One major trend in twentieth-century power politics, the rise of the superpowers, was beginning to interact with another, newer trend – the political fragmentation of the globe. Russia and the United States had to grapple with the hard fact that their ‘universalist’ message would not be automatically accepted by other societies and cultures (Paul Kennedy).

This was nothing new. Europe had seen many common causes from which particular states or social groups had opted out, whether temporarily or lastingly, and for many different reasons. The Crusades, in which the Christian nations of Europe were supposed to join in a common endeavour to liberate the Holy Places of Palestine from infidel control, provided an early example of dissidence: ‘Philip Augustus, and Richard the first, are the only kings of France and England who have fought under the same banners; but the holy service, in which they were enlisted, was incessantly disturbed by their national jealousy.’ Nor was Richard I (1189–99) the only Crusader to suffer greater treachery from fellow-Christians than from his Moslem enemies. Later wars of religion saw as many defections and reversals of alliance as the cynical eighteenth century itself, and in the long struggle from 1793 to 1815 Britain was the only major European belligerent not to have fought beside the French as well as against them, a record almost matched against Germany between 1939 and 1945. Trade, dynastic or ideological advantage, the chance to grab a little territory were considerations that often and easily diverted states from the common cause they professed.

After 1945 the world followed the example Europe had set, the main differences being a higher standard of hypocrisy, the proliferation of states and the emergence of competing common causes. The world was offered a choice of fissures: not just the Cold War, but the anticolonial struggle, the revolt of the Third World against the traditional hierarchy of international society, and the war of all against all waged, whenever they dared, by the greedier and more violent of the new nations. By one count there were 30 interstate
and 44 civil wars between 1945 and 1980. Most of these were naturally fought on land, but a minority attracted a significant naval contribution, even if there was no specifically naval war in this period. And 31 different states, the naval powers among them naturally being particularly prominent, used or threatened limited naval force for political purposes, otherwise than as an act of war, on at least 127 occasions during those years. If the world at large was usually little disturbed, this was nevertheless a period, which still continues, of violent peace.

The nations that took the initiative in using naval force, the 'assailants', were animated by a wide variety of political purposes. The arguments they advanced to justify those purposes were no less various and even more controversial. They can conveniently be summarised as justifying, in the eyes of the assailant, most uses of naval force after 1945 as being undertaken to uphold or restore the international order as that was manifested in the status quo. In many cases, of course, the other party to the conflict, the 'victim' of naval force, rejected the legitimacy of the status quo and its association with the concept of international order.

In 1949, for instance, the Royal Navy took it for granted that the practice of a hundred years had legitimised the free use of Chinese rivers by British warships and that the Siege of the Legations at Peking in 1900 had sufficiently demonstrated the need for the British Embassy in China to enjoy British armed protection. Civil war in China had reinforced the British view and lessened even the inclination of the Chinese government to object. By 1949, however, the communist rebels were gaining the upper hand, were disposed to resent foreign intrusion and were better placed to give effect to their resentment. So, when the frigate HMS AMETHYST ascended the river Yangtse to relieve the destroyer HMS CONSORT as guard­ship for the British Embassy at Nanking, the AMETHYST was shelled, on 19 April 1949, from the communist side of the river by a battery of field artillery, damaged and driven aground. Although the frigate, in a memorable display of skill and daring by her crew, was eventually refloated and repaired before making a successful escape down river to rejoin the fleet on 31 July, no British warship subsequently relieved the guard at Nanking or any other Chinese capital. Politically this had been a damaging fiasco for Britain, and once the Chinese civil war ended in a communist victory, not even the US Navy attempted to revive the tradition of treating Chinese rivers as international waters.