PUEBLO

A Retrospective

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North Korea's seizure of the U.S. Navy intelligence-collection—officially, "environmental research"—ship USS *Pueblo* (AGER 2) on 23 January 1968 set the stage for a painful year of negotiations. Diplomacy ultimately freed the crew; Pyongyang finally released the men in December 1968. However, in the first days of the crisis—the focus of this article—it was the military that was called upon to respond. Naval power would have played an important role in any immediate attempts to force the People's Democratic Republic of Korea to release the crew and ship. Failing that, the Seventh Fleet would have been on the forefront of any retaliation.

Many works published over the last thirty-three years support this view.[1] However, hundreds of formerly classified documents released to the public in the late 1990s offer new insight into many aspects of the crisis. They provide an unprecedentedly comprehensive documentary record of intelligence, planning, and operational issues dominating the first two weeks of the crisis, after which the Seventh Fleet began to withdraw from the Sea of Japan and the diplomatic track assumed preeminence.

The release of these archival sources makes it worthwhile to revisit a very useful case study in crisis decision making involving naval forces. The newly available documents make plain the imperfection of the intelligence available to the operational commanders involved; caught by surprise, they had to plan and move forces quickly to respond to a wide range of contingencies. Also, the record exhibits the dynamics in Washington and establishes what

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options the decision makers there thought were available to them. Finally, it shows how military forces were in fact employed once the national strategy for the crisis was settled upon.

The newly accessible material documents four main points about the early part of the crisis. First, the U.S. intelligence community provided uneven support. Analysts supplied detailed information about *Pueblo*'s location and on the capabilities and dispositions of the (North) Korean People's Army. They also assessed how the potential allies of the North Korean regime would react to the crisis, particularly if the United States resorted to force. However, the intelligence community found the North Korean motivations and intentions—which were, of course, central to the crisis—far more difficult to discern, as a result of its superficial understanding of Pyongyang's decision-making process.

USS *Pueblo* **Official U.S. Navy photograph**

Second, it is clear that within hours of the seizure, military staffs down to fleet level, whose forces had been unsuitably deployed and otherwise unprepared to protect *Pueblo*, devised and prepared to execute several options: to retake the ship, to prevent North Korea from salvaging it, to make a show of force off Wonsan, and to seize a North Korean merchant vessel. Superiors in the chain of command tempered these proposals but by no means discarded them.

Third, the released archives show that by 29 January the national command authority—the president and secretary of defense, advised and supported by the Joint Chiefs of Staff—had explored even more extensive military courses of action. The importance of the roles naval forces would have played in a number of them is striking. Although the national leadership shelved most of these proposals, some remained under consideration well into the crisis. Additionally, the staffs of the Joint Chiefs and of the commander in chief of U.S. forces in the Pacific reviewed conventional and nuclear contingency plans for Korea in case retaliation supplanted deterrence as the preeminent objective.

Fourth, the newly accessible documents trace how national strategy and theater posture effectively merged on 25 January with the implementation of Seventh Fleet's Operation FORMATION STAR. Over the next ten days, the U.S. Navy and U.S. Air Force "surged" more than three hundred aircraft into the theater to offset the unfavorable balance of air power between the two Koreas. U.S. forces in Korea itself substantially upgraded their readiness, although they did not raise their defense readiness condition. Forces of the Republic of Korea (ROK), already on heightened alert following a North Korean attempt to

assassinate President Park Chung Hee on 21 January, redeployed to contain any further North Korean provocations along the demilitarized zone.

THE INTELLIGENCE EQUATION

During the first days of the crisis, intelligence analysts supporting tactical and strategic commanders tried to answer a number of wide-ranging and fundamental questions. Their answers significantly influenced decision makers at all levels of the U.S. command structure.

What were the North's capabilities against the South? The Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command, concluded that North Korea could launch a surprise attack across the demilitarized zone with the twelve divisions and one brigade then deployed near the zone. A larger attack, employing between twenty and twenty-two of the total twenty-five North Korean divisions (or equivalents) supported by about five hundred combat jet aircraft, could be delivered with little warning. The North Korean air force enjoyed substantial superiority over its Republic of Korea counterpart. All of its fighters (MiG-21s, MiG-19s, and MiG-17s) and some of its Il-28 bombers were dispersed in caves and revetments; its fuel storage facilities were dispersed and "hardened" (strengthened to resist damage, as by concrete bunkers). In contrast, the air forces in the South comprised 203 Korean fighters and 151 American fighters, at unhardened bases. Aircraft, fuel stocks and terminals, radar sites, communications centers, and surface-to-air missile sites were all vulnerable to low-altitude surprise attack.

This airpower imbalance and the exposed nature of the airfields in South Korea became a major concern to U.S. decision makers.[2] The commander in chief of Pacific Command subsequently concluded that seventy aircraft would be lost to the first wave of a North Korean air campaign against aircraft on the ground, and 110 to the second wave.[3] As for the North Korean navy, however, the Central Intelligence Agency characterized it as a small defensive force, limited to coastal operations.[4]

What was the North Korean army's posture? Following the seizure of *Pueblo,* North Korean military units assumed a heightened state of alert and maintained it throughout the early days of the crisis. Analysts believed that the alert was defensive; there were "no signs of significant preparations for offensive action."[5] For example, the CIA reported that as of 28 January, North Korean naval patrol activity remained heavy, particularly off Wonsan on the east coast, where it extended thirty miles into the Sea of Japan.[6]

What had been Pyongyang's objective? The CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and the State Department rapidly concluded that North Korea had acted independently.[7] *Pueblo*'s seizure had grown out of the regime's desire for unification; Pyongyang's public statements had become more militant since October 1966. On top of this, the CIA noted, North Korea had been "uniformly

hostile" toward all vessels in nearby waters since the Korean War. In fact, few South Korean or U.S. ships ever approached North Korea's coast; the exceptions were ROK Navy patrol boats escorting fishing vessels. The North had sunk one of these patrol boats in 1967 and in November 1967 had resumed accusations about "spy boats" (which had begun around 1964).[8] Detecting *Pueblo* off its coast at least by 22 January, the North would have been sorely tempted to harass it, at least; two North Korean fishing trawlers had circled and approached to within thirty yards of *Pueblo* on that day.[9] The CIA assessed that the "report which the trawlers probably made would have been enough to justify making plans to deal with the *Pueblo* and sending a naval vessel out on patrol."[10] The CIA concluded that the ship

> was almost certainly taken as a result of a decision at the highest levels of the North Korean government. . . . It seems likely . . . that the North Koreans had identified the ship and her mission at least a day in advance. It is possible that the original intent was only to harass and drive off the *Pueblo*; the final decision to take the ship into Wonsan may have only been taken when it eventually appeared that U.S. forces were not coming to assist the *Pueblo*.[11]

In any event, the CIA quickly warned senior U.S. officials that the North Korean regime was prepared for a "period of sharply heightened tensions." It assessed that Pyongyang would seek to extract propaganda value from the crisis "for some days at least." Interestingly, the initial CIA assessment implied a role for U.S. military pressure, arguing that the North Koreans would release neither ship nor crew "unless they judge the U.S. will resort to retaliatory action, such as an air attack against the patrol craft that seized the *Pueblo*."[12]

Where was Pueblo? The United States had tracked the newly captured ship into Wonsan. A photo-reconnaissance mission flown on 25 January confirmed it was still there, along with seven Komar missile patrol boats and several patrol craft.[13] The imagery revealed no damage to the ship.[14] On 12 February, human intelligence reporting indicated that the North Koreans had moved *Pueblo* from

Changjahwan-man (Chojikan) to Munp'yong-ni (Wonsan), a naval facility nearby.[15] On 29 April, the Defense Intelligence Agency reported that *Pueblo* had moved from Munp'yong-ni to Najin, a port near the Soviet border.[16]

What were North Korea's economic and political vulnerabilities? North Korea's predominantly overland trade patterns and communist trading partners were not susceptible to naval action or diplomacy. The CIA quickly reported that approximately 87 percent of North Korea's trade in 1966 was with the communist world, 75 percent with the Soviet Union and China. With the exception of bulk commodities, almost all of this trade with its two bordering neighbors was overland. Japan accounted for nearly half of Pyongyang's noncommunist trade. Therefore, a maritime blockade could reduce North Korea's trade by no more than 25 percent, representing that with the noncommunist world and with communist countries other than China and the Soviet Union. Japanese and Soviet-flag ships would be primarily affected; they represented roughly two-thirds of all merchant ships entering North Korean ports. The remainder were Polish and British (8 percent each), Greek (5 percent), and an assortment of other ships flying free world and communist flags.[17]

North Korea had only five merchant ships of its own (a sixth was being fitted out in Nampo) that could be seized in retaliation; the locations of those not believed to be in port were unknown. Four were attached to the fishing fleet. All were under two thousand gross registered tons, except *Paektu-San* (7,218 tons). The status of three Polish-flag dry-cargo ships operated by the Joint Korean-Polish Ship Broker's Company was continually monitored.[18]

The Central Intelligence Agency painted a picture of a North Korea with similarly few political vulnerabilities. All communist states would wish the affair to "inflict the maximum feasible damage on the U.S. position, particularly with reference to Vietnam." Still, while these allies would want to hinder U.S. efforts in Vietnam, the CIA believed, none sought hostilities on the Korean Peninsula. Moscow, accordingly, would seek propaganda points but would counsel Pyongyang to avoid further provocations that might trigger U.S. retaliation. Nonetheless, the agency warned, Moscow might not be able to restrain Pyongyang should the latter pursue a more belligerent course. China would probably offer ambiguous advice but counsel against "any course of undue risk." Both states were aware that South Korea could also take actions, with or without U.S. concurrence, that could "balloon the crisis out of control." This factor, the CIA believed, gave Moscow and Beijing an additional incentive to moderate their advice to Pyongyang.[19]

What if the United States attacked? By 26 January, the intelligence community had begun to assess likely North Korean responses to several possible U.S. actions. The State Department judged that there was "a fair chance" that the

communist regime would release at least part of the crew in response to a combination of warnings, visible military preparations, and a U.S. show of force. Pyongyang would probably see little to be gained from holding the entire crew after exploiting the incident for propaganda value. This outcome could not be guaranteed. Moreover, the assessment observed, shows of force and the like could be "damaging" to South Korea. Further, the communists might regard some low-level military action (such as a blockade, attacks against a limited set of North Korean targets, etc.) as meant only to assuage American public opinion; they might doubt U.S. determination to go farther. In such a case, the North Koreans would probably "punish" the crew immediately. They might retaliate by launching air strikes against South Korean airfields or even U.S. aircraft carriers, though such acts seemed unlikely, because of the high risk of escalation and ground war. In fact, a State Department memorandum suggested, were the United States to strike North Korea, the Soviets would probably go "quite far in private pressures" on Pyongyang to end the crisis—regardless of their public stance. Still, no foreseeable scenario guaranteed the crew's release, let alone that of the ship.[20]

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What were the Soviets doing? The Soviet Union apparently acted quickly to harvest the intelligence windfall that had been brought into Wonsan Harbor. On 28 January, the CIA reported that a Soviet Pacific Fleet aircraft had made a highly unusual flight into North Korea. The agency believed that the aircraft might have carried Soviet personnel to examine *Pueblo* and its surviving equipment.[21]

The Soviet Pacific Fleet also deployed several units to monitor the growing U.S. task force. By 1 February, U.S. naval intelligence was tracking a Kildin guided-missile destroyer, a Kotlin destroyer, a Riga destroyer escort, and four auxiliaries in the Sea of Japan. On 5 February (after some of the U.S. Seventh Fleet ships had departed), six Soviet destroyers steamed into the Sea of Japan. By then, thirteen Soviet vessels—including two missile cruisers, three missile destroyers, two tankers, and two intelligence collectors—were in those waters. However, some of these were probably reliefs for ships that had arrived previously.[22]

What more could be determined? Surprised by the ship's seizure, national decision makers were starved for information. On 24 January the senior *Pueblo* crisis group met for the first time; its members included Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and certain of his principal assistants; Walt Rostow, the national security advisor; Richard Helms, the director of central intelligence; and General Earle Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. (The president was to attend several of its meetings but was not present for the first.) General Wheeler felt that the first thing to do, before

any of the military actions under discussion could be implemented, was to collect more photo intelligence.[23] McNamara agreed that the intelligence gaps had to be filled; he hoped to have a reconnaissance plan from Helms by day's end. Planners considered both drones and BLACK SHIELD (probably involving the SR-71 Blackbird, the only aircraft capable of safely flying a reconnaissance mission against Wonsan). At a cabinet-level meeting on the evening of 24 January, Helms pushed for three reconnaissance passes (presumably by BLACK SHIELD) in one day over Wonsan. McNamara endorsed a three-pass mission, arguing that the loss rate would be low. The first useful imagery was obtained the next day; after preliminary interpretation, it was to be shipped to Washington by Sunday, 28 January. The United States also continued to fly BUMBLE BUG drone reconnaissance missions. The drone, which was launched from a C-130 aircraft, was scheduled to fly on 29 January. On the 29th, however, the advisory group agreed to suspend reconnaissance against North Korea for several days.[24]

THE INITIAL RESPONSE IN THE THEATER

The documentary record shows that as the national command authorities began in the first twenty-four hours to formulate a strategy for dealing with the seizure of *Pueblo*, forces in the theater were already preparing to carry out any of several retaliatory contingencies. The commander of U.S. naval forces in Japan notified the commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet (a component of the Pacific Command) of the seizure at 1420 (2:20 P.M.) Korean time, within an hour of the event.* For the commanders and staffs of the Pacific Fleet and its subordinate Seventh Fleet, preparations entailed rapid planning and redeploying of units. The Air Force also began moving the first of several hundred aircraft toward or into the Republic of Korea. The Commander, U.S. Forces Korea, with headquarters in Seoul, heightened his forces' alert and surveillance status and considered increasing readiness from the normal Defense Condition Four to DEFCON Three.

The Pacific Fleet staff considered many options, some of which anticipated the more deliberate assessment process that would occur in Washington over the next six days. These options included requesting permission to conduct land-based or naval air strikes against "a suitable target"; steaming a carrier task group into the Sea of Japan and conducting photo reconnaissance; seizing a North Korean ship on the high seas; positioning *Pueblo*'s sister ship, USS *Banner* (AGER 1), off Wonsan; disposing naval forces in such a way that the U.S. government could credibly demand compensation, apologies, and guarantees from North Korea; and blockading Wonsan.[25]

* To simplify the chronology, all dates and hours are in local Korean time.

Many naval messages, several of them later revised, resulted from the planning in the theater. At 1506 on the afternoon of the seizure, the commander of the Seventh Fleet directed the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier USS *Enterprise* (CVN 65), the nuclear-powered guided missile cruiser *Truxtun* (CGN 35), and three destroyers to proceed "at best speed" to the southern end of the Tsushima Strait.[26] Between six and seven that evening, Pacific Command ordered its forces to prepare for photo reconnaissance of Wonsan to determine *Pueblo*'s position; at about the same time, the commander in chief of the Pacific Command requested the Joint Chiefs to authorize this reconnaissance if North Korea remained silent as to the ship's location.[27] As a precaution, USS *Banner* was ordered to discontinue surveillance operations off the east coast of Honshu and return to Yokosuka.[28]

Within hours of the seizure, military staffs, whose forces had been unsuitably deployed and otherwise unprepared to protect Pueblo, *devised and prepared to execute several options.*

At 1921 (7:21 P.M.), the commander of the Pacific Fleet directed the commander of the Seventh Fleet to "take steps to place and support [a] destroyer ASAP [as soon as possible] off Wonsan immediately outside 12-mile limit. Be prepared to engage in operations that may include towing *Pueblo* and or retrieval of *Pueblo* crew/provide air cover as appropriate. Make sitreps [situation reports] as appropriate and at least hourly."[29] The Seventh Fleet staff amplified this order seventy-five minutes later, directing *Enterprise* into the Sea of Japan and sending the destroyer USS *Higbee* (DD 806) toward Wonsan; a second destroyer would follow.[30] At about the same time the Pacific Fleet commander also directed the Seventh Fleet commander to conduct photo reconnaissance missions over Wonsan.[31] The commander of the Seventh Fleet relayed this order at 2334 but advised his subordinates that since *Pueblo* was believed to be inside North Korean territorial waters, no offensive military action was authorized unless directed by higher authority.[32] Shortly after midnight, the task group commander onboard *Enterprise* responded that he planned flight operations during daylight from a position east of Pusan to rearrange the air wing for future operations.[33]

Evidently, the national command authorities suddenly put the brakes on this planning, preparation, and northward surging of naval forces. At 0138 in the morning of the 24th, the Pacific Fleet commander directed all U.S. naval forces to remain south of thirty-six degrees north latitude and to make no show of force in the area of the incident; no destroyer would be positioned off Wonsan.[34] Furthermore, by seven o'clock the Pacific Fleet commander had also directed the cessation of signals-intelligence flights over the Sea of Japan and Yellow Sea. Further, no antisubmarine warfare flights were allowed near the incident site, with the exception of a two-plane barrier near the battle group.[35]

Half an hour later, the commander in chief of Pacific Command confirmed that the Joint Staff had prohibited shows of force. He explicitly directed the commander of the Pacific Fleet not to position *Higbee* off Wonsan; other fleet units repositioned as a result of the incident were to steam no farther north than their present locations.[36] *Enterprise* had advanced as far as the northeast end of the Korea Strait, south of Pusan; by noon, to gain sea room, the carrier had withdrawn southwesterly into the East China Sea. *Higbee* and three other destroyers, *Osbourn* (DD 846), *Collett* (DD 730), and *O'Bannon* (DD 450), were to rendezvous with *Enterprise* there between the 24th and 26th of January.[37]

By midday on 24 January, the commander in chief, Pacific Command, took further steps to reduce the risk of war, ordering his subordinate commanders to "initiate no show of force along the Korean demilitarized zone or elsewhere adjacent to North Korea. . . . U.S. naval and air forces will remain outside repeat outside of the area within 80 NM [nautical miles] of the coast of North Korea north of a line extending east from the DMZ [demilitarized zone]. This instruction does not alter your existing authorities and responsibilities for the security of your forces."[38]

Meanwhile, the U.S. Fifth Air Force had ordered all available F-105 fighter bombers from Okinawa to Kunsan and Osan in Korea. Twelve F-105s deployed to Osan by the 24th, and the Air Force began planning for a massive augmentation.[39]

The commanding general of the U.S. Eighth Army in Korea notified his forces of the *Pueblo* seizure and directed I Corps to bring its command posts to operating strength. He instructed subordinate commands to heighten their alert states and to review Defense Condition Three procedures. (In the event, the defense condition was not raised from four to three for U.S. forces.) Meanwhile, major elements of American and South Korean forces remained engaged in counterinfiltration operations, which had accelerated after the North Korean attempt to assassinate President Park on the 21st.[40]

General Charles H. Bonesteel III, commander of U.S. forces in Korea, was particularly concerned about the active infiltration threat to the security of surface-to-air missile and nuclear weapons sites. On the 24th he reported that he was considering deploying another battalion from the U.S. 7th Division to reinforce local defenses of these sites. Bonesteel also recommended an "expeditious decision" to augment the Eighth Army, particularly for local security. Concerned with the maritime borders, he indicated that he might soon recommend that two U.S. destroyers and maritime patrol aircraft reinforce the South Korean naval and air force units then conducting maritime patrol and interdiction.[41]

REVIEWING THE MILITARY OPTIONS

Although diplomacy was quickly to become paramount, during the early phase of the crisis the national command authorities devoted much time to military options. Between 24 and 27 January, a series of meetings of the *Pueblo* crisis group, the National Security Council, and the cabinet occurred. The early meetings were wide-ranging brainstorming sessions in which the participants strove to understand the facts of the case, ascertain North Korean motives, and then identify and evaluate military and diplomatic options. The policy makers were conservative; they sought to bound the crisis, and their paramount goal became the crew's return. But they also wanted to consider ways to pressure Pyongyang. On Friday, 26 January, the State Department established an interagency Korea Working Group, comprising representatives from the State and Defense Departments, the Central Intelligence Agency, the Agency for International Development, the White House, and the U.S. Information Agency. The group was to flesh out ten options in "think papers" addressing purpose, feasibility, risk, and North Korean response. A high-level advisory group met on Monday, 29 January, to weigh these ten possible courses of action and the working group's evaluations of them.[42]

Selected air strikes on North Korea: As a retaliation for *Pueblo*'s seizure, ninety-two Navy, U.S. Air Force, and South Korean air force aircraft could strike the Wonsan air base and the naval base at Munp'yong-ni.[43] The Korea Working Group cautioned that the strikes would not free the crew or substantially reduce, let alone disrupt, North Korean military capabilities. Attacks would be difficult to defend legally; they would put the United States on the diplomatic defensive; and they would risk escalation. In its report, the working group noted that the Joint Chiefs preferred to attack *all* North Korean military airfields and neutralize the *entire* North Korean air force in this course of action. Otherwise, losses of strike aircraft would be high, since the North Korean air defense system could concentrate on defending one or two targets.

Naval blockade of Wonsan: Given air cover, U.S. and possibly South Korean naval units could impose a blockade within Wonsan's twelve-mile limit. To achieve air superiority, strikes against North Korean air force fields would "quite possibly" be required. However, the Korea Working Group assessed that a blockade would pose only a minor inconvenience to the Democratic People's Republic. Moreover, if the North Korean regime did not respond in the desired way, the United States might be committed to an "indefinite, inconclusive, and politically awkward" military option. World reaction would be adverse. Nevertheless, the working group concluded that a blockade might eventually be useful.

Mine Wonsan Harbor: Enterprise-based A-6 attack aircraft could, by flying seventeen sorties, drop eighty-three mines in one night; thereafter they could

"reseed" the minefield as necessary. The working group projected the aircraft loss rate at less than 2 percent. On the other hand, it argued, mining would pose only a "minor inconvenience," given the availability of other North Korean ports and the possibility of Soviet mine countermeasures assistance.

Seize North Korean vessels: The purpose would be to retaliate in kind and then trade the seized craft, either a merchant vessel or a warship, for *Pueblo* and its crew. This option, the Korea Working Group believed, would be difficult to implement because the North's five primary merchant ships and most of its naval units were unlikely to be under way. While not deemed risky, this option seemed to have little chance of securing release of the *Pueblo* and, more importantly, the crew; it might, though, be "advantageous" as a step in a "sequence of events."

The policy makers were conservative; their paramount goal became the crew's return. But they also wanted to consider ways to pressure Pyongyang.

Sail USS Banner *into the area where* Pueblo *had been seized:* This complex operation would demonstrate U.S. determination to exercise freedom of the seas. The idea was to position *Banner* a minimum of thirteen miles from the North Korean coast for eight days. Two destroyers, a cruiser, and possibly a South Korean unit would escort the AGER, and carrier aircraft would fly cover overhead. U.S. Air Force aircraft in South Korea would assume "strip alert" (immediate readiness to take off). The working group felt that the action would involve low risk but would reduce the likelihood of the release of *Pueblo* and its crew. Nonetheless, the group recommended that a plan be prepared for this option, in case Washington decided to carry out a "relatively unprovocative" operation.

Recover cryptographic material jettisoned by Pueblo: An attempt would be made to recover highly sensitive gear while exercising freedom of the seas. The recovery would require a tug and mine warfare vessels from Sasebo, Japan, along with special detection gear from the United States, and probably a midget submarine (to be flown from Nassau). *Enterprise* and U.S. Air Force aircraft would provide air cover. The salvage unit would operate during daylight only and terminate the attempt after ten days. The working group stated no opinion on the prospects of recovery but in general concluded that a recovery effort would constitute "a legitimate display of U.S. activity and concern for U.S. rights with little risk of provocation." Supporting the course of action was a draft operation order. However, the letter from Admiral Thomas Moorer, the Chief of Naval Operations, forwarding the draft plan commented that its "disadvantages far outweigh its advantages" and recommended against it unless the recovery units were assured of adequate air cover.[44]

Conduct airborne reconnaissance: This proposal entailed flying reconnaissance missions in an attempt to convince Pyongyang that the United States was preparing for military operations. High-performance tactical aircraft or drones would cross the demilitarized zone and North Korean coasts and penetrate up to fifty miles inland. Electronic warfare aircraft would jam air defense and surveillance radars. North Korea would likely down several drones, but the risk to BLACK SHIELD missions was calculated at less than 1 percent, even against experienced surface-to-air missile crews. The working group concluded that reconnaissance had some value as a pressure tactic.

"I don't believe there is any military move that we can make that will assist us in getting the Pueblo *crew returned."*

Inform the Soviets of actual or possible military moves: Officially, the Soviets would be advised that ongoing military movements were meant to deter further North Korean provocations; in addition, however, "we might pointedly warn the Soviets of actions we may be compelled to take." In this scenario, Washington would use an unofficial channel to warn Moscow of the "gravity of the situation" and the need for "some action by the North Koreans to avoid further deterioration."[45] The State Department was to develop this option in greater detail as the crisis progressed.

Raid across the Demilitarized Zone: A punitive raid across the demilitarized zone could be staged against a significant installation, such as the North Korean 6th Division command post. Relying on surprise, an armor-heavy combined U.S.–South Korean force would seize and destroy the facility. The working group, however, warned that the raiders would sustain high casualties and that the North Korean military should be expected to mount rapid "counter activities." Moreover, if the operation went poorly, it could result in escalation to major ground action; even if successful, it would be merely punitive.

Economic pressure on North Korea: This proposal entailed a total embargo on trade by the United States and its allies, particularly a cessation of Japanese imports from North Korea and elimination of wheat exports to it. (Japan was the largest free-world importer of goods from North Korea, and wheat accounted for half of the free world's exports to that nation.) The Korea Working Group saw little prospect for success: communist shipping lines and overland routes would compensate for the loss of free-world vessels, and in any case key U.S. allies trading with Pyongyang were unlikely to cooperate.

On 29 January, a senior advisory group including Rusk and several high-ranking State Department officials, Helms, Rostow, and General Maxwell Taylor (then acting as a special military consultant to the president) met to review the operational alternatives offered by the Korea Working Group. The

advisory group rapidly and "universally" agreed that the United States should make no further military or diplomatic moves until it could ascertain whether U.S.–North Korean contacts at Panmunjom might be fruitful. The panel quickly eliminated several possible courses of action: in its view, selective air strikes were solely retaliatory and would diminish prospects for early release of *Pueblo;* blockade was inconclusive and potentially escalatory; and mining risked air combat and escalation. The panel further ruled out putting *Banner* on station, at least in the manner proposed, and concluded that recovery of the *Pueblo*'s cryptographic material was "almost an impossible task"—the attempt could lead to "unsought sustained hostilities." The meeting found free-world economic pressure unattractive, because of its limited impact and the difficulties of implementing it, especially since opposition from France, the United Kingdom, Japan, and West Germany was likely.[46]

"If diplomatic efforts . . . are not successful[,] . . . the conventional weapons strike plan we have submitted gives various options. . . . We also will be ready with various nuclear options."

The other options were received more favorably. In particular, if the crew and the ship—*or even just the ship*—were not returned, seizure of a North Korean vessel seemed to be a "punishment that fitted the crime." The panel recommended further staff work to locate North Korean vessels that might be susceptible to seizure in international waters.

The senior advisory group, however, recommended suspension of reconnaissance for several days. If these flights were to be resumed, the panel recommended they be BLACK SHIELD missions. The group also recommended that the United States consider bombing exercises in South Korea, for their demonstration value.[47]

After its deliberations, the panel met with President Lyndon Johnson. It advised him that "[we] should keep our eyes on the major objectives in this crisis: get the men of the *Pueblo* and, if possible, the ship returned; keep the confidence of the South Koreans and, especially, their willingness to provide an increment of force in South Vietnam; and avoid a second front in Asia."[48] Meeting privately with Democratic congressional leaders the following week, President Johnson echoed the theme: "We are trying to keep them [the North Koreans] talking. The Joint Chiefs have shown me twenty military plans, but none of them would get our men back alive."[49]

Admiral U. S. Grant Sharp, commander in chief, U.S. Pacific Command, made the same observation, but with a weather eye out for the possibility of things going amiss. In a "personal for" message to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, he summarized the planning:

> Our chances to get the crew back seem greatest if we do not make a show of force off Wonsan. . . . I have told CINCPACFLT and CINCPACAF [Commanders in Chief, Pacific Fleet and Pacific Air Forces] to caution their people that we want no belligerent statements from anyone at this juncture and that they should caution their people to remain quiet. . . . I don't believe there is any military move that we can make that will assist us in getting the *Pueblo* crew returned. . . . If diplomatic efforts for return of the *Pueblo* crew are not successful then we should consider moving *Banner* and escorts off Wonsan in accordance with the plan I have submitted. We could easily stir up a hornet's nest with this move and we must be prepared to take such steps as necessary to come out on top. The conventional weapons strike plan we have submitted gives various options for this contingency. We must also be prepared for retaliatory strikes against South Korea. Mining of Wonsan and/or Hungnam and the harbor on the west coast [Nampo?] can be accomplished without great difficulty. It should have a salutary effect on North Korea if a move of this severity is required. We also will be ready with various nuclear options. . . . I am not sure any of these military moves will assist in getting the *Pueblo* crew back but they would teach North Korea a lesson.[50]

The national command authorities thus at least temporarily ruled out most forcible options, although they had already taken steps to prepare for a wide range of military contingencies. Some measures were visible immediately. On 25 January, some reserve units had been called up, terms of military service had been extended, and 361 aircraft had been ordered into the western Pacific. The White House had approved moving additional carriers into the Sea of Japan, stationing more aircraft in South Korea, and alerting thirty-six B-52s for movement to Okinawa and Guam. The Joint Staff had also taken unpublicized steps to enhance readiness for war on the Korean Peninsula.[51]

PREPARING FOR MANY CONTINGENCIES

On 25 January, upon Washington's commitment to augment the U.S. presence in the Sea of Japan, the Seventh Fleet implemented operation FORMATION STAR. The operation order directed the *Enterprise* task group to prepare for a number of operations: assuming custody of and towing *Pueblo*; receiving returned U.S. personnel; conducting photo reconnaissance of Wonsan; and executing retaliatory air strikes or "other offensive actions as directed." The task group was to remain, and conduct flight operations, south of the thirty-eighth parallel; however, immediate ("hot") pursuit was authorized north of that line, and ships and aircraft could operate north of it to protect friendly forces. U.S. units were not authorized to penetrate the territorial sea/air space of the People's Democratic Republic.[52] Shows of force were prohibited; if attacked, however, the task group was to take "immediate and aggressive protective measures." In addition to the

Seventh Fleet measures, the South Korean navy had placed nineteen ships and two fast patrol boats in sixteen patrol sectors around the Republic of Korea.[53]

By 1 February, the task groups of the carriers *Enterprise*, USS *Ranger* (CV 61), and USS *Yorktown* (CVS 10) had arrived in the Sea of Japan and formed a task force.[54] The Joint Chiefs had also directed the Pacific Command to deploy up to nine diesel and nuclear attack submarines to Korea "as soon as practicable."[55] The *Banner* was to augment the force; Pacific Command directed the Seventh Fleet to get the intelligence collector under way to join the task force as soon as feasible. The move was symbolic: "Technical collection capability is secondary to this mission and should not repeat not delay sailing."[56] *Banner* rendezvoused with the force on 31 January but remained clear of North Korea's claimed territorial waters.[57]

During the first two weeks of the crisis, the Air Force had deployed aircraft from the United States into the region, and from within the western Pacific to Korea itself. Relatively few had been available in Korea at the outset; on 26 January, there were 214 U.S. and South Korean aircraft in Korea, of which 187 were on alert.[58] But on the 27th, the chief of staff of the Air Force released a flash-precedence operation order for the rapid deployment of elements of nine fighter and interceptor squadrons, along with B-52s and support aircraft (see the table). Supported by sixty-six KC-135 tankers, the tactical units were to arrive in Korea within five days of receiving orders to move to one of five bases: Kimpo (just northwest of Seoul), Osan, Kunsan, Suwon (south of Seoul), or Kwangju. Twenty-six B-52Ds would then deploy to Guam.[59] By 7 February, 395 American and South Korean aircraft were in Korea, and 308 of these were combat ready.[60]

U.S. AIR FORCE DEPLOYED AIRCRAFT

Type	Number
F-105	34
F-102	38
F-4	90
RF-4C	14
F-100	18
B-52	26
EB-66	6

As for U.S. ground forces in Korea, planners were immediately concerned about personnel and logistical shortfalls. Because of the demands of the Vietnam War, the two U.S. divisions were at approximately 70 percent of authorized strength.[61] They were now to be reinforced by 8,500 troops.[62] Even by late February, however, ammunition was available for only forty-five combat days for these two divisions, and eighteen combat days for the South Korean units.[63] Eighth Army had on hand 23,300 tons of its war-reserve requirement of 39,400 tons.[64] A sharp increase in air munitions was also needed. The Joint Staff assessed that Pacific Command's Air Force component (which had only four thousand tons in Korea) would immediately require 12,700 tons of munitions, and Pacific Fleet naval aviation

(which had 2,800 tons of munitions in Sasebo) needed 11,400 tons. However, over twelve thousand tons of ammunition were en route and would be available to both by 10 February.[65]

As General Bonesteel had foreseen, the vulnerability of sensitive installations proved worrisome both immediately and in the long term. U.S. planners were particularly concerned about the security of the unhardened South Korean airfields, Nike-Hercules surface-to-air missile sites, and nuclear weapons facilities. Several steps were taken to augment the protection of all these sites. By 30 January, the ROK First Army had been directed to provide two infantry battalions for airfield protection, one for Osan and the other for Kunsan.[66] By 7 February, construction of semipermanent shelters and other forms of physical protection for the Nike-Hercules sites and their missiles was under way.[67] The Joint Staff recommended that the Defense Department assign additional personnel to provide more security for nuclear weapons sites, and it initiated a longer-term study on physical security improvements to these facilities.[68]

Thus the United States girded for war while seeking to avoid it. The *Pueblo* buildup was costly, particularly because it diverted assets needed in Vietnam. Faced with a hostage situation on a large scale in 1968, decision makers in Washington were generally inclined to diplomacy from the first day of the crisis. Soviet pressure was also a factor; in response to U.S. requests for its "good offices," Moscow had argued repeatedly that the naval and air buildup was counterproductive. Premier Alexei Kosygin warned President Johnson on 3 February that the buildup only raised tensions and had no chance of resolving the crisis. Johnson responded on 5 February that "on the assumption that . . . we [Washington and Moscow] want peace in that area and that we will both work to that end," there would be no further air and naval buildup; further, he would order one carrier task group to move "somewhat southward." Accordingly, the *Enterprise* group sailed through the Tsushima Strait to a point approximately twelve hours' steaming time from its original position in the Sea of Japan. The national command authorities, however, would not release all naval assets committed to the contingency for several more weeks.[69]

The United States, then, never abandoned the option of force, but the most visible and frenetic military efforts were over. In more ways than were then publicly apparent, the U.S. military had handled a daunting array of planning, deployment, and logistical tasks smoothly and in a remarkably short period. The incident remains painful to recall, even so long after the fact. The material now available, however, makes much clearer how military commanders and national decision makers responded to an unprecedented and challenging situation. Analogous problems would later arise in Tehran and Lebanon, when concern for

American lives and the limitations of military force would compel U.S. leaders to use diplomatic means to free Americans held hostage.

NOTES

1. Trevor Armbrister, *A Matter of Accountability* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1970), is an excellent overview of all facets of the crisis. Informed by over a hundred interviews with participants throughout the chain of command, it is essential reading for students of *Pueblo*. Mitch Lerner's *Mission Impossible: The Pueblo Incident and American Foreign Policy*, to be published in 2001 by the University of Kansas Press, promises to be a worthy successor.
2. *Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Command* [hereafter CINCPAC] *Command History, 1968,* vol. 4, pp. 253–4; and *CINCPAC Command History, 1969,* vol. 4, p. 131. Both are at the Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C. [hereafter NHC].
3. *CINCPAC Command History, 1968,* vol. 4, pp. 253–4.
4. CIA briefing package for high-level *Pueblo* advisory group chaired by former under secretary of state George Ball, 5 February 1968, "*Pueblo* Crisis 1968, vol. 6, Day-by-Day Documents," part 10, boxes 29, 30, National Security Council [hereafter NSC] History—*Pueblo* Crisis, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, Austin, Texas [hereafter LBJ].
5. CINCPAC message date-time group 300708Z Jan 68 [30 January 1968, 7:08 A.M. Greenwich Mean Time], Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1, boxes 263–264, Korea Country File, National Security File [hereafter NSF], LBJ.
6. CIA *Pueblo* Sitrep [situation report] 14, 14 January 1968, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
7. CIA memorandum, "North Korean Intentions," 23 January 1968, doc. 2488, fiche 220, Declassified Documents Reference System [hereafter DDRS], Research Publications, Woodbridge, Conn., 1998; and CIA/Defense Intelligence Agency/State memorandum, "Reactions to Certain U.S. Activities," 28 January 1968, doc. 2465, fiche 218, DDRS, 1998. See memorandum from T. Hughes (State Department Bureau of Intelligence and Research) to secretary of state, "North Korea's Program for Unification of Korea," 2 February 1968, folder POL 32-4 Kor 1/1/67, box 2266, Record Group [RG] 59, Central Foreign Policy files, 1967–1969, National Archives, College Park, Maryland [hereafter NA], for the best contemporary assessment of trends in North Korean behavior from 1966 to 1968.
8. See response to Senator William Fulbright question number 9, *Pueblo* Crisis, 1968, vol. 10, Fulbright Letter, and appendix entitled "Representative North Korean Statements on Sea Incursions," *Pueblo* Crisis, 1968, vol. 11, Background Documents; both in boxes 31–32, NSC History—*Pueblo* Crisis, LBJ. The *New York Times* editorialized on 27 January 1968 that the official North Korean press had warned the United States that *Pueblo* was about to be seized. Intelligence agencies had assessed that the North Korean "spy boat" reaction in January 1968 was not unusual.
9. Memorandum for W. Rostow from N. Davis, "*Pueblo* Incident," 24 January 1968, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ; and Armbrister, *A Matter of Accountability*, p. 34.
10. CIA briefing package.
11. Ibid.
12. CIA memorandum, "Confrontation in Korea," 24 January 1968, doc. 2489, fiche 220, DDRS, 1998.
13. Chief of Staff, U.S. Air Force [hereafter CSAF] message date-time group 301416Z Jan 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1, boxes 263–264, Korea Country File, NSF, LBJ.
14. N. Katzenbach, memorandum to president, "What We Are Doing about the *Pueblo,*" 26 January 1968; and W. Rostow, memorandum to president, 25–31 January 1968, both box 28, NSF, LBJ.

15. CIA Intelligence Information Cable, "Implications of Reported Relocation of USS *Pueblo,*" 12 February 1968, doc. 0651, fiche 56, DDRS, 1999.
16. U.S. State Dept., "Chronology of Diplomatic Activity in *Pueblo* Crisis," entry for 29 April 1968, Research Project 924 (formerly classified), October 1968, doc. 2713, fiche 226, DDRS, 1999.
17. CIA memorandum, "North Korea's Foreign Trade," 26 January 1968, DDRS, 1998.
18. "Status of Merchant Shipping in North Korea," 31 January 1968, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
19. CIA, "Confrontation in Korea."
20. U.S. State Dept. memorandum, "Communist Reactions to Various Possible Courses of Action with Respect to North Korea," 26 January 1968, doc. 0906, DDRS, 1999.
21. CIA *Pueblo* Sitrep 14.
22. Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet [hereafter CINCPACFLT] message date-time group 012124Z Feb 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 2, 2/68–3/68, boxes 263–264, Korea Country File, NSF, LBJ; and CIA briefing package, part 11, 8 February 1968, boxes 29–30, NSC History—*Pueblo* Crisis, LBJ.
23. George Christian, memorandum, "Meeting Notes at the State Department on the *Pueblo,*" 24 January 1968, box 2, Meeting Notes File, LBJ.
24. "Summary Minutes of *Pueblo* Group," 24 January 1968, doc. 3410, fiche 282, DDRS, 1995; Bromley Smith, memorandum, "Meeting on Korean Crisis without the President," State Department, 24 January 1968, doc. 3411, fiche 282, DDRS, 1995; W. Rostow, "Report on Meeting of Advisory Group, January 29, 1968," 1 February 1968; "Korea *Pueblo* Incident Volume I, Part B," box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ; *Pueblo* meeting agenda prepared by W. Rostow 26 January 1968, LBJ; COMUSK [Commander, U.S. Forces Korea] message date-time group 281214Z Jan 68, file 091 Korea—*Pueblo* 23 January 1968–7 February 1968, vol. 1, box 29, RG 218, Records of U.S. JCS, Records of Chairman (Gen.) Earle Wheeler, 1964–1970, NA [hereafter General Wheeler Records].
25. CINCPACFLT message date-time group 240008Z Jan 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1.
26. Ibid. The ships were sent to 32°30' north latitude, 127°30' east longitude.
27. ADMIN [i.e., commander not present] CINCPAC message date-time group 230909Z Jan 68, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
28. CINCPACFLT message date-time group 240008Z Jan 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1.
29. Ibid.; and CINCPACFLT message date-time group 231021Z Jan 68, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
30. CINCPACFLT message date-time group 240008Z Jan 68.
31. Ibid.
32. Commander, Seventh Fleet [hereafter COMSEVENTHFLT] message date-time group 231434Z Jan 68, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
33. Commander Task Group 77.5 message date-time group 231520Z Jan 68, as cited in CINCPACFLT message date-time group 240008Z Jan 68 (a chronology of events). The operations were to take place near 35°30' north latitude 131° east longitude.
34. CINCPACFLT message date-time group 231638Z Jan 68, as cited in CINCPACFLT message date-time group 240008Z Jan 68.
35. Telephone conversations cited in CINCPACFLT message date-time group 240008Z Jan 68.
36. ADMIN CINCPAC message date-time group 232227Z Jan 68, "Korea *Pueblo* Incident, Part A," vol. 1, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
37. National Military Command Center [hereafter NMCC] memorandum for the record, "Current Information Concerning USS *Pueblo* Incident," 23 January 1968, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
38. ADMIN CINCPAC 240340Z message date-time group Jan 68, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
39. NMCC memorandum for the record.
40. Ibid.; and Commander in Chief, United Nations Command [i.e., in Korea; hereafter CINCUNC] message date-time group

070820Z Feb 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 2, 2/68–3/68, boxes 263-264, Korea Country File, NSF, LBJ. Interestingly, when General Bonesteel advised the South Korean minister of defense that CINCUNC was reviewing its procedures for Defense Condition Three although there were no indications of imminent attack, the minister considered it an overreaction. See CINCUNC message date-time group 231607Z Jan 68, Korea— *Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1, 2/68-3/68, boxes 263-264, Korea Country File, NSF, LBJ.

41. CINCUNC message date-time group 241240Z Jan 68, General Wheeler Records.
42. U.S. State Dept., "The USS *Pueblo* Incident," Research Project 939-C (formerly classified), October 1968, doc. 2712, fiche 226, DDRS, 1999.
43. The enclosures describing this and the other nine options are contained in the file entitled "North Korea—USS *Pueblo* Incident," box 17, Papers of Clark Clifford, LBJ. Further observations in "North Korean Aggression and the *Pueblo* Incident—Possible Strategies," 1 March 1968, doc. 3272, fiche 282, DDRS, 1999.
44. Admiral T. H. Moorer, memorandum to Secretary of the Navy, "Draft Message OPLAN," General Wheeler Records.
45. "Action No. 1—Advising Soviets of Actual and Possible Military Moves," in file "North Korea—USS *Pueblo* Incident," box 17, Papers of Clark Clifford, LBJ.
46. W. Rostow, "Report on Meeting of Advisory Group, January 29, 1968."
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. "Notes of the President's Meeting with the Democratic Congressional Leadership," 6 February 1968, doc. 569, fiche 48, DDRS, 1990.
50. CINCPAC message date-time group 310706Z January 1968, General Wheeler Records.
51. U.S. State Dept., "The USS *Pueblo* Incident."
52. COMSEVENTHFLT message date-time group 250332Z Jan 68, box 257, NSF, Country File Asia and Pacific, LBJ.
53. CINCUNC message date-time group 070820Z Feb 68.
54. U.S. State Dept. memorandum, "Actions by the United States and Republic of Korea," 10 April 1968, doc. 2704, fiche 225, DDRS, 1999.
55. JCS message date-time group 271735Z Jan 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1.
56. CINCPAC message date-time group 251817Z Jan 68, box 263-264, NSF, Country File Korea, LBJ.
57. CINCPAC message date-time group 300708Z Jan 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1.
58. U.S. State Dept., Korea Task Force, "Situation Report, 1700 Hours EST, January 26, 1968," LBJ.
59. CSAF message date-time group 270200Z Jan 68, Korea—*Pueblo* Incident—Military Cables, vol. 1. A table by Walt Rostow entitled "Movement of Combat Aircraft to 'Korea' following *Pueblo* Incident," in memorandum to the president, 25–31 January 1968, contains details of these deployments.
60. CINCUNC message date-time group 070820Z Feb 68.
61. CINCUSARPAC [Commander in Chief, U.S. Army Forces Pacific] message date-time group 062348Z Feb 68, General Wheeler Records.
62. Ibid.
63. Korea Working Group, "North Korean Aggression and the *Pueblo* Incident: Possible Strategies," doc. 3275, fiche 282, DDRS, 1999.
64. CINCPAC message date-time group 300708Z Jan 68.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. CINCUNC message date-time group 070820Z Feb 68.
68. N. Katzenbach, memorandum to president, 7 March 1968, NSF Country File, Asia and Pacific, Container 256, LBJ . The South Koreans were concerned also about force protection; Cyrus Vance, who traveled to South Korea as a "presidential envoy," would recall, "We often heard them comment on their inability to contain North Korean infiltration teams. The South Koreans are fearful that a North Korean strike/reconnaissance team will destroy some major economic facility, e.g., a refinery or a

dam." See Vance's memorandum to president, 20 February 1968, doc. 1511, fiche 121, DDRS, 1996.

69. U.S. State Dept. "Chronology of Diplomatic Activity in *Pueblo* Crisis," entry for 5 February quoting State Dept. message date-time group 060003Z Feb 68, and for 6 February, citing State Dept. message date-time group 062010Z February 68.