

ON CHINA

Henry A. Kissinger

New York: The Penguin Press, 2011, 586 pp. ISBN 798-1-59420-271-1.

In the four decades since Henry Kissinger's visit to China in 1971, the relationship between Washington and Beijing has undergone through a dramatic transformation. One case in point is that China has emerged from the painful isolation to become the most dynamic economy of the day; and the United States has to reexamine its role in a rapidly globalized world, even now its preeminence has been unrivaled since the end of the Cold War. Given this, Kissinger explores the shifting relations between the two powers in his 13th book, *On China*, published in 2011. As usual, this 89-year-old former United States National Security Advisor (1969-75), then Secretary of State (1973-77) provides an intimate historical perspective on China affairs, in particular China's relationship with the United States. Called as "Dr. Diplomacy" by media, Kissinger is one of the legendary figures in American foreign relations during the Cold War diplomacy. For the first time, Kissinger turns at a book length to a country that he has known intimately for four decades and takes the key issue that can China and the United States evolve a genuine partnership which would secure a world order in the new century. Once again he draws the world attention with his intriguing but controversial analysis.

Since then, there are a few book reviews or comments on his book, including well-known literati, such as Jonathan Spence, Robert Dallek, Niall Ferguson and Michiko Katutani. They all did diligent survey of the book with interesting views. Yet, few of them seem to venture to discuss the Sino-US relationship from the perspective of the classical tenets of diplomacy, as this book review does, and to critically expound Beijing's assertion of the "peaceful development". Kissinger observes that as China and the United States are walking toward two extremes, hence it is necessary to see each other's intentions and capabilities from a strategic height. Since he has gone through the American presidency of eight presi-

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dents (from Nixon to Obama) and closely watched the leadership shift of four generations of China, Kissinger has sort of career insights and incredible capacity to offer a clue of how the world's two largest economies would collaboratively handle their current issues and potential concerns with regard to the global crises and where the world should be heading for.

Kissinger was trained in political science at Harvard University, yet he tends to perceive international affairs not from abstract theories but from history. As he wrote in his Ph.D. dissertation *A World Restored* (1954), no sound foreign policy is made possibly without an awareness of history.¹ Due to this, Kissinger starts his *On China* with a historical review of how the leaders in Beijing, from the past Mao Zedong to current Hu Jintao, have perceived the world through the classical Chinese wisdoms. “The singularity of China” is the concept defined by Kissinger who has come to admire “the Chinese people, their endurance, their subtlety, their family sense, and the *very* culture they represent. Indeed, no other country can claim so long a continuous civilization, or such an intimate links to the ancient past from which classical principles of strategy and statesmanship derived.” In this light, Kissinger covered Chinese history from the third century B.C. to the twenty-first century into eighteen chapters, with four peculiar themes; as they follow; “From preeminence to decline (prologue and chapters 1-3); the Mao era (chapters 4-11); Deng’s *demarche* and his successors (chapters 12-17); and the new millennium (chapter 18), with an inspiring epilogue.²

Kissinger was not an expert on China affairs, in terms of his early studies and cultural affinity. In the 1950s, he saw China as a staunch Communist regime with a view of defeating Capitalism by

1 Henry Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace 1812-1822* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), p. 331.

2 Yale University historian Jonathan Spence divided *On China* into six sequential themes: 1. China’s early history, 2. China’s inadequate attempts to modify the imperial system of the later dynasties, 3. the formative years of Maoist consolidation, 4. Kissinger’s own experiences while orchestrating President Nixon’s 1972 China visit, 5. China’s later cycles of “opening up” and repression under Deng Xiaoping, and 6. epilogue. However, it is believed that they are inaccurately overlapped—noted by author.

flexible tactics and inflexible purpose. However, his insight into history, especially into Chinese ancient philosophy, and his rare capacity “as a senior official of the White House, as a message carrier between the two capitals, and as a scholar” all help make him an old China-hand in the purview of the foreign policy-making and the thinking of the ruling elite in Beijing. Kissinger reluctantly if not never comments on the human rights issues in China, but this is due to his pragmatic style and religion faith rather than his immoral trait, as some scholars argued. He is actually well-aware of Chinese subtlety and their strong sense of compromise and the win-win approach. For that end, Kissinger does play as a key interlocutor compared with other scholars who were trained in Chinese studies but short of real sense of Chinese reality.

As a retired statesman and senior diplomat, Kissinger wrote *On China* in his late 80s with an obligation of revealing when China and the United States first restored the tattered relations in 1972, the greatest contribution of the leaders of the time was their willingness to raise their sights beyond the immediate issues of the time. In doing so, they had the courage and vision necessary to cross the short-term barriers resulting from their long isolation from each other. The efforts made by the leaders of a generation ago in effect “laid the basis for a world unimaginable then and unachievable today in the event of no mutual trust and cooperation between the two countries.” This has been surely a complex journey, because both societies deem that they represent unique values. The Americans hold that they have a duty to spread their values and institutions to every part of the world in terms of “Manifest Destiny”. In contrast, the Chinese are more proud of their continuous tradition and universal culture, that is, the ancient intellect of the Middle Kingdom.³ Meanwhile, it has no motive of proselytizing other aliens nearby or afar, as the Chinese graded all other states as

³ One hundred years ago, American missionary and scholar W. A. P. Martin wrote his book *The Lore of Cathay: the Intellect of China*, wherein he argued “If China is to be a part of family of civilized States,—Chinese thought, the principles at the basis of Chinese history and life must be understood.” (Honolulu, Hi: University Press of the Pacific, 2004), p. 2.

various levels of tributaries based on their approximation to Chinese cultural and political forms. Yet, this *raison d'etre* was severely diminished when China's low place was exposed in the world dictated by the West; for sure, its ancient pride and modern ordeal resulted from foreign powers have aroused the contemporary *élan* for a stronger, progressive and respected place in the world.

Looking into the new century, Kissinger's primary focus in *On China* is to illuminate the inner workings of Chinese diplomacy that prized the virtues of subtlety, patience, indirection over feats of martial prowess during all pivotal events, with an emphasis on the decades from 1972 until today, during which "eight U.S. presidents and four generations of Chinese leaders have managed their delicate relationship in a consummate manner, considering their disputes in light of their strategic goals. He puts it that Beijing and Washington have allowed neither historic legacies nor current domestic politics to jeopardize the essentially cooperative relationship. Obviously, most of the political elite and popular opinion of the two sides come to a *de facto* consensus that, though diverse ideologically and institutionally, the fundamental interests of China and the United States have been so closely interdependent economically and strategically that a new round of Cold War between them would impose negative effects on the development of a whole generation in the Asia and the Pacific or even beyond that region.

Once again, in his book, Kissinger examined the Chinese, their leaders and the outlook of the world order. Drawing on his extensive and intimate meetings with four generations of Chinese leaders, he brings to life towering figures such as Mao, Zhou Enlai and Deng Xiaoping, revealing how their different visions have shaped China's modern destiny. With his singular vantage point on U.S.-China relations, Kissinger observed that Chinese negotiators like to use diplomacy to weave together political, military, and psychological elements into an overall strategic design. Yet, American diplomats feel an obligation to break deadlocks with new proposals—unintentionally inviting new deadlocks to elicit new bargains. Given this, it is

surely necessary for the two sides, either leaders or their aides, sensibly to incline towards understanding of the culture of each other. Kissinger argues that Chinese leaders never sound unreasonable, but sensible and pragmatic in most cases; unlike their counterparts in the United States, they make unreasonable demands and have confused ideas about democracy and human rights.

For example, he describes Mao advocated his ideas in a Socratic manner, beginning with a question or an observation and inviting comment. He would then follow with another observation: “Out of this web of sarcastic remarks, observations and queries would emerge a direction, though rarely a binding commitment.” Also in Kissinger’s eyes, Zhou always conducted lengthy conversations with the effortless grace and superior intelligence of the Confucian sage. He sensibly remarks that the elegant Zhou—who would be criticized for having concentrated on softening some of Mao’s practices rather than resisting them, who must balance the benefits of the ability to alter events against the possibility of exclusion, should he bring his objections to any one policy to a head. Frankly, Kissinger calls Deng Xiaoping the “indestructible leader of China”, as he was politically rehabilitated again in the wake of Mao’s demise and then resolutely guided China’s economic modernization during the crucial decades that follows. He writes that Deng is acerbic, no-nonsense style and he rarely wasted time on pleasantries, nor did he feel it necessary to soften his remarks by swaddling them in parables as Mao did. Yet, the rise of China nowadays is a sure testimonial to Deng’s vision, tenacity and common sense.

Due to Deng’s reform that has transformed China from a poverty-ridden, poorly educated nation into a great power, it now plays an increasingly pivotal role in the world affairs. As he analyzed in his *Diplomacy* (1994), in view “of all the great, and potentially great, powers nowadays, China is the most ascendant.” The United States already is the most powerful *status quo* country. Europe must work harder to forge greater unity as expected, Russia, though a giant still, needs time to recover; Japan is wealthy for sure but even so, it is

timid geopolitically. China, with rapid economic growth, a strong sense of national cohesion, and an ever more muscular military, will exhibit the greatest relative increase in stature among the major powers. Should the United States use all the means at its disposal to delay as long as possible the emergence of China as a major power? The answer from Kissinger is obviously negative. He argues that, first, China does not challenge the domestic structure of other states on ideological grounds; economically China is still a developing country but the largest one in the world; internationally, modern China has a huge stake in the world economic system — much more than the Soviets ever had — generating powerful incentives not to challenge the *status quo* in both Asia and the world at large; culturally, the Chinese are patient and long-range, deeply believing in their historical destiny.

It is true that, viewed from the past, the geopolitical challenge is likely perceived not as the conquest of neighboring countries but as preventing a combination of them against China. Least of all can it be in the interest of China's leaders to provoke the United States, the most distant power, which has never grabbed China's territory and dignity. To be sure, Chinese public statements often express concerns with American alliances in Asia, giving credence to the view that China's long-term objective is to undermine the America's political role and military presence in the region. Yet, prudent Chinese leaders will not lightly risk major confrontation with the world's dominant military power at this stage of China's development. Here is the wisdom of Kissinger like a sage that "conflicts with the United States would free all the countries around the vast Chinese periphery to pursue their various ambitions as well as territory claims." Thus, a far more prudent course for China would be to implement the basic maxim of its intellect—"of pitting the far-off barbarians against those close by." In such a context, the United States is cast in the role of a geopolitical option for China rather than an innate adversary necessarily. To take that evidence, Kissinger reveals the Dai Bingguo's discourse on the peaceful development of China.⁴

4 Kissinger, *On China*, p. 508. Dai is State Councilor, the highest-ranking officials overseeing China's foreign policy —noted by author.

However, the argument that a cooperative United States-China relationship is essential to global peace and stability needs mutual trust in their search for common goals. Can China and the United States develop a genuine strategic trust to overcome their cultural divergences and security concerns? At this point, even Kissinger cautiously raises the question of “Does History Repeat Itself”, with presenting a classic case of pre-World War I diplomacy, known widely by its author’s name as the “Crowe Memorandum”. Eyre Crowe was a career diplomat in the British Foreign Office with a special knowledge of Germany. In this well-written document (1907), Crowe wrote that Germany was bidding for the mastery of Europe with a view of projecting a kind of ruthless common sense rather than profound complexity. In light of that rationale, there are senior military officers and policymakers in both China and the United States today who wonder whether Crowe’s formulas could be adapted to the present time so as to replace early-twentieth-century Germany and England with the choices facing China and the United States now.

Kissinger frankly admitted there is today a “Crowe school of thought” in the United States, which sees China’s rise as incompatible with America’s position in the Pacific and therefore best met with containment policy or even a pre-emptive option. He perceives growing anxieties in both societies and fears they are exacerbated by Americans who claim that democracy in China is a prerequisite for a trusting relationship. He also warns that the implied next Cold War would arrest progress in both nations and cause them to “analyze themselves into self-fulfilling prophecies” when in reality their main competition is more likely to be economic than military. Thus, Kissinger warns that were a cold war to develop between the countries, it would arrest progress for a generation on both sides of the Pacific and spread disputes into internal politics of every region at a time when global issues like nuclear proliferation, the environment, energy security and anti-terrorism impose global cooperation. Thus, “relations between China and the United States need not —and should not— become a zero-sum game.”

Indeed, in the post-Deng period, Kissinger observes that the successors to Deng, from Jiang Zemin to Hu Jintao who are technocrats rather than career politicians, have reiterated the calls for China's "peaceful rise." In particular, after the return of Hong Kong and Macau, China's leaders no longer made any claim to represent a unique revolutionary truth available for export. Instead, they have espoused the essentially defensive aim of working toward a world not overtly hostile to their system of governance or territorial integrity and have invested all energy to develop the economy and work out diverse domestic problems. In light of this, Kissinger suggests "if America's preference for democratic governance is made the main condition for progress on other issues with China, deadlock is inevitable. Those who battle to spread American values deserve respect." But foreign policy must define means as well as objectives, and if the means employed grow beyond the tolerance of the international framework or of a relationship considered essential for national security, a choice must be made. He insists that "the best outcome in the American debate would be to combine the two approaches: "for the 'idealists' to recognize that principles need to be implemented over time and hence must be occasionally adjusted to circumstance; and for the 'realists' to accept that values have their own reality and must be built into operational policies."⁵

Similarly, Kissinger is worried about the rise of a new assertive nationalism in China along with its dynamic economic development. Internationally, there are some arguments going as this, China has a saying: "Hide one's capabilities and bide one's time, and endeavor to achieve something." So foreign observers speculate that China's declaration of taking a path of peaceful development is a probably conspiracy carried out under circumstances in which China is still not powerful enough of the time. Beijing's rhetorical commitment to peaceful rise is obviously taken as a propaganda with full of ideological jargons. But, Kissinger's analysis sounds more instructive and reflective. Because China's economic growth

⁵ Kissinger, *On China*, p. 508

has benefited from the current globalized world system wherein the United States carries on free trade rules and liberal regimes, Kissinger argues, China's economy will suffer tremendously from a duel with the United States. In addition, he never disregards China's domestic affairs. As Kissinger puts it, despite its unprecedented economic ascendance, China must keep its economic growth rate at annually 7 percent—a goal that would leave any Western nation gasping. Otherwise, the much-dreaded internal unrest will be expected. Corruption, meanwhile, is deeply embedded in the economic culture. He writes, “it is one of history's ironies that Communism, advertised as bringing a classless society, tended to breed a privileged class of feudal proportions.” Then followed is China's rapidly aging population that may dwarf our own impending Social Security crisis. Yes, the Chinese may be better equipped, psychologically and philosophically, to withstand the coming shocks than the rest of us. However, that is an issue ever overlooked.

Due to the diverse and thorny issues faced by both Washington and Beijing, Kissinger once again exhibits his habitual preference for diplomatic architecture. He insists that the common interests the two powers share should make possible a “co-evolution” to “a more comprehensive framework.” With a solid awareness of the concept of collective security of the Atlantic, he puts forward a wise notion of creating a “Pacific community”, comparable to the Atlantic community that America has achieved with Europe. In doing so, all Asian nations would then participate in a system perceived as a joint endeavor rather than a contest of rival Chinese and American blocs. And leaders on both Pacific coasts would be obliged to “establish a tradition of consultation and mutual respect,” positively making a shared world order “an expression of parallel national aspirations.” To that end, Kissinger does invest his hopes in a concert of nations represented.

In summary, forty years ago, the first American president's visit to China was assumed to change the world; but four decades later, if the United States and China could merge their efforts not to change the

world only, but to construct it in a creative way, that might be indeed the mission of the first Kissinger's journey to Beijing. While he does not quite say so, but his book *On China* implies clearly. True, Kissinger shares privileged insight into the thinking of the Beijing leadership and weaves historical and philosophical understanding of China. No matter how your view of this senior policy practitioner, government messages carrier and political scientist, *On China* is an essential book for students of Sino-American relations and perhaps anyone who is eager to be aware of the world politics. But to Beijing, Kissinger's initiative that "all Chinese on either side of the Taiwan Strait maintain that there is but one China and that Taiwan is a part of China" has been always appreciated highly as the token of his friendship to the Chinese people.

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