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Article Review 159

Thomas Tunstall Allcock, "Diplomacy, the Media, and a Search for Legitimacy: Reassessing Gerald Ford's Pacific Tours." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 33:4 (Dec. 2022): 741-771. DOI: 10.1080/09592296.2022.2143119.

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In "Diplomacy, the Media, and a Search for Legitimacy: Reassessing Gerald Ford's Pacific Tours," Thomas Tunstall Allcock has provided an insightful reassessment of a frequently overlooked president's two major diplomatic tours to Asia during his brief three-year occupancy of the Oval Office. In his analysis of Ford's diplomatic trips to Japan, South Korea and the Soviet Union in 1974 and the People's Republic of China, Philippines and Indonesia the following year, the author evaluates both the bilateral impact of his diplomacy but also its impact on domestic electoral politics in the United States.

As observed by Allcock, the Ford White House and its foreign policy have received less attention from scholars than most modern presidential administrations, which is perhaps understandable given that he served less than three years in office. It is also true that the majority of the studies of his foreign relations are indeed focused on the Cold War and the bilateral relationship with Moscow.¹ It should be noted, however, that recent work has now begun to explore US policy towards southern Africa under Ford.² Nevertheless, this article, in emphasizing the significance Ford's Pacific tours, both regionally and domestically, further enhances our knowledge and understanding of Washington's diplomacy during the Ford years.

The article is structured in a chronological fashion beginning with the tour of Japan, South Korea, and Vladivostok in the far south east of the then Soviet Union in 1974 before moving on to discuss Ford's second trip approximately twelve months later to the People's Republic of China, Philippines and Indonesia. The text, however, is interwoven with a number of key themes, notably bilateral ties with the host countries,

¹ Douglas Brinkley, *Gerald R. Ford* (New York: Times Books, 2007); John Robert Greene, (1995). *The Presidency of Gerald R. Ford* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995); Yanek Mieczkowski, *Gerald Ford and the Challenges of the 1970s* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005); Angela Romano, "Détente, Entente, or Linkage? The Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in U.S. Relations with the Soviet Union," *Diplomatic History* 33:4 (2009): 703–22, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2009.00802.x> and Sarah B. Snyder "Through the Looking Glass: The Helsinki Final Act and the 1976 Election for President," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 21: 1 (2010): 87-106, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592290903577767>.

² Eddie Michel, "Racial Justice and the Cold War: Gerald R. Ford, Rhodesia and the Geneva Conference of 1976" *Sajundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 20:4 (2019): 467-488, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533171.2019.1668648>; Michel, "A Principled Pragmatism: Gerald R. Ford and Apartheid South Africa" *South African Historical Journal* 73:3 (2021): 651-678, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02582473.2021.1960591>;

domestic politics including electoral considerations, Ford's personal style of diplomacy, the legacy of the Richard Nixon administration, and the role of the media.

As a diplomatic historian what I find particularly appealing is the article's exploration of the oft-omitted interaction between foreign and domestic considerations. In both the reasoning for and results of the Pacific tours, Allcock not only highlights the key differences between foreign and domestic perspectives but also the intrinsically interconnected nature of international diplomacy and domestic politics.

A diverse array of foreign-policy considerations formed the rationale for the two tours. Whether Ford sought to reassure Jakarta, Manila and Seoul of the continued US commitment to regional security, wanted to reset relations with Tokyo after the damage caused by his predecessor's focus on détente with China, or the strategic need to maintain and further advance the tentative diplomatic ties already created with Peking, from the perspective of regional diplomacy, the motivation for Ford's trips to the far east of Asia sprung from a variety of factors.

From a domestic perspective, while a number of his critics in the media, such as ABC news anchor Harry Reasoner, viewed Ford's trips as a chance to escape from more pressing concerns at home, including a hostile Congress and plummeting approval ratings, Allcock correctly discerns that despite his lack of an electoral mandate and the difficulties on Capitol Hill "diplomacy was one area in which Ford could exercise a significant degree of control" and thus make his mark on US politics (744). Furthermore, as pointed out in the article, Ford hoped to leverage his diplomatic successes to enhance his prestige with the US public and boost his chances in the upcoming presidential election of 1976.

In terms of foreign policy, Ford's bilateral diplomacy, according to the author, appears to have been relatively successful, whether in rebuilding ties with Japan and South Korea or in continuing the slow pace of normalizing relations with China. While the population of East Timor would be unlikely to have been impressed with the Ford administration's private acceptance of Indonesia's plan to invade and annex its eastern neighbor, nonetheless, the visits to Jakarta and Manila helped to shore up relations with important anti-Communist allies. Ford's announcement of a 'Pacific Doctrine' focusing on the US commitment to security and trade also reassured allies of Washington's continued support in the region. (742)

Domestically however, as Allcock points out, the reaction to Ford's diplomatic efforts was less positive. While the president received faint praise in the media for his actions during the first Pacific tour, his visit to Seoul led to criticism on Capitol Hill due to the repressive policies being enacted by South Korean leader Park Chung-hee and the perception that Ford's visit could be interpreted as an approval of Park's "egregious actions" (751). While Ford was away, Congress overruled two of his vetoes, which he had used to try to control the domestic legislative agenda, thereby further fuelling the sentiment that he was abandoning his domestic responsibilities. Despite Ford's statement that his second tour was a success with "no minuses, and a lot of pluses," he failed to convince media observers and his political critics that it was anything other than a pointless waste of time and energy and a distraction from more pressing concerns at home (761).

It is quite clear from the article that in terms of his effort to use foreign policy to boost his domestic standing and thus garner support for the impending election, Ford, in the words of the author, "badly misjudged the short-term electoral benefits" contributing to his defeat by his Democratic challenger Jimmy Carter (744). It is perhaps sadly ironic that Ford's diplomacy in the Pacific, which he believed would lift his flagging approval ratings, actually had the opposite effect by portraying him as fleeing the country to avoid his troubles at home and in so doing neglecting his domestic responsibilities.

The article also offers an interesting evaluation of Ford's personal style of diplomacy. Ford was widely regarded as an affable and likable everyman with a propensity for the occasional gaffe or clumsiness. Indeed, as Allcock observes, the president demonstrated all of these traits during his Pacific tours. The visit to Japan

provides the best example of this as his Midwestern charm and good will helped to assist in defusing of tensions with Tokyo. It also demonstrated Ford's diplomatic clumsiness when he embarrassingly marched down the red carpet and straight past Japanese Crown Prince Akihito.

A recurrent theme in the article is how the legacy of the Nixon administration hung over Ford's diplomatic initiatives. Both the protracted war in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal had battered American trust in the office of the presidency, and Nixon's focus on détente with China had led to tensions with regional allies. Indeed, a key part of the rationale for Ford's Pacific tours was to shed the "baggage of his predecessor." Nevertheless, as the article demonstrates, such baggage proved hard to shed, and the shadow of Nixon loomed large over the "good-natured caretaker" of the Oval Office during his Pacific tours (742). Even during Ford's visit to China, which was designed to build on a positive policy of the Nixon era, the media unfavorably compared the growing normalization of ties with Beijing, with Nixon's trip in 1972.

Allcock also explores the power of the media in crafting the narrative, and thereby influencing the public perception of Ford's foreign policy. By the mid-1970s, the media, notably global news networks, had become more important, including as a source of information on White House diplomacy that was conducted far from American shores. Ford had hoped that the press would promote a positive impression of his trips to the Pacific but the media, especially conservative publications which favored Ford's upcoming Republican primary rival, California Governor Ronald Reagan, delivered a more skeptical and even hostile analysis of his travels in the Pacific region.

One area that would be interesting to further explore, though understandably it is not within the scope of this article, would be whether Ford's other regional diplomatic efforts also followed a similar pattern of modest success in terms of foreign policy but at the expense of a loss of electoral support domestically. This was certainly the case regarding the White House's peace initiative in Rhodesia, where Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger sought to bring a political settlement to the vexed issue of continued white minority rule.³ On a broader geopolitical level, the signing of the Helsinki Accords also had a similar impact. A wider investigation of whether Ford's actions in the field of foreign relations actually served as a hindrance to hopes of retaining the Oval Office could prove to be very enlightening.

In terms of sources, the article draws from an impressive array of archival material from the Ford Presidential Library. Allcock has also made good use of other forms of primary sources including the autobiographies of both Ford and Kissinger, US and Japanese news media, as well as online repositories such as the American Presidency Project. The author also demonstrates a good grasp of the relevant secondary literature.

To conclude, Allcock's article provides a valuable addition to the growing literature examining the broader diplomacy of the Ford administration beyond the traditional focus on the Helsinki Accords or the SALT II negotiations.⁴ The article offers an informative and lively analysis of Ford's Pacific tours and exposes the complex and interwoven relationship between foreign policy and domestic considerations.

³ Michel, "Racial Justice and the Cold War," and Michel, "A Principled Pragmatism."

⁴ Andrew Gawthorpe, "The Ford Administration and Security Policy in the Asia-Pacific after the Fall of Saigon" *The Historical Journal* 52:3 (2009): 697-716, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X09990082>; Cécile Menétrey-Monchau, "The Mayaguez Incident as an Epilogue to the Vietnam War and its Reflection of the Post-Vietnam Political Equilibrium in Southeast Asia," *Cold War History* 5:3 (2005): 337-67, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740500222127>.

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