



THE EMERGENCE OF CHINA IN THE SYSTEM OF STATES: A REVIEW OF KISSINGER'S "ON CHINA"

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ABSTRACT

The significant role politics of China either domestic or international play in our current international system cannot be glossed over. Former American diplomat and scholar, Henry Kissinger, looked at this role through a historical pathway with a book entitled "On China" of which this review is made. What role did China's emergence play in the shaping of the 21st century? The author's central focus was understanding, the evolution of China vis-à-vis its entry into the world system of States, its place and conceptual lenses in modern diplomacy and international relations. This was done by linking the reconstruction of the past to enhance a present understanding in order to aid a vital quest to appreciate and predict our future international relations and diplomacy vis-à-vis China, the United States and the rest of the world and the problems and opportunities that lie ahead especially involving Sino – American relations. Through this review, vital criticisms and suggestions are offered to enhance the understanding of international politics regarding cooperation, peace and conflict.

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INTRODUCTION

"On China" was published in 2011 by The Penguin Press, Inc, New York (USA). It was authored by the renowned American politician and diplomat, Henry Kissinger. Kissinger combined his years of experience and know-how – a political scientist at Harvard, the United States National Security Advisor and later as the Secretary of State of President Nixon – to produce this book. Although there are no subdivisions in contents of 18 chapters (pp.1–2), as a matter of critical perspective, it is appropriate to say that the book is implicitly divided into two parts. The first part is pure Chinese history which encompasses approximately the first 150 pages stretching from the whole of chapters 1 to 7 (pp.15–149). The second part of the book is on Sino – American foreign relations or rapprochement in the 1970's – since the two fought each other in Korea in 1950 – which as a matter of fact was developed under the tutelage of Kissinger himself. It was more or less an account of Kissinger's own works and resembles a sort of, Kissinger: An Autobiography. This implicit part also stretches from chapters 8–18 (pp.151–377). What role did China's emergence play in the shaping of the 21st century?

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The author's central focus was understanding, the evolution of China vis-à-vis its entry into the world system of States, its place and conceptual lenses in modern diplomacy and international relations. Kissinger charts a route linking the reconstruction of the past to enhance a present understanding and aid a vital quest to appreciate and predict our future in international relations and diplomacy vis-à-vis China, the United States and the rest of the world and the problems and opportunities that lie ahead especially involving Sino – American relations. The first part of Chinese history is itself sub-divided into two: ancient history centered in chapter 1; and a more modern history comprising of Chapters 2 to 7. The first part transports us through the country's ancient glorious years of unique civilization. Kissinger began his journey with the opening opinion in Chapter 1 that the Chinese people, culture and civilization shows "no traces of the state of infancy" and that "they seem to have been always living in the same stage of advancement as in the present day" (p.15). These lines are supported by the founding myth regarding the Yellow Emperor who is seen as the founding father that alludes that it was a matter of "reestablishing, not creating, an empire" and Confucius who also "stressed that he had invented nothing, that he was merely trying to reinvigorate the principles of harmony which had once existed in the golden age but had been lost" in his era (p.15). The uniqueness of the civilization nurtured a particular perception among Chinese emperors who

claimed the Mandate of Heaven – “communication on the grandiloquent assurance that having, with reverence, received the commission from Heaven to rule the universe” (p.19) and that “states that imbibed Chinese culture and paid tribute to China’s greatness constituted the natural order of the universe” (p.18). Its unique civilization commensurate with rich economy and scientific invention, for example in navigation – Zheng He’s ships (p.17). The introductory chapter does not discuss the uniqueness of ancient glory in isolation. It is related to international relations. The Chinese knew the concept of realism theory and its application especially in terms of military conquests as demonstrated by Sun Tzu’s Art of War. Sun Tzu ideas of battle, like Machiavellian stratagems of our age, advised Chinese Emperors to build strong armies and engage in warfare, conquer with extraordinary and employ techniques of surprise and deception: “ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting” (pp.28–33). Although balance of power (Waltz, 1979) diplomacy played out in modern Europe and no state or religion “was strong enough to impose its will” on others, in fact hegemony was known, sought for and achieved by states of ancient China. Chinese Emperors stayed clear of other nations – a kind of isolationism. They held no “summit meetings with other heads of state” and when contacts were made, audiences represented “men from afar who brought tribute to recognize his over lordship” and “came to be transformed by the Emperor’s civilizing influence”. “Distant regions” were considered as “Barbarians” and they would be treated “humanely and compassionately in proportion to their attainment of Chinese culture and their observance of rituals connoting submission to China” (pp.24–25) and when “distant regions” prevailed in war, they got “assimilated into the order they had sought to dominate” through “Chinese method, Chinese language and existing Chinese bureaucracy” (p.27).

FORCE OPENING

Kissinger showed a more modern aspect of the Chinese history with his linkage exposition on Chinese foreign contacts and its subsequent forced opening (pp.35–43); culminating in a clash of orders and its attendant Opium wars, 1839 -1842 and 1856–1860 and “unequal treaties” (pp.44–50); a deep abyss fall and the “centuries of humiliation” (pp.51–75) until the unification of the country in 1949 and subsequent Mao’s revolutions (pp.75–145). The Chinese preeminence or ancient glory attracted “distant regions” especially from Europe and later America and Japan. The British with “The Macartney Mission” (pp.37–43) were the “Barbarians” to first arrive with the hope of establishment of mutual diplomatic embassies, conducting free trade on the Chinese coastal ports and address discriminately practices in trade, however all these goals failed to yield substantial results (p.37). “Barbarian” contacts in the form of trade resulted in the clash of ethics and values – the sales and smuggling of opium – resulting in wars and these subsequent treaties: Legalization of opium trade; minimal Chinese tariffs on imports; payment of indemnity to cover the cost of lost opium; ceding of Hong Kong to Britain; adoption of a most-favored-nation treatment; adoption of a treaty of extraterritoriality (foreign states exercised jurisdiction over their nationals residing in Chinese treaty ports); forced opening of other Chinese ports to foreign vessels and merchants; acceptance of foreign ambassadors in Beijing and offering equal treatment. (pp. 44–50). Cohen (2000) corroborated this. As a weakened State, Kissinger averred that China adopted some self-strengthening mechanisms in the mix of domestic,

ethnic and religious upheavals, rebellions and uprisings including the Taiping, Nian and Muslim Rebellions and later the Boxer uprising (pp.57–75). It however continued to carve the traditional path – “using Barbarians against Barbarians” and psychological diplomacy and warfare without adopting modern military techniques albeit numerous advices from statesmen and experts for example, Wei Yuan, Lin Zexu, Li Hongzhang on the need to develop modern military capabilities (pp.51–56; pp.62–66). It is worthy of note that one key aspect of this broad and seemingly boring historical reconstruction implicitly lies a key diplomatic maneuver of Chinese governments and still form a major part of Chinese diplomacy and warfare even today is what I refer to as Diplomatic Psychology specifically, hospitality as an instrument of diplomatic strategy. Diplomatic Psychology is exhibited throughout the book both in the ancient or modern historic periods and in the second part of the book that examines Sino–American rapprochement. This is an area that needs more research by students and practitioners of international relations and diplomacy. This is also inherent in the Sun Tzu’s Art of War. As early as the 3rd century, Zhuge Liang’s “Empty City Stratagem” based on psychological warfare, fended off an enemy by opening up the city gates, pretending to care less about an eminent threat posed by an approaching enemy. The enemy’s commander interpreted this as a form of a trap and turned his troop away (p.83). Macartney was dismissed after one and half months with a note left on a silk chair after a flattering hospitality of gifts, dishes and wines (pp.40–41). Zhou Enlai managed to get a presidential visit when he met Kissinger for the first time in 1971 by scheduling only two negotiating slots (pp.178). A subtle invitation to American Ping-pong team who were accorded with high level diplomacy (p.173). At Kissinger and Zhou’s first meeting, Zhou accorded Kissinger with seniority and the act of Zhou himself going to call the Kissinger’s envoy (p.177) showed flattery.

CHINA IN THE SYSTEM OF STATES

On a broad assessment of this long history, it will not be out of place to say that Kissinger merely indulged in historical narrative and description. It looks more or less a straight forward historical account for History students than an analytical work. Moreover, Kissinger description of the Chinese preeminence makes it seem like it was all rosy until the intrusion of external forces. There was no mention at all of the balance of power display and the struggle years of ancient Chinese system in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods for hegemony involving Chu, Qi, Jin, Wu, Qin, Yue, Yan, Lu, Song, Wei and a host of other states and clans (Hui, 2004). Perhaps, Kissinger is with the view that understanding the long period of Chinese history is important to comprehend China’s modern diplomatic maneuvers. However, the historical part of the book reinforces the sense of China’s essential differences in terms of how it sees the world and its place in it, its own history and its impacts on other civilizations and the world. The second part of the book (chapters 8–18) is on Sino–American foreign relations or rapprochement in the 1970’s – since the two fought each other in Korea in 1950 (pp.97–113). A war in which China was plunged into by USSR –Stalin – as Kissinger noted “he urged Mao to intervene, expecting that such an act would create a lasting hostility between China and the United States and increase China’s dependence on Moscow” (p.113). Kissinger himself was the key man in this development. He played a key role as the then

United States Secretary of State. It was more or less an account of Kissinger's own work. It is on this basis that I refer to this part as Kissinger: An Autobiography. The accounts go on to indicate that although none could be said to have won, the results of the war meant "something more than a draw" for China, establishing "China as a military power and center of Asian revolution....built up military credibility as an adversary worthy of fear and respect" (p.112). The US-China rapprochement was also preceded by a period of domestic turmoil in China beginning with the "The Great Leap Forward" (p.136) program which was believed to be the cause of "one of the worst famines in the human history, leading to deaths of over twenty million people" because, Mao had set a challenge so far outside the realm of objective reality that even the Chinese people fell short of its achievement. ...production goals were exorbitant, and the prospect of dissent or failure was so terrifying that local cadres took to falsifying their output figures and reporting inflated totals to Beijing (p.137). Next was the Cultural Revolution which Mao sought to use to replace the "Four Olds – old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits – that, in Maoist thinking, had kept China weak". Local government institutions were dissolved in violent confrontation throughout the country. Leaders of the Communist Party, army and all elites were "purged and subjected to public humiliation". Schools closed, children turned on parents, and students brutalized teachers; professionals, high officials and elites "sent down to farms and factories to learn revolutionary practice from illiterate peasants" (pp.144–145). During 1969, the signals of a possible China-USSR war grew prompting the US to speed up its consideration in view of an imminent Soviet attack as the US conveyed "that the United States was not indifferent and would not be passive" in case of war (p.164) albeit according to Kissinger "for a generation, China had been viewed as the more bellicose of the two Communist giants (p.163). It must be noted that the condition and purpose of alliance either in balance of power, balance of threat (Walt, 1988), balance of interest (Schweller, 1994), soft balancing (Paul, 2005), or omnibalancing (David, 1991), etc underlies the element of uncertainty in foreign relations. Both the US and China had an idea of what they needed each other for – to create doubt in the mind of the USSR to prevent it from launching attack against either side or their allies. An identification of a common security threat meant that China and the US had no excuse not to talk.

A concrete step towards rapprochement was made with a subtle invitation of American ping-pong team to China on 14th April 1971 (p.173). Another key event is Kissinger's secret trip to China where the groundwork was laid. Among other things revealed was Zhou's declaration of China as a non-power but a developing economy who would aim high and develop fast and "when our economy is developed, we will still not consider ourselves a superpower and will not join in the ranks of the superpowers" (pp.176–188). The momentous event occurred on 21st February 1972 when President Nixon of the United States arrived in China and several discussions, negotiations and alliance were sealed (pp.188–196) with the "The Shanghai Communiqué of 27th February, 1972. It summed up the areas of agreement and disagreement between the US and China at the end of Nixon's visit. China reaffirmed its support for North Vietnam, while the US supported South Vietnam. On Korea, China stressed the need for unification while the US stressed relaxation of diplomatic tensions between the Koreans (pp.197–202). Kissinger wrote "the

secret trip to China reestablished the Sino-American relationship. The Nixon visit began a period of strategic cooperation. ...The language of the Shanghai Communiqué implied a kind of alliance" (p.203). Kissinger conveyed that the significant process made with the rapprochement with China had a great effect on the subsequent administration of Deng Xiaoping with his "socialism with Chinese characteristics" that embraced of international market and investment (p.234). It must be noted that the current speedy economic progress of China owes tremendously to the programs of Deng Xiaoping who according to Kissinger, emphasized science and technology in Chinese economic development; the reprofessionalization of the Chinese workforce; and the encouragement of individual talent and initiative,...professional competence above political correctness,...reward individuals for excelling in their chosen fields,...tens of thousands of Chinese students would be sent abroad (pp.237–240). The final chapters of "On China" described the aftermath of Jiang Zemin and the millennium leaderships of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao and their millennium relationships with American administration headed by George W. Bush and later Barack Obama. Kissinger opined that "China and the United States no longer had a common adversary, but neither had they yet developed a joint concept of world order" (p. 348). However both have developed a kind of consensus on some issue-areas such as terrorism and "inched closer to each other's positions on Taiwan in 2003" although certain differences persist in areas of economics and proliferation of weapons vis-à-vis North Korea (pp.351–353).

Kissinger concluded in the epilogue that he considers "the cooperative US-China relationship...to be essential to global stability and peace" (p. 372). He hopes both the US and China will engage in "a serious joint effort involving the continuous attention of top leaders...to develop a sense of genuine strategic trust and cooperation" (p. 372) to build a "Pacific Community" of "a region to which the United States, China, and other states all belong and in whose peaceful development all participate" (p. 376). Although he was optimistic, he noted that "the crucial competition between the United States and China is more likely to be economic and social than military" (p.374). Looking at the current trade wars between the US and China, is it correct to say that Kissinger is right or is it too early to make this assessment? He foresees even a "partnership" to be difficult task but rather a more "co-evolution" in which "both countries pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict." (p. 375). He admonished both states to avoid a zero-sum game interaction and to avoid the path of the late 19th century German – British analogy that "the challenge was that a gain for one side spelled a loss for the other, and compromise ran counter to an aroused public opinion" because "even the most precise analogy does not oblige the present generation to repeat the mistakes of its predecessors. After all, the outcome was disaster for all who were involved whether victor or defeated" (pp.368–373). In particular, the US should stay out and not seek to change the nature of the Chinese state by imposing human rights and democracy as this "is likely to involve vast unintended consequences" especially in a "country with such a historical vision of itself" (pp.374–375). One could argue that the best part of this book is the epilogue (pp.367–377). Most parts of the book engaged in mere descriptions and general accounts; less analysis and lack International Relations theoretical

frameworks. However, the epilogue in fact analyzes and discusses. Another positive aspect of the book is the utilization of primary sources in a form of a full eye witness accounts in describing US diplomatic strategy during the period of China – America reconciliation and in itself provides excellent information for understanding and rethinking about the Cold

War period: a great source of material and information for scholars and students for further research. However it was made possible only on the basis of the political position Kissinger was privileged to occupy. Although today there are minor disagreements between the two countries on some issue-areas, the present sangfroid relations between the US and China owes greatly to the 1972 Nixon – Mao or Kissinger – Zhou rapprochement. Most contemporary books on China written by Europeans or Americans make projections into the future based on democratic rhetoric. Kissinger's book was not only silent on such but also avoided a judgmental posture. Perhaps, it's because most parts of the entire work lack analysis as there were too much of recounting historical events. In doing so, he declined to condemn some Chinese brutality and atrocities for example the "Tiananmen Square massacre" as he wrote "this is not the place to examine the events that led to the tragedy at Tiananmen Square; each side has different perceptions depending on the various, often conflicting, origins of their participation in the crisis" (p.295). He also refused to comment on areas such as Chinese territorial claims and sometimes aggressiveness concerning South China and Yellow Seas and some islands – Natuna and Senkaku – for example; as well as Chinese transfer of nuclear weapons technology to Iran, Pakistan, and a support for North Korea's nuclear program. Kissinger claims what really changed the world was the Nixon's diplomatic feat of rapprochement with China.

Although this feat deserves credit, there are other major events that happened in the Cold War period that could not be ignored as a game changer of the world for example Gorbachev's liquidation of the Soviet Union and the Communist Party. Combining the first part and the second part, it seems Kissinger is with the opinion that due to China's rich history of unique civilization or preeminence and the differences in the lenses of Chinese leaders, the US should calmly and beautifully capitulate to China's rise in order to avoid any incoming conflicts.

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