Review - Kissinger On China

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One surefire way to know that a bilateral relationship is of the upmost importance to the future of the international system is for Henry Kissinger to devote an entire book to the topic. Whereas Kissinger's recent works include a sweeping account of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War world[ii] and a *tour de force* on 400 years of European diplomacy[iii]– his most recent offering, *On China*, is more akin to his earlier works such as *The Troubled Partnership: A Reappraisal of the Atlantic Alliance*, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* and *A World Restored: Metternich, Castereagh and the Problems of Peace: 1812-22*.

On the other hand, a Kissinger book on U.S.-China relations seems long overdue. After all, few, if any, U.S. statesmen have had such a resounding impact on Sino-American relations. While ostensibly a history book on China with an explicit emphasis on its modern relationship with the United States, the book reads like a guide book to future American diplomats tasked with maintaining the fragile but essential relationship with Beijing. In writing this Kissinger pays close attention to the difference in Chinese and Western foreign policy styles, threat perceptions and concepts of deterrence. The extensive attention he devotes to individual leaders, on the other hand, reaffirms his adherence to the Classical Realist paradigm he helped define.[iv] His assessment of the future of the bilateral relationship has also once again brought to the fore the fissures that divide the Republican Party's foreign policy establishment. Although these are nothing new, they are likely to have significant ramifications on future U.S.-Chinese relations.

I. The Nature of Chinese Foreign Policy

One general issue I have had with many recent works on the rise of China and Asia has been that they all seem to endlessly cite impressive economic statistics in order to demonstrate to a not so skeptical reader that global power is shifting from West to East. What seems to get lost in this tired formula is any real analysis of the strategic culture that will make Chinese (and Asia more generally) global leadership different from that of its Western counterparts.

Kissinger's book goes a long way towards rectifying this shortcoming. Kissinger takes the rise of China as a given; and as such, explains the cultural and diplomatic characteristics that are uniquely Chinese. He begins the book with three chapters on ancient China and its subsequent century of humiliation before turning to modern times, which comprises the majority of the book. This helps convey the continuity in Chinese foreign policy that, to some degree, hints that there is some predictability in Beijing's actions.

The history of ancient China is broad and, by Kissinger's own admission, an oversimplification. [v] Still, Kissinger is able to convey the long history that has instilled the Chinese will a strong sense of pride in their culture. "Chinese elites grew accustomed to the notion that China was unique" Kissinger writes of the period. "Not just a 'great civilization' among others, but civilization itself (10)." Much like the United States, ancient China felt a strong sense of exceptionalism. Unlike American exceptionalism Kissinger points out, "In the Chinese version of exceptionalism, China did not export its ideas but let others come to seek them (17)."

Just as Kissinger has argued that Europe's adoption of Realpolitik and balance-of-power principles was nearly inevitable given geopolitical realities (16), ancient China's existence, vis-a-vis its neighbors, ingrained in it traits that persist to modern times. What Kissinger calls the most remarkable aspect of ancient Chinese foreign policy is that for most of its history, "the numerous 'lesser' peoples along China's long and shifting frontiers were often better armed

and more mobile than the Chinese," leaving China in a position where, "individually, neighboring peoples could pose formidable threats; with any degree of unity, they would be overwhelming (19)."

The recognition that, if united, its neighbors could overwhelm it, created an acute fear of strategic encirclement among Chinese leaders. Nonetheless, through shrewd diplomacy that one suspects Kissinger greatly admires, China maintained its preeminence in the region until the 19th century when European powers engulfed it. To maintain its superiority in the pre-European period, "Chinese statesmen relied on a rich array of diplomatic and economic instruments to draw potentially hostile foreigners into relationships that China could manage. The highest aspiration was less to conquer… than to deter invasion and prevent the formation of barbarian coalitions (20)." This was not always successful, of course, and Chinese leaders learned how to deal with nations that would not act in accordance with its wishes. Kissinger recounts, "For those who would not obey, China would exploit divisions among them, famously 'using barbarians to check barbarians' and, when necessary, 'using barbarians to attack barbarians (20)." This strategy would later resurface during the Cold War when China played the two superpowers off each other sometimes without the great powers even being aware it was happening.[vi]

These Sino strategies differ greatly from that of the Western tradition which, Kissinger notes, favored all-or-nothing battles and "decisive clash of forces (23)."[vii] In modern times, beginning during the Cold War, these differences manifested themselves in varying conceptions of deterrence. In the Western tradition, deterrence is the promise of such overwhelming retaliation to an enemy's action that any gains the enemy excepts to obtain from taking that action are easily overweighed by the punishment he would have to endure in return. This type of deterrence finds its best expression in the realm of nuclear weapons whereas a state maintains a second-strike nuclear capability that is sizeable enough to make an initial nuclear attack on it suicidal.[viii] In contrast, China's fear of strategic encirclement leads it to pursue a policy that Kissinger terms offensive or preemptive deterrence. Offensive deterrence utilizes quick and limited preemptive armed force[ix] in order to deter its rivals from taken future actions which it judges as inevitable without its intervention. Examples of China's offensive deterrence strategy are, according to Kissinger, the introduction of PLA forces in the Korean War, the Taiwan Strait crises, the Sino-Indo war of 1962 and the Chinese-Vietnam war in 1979 (also termed the Third Vietnam War).

Comparing the Korean and Third Vietnam Wars helps illustrate these points. In both instances, China chose to take on a much more powerful superpower[x] in an indirect place of conflict in an effort to fend off what it judged as inevitable future attacks on the Chinese homeland. Moreover, it believed that if it did not confront the superpowers abroad at this moment, it would later face a much more powerful foe. As Kissinger recounts, "Both Chinese decisions [to intervene in the wars] were directed against what Beijing perceived to be a gathering danger- a hostile power's consolidation of bases at multiple points along the Chinese periphery. In both cases, Beijing believed that if the hostile power were allowed to complete its design, China would be encircled and thus remain in a permanent state of vulnerability."

II. Classical Realism

Although China's offensive deterrence is borne out of geopolitical realities, Kissinger does not overlook the importance of individual leaders. Indeed, one of the most noteworthy parts of the book is Kissinger's intense focus on the nature of individual leaders and his ability to illustrate the dilemmas they faced. Given his nearly unprecedented access to a vast range of high-ranking officials on both sides of the relationship, Kissinger is uniquely qualified to tell this history. In doing so, Kissinger allows the reader to "look over the shoulder" of the statesmen in the best traditions of Classical Realism.

Overall, Kissinger portrays leaders in both countries in a fairly positive manner. This is especially true with American Presidents and occasionally their advisers (most notably, Zbigniew Brzezinski and Winston Lord), whom Kissinger finds little to criticize.

Although similar in many respects to his portrayals of American leaders, ultimately Kissinger's accounts of their Chinese counterparts are more interesting. Kissinger clearly understands the difficult conundrums Chinese leaders often face when weighing the importance of good relations with the United States against domestic political

considerations. Kissinger's ability to put the reader in the minds of Chinese officials is the aspect of the book that will likely be the most enticing to current and future diplomats dealing with China.

Although Kissinger appears to understand each Chinese leader, he clearly holds some in greater regard.[xi] For example, while sometimes describing Mao in lackluster terms, Kissinger offers near inhibited praise for Mao's right-hand man Primer Zhou Enlai.[xii] "In some sixty years of public life," Kissinger begins his introduction of Zhou, "I have encountered no more compelling figure than Zhou Enlai (241)." Kissinger continues:

[Zhou] dominated by exceptional intelligence and capacity to intuit the intangibles of the psychology of his opposite number…. He had made himself indispensable… [by] translating Mao's sweeping visions into concrete programs. [While] At the same time, he had earned the gratitude of many Chinese for moderating the excesses of these visions, at least wherever Mao's fervor gave scope for moderation (241).

Kissinger's greatest praise for a Chinese leader is perhaps reserved for Deng Xiaoping however. "China as the present-day economic superpower is the legacy of Deng Xiaoping," Kissinger states at one point in the book (333). There is also little doubt who he views as the greater Chinese leader, Mao or Deng "Mao destroyed traditional China and left its rubble as building blocks for ultimate modernization. Deng had the courage to base modernization on the initiative and resilience of the individual Chinese (321)."

No matter which Chinese leader Kissinger discusses, his ability to portray their mindset and circumstances to the reader is remarkable. Preciously because he understands their dilemmas, however, that Kissinger is not overly critical of their actions. It is this factor that has put him at odds with others within the Republican Party's foreign policy establishment.

III. China and the Future of Republican Foreign Policy

The variation in foreign policy philosophies held by members of the Republican Party can be daunting. [xiii] For instance, the GOP is at once home to both isolationists like Ron Paul and the aggressive interventionism of the George W. Bush administration. Nor are the conflicting foreign policy philosophies within the Republican Party a particularly new phenomenon. Indeed, Dwight Eisenhower's decision to seek the Presidency in 1952 was the result of his fears that isolationist Senator Robert A. Taft (R-OH), who favored withdrawing from NATO, would win the GOP nomination and possibly the highest office.[xiv]

In today's GOP foreign policy establishment two different foreign policy philosophies predominant: the Realists led mostly by elder statesmen like Kissinger and Brent Scowcroft, but also others like Richard Haas, and the Neoconservatives, such as Paul Wolfowitz and Robert Kagan. Whereas the Realists advocate a foreign policy that is more attuned to concepts like the balance of power and national interest, sometimes at the expense of strictly adhering to American ideals; the Neoconservatives combine militarism with an intense sense of American exceptionalism. They therefore advocate using America's unparalleled power (particularly military) to spread liberal democracy across the globe, something they see as both inevitable (in the long run) and the only path to international stability.[xv] It is for this reason that Kissinger's muted condemnation of the CCP's less praise worthy qualities and repressive actions has made him the target of Neoconservatives' criticism.

Opposition towards Kissinger's vision of future Sino-American relations has been waged both explicitly, particularly by the *Wall Street Journal's* "Global View" columnist Bret Stephens, as well as implicitly, most notably from Princeton Professor and former Dick Cheney aide Aaron Friedberg.

Bret Stephens does not hide his disdain for Kissinger's thinking on China (and perhaps for Kissinger himself) in his recent book review of *On China* and an account of a recent interview he had with the former National Security Adviser and Secretary of State.[xvi] Stephens begins his book review by blasting some of Kissinger's greatest achievements: from the Nobel Peace Prize Kissinger received for helping negotiate a settlement to end the Vietnam War (which Stephens writes "quickly foundered on Hanoi's determination to conquer to South Vietnam") to his détente with the Soviet Union (which, Stephens claims "was upended by Moscow's expansionism" and only saved

by President Reagan's assertive policies during the 1980's). Not content to stop there, Stephens next takes aim with Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which, although admitting that it "charted the course for peace between Israel and Egypt… is [now] also in doubt as Cairo seeks new friends in Gaza and Tehran."

Thus, the rapprochement with China is Kissinger's singular lasting achievement, as far as Stephens is concerned. After a fairly brief review of Kissinger's book, however, Stephens seeks to cut into this legacy as well. This begins when Stephens terms Kissinger's account of the 1989 "massacre" at Tiananmen Square "an apology for the regime." He then calls *On China's* final chapters on more modern history and future relations "its weakest," characterizing Kissinger's failure to consider the possibility of a future democratic upheaval in China as "more than just a moral error." "What a pity for the remarkable legacy of Mr. Kissinger," Stephens concludes, "who did so much to steer China toward its best traditions- and so little to steer it away from its worst ones."

Although not a direct refutation of Kissinger's book, Aaron Friedberg's new article in the *National Interest* (based on a forthcoming book) amounts to a more intellectual Neoconservative critique of Kissinger's work.[xvii] Kissinger's concluding chapter in *On China* lays out a vision of future Sino-American relations that can be best characterized as guarded optimism. While arguing for the creation of a Pacific Community (modeled off of the Atlantic Community in Western Europe), Kissinger notes that, "for these two societies representing different versions of exceptionalism, the road to cooperation is inherently complex (529)." After arguing that the world is at a "juncture" where Immanuel Kant's "Perpetual Peace" must succeed, Kissinger ends his book on just such a cautiously optimistic note: "When Premier Zhou Enlai and I agreed on the communiqué that announced the secret visit he said: 'This will Shake the World.' What a culmination if, forty years later, the United States and China could merge their efforts not to shake the world, but to build it."

Friedberg- whose not an avowed Neoconservative by any means and even wrote a founding Neoclassical Realist text- lays out a more gloomy future in his article.[xviii] After reviewing the historical catastrophes that have accompanied rising powers and global power shifts, he concludes, "Deep-seated patterns of power politics are thus driving the United States and China toward mistrust and competition, if not necessarily open conflict."

This decisively Realist statement is betrayed by the essay's central argument, which is that different political ideologies are the greatest barrier to China and America maintaining friendly relations. After first stating that, "the fact that America is a liberal democracy while China remains under authoritarian rule is a significant impetus for rivalry," Friedberg concludes that "the United States can learn to live with a democratic China…. Until that day, [however], Washington and Beijing are going to remain locked in an increasingly intense struggle for mastery in Asia." In other words, despite the challenges power politics are causing, it is ideology will ultimately determine whether China and the United States maintain cordial relations or usher in a treacherous future for themselves, and indeed the world over.

With world stability likely to hinge in good part on the nature of future of Sino-American relations, much is at stake over which strand of Republican foreign policy thought predominates in the days ahead. Although we all hope that democracy one day flourishes in China; in the interim period, Realism seems to offer the best prospects for peace.

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Henry Kissinger, On China (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011) Citations of this work appear with the page number in parenthesis.

[ii] Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy?: Toward a Diplomacy for the 21 st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

[iii] Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994).

[iv] The preeminent Classical Realist text remains Hans J. Morgenthau, Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace (New York: Mcgraw-Hill Companies, 2006).

[v] As Kissinger notes, "Any attempt to understand China's twentieth-century or its twenty-first century world role must begin-even at the cost of some potential oversimplification- with a basic appreciation of the traditional context (3)."

[vi] Examples of this includes when Mao used the occasion of Soviet Primer Khrushev visit to China (for entirely different matters) to launch both the Taiwanese Strait Crises, giving the United States the impression he was acting with the Soviets blessings if not at their behest. Twenty years later the superpowers switched places when Deng Xiaoping launched the Third Vietnam War a couple of weeks after visiting the United States in order to give the Soviet Union the impression that President Jimmy Carter had blessed this action. In reality, Carter, while being somewhat ambiguous, had expressively rejected it (see, 366).

[vii] To illustrate this difference, Kissinger contrasts the ancient Chinese game wei qi with that of chess. Whereas chess "is about total victory, in wei qi "the players take turns placing stones at any point on the board, building up positions of strength while working to encircle and capture the opponent's stones. Multiple contests take place simultaneously in different regions of the board…. At the end of a well-played game, the board is filled by partially interlocking areas of strength. The margin of advantage is often slim, and to the untrained eye, the identity of the winner is not always immediately obvious, (23).

[viii] The literature on nuclear deterrence is too vast to cite here. For one of the more timeless founding texts on the subject see, Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). For a particularly good later work see, Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989). On non-nuclear deterrence see, John J. Mearsheimer, *Conventional Deterrence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[ix] As Kissinger describes China's military strategy in its 1962 war with India: "China executed a sudden, devastating blow on the Indian positions and then retreated to the previous line of control, even going so far as to return the captured Indian heavy weaponry (2)."

[x] The Chinese Vietnam War was preceded by an alliance between Vietnam and Moscow that the Chinese rightly judged to be directed at them. In addition, the Korean War was felt to be justified because a clash with American forces was inevitable and the Chinese feared that if they delayed this fight a future one would include a remilitarized Japan on the side of the United States.

[xi] This seemed less evident in his discussion of U.S. administrations.

[xii] One cannot help but suspect that Kissinger feels that Zhou was to Mao what he himself was to President Richard Nixon. To cite just one example, after noting Zhou's role in the Cultural Revolution (which Kissinger is harshly critical of throughout the book), Kissinger writes, "The advisor to the prince occasionally faces the dilemma of balancing 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 (242)." Some historians have depicted Kissinger as at times accommodating himself to Nixon's biases, personality and policies in order to remain in the President's good graces and maintain influence. See generally, Robert Dalleck, Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power (New York: Harper Collins, 2007). It's also worth pointing out that Zhou was the leader Kissinger worked most extensively with in the run-up to Richard Nixon's trip to China.

[xiii] On modern Republican Foreign Policy see, Colin Dueck, Hardline: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy Since WWII (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[xiv] See, Robert R. Bowie and Richard H. Immerman, Waging Peace: How Eisenhower Shaped an Enduring Cold War Strategy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 70-71.

[xv] The literature on Neoconservatism is extensive due to the prominence of the ideology among members of the George W. Bush administration. For a history of the rise and evolution of Neoconservatism as an intellectual movement see, Francis Fukuyama, *America at a Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006). For a history of the rise of some of the more prominent Neoconservatives in the George W. Bush administration see, James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Viking, 2004). For a blending of the two histories see, Stephen McGlinchey, "Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy," *e-International Relations* (June 1, 2009), available at, http://www.e-ir.info/?p=1394 and Stephen McGlinchey, "Neoconservatism and American Foreign Policy," *Politikon,* vol. 16, no. 1 (2010), pp. 21-33.

[xvi] Bret Stephens, "A Diplomat Looks East," The Wall Street Journal (May 12, 2011), available at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703730804576314931204039982.html; "Henry Kissinger on China. Or Not.," The Wall Street Journal (May 21, 2011), available at http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703730804576321393783531506.html.

[xvii] Aaron L. Friedberg, "Hegemony with Chinese Characteristics," The National Interest (June 21, 2011), available at http://nationalinterest.org/article/hegemony-chinese-characteristics-5439. For a shorter version of this article see, Aaron L. Friedberg, "In U.S.-China Relations, Ideology Matters," Foreign Policy (July 1, 2011), available at, http://shadow.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/07/01/in_us_china_relations_ideology_matters. For an article reviewing both Kissinger and Friedberg's new books on Sino-U.S. relations see, Andrew J. Nathan, "What China Wants: Bargaining with Beijing," Foreign Affairs, vol. 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011), pp. 153-160.

[xviii] See, Aaron L. Friedberg, The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989). Friedberg's second book is also considered a leading Neoclassical Realist text. See, In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America's Anti-Statism and its Cold War Grand Strategy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). Neoclassical Realism is a term coined (in an article reviewing five books including Wearing Titan) by Foreign Affairs editor Gideon Rose to depict a number of scholars whose works combine Neorealism's focus on the structure of the international system with Classical Realism's focus on how statesmen actually make foreign policy in order to construct theories of foreign policy (as opposed to broad international outcomes). See, Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," World Politics, Vol. 51, No. 1 (October 1998), pp. 144-172. The most extensive work on Neoclassical Realism is Steven Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman and Jeffrey Taliaferro eds., Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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