow to Prestige Feared

What Mr. Kissinger and President Ford feared, officials said, was an effort by the Cambodians to propagandize the capture of the American crew members, with Washington having to watch and do nothing. Not only would this have hurt American prestige abroad but it would have demoralized the American people, they believed.

Diplomatic efforts to bring about a peaceful release of the Mayagüez was handled through notes relayed to the Cambodians by the Chinese. Mr. Kissinger believes that the Chinese got the message through and might even have counseled restraint by Cambodia.