It sometimes happens that a man will occupy a high state position, and yet will be written of and spoken of only in passing. Gerald Ford, President for barely two years, belongs in this category.

It is perhaps easier for a foreigner than for an American to characterise Ford objectively as a politician. In general terms, his administration continued the line set out by Nixon which was designated as the shift from the era of confrontation to the era of negotiations. However, certain events connected with his presidency, which left their mark on international policy, should be emphasised.

I remember when President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger arrived in Vladivostok in November 1974 for talks with Brezhnev. The President's plane landed not far from the city and Ford came boldly down the steps. We saw a quite tall man of athletic build. He turned out to be an affable type, with a pleasant, easygoing simplicity; certainly he did not look like an intellectual.

The road from the airport produced a marked impression on our guests. For its entire length, they travelled through vast fields alternating with forest, and the autumn colours were enchanting.

The talks were directed towards a new agreement on limiting strategic offensive weapons. They lasted for three days, during which I felt that both sides were seeking to clear the way for an agreement.

I will single out one issue which later became public property and at the same time - after Ford had left office - a stumbling block. Ford and Kissinger persistently wanted the USSR to relinquish a significant number of so-called heavy, land-based ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles). This would have seriously damaged our national interest and would have been against the principle of parity and equal security. The Soviet side could therefore not concede this, and we explained why.

Brezhnev said: 'We must adopt a realistic approach. Neither side should attempt to gain strategic superiority. The Soviet Union is not happy that the USA has nuclear weapons in forward positions in Europe and in other regions close to our country. Yet the American leaders will not even discuss this. In such circumstances, the American request concerning Soviet ICBMs cannot be discussed either.'

Ford finally withdrew the question from the agenda - no doubt after careful analysis by the experts and approval from the military - thus opening the way to agreement on SALT-2 and contributing to a climate of moderation in Soviet-US relations in which each side took account of the other's interests.

Similarly, the Ford administration witnessed America's participation in the Helsinki Final Act, when Ford added his name to those of the leaders of the thirty-five member states in the European conference, proving that there was still the possibility in US politics for dialogue in the search for peaceful solutions to difficult problems.

Finally, it was under Ford's administration that the Vietnam war came to an end. He said himself, 'Vietnam was a trauma for our country for fifteen years or more. The war in Vietnam is over. It was a sad and tragic event in many respects ... I think the lessons of the past in Vietnam will be learnt by Presidents, by Congress and by the American people.'

These were sober judgements, and one hopes that Washington has not forgotten them.

However, there were also negative trends in US foreign policy under Gerald Ford. In particular, in December 1974 Congress voted to accord trade and credit facilities, at most-favoured-nation level, to the Soviet Union, but made these dependent on the settlement of issues which had nothing to do with trade or international economic ties. The USSR declared that it would not enter into trade relations on a discriminatory basis.

It was also symptomatic that in March 1976 President Ford, in tune with extreme right-wing forces, ordered that his staff stop using the word 'detente' and instead start talking about 'peace through strength'. If there had not been serious issues at stake behind this, one might have thought the man in the White House was simply indulging in a little semantic exercise.

A special place in the formation of US foreign policy under Nixon and Ford belongs to Henry Kissinger, the Secretary of State whom I met more often than any other holder of that post after the war.

I have known generations of American state officials, each man with his own personality and way of thinking, and each with a supply of negotiating ammunition already well tested in his political career. Kissinger, however, had spent the war in US intelligence somewhere in Europe, and had not climbed the ladder of state service. Even so, he seemed perfectly at home in his jobs, first as Nixon's assistant and then as Secretary of State.
It took quite a few meetings at various levels to prepare SALT-I, and Kissinger and I drank many a cup of tea together at them. Our meetings in Moscow, Washington, Vienna, New York and Geneva were businesslike and dealt with the nuts and bolts of the issues. The summit meetings took place in order to draw all the ends together, to set the seal on the understandings we had reached and to maintain impetus for the future.

Whenever we two ministers took our seats at the table, each could be sure that his opposite number, first of all, wanted an agreement – otherwise he wouldn’t be there – and, secondly, was properly prepared for the discussion. This ruled out any notion of outsmarting each other or of pulling the wool over anyone’s eyes, and indeed the prestige of any man who attempted such tactics would have been damaged. It is surprising, therefore, to read in Kissinger’s memoirs suggestions that in certain cases, referring even to summit talks, he was supposedly able to ‘out-smart the Russians’. He does not, of course, produce any facts to support his claim, since there aren’t any. In practice, the Secretary of State behaved with dignity at the talks, and did not resort to any of the methods he hints at in his memoirs.

Kissinger is without doubt a capable, even a highly capable, man, who has acquired considerable experience in foreign affairs. Within the limits allowed him, he was able to put forward genuinely constructive proposals, and I always found it extremely interesting to conduct talks with him. He never stated the obvious or took refuge in the platitudes of less experienced diplomats. The arguments he brought into play always contained elements so powerful that it was not enough merely to say they were unconvincing – one had to show why they were unconvincing.

Kissinger was also given to widening the terms of his analysis, especially when the subject was world tension, the mistrust between states and between the USA and USSR. He liked to introduce theoretical reasons for Washington’s policy on a given question. When we debated arms reduction and disarmament, he would return repeatedly to his belief that all the problems which divided East and West, including the USSR and USA, were interconnected: ‘These problems cannot be solved separately, in isolation. They are all connected. Therefore they have to be solved interrelatedly.’

His judgements, however, were often dubious, offending both logic and history. For instance, he frequently cited Metternich
as his idol in nineteenth-century European political history. He believed that Metternich, the Foreign Minister of the Austro-Hungarian empire and later its Chancellor, had been right when he claimed that the problems dividing the European states should not be treated in isolation from each other, but that their solution should somehow be embodied in a single process. Kissinger had nothing convincing to offer, however, when it was pointed out to him that Metternich and his successors were in large measure responsible for the eventual collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire; and that even before its collapse it had been endlessly engaged in largely unsuccessful wars. Fortunately for the world, Kissinger did not practise what he preached with total consistency. Thus most of the successes he eventually achieved in combination with the Soviet side – particularly in the field of nuclear arms limitations – occurred because Washington did not make agreement in one area conditional upon agreement in another.

Even so, for almost the entire period of his tenure as Secretary of State, Kissinger practised the technique of applying pressure on the Soviet Union wherever possible, whether in Asia, Africa, the Middle East or anywhere else, as a way of forcing us to make concessions. Clearly this was a straight transfer to international affairs of the sort of wheeling and dealing that goes on throughout American domestic politics, and for as long as Washington employed this approach nothing useful could be achieved in talks with us. It was only when realism triumphed and the USA learned to take account of the interests of both sides that things improved.

The former Secretary of State has one particular quality of which he says nothing in his memoirs – his extraordinary ability to switch positions. For example, in our talks on strategic arms, he had accepted the principle that they were based on Soviet-US parity. He liked to repeat: ‘The principle of parity is of fundamental importance.’ Now, however, when he is out of office, the same Kissinger who contributed so much to our agreements regards this principle as a virtual anathema. Moreover, he tries to assert that the agreements made by the two powers no longer fully meet the needs of this principle. He brings no evidence for this; it is pure opportunism.

To ignore principles, as Kissinger had frequently done, is a game that takes its toll. Having immersed himself in the world of his memoirs after leaving office, Kissinger tried to join public life again by offering his services to the Reagan administration. This
was the administration which denigrated everything of value that had previously been achieved in Soviet-US relations, yet Kissinger approached it without batting an eyelid, in the hope that the new President would want him in his cabinet. However, his attempt was unsuccessful; apparently he was not quite what Ronald Reagan was looking for.

Seneca, the Roman philosopher and Nero's tutor, once uttered this wise saying: 'When a man does not know which harbour to head for, no wind is fair.'

With the advent of Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1977, the myth of the 'Soviet threat' was again dragged out and US foreign policy once more became contradictory and inconsistent. During his term of office, Carter himself slid steadily towards confrontation.

Indeed, our very first contact with the Carter administration made it plain that the USA intended to withdraw from the Soviet-US accords reached at the Vladivostok summit, and to try instead for a treaty that would give the USA significant superiority in strategic nuclear arms. It was with this mission that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance came to Moscow in March 1977.

Vance met Brezhnev and had a general discussion on nuclear weapons. I too had a number of meetings with him to discuss the issue in greater detail. I explained to him: 'The chief demand being made by the USA, namely that we destroy half our land-based ICBMs, is absurd. We are wholly opposed to tampering with the Vladivostok accords. They took so much effort from both our sides to achieve, and we must use them as a basis for a second treaty on limiting strategic offensive weapons.' I reaffirmed our position at a Moscow press conference for Soviet and foreign journalists on 31 March 1977, and international public opinion on the whole supported it.

SALT-2 was the main subject of my first meeting with President Carter, in Washington in September 1977. I arrived at the White House together with Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister G.M. Kornienko and our ambassador, A.F. Dobrynin. We were shown through to the cabinet room, where Cyrus Vance was waiting with the President's ubiquitous foreign policy adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the US ambassador to Moscow, Malcolm Toon. We all waited for President Carter to appear.

He came in unannounced through one of the many doors, and approached us with the famous half-smile on his face. He greeted us warmly, clearly wanting to show that he intended serious business.

We sat down at an oval table, the Soviet team on one side, the Americans on the other. Any other President — and I can speak from personal experience of many — would have held a meeting of this sort in his private study, where everyone would have sat in easy chairs and been extremely uncomfortable whenever they tried to speak even to their most immediate neighbours. Carter, in contrast, evidently preferred a degree of formality that positioned his advisers close at hand, where they could pass him any information he might need. This made sense, as Carter was not overburdened with foreign policy expertise and anyway he had not been in the White House very long.

It was up to me to open the discussion. I raised some key issues, notably a number of unresolved questions concerning the SALT-2 treaty, and set out our position for settling them.

Carter replied, 'We are ready to speed up completion of the work that has already been done over the last few years on this treaty.'

However, as soon as the discussion got down to brass tacks, it became clear that mutual understanding was not going to be so easy to achieve. Particular difficulties arose when we reached the point of actually defining what constituted a nuclear ballistic missile. There was also hesitation when it came to naming the locations of such weapons, even though they had long been known to both sides.

Being a diligent man, Carter did his best, but when he tried to pronounce the names of towns and regions in the Soviet Union all that came out was a sequence of incomprehensible noises. More worryingly, we quickly discovered that he had difficulty in grasping even the most elementary basic features of the Soviet-US relationship. Clearly, therefore, the President's advisers had urged him to devote his main attention to the Soviet ICBMs which he must persuade us to agree to reduce in number, and indeed he had managed to retain what they explained to him — in words of one syllable, as it were. Thus, at a certain moment, he produced a souvenir set of plastic missiles consisting of a row each of American and Soviet missiles, and set them down on the table. Pointing to two Soviet missiles which were clearly much bigger than the US ones, he said: 'These are the ones we are most afraid