

FEBRUARY 14, 1968 - 1:14 p.m.

FOREIGN POLICY ADVISORS ON VIOLATION
OF CHINESE AIR SPACE

62

The Vice President
Secretary Clark Clifford
Secretary Clifford
General Earle Wheeler
General Taylor
Secretary McNamara
George Christian
Secretary Rusk
Tom Johnson

MEMORANDUM

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

February 14, 1968

~~TOP SECRET~~ - EYES ONLY

Mr. President:

Attached are the notes of your meeting February 14, 1968 in the President's Office on the violation of Chinese Air Space.

Those attending were:

The President
The Vice President
Secretary Clark Clifford
General Earle Wheeler
General Maxwell Taylor
Secretary McNamara
George Christian
Secretary Rusk
Tom Johnson

The meeting began at 1:14 p.m. The meeting ended at 1:40 p.m.

Tom Johnson

DETERMINED TO BE AN
ADMINISTRATIVE MARKING

BY DCM ON 10-28-82

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DECLASSIFIED

E.O. 12356, Sec. 3.4

NUJ 90-143

By 6-8 NARA. Date 11-30-90

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NOTES OF THE PRESIDENT'S MEETING
ON VIOLATION OF CHINESE AIR SPACE

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February 14, 1968
In the President's Office

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The President read two memoranda from Walt Rostow relating to the violation of Chinese air space and the shooting down of a U.S. aircraft. The two memoranda are attached as APPENDIX A and APPENDIX B.

Admiral Clarey: We propose sending a chopper in low. The 7th Fleet believes the chances of getting the pilot is good. The fighter aircraft would stay outside the 12 mile limit in a protective cap. The chopper would be sent in at night to rescue the pilot. There would be no retaliatory action against MIGs.

The President: Then the question really is (1) Do we come to the men's rescue? (2) What method do we use?

Admiral Clarey: The pilot is 6 miles east of Hainan Island. The chopper would invade Chinese air space.

The President: What if the chopper were attacked?

Admiral Clarey: In that case the chopper would pull back.

Secretary Rusk: It is not unusual for our commanders in Vietnam to consider rescue of pilots downed. It would be a mistake if any aircraft other than the proposed chopper went inside the 12 mile limit. The fighter cap could not be inside the 12 mile limit.

The President: Then what's the purpose of the fighter cap?

Admiral Clarey: They would be there for protective purposes. Perhaps they would keep enemy aircraft from attacking the chopper.

Secretary Rusk: How many men are there on a chopper?

Admiral Clarey: There are 3 or 4 men.

Secretary Rusk: Do you want to risk 3 or 4 men for 1?
Do you want to go into Chinese air space? I have no objection

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to going in an unarmed chopper to attempt to rescue the man at night. I do not want to do it in the daylight.

Admoral Clarey: The 7th Fleet Commander believes the chances of rescue are good. He is optimistic about success.

Secretary McNamara: I hate to say this Mr. President, because this pilot is one of my men. But I recommend against this action for the following reasons: There is a very high chance of losing 3 or 4 men in an effort to save 1. The chances are better than 50-50, perhaps 60 to 40 that this would involve us in a conflict with the Chinese.

The Chinese watch our planes and ships on radar very carefully. This was how they could detect this aircraft and decide to shoot it down. In addition, this may be an ambush.

The Chinese will have heard the beeper and they will be forewarned of any planes which would be launched from one of our carriers.

I do not want us to get in a dog fight with MIGs where we could lose more than we would gain by the action. Because the risks are so high, I would recommend against this action.

General Wheeler: Would the MIGs be spotted flushing so that the chopper could be contacted to abort its mission?

Admiral Clarey: There would be communication with the chopper, but we may not be able to pick up the MIGs on radar if they respond. Because of the land mass and the range of mountains, it would be impossible to pick them up until they are at the high altitude and clear of land.

General Wheeler: Where is the nearest MIG Air Force?

Admiral Clarey: (Showed on a map the MIG air base. The Admiral also showed on a map the position of the beeper and Hainan Island.)

Secretary Rusk: We lose fighter pilots each week when commanders decide that the risks are too great for rescue operations to be undertaken.

~~TOP SECRET - EYES ONLY~~

~~TOP SECRET - EYES ONLY~~

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The Secretary of Defense's recommendation is the simplest one for me. I have very great concern about the fighter cover.

The President: How do you feel about this, General Wheeler?

General Wheeler: I would recommend against it. There is a high risk. The MIGs are near. We cannot adequately protect the chopper. The chances are high that we would lose the chopper along with this man. We could lose 3 men in a high risk operation to save 1.

I would feel differently if we could see the MIGs flushed so the chopper would be able to avoid aborting in time. I would say yes if that were the case. Since it cannot, I would recommend against.

The President: Is there any other way of detecting the MIGs?

General Wheeler: We do not have the proper kind of planes in the area. We do not have a "big eye."

Admiral Clarey: The pilot could have been swept further out at sea if the Chinese have not already picked him up. We could send a craft up to the 12 mile limit to check on this.

General Taylor: What is the likelihood of a chopper being detected by the Chinese radar at night?

Admiral Clarey: The risk is quite high.

Secretary Rusk: They will be looking for this guy and also be looking for rescue craft.

General Taylor: It is hard to understand why they haven't picked him up already.

Walt Rostow: We could send out an electronic plane to determine the pilot's location. Could we do this without violating air space?

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Admiral Clarey: Yes, we could send the plane outside of the 12 mile limit. But we do not know what the condition of the man is. He could be injured. We may have to put a man in to help him out.

Secretary Rusk: Can you shoot down a chopper easily at night flying in a jet?

Admiral Clarey: It would be tough to shoot it down if the chopper were to be alerted. If the chopper does not know the MIGs are on the way, it would be rather easy to shoot him down.

Paul Nitze: I would not do this in daylight. It might be worth going to the 12 mile limit and if an attack is flushed, we could withdraw immediately.

Secretary Rusk: If one of our carriers were to launch a chopper into Chinese territorial waters, the Chinese have a pretext for attacking that carrier.

Secretary McNamara: I do not want to come out of this with greater losses than we already have.

Clark Clifford: These planes of ours did inadvertently violate air space. The Chinese could have done something other than shooting it down, but it chose to do so. They could have warned the planes.

At first I felt it might be worth trying to rescue them. Now I feel uneasy about it. They chose to shoot this plane down. They will see the chopper. They will hear the beep. They will see the ship if it turns in that direction. And of course, they will know of the air cap.

The Chinese also don't know what our intention might be. There is a very strong element of danger here.

They may conclude that this is a retaliatory action by us. We may send planes. So I grudgingly conclude that we must let this man go.

I would not even start an action toward the 12 mile limit. This was an inadvertent violation.

I conclude that we are better off not doing anything rather than taking a risk of doing something that would involve a major incident. Our position is unfounded although this would be a mission of mercy. I am afraid we would not get the support we would need to defend the action we would take.

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General Wheeler: I feel that way myself.

I would like to launch an electronic aircraft outside of the 12 mile limit to determine if the beeps are drifting out to sea.

But I would not do anything that would violate their air space.

The President: The plane would stay outside of the 12 mile limit?

General Wheeler: Yes Sir.

Admiral Clarey: Yes Sir.

The President: Is there any objection to taking this action?

(There was no objection by any of those present.)

The President: Okay, let's send an electronic plane.

Secretary Rusk: Don't we have radar in the Philippines to help planes such as these get back on course? This was a 30 to 40 degree navigational error.

I know it may be a little inappropriate to ask, but can't we keep these guys on course?

Secretary McNamara: There is no radar in the Philippines that would keep this from happening.

The President: Bob, do you have anything new to report on the appearance before the Committee today?

Secretary McNamara: We are still talking about the Pueblo.

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Wednesday, February 14, 1968
12:00 noon

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MR. PRESIDENT:

SUBJECT: Hainan Territorial Waters Rescue Operation

1. Facts

The Seventh Fleet would like to launch its rescue chopper from the Kearsage at 0400 its time (3-3/4 hours from now). It would take 45 minutes to get to the scene. They hope to complete the operation before dawn (0615 their time). Despite night operations, the Coral Sea would mount a protective fighter CAP against MIG's. Nitze is awaiting a final assessment from the Commander of the 7th Fleet before coming to the Cabinet meeting to answer this question: What are the chances of success?

2. Sect. Rusk. He does not believe the operation should be undertaken:

- the risks to the helicopter crew are too great;
- the man is in territorial waters: we would not attempt rescue if he were on Hainan or the China mainland.

3. Sect. McNamara. The rescue attempt should not be made.

4. Gen. Wheeler. The risks of an air engagement are high against a sizable force. Nevertheless, his gut feeling is the rescue should be attempted; although much depends on whether the 7th Fleet Commander believes the chances of successful rescue are good, in the light of weather and other factors determining whether the man can be found.

5. Mr. Clifford. Rescue the man. It is a mission of mercy. He feels Hainan is in a somewhat different status -- in fact, if not in law -- than the Chinese mainland.

W. W. Rostow

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NLJ 90-143

By DLG, NARA, Date 3-1-97

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Wed., Feb. 14, 1968
12:40 p. m.

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MR. PRESIDENT:

Nitze reports:

1. Seventh Fleet Commander optimistic on rescue, if beeper continues to beep -- even though it's a night job.
2. The protective fighter CAP of six aircraft will be held 25 miles off shore unless the chopper is attacked.
3. The rescue chopper -- and the whole rescue party -- are under strict instruction to initiate no hostile action.

W. W. Rostow

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By PCW, NARA, Date 3-1-98

APPENDIX B

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