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THE FORD ADMINISTRATION AND SECURITY POLICY IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC AFTER THE FALL OF SAIGON*

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ABSTRACT. *This article enhances our understanding of the Ford administration's foreign policy by examining how it sought to react to a changed situation in the Asia-Pacific after the fall of Saigon in May 1975. It shows how changes in regional politics forced the administration to adapt to a situation in which allies began to look to the Communist countries for friendship and to reconsider having American forces on their soil. It illustrates this situation by looking at base negotiations in Thailand and the Philippines, and the administration's search for an alternative arrangement in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. It then reconsiders two crisis situations in the region to examine the relevance of the superpower competition to the administration's responses. This aids our understanding of the role that regional factors played in tactical foreign policy decisions taken by the Ford administration, extending beyond a focus on the superpower competition that has marked the historiography of the administration in the past.*

Of all of the Cold War presidents, Gerald Ford is the one whose time in office has been least explored by historians. Over twenty years after Ford's inauguration, John Robert Greene could write that the task of understanding and analysing the Ford presidency was 'only beginning'.¹ Despite the publication of Greene's book and an excellent recent monograph by Yanek Mieczkowski, the same could be said today.² Ford's presidency has often been treated as a mere appendage to the Nixon years, and although Mieczkowski helped to dispel this myth in the realm of domestic policy, much work remains to be done on the foreign policy of the Ford administration. Students of Ford's foreign policy are forced to rely on various works concerning the career of Henry Kissinger or studies which treat

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¹ John Robert Greene, *The presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence, KA, 1995), p. xiii.

² Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington, KY, 2005).

the 'Nixon–Ford' years as one whole.³ Meanwhile, scholars who have remained focused on the superpower competition do not credit the Ford administration with much originality in the realm of foreign policy and, within their sphere of study, they are quite correct not to do so.⁴ The historiography of the administration has not moved significantly beyond a claim made by A. James Reichley in 1981 that Ford and Kissinger 'administered foreign policy around the goals and strategies that had been developed by Nixon (with Kissinger's assistance)'.⁵ Mieczkowski echoed this appraisal when he wrote in 2005 that Ford 'invoked no new diplomatic doctrines or grand visions, even as many previous cold war verities collapsed around him'.⁶ This article aims to provide a more detailed analysis of Ford's foreign policy in a particular region – the Asia-Pacific – and to show how the administration dealt with challenges to which there was no direct analogy in the Nixon administration, and which cannot be understood simply through the lens of superpower competition. This article's argument is that the Soviet Union was far from the only consideration in decisions about security policy in the Asia-Pacific. It is necessary to move past the focus on the USSR that has hitherto dominated the historiography of the Ford administration to understand fully how decisions were made about the configuration of American power in the region and how to respond to crisis situations.

Détente and the opening of China had served to reduce perceptions of tension and competition between the superpowers in the mid-1970s. However, because the process remained ambiguous and reversible, the idea that the great powers were involved in a zero-sum competition for influence persisted. What had changed was not the existence of this competition, but perceptions of its intensity. American policy in the Asia-Pacific region was strongly predicated on a need to maintain stability in the region and to avoid the impression that there had been a rout of US power after the fall of Saigon. Whilst on a strategic level this policy was designed with the Soviet Union in mind and although Soviet influence in the Asia-Pacific was increasing, it was by no means so overwhelming a factor that it dwarfed all others. In the long term, maintaining US influence and power projection capabilities in the Asia-Pacific meant paying attention to specific countries and conflicts on their own terms and through the adoption of a regional perspective as well as in terms of superpower conflict.

To illustrate this argument, this article first examines the wider context of the American position in the Asia-Pacific by looking at the diplomacy of US bases in

³ Jussi Hanhimäki, *The flawed architect: Henry Kissinger and American foreign policy* (Oxford, 2004); Walter Isaacson, *Kissinger: a biography* (New York, NY, 1992); Robert D. Schulzinger, *Henry Kissinger: doctor of diplomacy* (New York, NY, 1989).

⁴ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of American national security policy during the Cold War* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 272–341; Richard A. Melanson, *American foreign policy since the Vietnam war: the search for consensus from Richard Nixon to George W. Bush* (London, 2005); Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and confrontation: American–Soviet relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC, 1994), pp. 489–620.

⁵ A. James Reichley, *Conservatives in an age of change: the Nixon and Ford administrations* (Washington, DC, 1981), p. 357.

⁶ Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford*, p. 275.

the region, taking into consideration political pressures that buffeted America's position in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon. It then turns to examine American actions during two crisis situations: the *Mayaguez* incident of May 1975 and the Panmunjom incident of August 1976. The former saw a US container ship hijacked by Khmer Rouge forces, igniting fears of a repeat of the *Pueblo* incident of 1968, when the *USS Pueblo* had been captured by North Korea and its crew held hostage for nearly a year. The Ford administration was determined to avoid a repetition of both the feeling, and appearance, of impotence that had afflicted the US during this earlier incident, and so embarked on a military response. Similar motives explained the US reaction to the incident at Panmunjom in 1976 when two American officers were murdered by North Korean forces. By examining these case studies, this article examines the validity of John Lewis Gaddis's claim that the Ford administration had a tendency 'to impose categories of thought derived from the global superpower competition upon regional events, with results that deadened sensitivity to the distinctive contexts within which they had developed'. For Gaddis, the *Mayaguez* incident supplied an 'extreme example' of this mindset.⁷ This article argues that the intended audience for these actions was not only, or even primarily, the Soviet Union, as can be seen by analysis of the internal discussions that took place within the administration itself. This focus on the complexities of a particular area of policy allows for insights that are not supported by analysis of the superpower competition itself, and qualify our understanding of the Ford administration's foreign policy.

This also allows light to be shed on another tenet of the historiography of the Ford administration, namely that it was essentially a continuation of the Nixon presidency, continuing its policies, if not its perfidies. Certainly if one focuses on American-Soviet relations during the Ford presidency, there was little innovation to be seen. It is also true that this was the most visible aspect of the Ford administration's foreign policy. Ford continued the process of *détente* to the bitter end of his presidency, even when it was attacked by both the Democratic party and the right wing of the Republican party. Although Ford abandoned the term during the 1976 primaries in favour of the slogan of 'peace through strength' (which Reagan later adopted when president), he remained committed to both the idea and the process.⁸ But this is not the whole story of the administration's foreign policy. The Ford administration faced challenges and situations to which there was no direct analogy in the Nixon administration, such as Cuban intervention in Angola, responding to the international impact of the Church Committee's investigations into the CIA, and promoting American interests in the Asia-Pacific after the Vietnam war.

The historiography of the Ford administration is largely correct in its assessment of Ford's continued fidelity to Nixon's foreign policy with regard to the superpower competition. What requires qualification is how this affected policy

⁷ Gaddis, *Strategies*, p. 331.

⁸ Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford*, p. 288; Reichley, *Conservatives*, pp. 347–54.

on a tactical level. This article is a contribution towards that understanding. Before turning to the crisis situations mentioned above, it looks first at the regional context within which they occurred. After the fall of Saigon, the Ford administration was forced into a fundamental shift in policy in the Asia-Pacific. Its reaction to a perceived threat of being drummed out of the region can be seen through negotiations with allied nations over bases and its use of force in crisis situations. Although largely reactive, its policy had consistent aims that were more complex than existing historiography might suggest.

I

The final drama in Indochina began on the first day of 1975, and by 3 May Communist forces controlled the entire territory of South Vietnam. A congressional ban on military activity in, over, or near Indochina, and the general reapportionment of power between the legislative and executive branches that had followed Watergate militated against renewed involvement by the US. Congress turned down further aid requests for the South, believing the money would be wasted and any supplies would fall into the hands of the North. South Vietnam, a country which the US had physically defended at such great cost, was ultimately defeated without the US participating in the final battle. Unable to affect the battle's outcome, the Ford administration turned its attention to the consequent challenge of how to structure an Asian-Pacific policy for the post-Vietnam era.

A brief look at the policy inherited from Nixon is necessary to understanding this challenge. *Détente* and the Nixon Doctrine were interlinked attempts to cope with the Soviet Union's achievement of strategic parity by attempting to draw the Communist superpower into a more routine and stable relationship while simultaneously reducing those American commitments abroad that could potentially lead to conflict between the superpowers. In this context, the Nixon Doctrine stated that while the US would remain committed to the defence of its allies, it would henceforth require the allies themselves to provide the manpower necessary for their defence.⁹ The 'Vietnamization' of the war in Vietnam became the paradigmatic case of the Nixon Doctrine as it was American over-commitment to Vietnam that originally begat the doctrine. At issue was whether the doctrine was in fact a readjusted means for the familiar end of American regional preponderance – as stated by Nixon and Kissinger – or actually a cover for an abandonment of America's commitments worldwide. The events of early 1975 seemed to indicate that the latter might be the case, and led to increased scepticism regarding the value and reliability of close relations with the US on the part of countries in the region. The Ford administration had to work with limited means to ensure that its power in the Asia-Pacific could be reconfigured on a

⁹ See Robert S. Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine: American foreign policy and the pursuit of stability* (Cambridge, 1984).

sustainable basis without exposing gratuitous openings to countries hostile to its allies or itself. 'Vietnam is over', wrote William R. Kintner, a former ambassador to Thailand who produced a report on America's future role in the Asia-Pacific in January 1976. '[T]he need to clearly understand our changing status and redefine a creative and credible policy for Asia remains.'¹⁰

Kintner's review of American goals and interests in the Asia-Pacific concluded that the main purpose of US influence in the region was strategic denial: to prevent a potentially hostile country establishing preponderance there, particularly the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China (PRC). The dominance that Kintner feared was not, however, a military one, but rather 'an ascendant political and psychological posture', or the potential turbulence that might thereby be introduced into the Asia-Pacific if one of the large Communist powers tried to achieve this. In warning that a 'precipitous US military and political withdrawal from one of the regions of the East Asia-Pacific area could catalyze such excessive Sino-Soviet-Vietnamese competition', Kintner demonstrated an awareness of fractures in the Communist world.¹¹ He did not fear a unified Communist conspiracy, but worried that if the US allowed a power vacuum to develop then competition among the Communist powers might destabilize the region. Kintner foresaw a continued role for US forces in Asia '[t]o deter conflict either via forward presence or rapid access to threatened areas', but remained aware that political pressure was likely to lead to a withdrawal of US forces from most of mainland Asia. The task, as he saw it, was to retain 'the capability to exercise political influence and project military power' in the region while accepting the consequences of such pressures.¹² Such a task fell to the Ford administration. When Ford proclaimed his Pacific Doctrine on 7 December 1975, he addressed many of the themes that Kintner had elaborated. Noting that '[t]he security concerns of great world powers intersect in Asia', Ford continued that 'American strength is basic to any balance of power in the Pacific' and stated his opposition to any nation seeking 'hegemony'. He added that the US would seek peaceful resolution of disputes such as the ongoing conflict between the two Koreas.¹³ Events made clear that he would also still countenance the use of force to defend the regional status quo. Whilst these incidents are discussed in the next section, it is first necessary to explore the diplomatic means used by the Ford administration to further the continuation of the US role in the region.

Japan and China are two countries that deserve special mention in a discussion of the Ford administration's policy in the Asia-Pacific. Nixon had shocked the world by visiting Beijing, and Ford followed in his footsteps by becoming

¹⁰ William R. Kintner, 'U.S. policy interests in the Asia-Pacific area and the U.S. purpose in Asia', 15 Jan. 1976, folder 'Ambassador Kintner's study of U.S. policy interest in the Asia-Pacific region', box 1, national security advisor: presidential country files for East Asia and the Pacific (country files), Gerald Ford Library (GFL), p. 1.

¹¹ Kintner, 'U.S. purpose in Asia', pp. 26–7.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 45.

¹³ *Public papers of the presidents of the United States: Gerald R. Ford, 1975* (Washington, DC, 1977), pp. 1950–3.

the second American president to visit China. However, Ford did not find it politically palatable to establish normal diplomatic relations with China while facing a right-wing challenge from Reagan. Although the administration temporized, this did not constitute a fundamental change of direction in policy and Kissinger continued to assure Beijing that normal relations could be established after the 1976 election.¹⁴ Despite making no great changes in China policy, Ford benefited from the PRC's restraint during the events discussed in the case studies below. Meanwhile, Ford became the first US president to visit Japan. Relations between Tokyo and Washington had often been strained under Nixon, whose opening to China had shocked the Japanese in both style and substance. Ford took steps to stress the importance he placed on the alliance, declaring 'partnership with Japan' to be the 'second pillar' of the Pacific Doctrine; improving ties with the PRC was relegated to being its 'third premise'. Ford also declared that he had 'devoted more attention' to the relationship with Japan than to any other.¹⁵ Here Ford was again echoing Kintner, who had written that 'the US-Japanese alliance can serve as at least one pole of stability in the [Asia-Pacific]' and that 'US security interests in Asia are most directly served by the maintenance of a close, cooperative alliance relationship' with Japan.¹⁶ While the country was militarily inconsequential, Japanese trade and investment were considered important for the development and strength of the Asia-Pacific's non-Communist countries. Japanese security interests – especially in South Korea and the region's shipping lanes – were a factor that contributed to shaping the Ford administration's policy.

The withdrawal of US combat forces from Vietnam beginning in 1969 and the congressional ban on military activity in Indochina in 1973 had inaugurated a period of change and uncertainty for US military bases throughout the region, whilst the Communist victory in Indochina further complicated the situation. US allies began to look to Communist countries for friendship. Highlighting this trend, in July 1975, Thailand and the Philippines decided that the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, the regional security organization that included outside powers with anti-Communist agendas like the US, ought to be dissolved, a process completed by 1977. The two countries also voiced their desire for regional Communist countries to enter into the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional political and economic organization from which they had previously been excluded.¹⁷ This trend meant the US found itself on the defensive in negotiations about the presence of American forces in allied nations, who worried about their own over-commitment to the US in the aftermath of the fall of Saigon.

¹⁴ James Mann, *About face: a history of America's curious relationship with China, from Nixon to Clinton* (New York, NY, 1998), pp. 66–73.

¹⁵ *Papers: Ford, 1975*, p. 1952.

¹⁶ Kintner, 'U.S. purpose in Asia', p. 33.

¹⁷ O. Edmund Clubb, 'The new power imbalance in Southeast Asia', *Current History*, 69 (1975), pp. 209–12, 242–3, at p. 212.

The two countries in which negotiations over the presence of troops were toughest were Thailand and the Philippines. Of all the Southeast Asian countries apart from South Vietnam, Thailand had been America's closest ally in the region during the Vietnam war. Ruling figures in Thailand had however realized that they needed to move away from their exclusive relationship with the US and begin to court Communist countries after it became clear that the US would withdraw from Indochina, and talks had begun as early as August 1973. During the Ford administration, a succession of Thai governments pursued a dual policy of normalization with the Communist powers – announcing full ties with the PRC on 1 July 1975 and with North Vietnam on 6 August 1976 – and the withdrawal of US forces. In March 1975, a newly inaugurated Thai government increased the pressure on the US by announcing that it would seek the withdrawal of all US forces within one year. In the view of the White House National Security Council's (NSC) East Asia expert W. R. Smyser, the new government of Khukrit Pramroj 'won its critical confidence vote in part by pandering to politicians and intellectuals' interest in getting US military forces out of Thailand in 12 months'.¹⁸ The heavy American presence in Thailand had indeed largely become an anachronism after the fall of Saigon. Shortly before the fall of Saigon, Smyser stated that the US 'of course does not anticipate' an attack by North Vietnam on Thailand 'in the near future'.¹⁹ The forces' withdrawal was also fully in line with the thrust of the Nixon Doctrine. After the fall of Saigon, however, the Ford administration feared that if it was seen to pull out of Thailand too precipitously, then this would be seen as part of a general rout of American power from the Asia-Pacific. As the Nixon administration had done in Vietnam, the Ford administration accepted the fact that disengagement had to take place, but placed considerable emphasis on the manner in which it was achieved.

This emphasis was mainly expressed in attempts to delay the pace of withdrawal. In conversation with the prime minister of New Zealand W. E. Rowling on 7 May, Kissinger indicated that he wanted to leave 'grudgingly' and make the Thai 'force the pace'. Ford added: 'The more we delay and phase it out, the better for the area as a whole.'²⁰ A few weeks earlier on 22 April, Kissinger had sent a telegram to the US *chargé d'affaires* in Thailand, Edward Masters, instructing him to inform the new Thai government that the US recognized the need to move to a new relationship that was less focused on the presence of American troops, but wanted to allow for a period of reflection before hearing the new government's policies on the matter. Masters was also told to say that the US would reduce its troops from 27,000 to between 19,000 and 20,000 before 30 June in a gesture of good faith, but that the Ford administration was 'concerned about the impact of our withdrawals on the morale of the people in Thailand and

¹⁸ Smyser and Granger to Kissinger, 15 Apr. 1975, folder 'Thailand (10)', box 17, country files, GFL.

¹⁹ Smyser to Scowcroft, 24 Apr. 1975, folder 'Thailand (6)', box 16, country files, GFL.

²⁰ Memcon: Ford, Kissinger, Rowling, 7 May 1975, folder 'May 7, 1975 – Ford, Kissinger, Rowling', box 11, NSA Memcons, GFL.

elsewhere in Asia'. Kissinger informed Masters that he hoped this message would prevent the new government from a 'kneejerk' reaffirmation of the one-year deadline and that by stalling, the Thai government would be persuaded away from a 'neutralist' stance. He believed that 'further large-scale withdrawals' would send 'completely the wrong signal to Hanoi and other Communist capitals' and were hence to be avoided.²¹ When Masters met the Thai foreign minister, Chatchai Chunawan, on 25 April to discharge his instructions, however, the latter reminded Masters of the need to withdraw troops within a year 'subject to [the] security situation in southeast Asia', adding that discussions of further withdrawals could wait until after 30 June. He accepted a withdrawal of 7,500 as sufficient to placate Thai public opinion in the short term.²² This was a partial victory for the administration and served the purpose of making the Thai 'force the pace'; yet despite a series of further negotiations, no acceptable basis for the continued presence of American forces could be found and the last departed on 20 July 1976. Together with a policy statement on 21 April 1976 that the US would '[n]ot hinder the Thai in their efforts to adjust to new relationships with their Communist and non-Communists neighbours, and with us', this indicated the end of the US–Thai special relationship that had endured since at least 1950.²³

In the Philippines, meanwhile, the government had professed to being 'shocked' by US inaction as South Vietnam collapsed.²⁴ The Filipino government subsequently called for a renegotiation of the terms of the agreement by which it hosted US bases, which was of particular concern because Philippines bases were crucial for 'national policy' according to a defence department study in 1976. 'If use of all or part of these bases were denied to the US without a possible fallback base in the region, the US would be unable to adequately support forces afloat and our Southwestern Pacific allies because of the extreme distances involved', the report stated.²⁵ Although there was little chance of the US being forced to leave as had occurred in Thailand, hard bargaining ensued. The Filipino foreign secretary, Carlos Romulo, said at the start of negotiations that the US–Filipino security relationship had never been 'fully satisfactory' but had been endured by the Filipinos due to circumstances in Indochina. 'It will not have escaped Your Excellency's notice that now the situation has in fact changed', he told Kissinger, before proceeding to insist that he did not wish to be 'encumbered' by provisions from previous agreements. In the post-Vietnam era,

²¹ Kissinger to Masters, 22 Apr. 1975, folder 'Thailand (6)', box 16, country files, GFL.

²² Masters to Kissinger, 28 Apr. 1975, folder 'Thailand – State Department telegrams: to SECSTATE – NODIS (1)', box 18, country files, GFL.

²³ National security decision memorandum 327, 21 Apr. 1976, folder 'U.S. policy toward Thailand', box 1, national security advisor: national security study memoranda and decision memoranda, 1974–7, GFL.

²⁴ 'Memcon: the Philippines, July 10, 1975', 10 July 1975, folder 'Philippines (3)', box 15, country files, GFL.

²⁵ 'DOD assessment of US strategic interests and objectives in Micronesia', 29 Nov. 1976, folder, 'Micronesia study (2)', box 37, national security advisor: NSC East Asia and Pacific affairs staff files (staff files), GFL.

Romulo suggested, everything was due for renegotiation.²⁶ Filipino President Ferdinand Marcos later stated that he wanted the US defence commitment made more 'explicit', and then made a host of demands unlikely to be conducive to bringing negotiations to a quick conclusion. Marcos was also concerned to avoid the use of US military forces based in the Philippines against the Indochinese regimes, as this would hamper Filipino efforts to move towards normal diplomatic relations with them.²⁷ The Filipino government then proceeded to make unrealistic aid demands, initially demanding \$500m in the first year of any agreement.²⁸ On 2 December 1976, Romulo agreed to an overall package of \$1bn over five years, split equally between military and economic aid.²⁹ The Filipinos initially requested \$2bn, which had prompted Kissinger to tell Romulo that he could deal with Carter. 'Then I told Romulo he was crazy', Kissinger recalled. 'Carter would badget [sic] them on human rights, etc.'³⁰ Although Romulo had subsequently undergone a change of heart, Marcos vetoed the agreement by asking for \$1bn in dedicated military aid.³¹ The negotiations ended amid re-terminations and were branded a 'fiasco' by the US ambassador to Manila.³²

As these two examples illustrate, the continued existence of US bases across the region was in danger. Even though the US was not forced to leave the Philippines, the new security situation in the Asia-Pacific following the fall of Saigon meant that Manila now had a different perspective on what basing rights were worth. There was no guarantee that, at a later date, the price demanded by the Philippines would remain worthwhile. With basing agreements in doubt or ending across the Asia-Pacific, the defence department began to consider developing facilities in the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands (TTPI), a group of islands in Micronesia which had been administered by the US under a UN trusteeship since 1947. Negotiations were underway to determine the future political status of the islands, and the defence department began to consider the possibility of leasing land from the islanders on which to build bases. A departmental study in 1973 – the conclusions of which were reaffirmed in 1976 – stated that the need for this back-up option was especially acute because of the 'declining cohesiveness of our alliances, and the internal political reliability in many of the countries in Asia, both of which make tenuous any US military presence in Asia that is dependent upon foreign basing rights'. The study further noted that

²⁶ 'Statement of the chairman of the Philippine delegation', 12 Apr. 1976, folder 'Philippines (4)', box 15, country files, GFL.

²⁷ Barnes to Scowcroft, 6 Aug. 1976, folder 'Philippines (5)', box 15, country files, GFL.

²⁸ Robinson to Sullivan, 6 Oct. 1976, folder 'Philippines – State Department telegrams from SECSTATE to NODIS', box 16, country files, GFL.

²⁹ Robinson to Sullivan, 2 Dec. 1976, folder 'Philippines – State Department telegrams from SECSTATE to NODIS', box 16, country files, GFL.

³⁰ Memcon: Ford, Kissinger, 3 Dec. 1976, folder 'December 3, 1976', box 21, NSA Memcons, GFL.

³¹ Kissinger to Sullivan, 4 Dec. 1976, folder 'Philippines – State Department telegrams from SECSTATE to NODIS', box 16, country files, GFL.

³² Sullivan to Kissinger, 6 Dec. 1976, 'Philippines – State Department telegrams from SECSTATE to NODIS (2)', box 16, country files, GFL.

‘[a]s the number of independent, economically weak mini-states in the Pacific increases, so does the likelihood of instability which could result in a more permanent Soviet, and perhaps eventually, Chinese presence in the area’.³³ Due to the ‘cost of lives, time, and resources paid by the United States in World War II to secure control of the Pacific’, this was not viewed as an acceptable scenario. The capacity to develop bases in the TTPI was also designed to indicate to allies that the US could maintain its position in the Asia-Pacific without their assistance and thus weaken their envisaged bargaining positions.³⁴ After the Carter administration reached an accord with Manila on bases in the Philippines in 1978 these plans were shelved, but the extent to which they were considered under Ford reveals the pessimism in the administration over the tenability of a new long-term agreement with Manila.

The Ford administration was on the defensive when it came to alliance diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. Its freedom of action was limited and the challenge it faced was to accept inevitable readjustment to a weaker position. The administration registered no major successes during this process, but it shows the backdrop against which policy in the region had to be made. Attempting to hold on to bases in countries where a US presence was not wanted, such as Thailand, would have ultimately been counterproductive and served to heighten anti-American sentiment. But the administration’s recalcitrance and its tenacity in considering alternative options for bases indicated that it was in no hurry to liquidate the US presence in the Asia-Pacific. The Ford administration did not supinely plan larger cutbacks than necessary to placate political pressure in the region, as Jimmy Carter would subsequently do in South Korea. The administration’s policy was driven by a fear that the balance of power in the region would be upset by a US withdrawal, rendering future conflict more likely. The anti-Communist crusade in the Asia-Pacific was over, and it was time to retrench and protect the status quo. The administration’s policy was a holding action, not a retreat. That Ford remained willing to use force in the region to defend this status quo was demonstrated during two crisis situations: one just after the fall of Saigon and another shortly before the 1976 election.

II

The Ford administration faced two crisis situations in East Asia which it interpreted as a test of its mettle. Since military base negotiations were ongoing and likely to be inconclusive for some time, these crises were immediate tests of whether the US retained the will to deploy force to protect its interests. Bipolar confrontation lurked behind each incident because, as discussed, it was feared that a decline in US preponderance could lead to an increase in regional tension

³³ ‘Review of Micronesian status negotiations’, 29 Nov. 1976, folder ‘Micronesia study (1)’, box 37, staff files, GFL.

³⁴ ‘DOD assessment of US strategic interests and objectives in Micronesia’.

and create opportunities for enhanced Soviet or Chinese influence. An intensification of the superpower competition in the Asia-Pacific could only serve to undermine *détente* and triangular diplomacy. These were not the concerns, however, uppermost in policymakers' minds as they attended crisis meetings. This danger was hypothetical, whereas the current danger was the immediate impact that the US response to these crises would exert on regional allies. It is therefore an over-simplification to claim that these crises were considered purely in terms of their impact on great power politics.

The story of the *Mayaguez* incident has been told at length elsewhere.³⁵ On 12 May 1975, just over a week after the fall of Saigon, Cambodian gunboats intercepted a US container ship, *SS Mayaguez*, in international waters and steered it towards the island of Koh Tang. The US feared that the crew would be taken to the Cambodian mainland as hostages, raising the spectre of an incident similar to the seizure of the *USS Pueblo* by North Korea in 1968. The administration decided to stage an airborne assault on Koh Tang, seize the *Mayaguez*, and launch airstrikes against targets on the Cambodian mainland. Critics alleged that there had been a heavy-handed, slapdash approach to the rescue effort because it was interpreted mainly as a signal to the Communist superpowers. A recent historian of the incident claimed that Ford 'misperceived [the incident] as a deliberate provocation of Washington by the communist world and their new Indochinese allies', hence inappropriately 'global[izing]' it.³⁶

This interpretation requires qualification. From the first meeting of the NSC following the ship's seizure, administration figures interpreted the incident in terms of regional politics. William Colby, director of Central Intelligence, explained that the Cambodians were occupying offshore islands like Poulo Wai – which the *Mayaguez* had been near when seized – 'to reiterate the Cambodian claim vis-à-vis the Vietnamese Communists', adding that the occupation 'may provide an early test for future relations between the Khmer and Vietnamese Communists'. Colby observed the existence of local oil deposits that were enticing to both governments and had caused a previous clash. Defence Secretary James Schlesinger further speculated that the ship's seizure 'could be a bureaucratic misjudgement or a bi-product [sic] of an action against South Vietnam'. This discussion shows that fractures in the Communist world that might have lain behind the incident were discussed at the highest levels, and that the regional context was understood. Yet, although speculation was rife after the incident as to whether the seizure had been directed from Phnom Penh or merely represented the action of a local commander, this issue was irrelevant to the NSC's concerns. 'I am not inclined to believe that this was a carefully planned operation on the part of the Cambodian authorities', Kissinger later explained.

³⁵ Ralph Wetterhahn, *The last battle: the Mayaguez incident and the end of the Vietnam war* (New York, NY, 2002); Cécile Menétray-Monchau, 'The *Mayaguez* incident as an epilogue to the Vietnam war and its reflection on the post-Vietnam political equilibrium in Southeast Asia', *Cold War History*, 5 (2005), pp. 337–67.

³⁶ Menétray-Monchau, 'The *Mayaguez* incident', p. 348.

‘Nevertheless, the impact on us was the same.’³⁷ As the administration’s prime fear was that the US would appear weak and impotent in the face of provocation, the actual motive for the provocation did not receive much analysis, as it was the reaction and the message thereby conveyed that was deemed important. Ford silenced discussion of motives by saying it was ‘interesting, but it does not solve our problem’.³⁸ The fact that the administration did not seek to apply pressure to the USSR or the PRC over the incident – except for attempting to pass a message to the Cambodians via the PRC – also indicates that they did not consider the larger Communist powers responsible.

Kissinger, however, repeatedly proved himself to be thinking about the impact that the incident would exert on other Asia-Pacific countries whom he wanted to discourage from issuing a challenge to the US by making them realize such an action could not be ‘localize[d]’. Potential aggressors had to realize that the US would not ‘confine ourselves to the areas in which they challenge us’.³⁹ Kissinger hence proposed the punitive military strategy described above, explaining: ‘If we only respond at the same place at which we are challenged, nobody can lose by challenging us. They can only win. This means, I think, that we have to do more.’ Kissinger added that in tailoring his response: ‘I am thinking not of Cambodia, but of Korea and of the Soviet Union and of others’, later stressing the importance of doing ‘something that will impress the Koreans and the Chinese’.⁴⁰ While a factor in this thinking, the Soviet Union was by no means dominant, and the Communist superpower was only mentioned once in the deliberations, which certainly does not constitute evidence that the incident was seen as a global Communist plot directed from Moscow. Indeed, the logic of responding harshly to the provocation did not require that this view be held, but merely that a strong response would be regarded as a confident assertion of US power. That the main target audience for this response was Communist countries is obvious, as these were the countries perceived by the administration as most likely to challenge US interests. This did not necessarily mean, however, that any country other than Cambodia was perceived as responsible for the provocation. A response that may have appeared ‘disproportionate’ from the viewpoint of the limited goal of retrieving the ship and its crew looked more logical as an exercise in demonstrating to potential challengers that the US would not permit them to go unpunished for assailing US interests.

Kissinger was also keen to demonstrate that the executive retained freedom of action in the wake of Watergate and the conflict between the executive and

³⁷ ‘Secretary Kissinger’s news conference of May 16’, *Department of State Bulletin*, 72 (9 June 1975), p. 757.

³⁸ ‘Minutes: NSC meeting’, 12 May 1975, folder ‘NSC meeting, May 12, 1975’, box 1, national security advisor: NSC meeting file, 1974–7 (NSC meetings), GFL.

³⁹ ‘Minutes: NSC meeting’, 14 May 1975, folder ‘NSC meeting, May 14, 1975’, box 1, NSC meetings, GFL.

⁴⁰ ‘Minutes: NSC meeting’, 13 May 1975, folder ‘NSC meeting, May 13, 1975 (Evening)’, box 1, NSC meetings, GFL.

legislative branches of government that had characterized recent years. When the White House counsel, Phil Buchen, raised the prohibition on military action in Indochina and thereby cast doubt on the legality of bombing the mainland, Kissinger deemed the 'worst stance' as being to allow such legislation to interfere with plans for the operation. He explained that '[t]he Koreans and others would like to look us over and to see how we react' and that '[u]nder certain circumstances, in fact, some domestic cost is to our advantage in demonstrating the seriousness with which we view this kind of challenge'. Ford added that 'Phil and I have argued for years'; this put paid to further discussion of Buchen's concerns.⁴¹ Demonstrating a willingness to confront a recalcitrant Congress would also help to reassure allies such as Thailand and South Korea, who worried that the executive branch would be prevented by the legislature from enacting defensive treaty obligations. Ford was also keen to overcome obstructionism from the bureaucracy, especially insofar as it stemmed from the defence department. Ford was never enamoured of his first defence secretary, Schlesinger, and when he warned against the use of B-52 bombers during the rescue operation, deeming them a 'red flag on the Hill', Ford ordered them prepared for use anyway even though he eventually decided not to use them.⁴² Ford was following Kissinger's advice to 'establish a reputation [among the bureaucracy] for being too tough to tackle' during his first crisis situation.⁴³ The projection of American power abroad was hence also about the projection of presidential power at home.

Ford's domestic position was also a salient factor in responding to the *Mayaguez* incident. He described it in his memoirs as an 'opportunity' for the US to reassert its credibility abroad, and it certainly did not harm Ford's approval rating at home, which leapt by eleven points.⁴⁴ Coming so soon after the fall of Saigon and when the nation's attention was already on the region, the incident dominated news coverage for days. This only heightened the eventual controversy caused by the death of forty Marines in the attack and the fact that the Cambodians had, unbeknownst to the US, released the crew of forty-one shortly before the attack. The domestic political situation was not, however, discussed extensively in NSC meetings, and evidence suggests that the response was primarily planned for its impact abroad. The same can be said of the US response to the Panmunjom incident, to which we now turn.

III

Like every other US ally in East Asia, South Korea was disturbed by the promulgation of the Nixon Doctrine and the opening to China. By March 1971, the US had withdrawn 20,000 troops from South Korea. As part of this decision, Nixon had also ordered that the remaining infantry division be deployed away from the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between the two Koreas, casting doubt on whether it would still function as a tripwire that would trigger a larger American

⁴¹ *Ibid.* ⁴² *Ibid.* ⁴³ Memcon, 14/07/1975, 'May 14, 1975', box 11, NSA Memcons, GFL.

⁴⁴ Ford, *A time to heal* (London, 1979), pp. 275, 284.

intervention in the case of an invasion from the North. Nixon's call for a five-year military modernization programme for the South also seemed to at least leave open the option of further US withdrawals. On taking office, the Ford administration was keen to reassure the South of Washington's continued commitment to its safety. Visiting the country in November 1974, Ford assured the country's president, Park Chung Hee, in a public communiqué that 'the United States has no plan to reduce the current level of United States forces in Korea'.⁴⁵ Several weeks after the fall of Saigon, Kissinger told an interviewer that withdrawal from South Korea 'would have drastic consequences in Japan and all over Asia because that would be interpreted as our final withdrawal from Asia and our final withdrawal from our whole postwar foreign policy'.⁴⁶ The robust response to the *Mayaguez* incident had been formulated partly in order to reassure South Korea and to warn the North. In August 1976, the Ford administration would also have an opportunity to confirm its stance directly on the Korean peninsula.

For some years, provocations by North Korea against South Korea had been increasing, encouraged by the Nixon Doctrine and the possibility of US withdrawal.⁴⁷ The North had carried out a massive military build-up that was only becoming apparent as US intelligence assets were diverted from Indochina to study the Korean situation. US officers stationed in South Korea believed they were seeing preparations for an invasion of the South, and that the North would seek to provoke United Nations Command (UNC) forces into starting hostilities.⁴⁸ Their military efforts were accompanied by a diplomatic campaign which involved issuing a statement on 5 August 1976 denouncing the US presence on the peninsula as a source of instability and calling for a withdrawal. On the same day, a UNC work party went to remove a tree that was blocking the sightlines between two UNC guard posts in the Joint Security Area (JSA), which was the only part of the DMZ where troops from either side could come into physical contact with one another. After North Korean soldiers demanded they not remove the tree, the UNC guards decided to trim the tree instead, resolving to return at a later date to carry the work out. On 18 August, a UNC work party of five Korean labourers, two US officers, one South Korean officer, and seven guards returned to trim the tree's foliage. When a North Korean officer arrived on the scene and ordered that the work be stopped, he was ignored by the work party, causing him to send for reinforcements until there were 'approximately 30' North Korean guards present. This was when violence started:

At this point, one North Korean Army officer put his watch, which he had wrapped in a handkerchief, into his pocket. Another rolled up his sleeves. One officer yelled 'kill' and

⁴⁵ *Public papers of the presidents of the United States: Gerald R. Ford, 1974* (Washington, DC, 1975), p. 654.

⁴⁶ 'Secretary Kissinger interviewed for NBC "Today" show: portion broadcast May 6', *Department of State Bulletin*, 72 (26 May 1975), p. 669.

⁴⁷ Don Oberdorfer, *The two Koreas: a contemporary history* (New York, NY, 2001), pp. 47–83.

⁴⁸ John K. Singlaub with Malcolm McConnell, *Hazardous duty: an American soldier in the twentieth century* (New York, NY, 1991), pp. 358–65.

then struck Captain Bonifas, knocking him to the ground. Five other North Korean Army guards jumped on Bonifas and continued to beat him. Other North Korean Army guards attacked the other United Nations Command guards, beating them with axe handles and clubs ... Captain Bonifas was beaten with the blunt head of the axes while he was on the ground. All United Nations Command personnel received repeated beatings even though they tried to break contact and leave the area.⁴⁹

The two American officers were both killed, and four enlisted personnel were wounded. There were no known North Korean casualties. With two Americans dead after such a one-sided engagement, there was a strong feeling within the administration that a response was required. In the second meeting of the Washington Special Action Group (WASAG) convened to deal with the crisis, Kissinger said: 'If we do nothing they will think of us as the paper tigers of Saigon. They might then try to create a series of events. If we do nothing there may be another incident and then another.' He repeated this point later in the meeting.⁵⁰ Arthur W. Hummel, Jr, the assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs, would later tell a congressional subcommittee that the administration believed North Korea's actions to be a 'major provocation' due to the quantity of personnel involved and the 'ferocity of the attack'. He further cited the North's 'readiness to spill blood in the Joint Security Area, an area in which there had been no deaths during the twenty three years of the Armistice'.⁵¹ Various measures were discussed to respond to this unprecedented provocation.

In considering the response, the members of the WASAG had to consider the North's motives. The CIA judged that the North did not plan to attack the South in the 'near future', but were 'virtually certain' that the North carried out this 'deliberate provocation' as part of their diplomatic efforts to portray American forces as the destabilizing influence on the peninsula. Just hours after the attack, North Korea presented the incident as evidence of US aggression to the Non-Aligned Conference in Colombo, which helped a motion calling for US withdrawal to be carried. Another suspected goal was 'to arouse US public opinion about the American troop presence in Korea during the presidential election campaign'. The CIA assessment concluded that the North would engage in further 'controlled acts of violence' if it perceived a weak US response or the beginning of a 'divisive domestic debate' over the presence of US forces in Korea.⁵² The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) concurred that the North could not 'mount an effective military invasion' at the present

⁴⁹ This narrative is based on the testimony of Ambassador Arthur W. Hummel, Jr, assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs, to the House subcommittee on international organizations and international political and military affairs. See 'Statement by Ambassador Hummel', 1 Sept. 1976, folder 'War powers resolution: Korean incident', box 65, Philip Buchen files, GFL.

⁵⁰ 'Korean WASAG', 19 Aug. 1976, folder 'Korea - North Korea tree incident, 8/18/76 (2)', box 10, country files, GFL.

⁵¹ 'Statement by Ambassador Hummel'.

⁵² 'DMZ incident: Korea, 18 August 1976', undated, folder 'Korea - Operation Paul Bunyan', box 10, country files, GFL.

time.⁵³ The administration hence had to tailor a response that would deter the North from ‘creat[ing] a series of events’, as Kissinger had feared, but without causing undue escalation. From the first WASAG meeting, it had been decided that the tree would have to be cut down, as originally planned, but that this action alone would not be an adequate response. Kissinger wanted to ‘overawe’ the North with additional steps. Two possible extra sets of measures were hence discussed: first, the introduction of new forces into the South and, secondly, a military strike into the North. Under the first rubric, James L. Holloway, the chairman of the JCS, suggested that a B-52 exercise could be carried out and that Marine and Ranger battalions could be flown into the South. He was unsure, however, whether such moves would be sufficient to get the ‘attention’ of the North. He added that artillery or air strikes could be carried out against the North, or that the military could carry out a precisely targeted incursion using Special Forces.⁵⁴

Although on 18 August, Deputy National Security Advisor William Hyland had reported that Kissinger had been ‘somewhat taken with the idea’ of an airstrike in the DMZ and raised it again at a WASAG meeting the following day, the group eventually decided not to strike the North.⁵⁵ Deputy Defence Secretary William Clements felt that the North would ‘react violently’ and that it could ‘start something’. The WASAG eventually decided to send in a large number of ground forces to remove the tree, while simultaneously making a show of force that included a flight of B-52 bombers on a vector for Pyongyang and nuclear-capable strategic bombers circling over the JSA. The administration assessed that since the North was not seeking an all-out war, it would not be diplomatically fruitful for the US to bring such a situation closer. As Hummel told Congress, the measured response helped to dispel the idea that the US was on the verge of invading North Korea, which had become a staple of the country’s propaganda.⁵⁶ As Kissinger explained, the US had to venture just far enough to force the North to retreat without provoking further incidents: ‘The purpose of doing something is to show that we are ready to take risks. The trick is to do something from which they will back off.’⁵⁷ Despite the fears of Clements and the chief of staff of US forces in Korea – who felt the probability of a war resulting from the operation was one in two – the risk of the tree-cutting operation was regarded as acceptable.⁵⁸ The JCS felt the incident would probably pass without a fight.⁵⁹ Whereas the US had been able to use greater force in the rescue of the *Mayaguez* because there was virtually no danger of serious escalation, the response in Korea had to

⁵³ ‘Washington Special Action Group meeting: August 18, 1976’, 19 Aug. 1976, folder ‘Korea – North Korean tree incident 8/18/76 (1)’, box 10, country files, GFL.

⁵⁴ ‘Korean WASAG’.

⁵⁵ Hyland to Scowcroft, untitled, 18 Aug. 1976, folder ‘Korea – North Korean tree incident 8/18/76 (1)’, box 10, country files, GFL.

⁵⁶ ‘Statement by Ambassador Hummel’.

⁵⁷ ‘Korean WASAG’.

⁵⁸ Singlaub, *Hazardous duty*, p. 376.

⁵⁹ William Hyland to Brent Scowcroft, 19 Aug. 1976, folder ‘Korea – North Korea tree incident, 8/18/76 (2)’, box 10, country files, GFL.

be more carefully tailored. On the other hand, willingness to take the risk of escalation made the US demonstration of resolve all the more impressive to the North Koreans.

The operation was indeed carried out, on 21 August, with no resistance encountered from the North. An illegal road block in the JSA was also removed.⁶⁰ An intelligence analyst monitoring the North Korean tactical radio net during the operation reported that the accumulation of force 'blew their ... minds'.⁶¹ In the administration, the diplomatic reaction of the North was widely interpreted as indicating that Pyongyang was, in the words of Hummel, 'chastened'.⁶² At a meeting of the Military Armistice Committee (MAC) several hours after the operation, the North Korean representative brought a message from North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung – his first ever to the MAC – indicating that the incident on 18 August had been 'regrettable' and that 'both sides should make efforts' to prevent a recurrence. The ambassador to South Korea noted that the North's statements were 'comparatively mild and ambiguous'.⁶³ There was no repetition of the usual propaganda themes favoured by the North in such meetings, including the warning that 'war could break out at any time' which was frequently issued and had been repeated at a MAC meeting on 19 August.⁶⁴ Furthermore, this was the first time in the MAC's twenty-three-year existence that 'the North Koreans had expressed even partial responsibility for violence along the DMZ'.⁶⁵ There was a further meeting of the MAC on 25 August, in which the North made no mention of the tree-cutting operation and did not complain about the introduction of new US forces into the South. The meeting was reported to be 'businesslike' and the usual propaganda themes were again absent. On this occasion, the North suggested that personnel be physically separated within the JSA to prevent further incidents.⁶⁶ Eventually these new security arrangements were implemented, an outcome viewed as a success within the administration.

The Panmunjom incident had showed that the Ford administration was willing to take risks to defend America and its allies against provocations by countries seen as enemies. Unlike the response to the *Mayaguez* incident, the tree-cutting operation had carried a risk of severe escalation, albeit a risk perceived as manageable. The Ford administration had showed itself alive to the complexities of the local situation, tailoring its response so that the North would be chastened but not unduly provoked. Here was a response that was not carried out primarily to impress the Soviet Union and China, but to deter the North itself. In fact, the

⁶⁰ 'Panmunjom incident: situation report as of 0600 hours', 21 Aug. 1976, folder 'Korea – tree incident, Aug–Sept, 1976 (2)', box 7, NCS press and congressional liaison staff: files, 1973–6, GFL.

⁶¹ Quoted in Oberdorfer, *Two Koreas*, p. 81.

⁶² 'Statement by Ambassador Hummel'.

⁶³ Sneider to Kissinger, 21 Aug. 1976, folder 'Telegrams (3)', box 10, country files, GFL.

⁶⁴ Stern to Kissinger, 19 Aug. 1976, folder 'Telegrams (2)', box 10, country files, GFL.

⁶⁵ Singlaub, *Hazardous duty*, p. 378.

⁶⁶ Richard D. Stillwell to joint chiefs of staff, 25 Aug. 1976, folder 'Telegrams (3)', box 10, country files, GFL.

administration believed that the large Communist powers were exercising a restraining influence on North Korea, as had been hoped would be the outcome of détente. Hummel told Congress that '[w]e believe that neither the People's Republic of China nor the USSR wish to see North Korea make any move that would destabilize the situation on the Korean peninsula'.⁶⁷ During the crisis period, Chinese and Soviet media refrained from editorial comments criticizing the US.⁶⁸ It hence cannot be said that the Ford administration's view of the Panmunjom incident was through the lens of the bipolar confrontation, as the basic irrelevance of this confrontation was realized – China and the USSR were not discussed in the WASAG meetings. More relevant was the goal of maintaining stability and credibility on the Korean peninsula, which in turn was perceived as important for the US position in the region as a whole.

The incident at Panmunjom occurred whilst Reagan was challenging Ford for the Republican presidential nomination at the party conference in Kansas City. On 19 August, newspapers across the country led with news that Reagan's challenge had been defeated, whereas front-page coverage on 20 August was given over to Ford's selection of Bob Dole as his running-mate. While the Panmunjom incident received coverage, it remained in the background. The White House received only eighty-two messages from the public about the incident, all urging punitive action.⁶⁹ Editorial boards also found little controversial in the US response, and praised the administration for its measured approach.⁷⁰ Domestic factors again played only a small role in the actual response and there was a limited discussion of electoral politics in the crisis meetings. However, it is notable that the divisive domestic debate over the troop presence in Korea which the North had sought was not sparked by the incident, which was another dimension of the Ford administration's success. The administration's actions had to be calibrated carefully to the situation on the Korean peninsula, and its quiet, measured response suited a country that was more diverted by domestic economic issues than foreign policy. Hence, just as during the *Mayaguez* incident, the administration acted in the knowledge that its assessment of what action would be best for the US position in the Asia-Pacific would also be acceptable domestically.

IV

Examining alliance diplomacy and crisis response allows us to form a clearer picture of the Ford administration's policy in the Asia-Pacific. If the US found itself on the back foot diplomatically, it still possessed assets to assert its will when it felt its interests were threatened. The administration was determined not to allow the US regional position to be further threatened by the creation of what

⁶⁷ 'Statement by Ambassador Hummel'.

⁶⁸ 'Panmunjom incident: situation report as of 0600 hours'; 'Statement by Ambassador Hummel'.

⁶⁹ Telegrams, box 143, Robert T. Hartmann papers, GFL.

⁷⁰ For examples, see *New York Times*, 23 Aug. 1976, p. 22; *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 Aug. 1976, p. 28; *Washington Post*, 24 Aug. 1976, p. A16.

the historian Robert Litwak called 'new politico-military precedents'.⁷¹ To have allowed for the disruption of shipping near Cambodia or for North Korea to kill US officers with impunity would have sent undesirable signals to the entire region at a time when uncertainty abounded. Such situations could have created new precedents and invited further aggression. The administration judged that North Korea's unprecedented probing was a result of domestic uncertainty in the US over the troop presence in Korea together with a general perception that US influence was waning. If the Ford administration's actions had merely served to validate these perceptions, then the 'series of events' feared by Kissinger could well have followed. Judging the administration's response as disproportionate is only possible with the hindsight of knowing that further provocations did not ensue, whereas in fact the US willingness to take controlled risks and act forcefully instead contributed to the non-occurrence of further provocations. The controlled risk of the US response to the Panmunjom incident appears to have been successfully calibrated, as the result was a diplomatic coup achieved without a shot fired. The fact that the Ford administration was willing to risk escalation shows the seriousness with which the incident was regarded. Its response represented the greatest success of Ford's Asia-Pacific policy, and the policy of détente and triangular diplomacy was vindicated in this instance by the fact the Soviet Union and the PRC played constructive roles in the outcome. The fact the outcome was uncontentious and low-key – in contrast to that of the *Mayaguez* incident – has probably contributed to its omission from the existing historiography, but it was precisely in these qualities that its success consisted.

Accordingly, it seems a fair judgement to argue that the Ford administration continued to pursue the goals and strategies of the Nixon administration. The precedents being set in the post-Vietnam world required different tactical responses, but the primary goal remained the same: the maintenance of a strong US presence in the Asia-Pacific at a level commensurate with the region's importance. American power had to be maintained, since it was fundamental to the 'new structure of peace' so frequently invoked by Nixon and Kissinger. 'Peace', of course, implied the maintenance of the status quo, rather than an active crusade to restructure the region. This was a defensive strategy that had begun with the opening to China. The US strategy of retrenchment would not have been possible if efforts had not been taken to reduce the perceived threat posed by China and, simultaneously, the Soviet Union via the process of détente. Hence, while it would be erroneous to suggest that the superpower competition was wholly absent from the minds of policymakers, it is a simplification to view the Ford administration's policy in the Asia-Pacific merely through this lens. To do so ignores the extent to which the whole policy was predicated on the declining urgency of the Soviet and Chinese threat. The case studies addressed above show that regional and local concerns influenced US policy in the Asia-Pacific to a greater extent than admitted by the existing historiography. One such concern

⁷¹ Litwak, *Détente and the Nixon Doctrine*, p. 96.

was the security of Japan, which the Ford administration was safeguarding by acting swiftly to meet the threat to South Korea in 1976 and by responding forcefully to a threat to shipping lanes during the *Mayaguez* incident. American policymakers feared that Japan could move into the Soviet orbit or undertake a military build-up if it had reason to be sceptical of America's commitment to its defence, and either of these actions could have proved profoundly destabilizing to the regional status quo and caused China to take retaliatory measures.

Many of the administration's critics were aware of the minimal relevance of regional crises such as the *Mayaguez* and Panmunjom incidents to the bipolar competition. The constellation of liberals, neoconservatives and traditional conservatives who opposed the general policy of détente was not placated. Tough crisis response in the Asia-Pacific was insufficient to satisfy critics who demanded a wholesale restructuring of US foreign policy and a tougher line towards the Soviet Union. They remained unimpressed by, and uninterested in, the Ford administration's holding action in the Asia-Pacific. One of their premier spokesmen, *Commentary* editor Norman Podhoretz, alleged that Kissinger 'often sounds like Churchill, and just as often acts like Chamberlain'.⁷² This group of critics saw détente as a process of appeasing the Soviet Union, and worried that the strategies of the Nixon and Ford administrations were intended as a cover, not for the continuation of American preponderance on a more sustainable basis, but for outright retreat from the world. As Reagan's campaign slogan during the 1976 primary battle explained, they sought to 'Make America No. 1 Again'. But the America that elected Jimmy Carter in 1976 was not an America ready for bold foreign action or a massive military build-up. The Ford administration's freedom of action was circumscribed by domestic and international factors that prevented it from taking up the right-wing exhortation for massively increased defence spending and the practice of more assertive diplomacy towards the Soviet Union. Under these circumstances, the administration deserves credit for its holding action in the Asia-Pacific. The stated aim of its policy was to maintain a stable balance of power in the Asia-Pacific and to avoid the creation of new politico-military precedents that might challenge the status quo: this policy was successful. When neoconservative critics of the Ford administration went on the offensive during the Reagan presidency, they owed a debt of gratitude to the Ford administration's consolidation in the Asia-Pacific.

⁷² Quoted in Anne H. Cahn, *Killing détente: the right attacks the CIA* (University Park, PA, 1998), p. 31.