Coalition Coordination during the Boxer Rebellion: How Twenty-Seven “Councils of Senior Naval Commanders” Contributed to the Conduct of Operations

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In China’s Shantung (Shandong) Province at the end of the nineteenth century, xenophobic bandits known as Boxers emerged, and violence against foreigners and Christians increased. Ministers representing foreign countries in Peking (Beijing) complained to the Qing court and requested that warships be deployed to protect their nationals.¹ At that point a matter that had begun as terrorist attacks by bandits became a conflict between the nations involved: the Qing government declared war against foreign powers. The military operations that the foreign states—which included Japan, a newly emerging Asian power—conducted during this war were the first coalition operations of the modern era.²

On June 5, 1900, Vice Admiral Edward Seymour, Royal Navy, Commander in Chief, British China Squadron, the senior naval officer present in the port of Taku (Dagu), took the initiative. He assembled a council of the naval commanders of the foreign powers represented in Taku on board his flagship, with the aim of achieving concerted action.³ Between then and October 25, twenty-seven such councils convened.⁴ The senior naval officers of all the foreign powers with ships in Taku composed the membership. Councils assembled...
on an ad hoc basis and functioned as the supreme consultative body for the commanders.

Historical analysts assess that “on the whole, this consensual method worked well.” By way of contrast, the theater commanders who led the army forces that the foreign powers deployed to conduct the ground campaigns assembled only at the most crucial point during their pursuit of the ultimate goal, which was to rescue the diplomatic corps in Peking. Naval commanders, by assembling the Council of Senior Naval Commanders periodically throughout all phases from the outset of the uprising to the end of major operations, ensured that coalition operations were conducted smoothly. Because the naval councils were the sole mechanism for command and coordination of the coalition forces, they shaped the course of not only naval operations but all military activities that the foreign powers conducted during the war.

Today’s Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, as part of the global war on terrorism, which broke out in 2001, has become the largest example of coalition warfare at the beginning of the twenty-first century—one hundred years after the foreign response to the Boxer Rebellion represented the first coalition warfare of the twentieth century. In Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, U.S. armed forces have created a model of command and coordination for coalition warfare. Joint publications governing Operation ENDURING FREEDOM provide for parallel command structures, with no single force commander designated—which was the case during the Boxer Rebellion as well. However, the leadership of any coalition must develop a means of coordinating among the participants to attain unity of effort, so employing some coordination center is essential. The Council of Senior Naval Commanders worked so well during the Boxer Rebellion because it served as the multinational coordination center for the commanders of the foreign navies present.

This article examines the roles the Council of Senior Naval Commanders played during the Boxer Rebellion throughout the conflict’s phases—with that role changing on the basis of the nature of the particular challenge at hand—and how these councils contributed to the smooth coordination of coalition warfare. The most important supporting documentary reference is the official naval record edited by the Kaigun Daijin Kanbo (Office of the Minister of the Navy), Meiji 33 Nen Shinkoku Jihen Kaigun Senshishou Kan 1–5 (Naval History of the Northern Qing Incident in 1900), which contains all the documents regarding the twenty-seven councils, including minutes of their deliberations, Japanese translations thereof, reports of the participants, and the related orders submitted by the respective authorities. (The numbering of the councils from first to twenty-seventh is in accordance with this document.)

For the sake of convenience in discussing similar items with regard to each council, the article divides the period of the Boxer Rebellion into four phases.
organize examination of the discussions and resolutions of each council meeting, the analysis identifies the foremost feature of each phase. In doing so it takes into consideration the diplomatic relationships among the foreign powers, the situation on the ground among the fighting armies, and the activities of Admiral Seymour as senior commander of the foreign navies and the central figure of the naval coalition.

**Phase 1** covers the period from the outset of the Boxer Rebellion to Seymour’s landing in command of the marines that the coalition navies supplied to move on Peking. During this phase the naval commanders of the foreign powers present established the coalition and set its course. Phase 2 covers Seymour’s return to Tientsin (Tianjin) following his failed expedition against Peking, during which the coalition navies supported the expedition. Phase 3 begins with the shift of the ground campaigns from bluejackets to soldiers and ends with the relief of Peking. By this phase, the objectives of the foreign powers had become more complex and the objectives of the naval coalition therefore more diffused. Phase 4 marks the period during which the coalition navies planned and executed operations for occupying Shanhaikwan (Shanhaiguan) and Chinwangtao (Qinhuangdao) to maintain coalition communications during the winter.

**PHASE 1: ESTABLISHING THE COALITION AND SETTING ITS COURSE**

Since a British priest had become the first victim of the most recent bout of Chinese xenophobia in 1899, the Boxers repeatedly had attacked Christian churches and killed foreigners. On May 28, 1900, when the Boxers destroyed a train station
in a suburb of Peking, the ministers of the foreign powers in the capital requested the deployment of marines to protect the embassies, and warships of the foreign powers started arriving off Taku. By June 2 the foreign navies with ships in the vicinity of China had sent 442 marines to Peking. Seymour arrived off Taku on June 1 and went ashore on the 3rd to inspect the Tientsin area.  

As the senior naval officer present, Seymour believed he should initiate any action. He consulted Rear Admiral Charles Courrejolles of the French navy, the next-most-senior naval officer present, who suggested that Seymour convene a council on his flagship. The immediate aim was to inform the other naval representatives of the request for relief from the ministers in Peking. Seymour issued the following invitation to the commanders.

In view of the gravity of affairs at Peking and its neighbourhood, and the possibility of all communication being cut off by the “Boxers” between the Capital and Tientsin, leaving our respective Ministers isolated and unable to communicate with their Government or with us in this anchorage; it seems to me desirable that the respective Senior Officer of the Ships of War present here (except the Chinese) should meet together to consider the situation. As I happen to be the Senior Naval Officer present I therefore take on myself to have the honour of putting the above question before you; and should you agree I would suggest you might assemble on board this ship at 4 p.m. to-day for the above purpose.

On the 5th, Seymour assembled the first Council of Senior Naval Commanders of the foreign powers on board his flagship, Centurion. This action represented the very outset of the formation of a coalition: the consolidation of twenty-five ships, from eight navies, that happened to be present off Taku. It marked the beginning of a series of twenty-seven Councils of Senior Naval Commanders. Seymour had no authority to command or control the foreign navies, and the humble wording of the invitation letter implies the difficulty of his position. At the first council, in addition to Seymour, the participants were Rear Admirals Courrejolles of France, Vesselago of Russia, and Kempff of the United States and Captains Guelig of Germany, Casella of Italy, and Nagamine of Japan. In addition, a commander represented Captain Montalmar of Austria, as he would at the second and third councils as well.

At the first council, the participants agreed to points as follows:

- The purpose of the coalition was to protect the lives and properties of their countrymen via a peaceful and defensive mission, which in no way was directed against the Chinese government.

- Actions of the coalition should be taken according to the desires and with the consent of the ministers, and it behooved the commanders to act in concert.
• If the ministers in Peking were isolated and communicating with them was impossible, and if time permitted, the commanders should consult their superior naval authorities.

• If affairs were so serious and urgent that time did not permit such consultation, the commanders should consult with each other and act without further consultation with authorities.\(^\text{12}\)

At the second council, on the 6th, Seymour presented a telegram from the British minister at Peking asking, as the collective will of the diplomatic corps, that, should railway and telegraph lines be cut and Peking besieged, the commanders off Taku would consult with one another and march to the ministers’ relief. The commanders discussed the matter and decided on a concept for deploying their embarked marines, as follows:\(^\text{13}\)

• Command and control: While different foreign guards should consult their own consuls with regard to the protection of their consulates in Tientsin, if combined forces made an advance on Peking there would need to be a single officer in command. Seymour asked the participants to consider whether an officer should be nominated to command the forces, and if so who that officer should be.

• Rules of engagement: In his telegram, the British minister strongly urged that permission be granted for the guards to respond to hostility with active measures. The only comment on or response to this request from the British minister came from the U.S. Navy’s Admiral Kempff, who stated that if the Chinese attacked the guards who were protecting lives and properties and keeping communications open with Peking, they must accept the consequences.

While the ministers were taking an active line with regard to the possibility of military engagement, the naval commanders’ approach seems generally restrained; the missions of the deploying marines were to protect lives and property and restore communications with Peking.\(^\text{14}\)

The first and second councils were conducted with no prearranged format to the meetings—there was no time for the participants to prepare. However, during the second council it was agreed that if anyone received a dispatch containing news of great importance he should send it to Seymour so that, if necessary, the Council of Senior Naval Commanders might be convened. The participants also agreed that the senior naval officer present should preside over each meeting, meaning that if Seymour should be absent from Taku the next-most-senior naval commander present would preside.\(^\text{15}\)
The ministers in Peking recognized on the 8th that the Chinese governmental forces had no intention of defending Peking from the Boxers. Seymour decided to send marines to Tientsin to augment its defenses and announced his intent to the other naval commanders at the third council, which took place on the 9th. The French and Russian commanders proposed that a request be submitted to the Chinese government to suppress the rebels, but Vice Admiral Bendemann of Germany, attending the council for the first time, stated that the German government had directed him to consult with the other powers on how best to relieve the ministers; he argued that anything beyond that was the province of the diplomats in Peking. The French-Russian proposal was denied. This indicates that the naval commanders considered the province of the council to be military affairs only, staying out of diplomacy.  

After the conclusion of the third council, Seymour received a message of alarm from the British minister in Peking. The admiral sent a letter to Captain Nagamine of Japan, commanding officer of Kasagi, in which he argued that time was limited. Seymour therefore requested commencement of a combined action, for which Seymour planned to land as many forces as possible immediately and take command himself. Seymour took this precipitate action not only because speed was paramount but also because the perceived risk in taking military action was low, as the enemy was considered to be mere bandits.  

An additional consideration was that by taking action the British government could forestall Russian occupation of the territory around Peking, as well as the railway in northern China. This consideration vis-à-vis Russia may have been an important factor, as demonstrated by the fact that Seymour communicated his critical decision—to land forces and take direct command—only to Japan, without convening the council.

As reasons why coalition operations were executed smoothly under the auspices of the Council of Senior Naval Commanders, despite the fact that the coalition contained, within its eight powers, nations in competition with each other (e.g., Japan versus Russia, France versus Germany), Eric Ouellet offers four, as follows: Seymour, the senior commander, was from the Royal Navy, which was the world’s leading navy; all the commanders shared a sense of urgency; the powers believed it would be easy to suppress the Boxers; and all the powers sought to expand their influence in China.

The theme of the initial three councils, comprising Phase 1, was how to deal with the crisis unfolding in Peking, and the powers—despite their diverse diplomatic calculations—framed an initial posture concentrated on relieving the besieged diplomatic corps. Seymour believed that if the commanders had no time to confer with their home authorities, it was most important that they consult as a body. Thereafter the Council of Senior Naval Commanders was considered the
supreme decision-making body among the powers fighting against the Boxers in theater. A corroborating fact is that when the diplomats in Peking sent their telegraph beseeching that “should this (the siege of Peking) happen we beg immediate instructions be sent to Officers commanding Squadrons Taku to consult together and march to our relief,” it was sent to the naval commanders. This indicates that the diplomats approved the Council of Senior Naval Commanders functioning as the supreme decision-making body at the outset of the incident.

The diplomatic position of each power vis-à-vis China varied, depending on the respective governmental policy. Britain intended to maintain the status quo—preventing Russia from taking advantage of the Boxers’ uprising—while other powers swarmed over China seeking to extract concessions over finance, trade, and territory. In this international environment, the Councils of Senior Naval Commanders held during Phase 1 played the role of determining the strategic course of action of the coalition, as well as functioning as a body of liaison and coordination, and even of decision-making to execute military operations.

**PHASE 2: SUPPORTING SEYMOUR’S EXPEDITION**

As soon as Seymour landed on June 10 he began leading the coalition forces composed of marines on their march toward Peking. On the same day, communications between Peking and Tientsin were cut. On the evening of the 11th, the first armed engagement against the Boxers occurred, and the railway between the coalition forces and Tientsin was cut. Vice Admiral Hiltebrandt of Russia, the senior commander present in Taku, was informed that the Boxers were approaching Taku to occupy the train station and destroy the railway and were contemplating mining the mouth of the Peiho (Hai) River. Hiltebrandt convened the fourth council on the evening of the 15th aboard his flagship, *Russia*. The council decided to direct the commanding officers of the gunboats anchored in the Peiho to protect the railway station and the trains but not to take any offensive action initially; however, if the Chinese forces attempted to occupy the railway station the naval forces were to attack, first at the station, then at the fort.

On the morning of the 16th, the fifth council convened aboard *Russia*. The commanders judged that the minelaying that had been conducted at the mouth of the Peiho demonstrated the will of the Chinese government to cut the transportation link from Peking and Tientsin to Taku. The commanders off Taku needed to maintain their communications with Seymour’s force, so they could not overlook the danger of an attack from the fort at Taku. The commanders decided to propose that the Chinese evacuate the fort, and if this was not accepted they would occupy the fort by force. They set a deadline of 2 AM the next day. However, Admiral Kempff rejected the proposal and refused to sign the minutes, believing that an attack on the fort could lead to war with the Qing government.
Thereafter the coalition forces attacked the fort at Taku and occupied it after a fight of a few hours.\(^{23}\)

Immediately after the occupation of the fort on the 17th, the sixth council was held aboard *Russia*. The commanders discussed how to dispose of the Chinese ship *Hai Yung* that was anchored in the harbor.\(^{24}\) Inviting Admiral Yeh of the Chinese Navy aboard, they directed Yeh to forbid the departure of the ship; he agreed to do so, albeit unwillingly.\(^{25}\) Kempff was waiting for instructions from his government, and left the council before its adjournment without signing the minutes.\(^{26}\)

Seymour wrote in his memoir that, although he had been absent at the time and thus was not in a position to comment authoritatively, he felt that it had been necessary for the commanders off Taku to make a judgment without him and that under the circumstances occupying the fort at Taku was the right decision.\(^{27}\) However, subsequently the conservative faction in the Qing court took advantage of the coalition navies’ attack on the fort to declare war against the powers, with the empress dowager issuing a proclamation to that effect.\(^{28}\)

The seventh council took place aboard *Russia* on the 20th. The commanders resolved to notify Chinese governmental officials that the purpose of coalition military operations was to relieve their nationals in Peking, and that their targets were the bandits who were hindering that aim.\(^{29}\) However, heavy resistance by both the Boxers and Qing forces halted all advance by Seymour’s force on the 18th, and the marines started retreating to Tientsin on the 19th. The coalition forces set up defenses around the city while their opponents closed in. On the 23rd, augmenting army forces broke through the encircling net around Tientsin and succeeded in contacting Seymour and his marines.

On the same day, the naval commanders convened the eighth council, again on *Russia*, and discussed a request received from the senior consul general in Shanghai, in the south of China, for the protection of foreign nationals there.\(^{30}\) The commanders deemed that no ship was available to allocate to Shanghai while the crisis was still going on in northern China, especially since the situation in the south was still relatively calm. This council also agreed that Admiral Vesselago of Russia would assume command of the forts and gunboats in the Peiho River, while Lieutenant Commander Wise, USN, was appointed commander of forces at the Tongku (Tanggu) railway station near Taku.

Admiral Togo of Japan, who had arrived at Taku the day before, attended this eighth council. To finesse the issue of seniority, thereafter Rear Admiral Dewa attended almost all councils on behalf of Togo.\(^{31}\)

Following the failure of Seymour’s expedition, the coalition marine forces finally returned to Taku on the 26th. Any further relief operation was postponed until additional army forces arrived to augment the marines. Japan, as the
power located closest to northern China, was expected to send a good number of soldiers.\(^{32}\)

The term of the Seymour expedition coincided almost exactly with that of Phase 2. During this phase the senior naval commanders used the councils to discuss how to support Seymour’s force and how to break the encirclement of Tientsin, including by their attack on the fort at Taku. The councils were not the venue by which to exercise tactical command over the attack on the fort; however, it was the strategic decisions the councils made, especially to attack the fort, that changed the nature of the struggle from the suppression of bandits to a war against China, even if this development was unintended.

Although northern China remained the focal area, the Yangtze River area, which included Shanghai, had become an additional area of interest for some coalition nations. One reason advanced for this is that the diplomatic priority for Britain—the most important actor in the coalition—was to maintain its national interests in the Far East in general, with the specific issues at stake in Peking and with regard to the Qing dynasty being of secondary importance.\(^{33}\) Separately, the British government had ordered its deputy consul general in Shanghai to build a cooperative relationship with the Chinese viceroy’s there, and the Admiralty had ordered the China Squadron to take measures sufficient to protect the lives and property of British nationals along the Yangtze River. This demonstrated the government’s great interest in southern China—and that maintaining those interests was even more important than the relief of Peking.\(^{34}\)

**PHASE 3: DIFFUSION OF COALITION OBJECTIVES**

While he was in Tientsin Seymour sent a letter to Rear Admiral Bruce, the next-most-senior RN officer off Taku, directing him to request that Japan augment the coalition forces in response to reinforcement by the enemy. The senior naval commanders convened the ninth council on Russia and decided to ask Japan for an army division, and that they would conduct boardings to prevent ammunition and military equipment from flowing into northern China.

In his letter Seymour also requested consultations about the situation in Shanghai, at the Woosung (Wusong) forts, and regarding the Chinese cruisers and other ships in that area; however, there is no evidence the commanders discussed these subjects at the council. One might presume that this was because they already had made a decision regarding the Shanghai area at the eighth council. But Seymour’s attempt to swing the discussion over to Shanghai served to demonstrate the magnitude of British interests in southern China. Britain realized an immense profit from the enormous commercial network it had formed in the south around the Yangtze River, and the British government was very keen to maintain order in the Shanghai area.\(^{35}\) On June 27, the consuls general of the
powers in Shanghai concluded an agreement with the viceroys there to maintain order in southern China, with the viceroys attesting to their desire for peace, including no confrontations with foreign powers.\textsuperscript{36}

The tenth council, held on July 7 aboard \textit{Russia}, convened at the request of Admiral Kempff, whom Washington had directed to ask the coalition navies' collective opinion regarding how many soldiers it would require to relieve Peking. At the eleventh council, convened on the 8th, again on \textit{Russia}, the execution of boardings of merchant ships sailing under the flags of the council members' nations, which already had been discussed at the ninth council, was the theme.

Seymour returned to his flagship, \textit{Centurion}, on the 12th, fresh from completing a plan to capture Tientsin that had been produced with the army commanders of the forces of Japan, the United States, and France.\textsuperscript{37} The attack on Tientsin took place the next day and the city was liberated on the 14th. Seymour convened the twelfth council on July 13 on \textit{Centurion}, with Admiral Togo participating. It had been more than a month since Seymour last presided over the council. The body resolved to order the consuls to conduct boardings to enforce the embargo against weapons and ammunition flowing into China. Even though the attack on Tientsin commenced that day, the only issue relating to the ground campaign discussed was a proposal to request that the Japanese army take the initiative in the defense of the fort at Taku.

On the 16th, the army commanders of the foreign powers gathered at the Tientsin headquarters of Lieutenant General Alekseyev of Russia and discussed the governance of the city. On the same day, in response to a request from Alekseyev, Seymour convened the thirteenth council aboard \textit{Centurion} (with Togo again in attendance) to discuss the management of the railway between Tongku and Tientsin. It was resolved by majority vote, with Britain and the United States opposed, that management of the line should be placed in the hands of Russia, which would assume the responsibility to guard it, with the reservation that the railway would be returned to the former administration as soon as military circumstances permitted. Having taken this action, the Coalition Transportation Committee, which had been established at the eighth council, was dissolved.

Admiral Seymour and Major General Gaselee, commander of British army forces, were dissatisfied with this conclusion; they thought that the matter of the railway's operation should not be decided by the fleet alone. It was true that the Russians in actuality were already in charge of maintaining and protecting the railway; that the Coalition Transportation Committee was then the only organization authorized to delegate railway management; and that the senior officer of that committee was Russian. Yet given that it was the eighth council that had granted the committee its authority, it would have been appropriate for any amendment of that agreement also to be discussed and resolved by the council.
That, presumably, is why General Alekseyev had requested that the council convene. This episode illustrates that the nature of the Council of Senior Naval Commanders had changed by this stage, with the core concern shifting to the relief of Peking by army forces.

On the 23rd Seymour left Taku, cruising south with his flag in *Alacrity*, arriving at Shanghai on the 26th. On the 24th, Hiltebrandt convened the fourteenth council aboard *Russia*, at Bendemann’s request. Berlin had directed Bendemann to propose a discussion of the blockade of the Chinese fleet in the Yangtze River and measures to prevent the Chinese from reinforcing the forts along the Chinese coastline. The commanders decided to send a letter to Seymour, who was then on route to the south, and the naval commanders in the Yangtze area to dictate to the local Chinese authorities that there was to be no departure by the Chinese fleet from the Yangtze River and no reinforcement of the coastal forts. In his letter of response dated August 6, Seymour would write that such a request was inappropriate at that time.

Also at the fourteenth council, the commanders discussed the earliest possible relief of the diplomatic corps in Peking. It also concluded to request that the viceroy in Shantung send a letter to the Tsungli-Yamen (Zongli Yamen) (the government body in charge of foreign policy in imperial China) requesting that a letter be produced signed by the ministers themselves, to prove they were safe.

On the 27th, Seymour handed command of all British forces over to General Gaselee. Lieutenant General Linevich arrived as commander of Russian forces on the 31st. The commanders of the ground forces of all eight foreign powers convened on August 4. With this, the ground forces were being reinforced, a leadership structure was being consolidated over them, and a concrete plan for the relief of Peking was being prepared. On the 28th in Shanghai, the consuls general resolved to entrust the protection of the foreign settlement there to the naval ships of the foreign powers anchored in Shanghai. Seymour, who was in Shanghai, accepted the new charge.

Back in Taku, Hiltebrandt convened the fifteenth council on August 2. The commanders applied themselves only to a purely practical business issue: they discussed and agreed on the landing point of undersea cables that were being laid from Chifu (Yantai), which lay across the Gulf of Chihli (Bohai Sea) to the southeast.

On the 5th—the day the ground forces started marching on Peking—Hiltebrandt convened the sixteenth council. He proposed to notify Seymour to direct the commanding officers of coalition navy ships in Shanghai to halt the departure of Chinese warships, a step with which all the commanders off Taku agreed. Seymour, however, sent a letter, dated the 19th, in which he wrote that he was unable to give orders to Chinese warships. Instead he notified the Chinese
that they should inform the consuls general of the purpose of any departure by Chinese warships, so that any misunderstanding by coalition navy commanders could be avoided.

During this period Seymour acted as the senior naval commander in Shanghai, and through a second council of senior naval commanders there he exerted his influence among the powers. As early as July 3 the British Admiralty already had notified Seymour of the shift of command authority over military operations in China from him to Gaselee, so Seymour could concentrate his efforts on activities intended to maintain British interests in southern China without worrying about the operation to relieve Peking. Therefore, even though the operation to relieve Peking was still going on, he cruised south on July 23 and met the viceroy in Nanking (Nanjing). His intent was to confirm for himself whether the China Squadron could shift its focus to southern China once Gaselee’s army forces were launched into northern China.\(^41\) Following his consultations with Chinese officials in southern China, on August 18—when the relief of Peking had been completed—Britain landed two thousand troops in the south, on its own discretion.\(^42\) Seymour’s denial of restrictions on the ability of the Chinese fleet to maneuver—contrary to the resolution of the sixteenth council in Taku—makes it quite clear that Seymour’s activities in southern China were aimed at protecting British national interests in that area, regardless of whether Peking was relieved.

Russian interests in Manchuria started to suffer damage at the end of June. In response, the Russian emperor approved the deployment of forces to Manchuria, and battles began to occur in various places. Like Britain, Russia prioritized protection of its national interests, in its case in Manchuria, ahead of the relief of Peking, which likely weakened the Russian will to invade the city.\(^43\) On the other hand, since Russia had no direct interest in southern China, it must have looked favorably on the competition among foreign powers in that region, as it might divert the attention of the other powers away from northern China.

Off Taku on August 10, Admiral Courrejolles presided over the seventeenth council aboard *D’Entrecasteaux*. The commanders again discussed a purely practical business matter, having to do with a contract with a civilian company regarding a lighthouse boat.\(^44\)

Peking was relieved on August 14. On the 23rd, Rear Admiral Candiani of Italy presided over the eighteenth council on *Fieramosca*. Matters discussed were how to handle contributions received for the men wounded, asking Rear Admiral Dewa to convey a collective message of gratitude from the coalition to the government of Japan for the Japanese treatment of the wounded men, and how to deliver messages that arrived via the submarine cable that had opened just two days before.\(^45\)
The fourth through eighteenth councils used French as their official language, and minutes were recorded in that language.\textsuperscript{46} This probably was because Hiltebrandt did not speak English.\textsuperscript{47} By contrast, almost all the senior officers were proficient in French, as it was common for people from the upper echelons of European societies, from which most senior officers were drawn, to learn French. In modern coalition operations as well, language differences within a multinational force can present a real challenge to command and control, efficient communications, and unity of effort. From a tactical and an operational perspective, proficiency in French influenced the cohesion of the 1900 coalition positively.\textsuperscript{48}

In Phase 3 the major action shifted away from the navies to the armies, and the primary focus of the coalition became the planning and implementation of a ground campaign springboarding from the capture of Tientsin to the relief of Peking. As was seen in the record of the ninth council, at which the request for Japan to deploy an army division for the relief of Peking was resolved, the commanders (unanimously) participated in that strategic decision made early in Phase 3.

In contrast, it is worth noting that Britain and Russia—two major actors in China—acted more for their own important interests than for the relief of Peking, which was the initial common goal of the coalition. On completion of the relief, the foreign powers started acting unilaterally to build a new order in China—prioritizing their own interests.\textsuperscript{49} During the latter stages of this phase the focal points of discussion in the Councils of Senior Naval Commanders became unsettled, and the role of the council became unclear.

**PHASE 4: EXECUTING OPERATIONS IN SHANHAIKWAN AND CHINWANGTAO**

Once Peking was subjugated, the withdrawal of troops started taking place in September. Marshal Waldersee of Germany, the commander in chief of coalition forces, arrived in Taku on the 25th. On the 27th, Seymour convened the nineteenth council aboard *Alacrity* in response to a request from Bendemann. Bendemann introduced Waldersee’s contention that occupation of Chinwangtao was necessary to maintain transport connections during the winter, and that the navy should conduct the operation.\textsuperscript{50} The senior naval commanders agreed to this proposal, except that Rear Admiral Skrydroff of Russia reserved comment, as he had no instructions from General Alekseyev. Two days later, on the 29th, the twentieth council discussed the details of the operation. Seymour would take overall command of the operation in Chinwangtao, and an anchoring plan was decided on. No American representative attended the twentieth council—in fact, the United States did not send anyone to any of the remaining councils—and the United States did not participate in the Shanhaikwan operation.
On the 30th, Seymour presided over the twenty-first council. The commanders decided that the expedition would depart for Shanhaikwan on October 2. This council settled the tactical details of the operation, including the allocation of forces, the order of march, and reporting procedures. In comparison with most of the other councils, this one was more tactical and operational, aimed at conducting a specific campaign; it was most similar to the council that preceded the capture of the fort at Taku.

Meanwhile, Walter Hillier, a former British diplomat who had been stationed in Peking, voluntarily proceeded to Shanhaikwan aboard the British gunboat Pigmy to recommend surrender to the Chinese. Surprisingly, the Chinese commander in Shanhaikwan followed this advice and evacuated the forts with no conditions. By the time the coalition forces landed at Shanhaikwan the Chinese troops already had completed their evacuation, so the forts were reoccupied without any conflict. At the twenty-second council, on October 1 aboard Centurion in Taku, Seymour notified the participants of the reports from Pigmy, and the council resolved that the national flags of the seven countries involved should be hoisted and that the commanders should land at 7 AM on October 2 to fix the location of the flags. Then Admiral Skrydroff shocked the other participants by declaring that, because Shanhaikwan was at the left front of the Russian maneuver area in Manchuria, it was included within the Russian sphere of influence.

On the 2nd, the flagshipships of the coalition powers anchored off Shanhaikwan and the commanders went ashore. They gathered at Fort No. 1, made an inspection, and then convened the twenty-third council at the railway station—the first council held ashore. The commanders made interim decisions on which countries should occupy the five forts, the magazine, and the railway station and how to hoist the national flags, pending submission of these matters to Walderssee for approval. On the 4th, Seymour presided over the twenty-fourth council aboard Centurion, at which it was agreed that the principal place of disembarkation would be at Chinwangtao and that a small jetty would be constructed at Shanhaikwan.

It was resolved further that the taotai (daotai) (the Chinese official in charge of administration and foreign diplomacy) and the principal officials of the walled town of Shanhaikwan were to be summoned to appear before the representatives of the coalition nations at Fort No. 1. On the 5th, the Chinese general and other Chinese officials presented themselves at the fort, demonstrating their submission. Thereupon the twenty-fifth council convened at the fort and drew up minutes of what had been discussed with the Chinese officials.

Although the twenty-fourth council had determined by majority vote to build a jetty at Shanhaikwan, Rear Admiral Dewa continued to insist that it was possible to transport goods from the sea and unload them without the expense...
of constructing a jetty. He sent Seymour a letter repeating his opinion, and Seymour agreed to raise this issue anew at the next council. Accordingly, when the twenty-sixth council convened on the 8th aboard Centurion off Taku, the commanders agreed to nominate officers to a committee that would assemble at Chinwangtao and Shanhaikwan to consider the question and advise what piers, if any, should be constructed at each place, where they should be positioned, and for whose use they should be appointed. The twenty-seventh council, held on the 15th aboard Centurion, decided to construct one pier at Chinwangtao and three jetties at Shanhaikwan. The council also received notification of the departure of the Chinese cruiser Hai Yung, escorted by an RN ship, to be kept under watch in Weihaiwei (Weihai).

During the first half of Phase 4 the Councils of Senior Naval Commanders served as naval operational planning conferences aimed at capturing Shanhaikwan and Chinwangtao. During the second half the commanders discussed the management of these two places, which the coalition fortuitously had occupied without bloodshed. In short, the councils of this phase almost exclusively discussed issues related to the Shanhaikwan-Chinwangtao operation. Thus, the focus of discussion in the councils of Phase 4 did not blur, as it had during Phase 3. The primary reason was that by the early part of July Britain's China Squadron already was interested in occupying Shanhaikwan, and once the squadron had completed its activities in southern China, Seymour—as chairman of the council—could focus the council’s attention on the Shanhaikwan-Chinwangtao operation.

Historically, navies have fulfilled a role of protecting nationals and assets endangered overseas during peacetime. In the case of the Imperial Japanese Navy, the mission of protecting overseas nationals was regulated by the Gunkan-Gaimurei (Orders for Expeditionary Fleets) that the Navy Ministry had issued in 1898; therefore, a military operation conducted for this purpose was not considered “war.” In addition, one result of the Opium and Sino-Japanese Wars was that port calls by warships and the landing of marines in China by the relevant foreign powers, including Japan, were authorized by treaty. Therefore, at the outset of the Boxer Rebellion it was the navies that took the initiative, and the Council of Senior Naval Commanders was expected to serve as the sole coordinating body among the foreign powers throughout the incident.

During Phase 1, when no framework yet existed under which the representatives of the eight foreign powers could discuss issues of mutual interest, Admiral Seymour, the senior naval officer present off Taku, proposed convening a Council of Senior Naval Commanders, and the commanders of the foreign navies present agreed. The council would serve as the decision-making body to set the
coalition’s strategic direction, including clarifying the coalition’s purpose and ensuring that it acted in concert. The commanders further agreed to convene councils as necessary to share the latest information and make any decisions required. Commanders’ intent during this phase was unified.

During Phase 2—the period of the Seymour expedition—the naval coalition supported Seymour’s forces indirectly by capturing the fort at Taku, as well as by breaking through the net encircling Tientsin. The council provided the venue for exercising command and control.

At the council at which the commanders decided to attack the fort at Taku, the U.S. commander opposed the plan and did not sign the minutes, and the next day he carefully left the council that had been convened on completion of the capture of the fort before the meeting’s end so again he could avoid signing the minutes. The reason given was that he still was waiting for direction from his government; however, his behavior can be interpreted as a desire not to constrain the coalition from adopting its overall course of action unanimously. In this way the coalition could adhere to the original objective of supporting the Seymour expedition and maintain unity of effort.

During Phase 3 the army became the primary actor in military operations, and the expectations of the foreign powers began to diverge from each other. As a result, the focus of the councils began to blur and the role of the council became unclear. Nonetheless, even though four different commanders presided over these councils, each council continued to produce useful results, including the request for Japanese reinforcements, the boarding of merchant ships, the managing of railways, the disposal of the Chinese warships in the Yangtze River, and the laying of submarine cables.

Finally, during Phase 4 the councils functioned as tactical-operational conferences. In this mode they conducted the Shanhaikwan-Chinwangtao naval operation and managed its aftermath.

In each phase the senior naval commanders of the foreign powers present acted in concert—although on the basis of their own national interests—even when they could not communicate with their respective ministers in Peking. It was the coordination that the Councils of Senior Naval Commanders accomplished that made this “system” work, enabling them to conduct coalition operations smoothly. In short, the commanders were able to maintain their unity of effort, with the councils providing the means of coordination.

At the outset of the twenty-first century—one hundred years after the Boxer Rebellion—the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) created a coordination mechanism to carry out Operation ENDURING FREEDOM—another coalition operation—by hosting roughly four hundred liaison officers from approximately sixty countries at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. The goal was to
create a coordination mechanism by which the U.S. commander conducting the operation could liaise and coordinate easily with his coalition counterparts, obviating the need for complex diplomatic processes.\textsuperscript{61} This unique mechanism provided a venue at which representatives of all participating nations were gathered in one place, with the United States as host. It has served its purpose very successfully, carrying out the liaison and coordination roles efficiently and effectively. In executing the war, the CENTCOM commander is the primary actor and the coalition partners are in position to support him. To conduct the administrative work, such as the business procedures for managing the coalition, senior national representatives (SNRs) set up an SNR Coordinating Group, with a chairman elected by mutual vote.\textsuperscript{62}

For operations during the Boxer Rebellion, although Admiral Seymour played an important role, the courses of action the coalition followed were determined at the Councils of Senior Naval Commanders. Each council was presided over by a particular officer, whoever happened to be the senior naval commander present—not necessarily British. The business practices of the council—such as who would propose a council, who would chair the meeting, and what language would be used—were established in an ad hoc fashion, without a standing secretariat. The Council of Senior Naval Commanders functioned as the unique mechanism for coordinating coalition operations. This council, during the first major coalition operation at the beginning of the twentieth century, performed essentially the same function that coalition operations still require in the twenty-first century.

At the ninth council the Japanese representative was Rear Admiral Dewa, not Vice Admiral Togo. Togo had attended the eighth council, over which Hiltebrandt presided even though Togo was senior to him. Dewa later wrote in a report that Togo directed him to attend subsequent councils on his behalf so that Hiltebrandt could preside—in accordance with the “circumstances.”\textsuperscript{63} There is no clear explanation for this decision. The editor of Meiji 33 Nen Shinkoku Jihen Kaigun Senshishou merely footnotes the dates of promotion of Togo and Hiltebrandt, adding the comment “suffice it to mention the fact.”\textsuperscript{64} One might conjecture that Japan sought to avoid an unnecessary confrontation with Russia, that Japan did not want the other powers to perceive it as eager to take advantage of the Boxer Rebellion to expand its sphere of influence, that the other powers subtly exerted pressure to discourage the newcomer from stepping forward, or simply that Japan lacked confidence to fulfill the role.

For whatever reason, Japan intentionally avoided taking the initiative in this early coalition operation. It was not until 115 years later that a flag officer of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force—the successor to the Imperial Japanese Navy—assumed the duty of Commander, Combined Task Force 151, a
multinational naval force combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off Somalia, under the Japanese governmental policy of “proactive contribution to peace.”

NOTES


1. The British Admiralty ordered HMS Hermione and HMS Brisk to proceed to Taku in response to a request from the Foreign Office dated March 24. Naval Intelligence Department, “Diary of the Principal Events in China during the Boxer Insurrection 1900,” no. 583, p. 3. For place-names in China and similar references, this article uses the appellations that were in use in the West at the time of the Boxer Rebellion. On first mention, the accepted modern version is appended in parentheses.

2. The adjectives that historians and analysts have applied to the forces of the eight foreign powers range from allied to coalition, international, and multinational, with no consensus. In the modern sense of the term, coalition is the most appropriate choice.


4. The Royal Navy did not apply any official name to these meetings. The Imperial Japanese Navy officially entitled the body “Rekoku Kaigun Shikikan Kaigi,” whose English translation is “Council by the Naval Commanders of the Powers.” Office of the Minister of the Navy, Meiji 33 nen shinkoku Jihoi Kaigun Senshishou [hereafter M33 SJKS K1–5]. For convenience, this article refers to these meetings as “Councils of Senior Naval Commanders,” or “councils” for short.


8. At the stage when Peking had been relieved and Marshal Waldersee had arrived, an integrated command structure was implemented ashore to administer the occupation. However, the foreign navies made sure they were not part of this structure. See, for example, M33 SJKS K1, p. 2.


12. M33 SJKS K1, p. 72.

13. Ibid., pp. 83–86.

14. Seymour reported to the Admiralty that he did not accede to the request from the consul in Tientsin for active measures. Seymour to Admiralty, ADM 125/109, no. 384, June 27, 1900. Ion interprets Kempff’s statement as a warning against taking active measures. Hamish Ion, “The Idea of Naval Imperialism: The China Squadron and the Boxer Uprising,” in British Naval Strategy East of Suez,

15. The fourth through the eleventh councils were presided over by Hiltebrandt aboard Russia, the seventeenth by Courrejolles aboard D’Entrecasteaux, and the eighteenth by Candiani on Fieramosca.


17. Ibid., pp. 95–96; Seymour to Admiralty, June 27, 1900.


19. Financial capitals such as Hong Kong and concerns such as the Shanghai Banking Corporation were afraid they would become unable to recover the money they had invested if the Russians occupied the railways under the pretext of securing the transportation link, so they pressured the British government. The government also feared for British national interests if the Russians speedily invaded and occupied Peking. Seymour therefore decided to conduct his expedition to Peking, which otherwise was questionable from a military viewpoint. Ion, “The Idea of Naval Imperialism,” pp. 42–44.


22. M33 SJKS K1, pp. 103–104.


24. Ibid., pp. 115–17.

25. Rear Admiral Dewa, Commander, Standing Fleet, to Admiral Yamamoto, Minister of the Navy, written report, June 21 (4 PM), M33 SJKS K1, pp. 509–10.

26. Washington had ordered Kempff not to initiate action against China unless provoked to the point of war. Silbey, The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China, p. 93.


28. Silbey, The Boxer Rebellion and the Great Game in China, pp. 101–102. Saito, relying on Kimihiko Sato, Giwadan no Kigen to Sono Undo (Tokyo: Kenbun Shuppan, 1999), writes that this proclamation actually was aimed at creating unity of national effort by mobilizing nationalism and anti–foreign power sentiment among high-ranking officials, and was not directed at foreign powers, which is why it was not transmitted to those powers. Seiji Saito, Hokushin Jihen to Nihon Gun (Tokyo: Fuyo Shobo Shuppan, 2006), pp. 65–66.

29. M33 SJKS K1, p. 543.

30. The consuls’ meeting on June 21 resolved to request that the senior naval commanders off Taku send four warships to protect the lives and properties of foreign residents. Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nihon Gaiko Monjo, Dai 33 Kan, p. 790, Dai 777 Bunsho.

31. Togo was the senior naval officer present; he had been promoted to vice admiral about six months before Hiltebrandt. Togo’s attendance at councils presided over by Hiltebrandt would have violated the principle of the senior officer present presiding. This sequence of events implies Japanese reluctance to preside over councils. M33 SJKS K2, pp. 171–72.

32. The British government submitted requests for reinforcements to Japan on June 23 and July 3 and 5; at a cabinet meeting on the 6th the Japanese government decided to deploy the 5th Division. Japan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nihon Gaiko Monjo, Dai 33 Kan, Jo-Kan, p. 579, Dai 605 Bunsho.


34. Ibid., pp. 35–36.

35. Ibid., p. 44. Saito, relying on the correspondence between the Admiralty and the senior officer present, states that the
British government clearly directed that maintaining order in the Shanghai area was a very important role for the forces in theater. Saito, *Hokushin Jihen to Nihon Gun*, pp. 207–208.


37. According to Seymour, the reasons he returned to his squadron were that there were three general officers at Tientsin, and the matter had become mostly a military (as opposed to naval) one, whereas his duty was to perform the duties of the minister of the Navy. Ibid., pp. 201–202. Today what was requested would be termed *proof of life*.


40. In particular, the U.S. government ordered its commander on-site to propose the necessity of making this an urgent demand to Peking. Ibid., pp. 201–202. Today what was requested would be termed *proof of life*.


42. Ibid., pp. 856–60.

43. Saito, *Hokushin Jihen to Nihon Gun*, p. 133.


46. Dewa reported to Minister of the Navy Yamamoto that either a military officer or a civilian official fluent in English and French was needed. Ibid., p. 545.

47. Dewa wrote in his report that at the sixth council the German admiral had put the questions to the Chinese admiral on behalf of the Russian admiral, because the latter did not speak English. Ibid., p. 509.


50. By the early part of July the China Squadron’s interest had become focused on the occupation of Shanhaikwan rather than the relief of Peking, to protect British investments in the railways in northern China from Russian ambitions over the territory. Ion, “The Idea of Naval Imperialism,” pp. 50–51.


52. Adm. Walter Kerr, the First Sea Lord, described this action as Russia showing its true nature. Ion, “The Idea of Naval Imperialism,” p. 51.


55. Ibid., pp. 444–45.

56. Ibid., p. 520.


58. Ibid., pp. 546–50.


62. The author worked as the Japanese SNR at CENTCOM from November 2002 to June 2003, and in due course assumed the post of deputy chairman of the SNR Coordinating Group, with more than fifty SNRs as members. This allowed him to observe how efficiently and effectively the Coalition Coordination Center coordinated among the partners.

63. *M33 SJKS K1*, p. 551.

64. Togo was promoted to vice admiral on May 14, 1898, Hildebrandt on December 18, 1898. *M33 SJKS K2*, p. 172.