On China

By Henry Kissinger

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Every book on China is a potential bestseller these days. Literature on the topic is abundant, growing as we speak and not easy to follow. Themes on the political, economic and social development of China have been monopolising policy and academic debates. Henry Kissinger's *On China* is as interesting as it can be, and contributes to this trend. Not only because he personally orchestrated the most dramatic diplomatic initiative of the Cold War in which the US succeeded in establishing a working strategic relationship with Maoist China, but also because of China's meteoric rise to superpower status within a generation.

Kissinger was not only the first official American emissary to Communist China, he can truly claim to be the chief architect of one of the pillars of the post-war international system. He advised and directed the White House's China policy for four decades, and on almost 50 visits to China consulted with every one of its leaders. To the degree that Washington and Beijing now understand each other, it is in good measure because Kissinger has been striving to find "strategic concepts" that could be made to alleviate conflict, mutual grievance and fear.

Prior to the publication of this book the definitive resource on China was Jonathan Spence's *The Search of Modern China* (New York, Norton, 1990). It is still indispensable to a modern understanding of China. Kissinger's book, according to Spence, tries to "make sense of China's diplomacy and foreign policies across two and a half millennia, and to bring China's past full circle in order to illuminate the present… it is part reminiscence, part reflection, part history, and part intuitive exploration".[1]

Kissinger's portrait of China goes well beyond the stereotype of the proud, ancient civilisation humiliated by the West and now rising again. Because it has been for millennia the central country of Asia and has the largest population and resource base, China's situation is fundamentally different from that of the West's numerous great powers. With the

building of the Great Wall, China became the world's largest gated community, protecting itself from neighbours that it could not eliminate. Traditional China's greatest accomplishment was not its vastness but rather its constant re-emergence from periods of disunity and conquest. Kissinger points out that China's diplomacy mirrors the game of *wei qi*, also known as *go*, in which players try to encircle one another, rather than the Western strategic game of chess in which the goal is to eliminate the adversary.

There are 18 chapters plus an epilogue. The first three chapters are devoted to China's history. The book deftly traces the rhythms and patterns in Chinese history (its cycles of turning inward in isolationist defensiveness and outward to the broader world) and underlines the fact that China's exceptionalism is cultural: China does not proselytise or claim that its institutions "are relevant outside China," yet it tends to grade "all other states as various levels of tributaries based on their approximation to Chinese cultural and political forms".

According to Kissinger there are four key elements to understanding the Chinese mind: Confucianism ("a single, universal, generally applicable truth as the standard of individual conduct and social cohesion"); Sun Tzu (outsmarting: good; direct conflict: bad); an ancient board game called *wei qi* (or *go,* which stresses "the protracted campaign"); and China's "century of humiliation" in the 1800s.

Early China was plagued by internecine conflict that threatened the empire's sustainability. Confucius (551-479 BC), an itinerant philosopher largely ignored in his lifetime, provided the "glue" that has both kept the empire together since, while uniting its people, and providing much of Asia's "'state religion". Expertise in Confucian thought became the key to advancement after the Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 220) adopted Confucius' thinking. In doing so, the state assumed a moral obligation to provide virtue and harmony, and its people took on an obligation to obey the state as well as honour their ancestors and emphasise learning.

Between 1405-1433, China's Admiral Zheng sent out a fleet of large, technically advanced ships to Africa, the Middle East, India and other closer locales. The purpose of the voyages is unclear to historians, and the next Emperor ordered the fleet destroyed, along with Zheng's records of those voyages. The withdrawal from contact with Western nations limited access to new ideas and led to China being physically and economically dominated by others

from the mid-1800s until the 1990s-its "Century of Humiliation." (China's share of the world's GDP was about 25% in 1500, grew to approximately 30% in 1820, and fell to about 4% in 1950).

Chapter four is about Mao's Continuous Revolution. This chapter is superb and superbly written. If you study American China relations, the question that is always asked is whether or not America lost China in 1949. Kissinger correctly reminds Americans that China might never have been theirs to lose, and so they have been asking the wrong question all along. Mao always believed that the Confucian order of harmony had resulted in a weak China. He therefore believed that progress could only come from brutal confrontations both within and with outside adversaries for China to advance.

After a chapter on the Korean War, chapter six is an excellent analysis of China's strategy of confronting the Soviet Union and creating the Sino-Soviet split, and the United States with the Taiwan Strait Crisis. The chapter is riveting, and immensely contributes to our understanding of history.

Following a chapter on the great domestic turmoil in the 1960s and the Cultural Revolution, the author takes us through the Road to Reconciliation in chapter eight, and, in chapter nine, the first encounters with Nixon, himself and the Chinese leadership. It is a fascinating portrayal of a head-to-head meeting where Kissinger recounts in minute-by-minute detail the secret mission in 1971 that prepared the way for President Nixon's historic visit and the personal interactions with Premier Zhou Enlai and Mao. What is interesting is Kissinger's confession that the Nixon-Kissinger visits 1971-72 turned out to have been the easy part. "That China and the United States would find a way to come together was inevitable given the necessities of the time", he writes. "It would have happened sooner or later whatever the leadership in either country". Both nations were exhausted from war (Vietnam, clashes on the Soviet border) and domestic strife (anti-war protests in Nixon's case, the Cultural Revolution in Mao's).

Kissinger was and still is overwhelmed by Mao's stature. He describes him as "the philosopher king". All Mao's decisions are based on meticulous planning; informed by the millennia of China's culture; and with long term considerations. "Mao enunciated the doctrine of 'continuous revolution', but when the Chinese national interest required it, he could be patient and take the long view", he writes. "The manipulation of 'contradictions' was his proclaimed strategy, yet it was in the service of an ultimate goal

drawn from the Confucian concept of da tong, or the Great Harmony". Also, Kissinger's portraying of Mao's successors is indicative of an appreciative intimacy. He remembers Zhou Enlai as conducting "conversations with the effortless grace and superior intelligence of the Confucian sage". He adds that the elegant Zhou-who would be "criticized for having concentrated on softening some of Mao's practices rather than resisting them-faced the classic quandary of the "adviser to the prince", 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".

Of Deng Xiaoping, Kissinger reminds us that he and his family suffered greatly during the Cultural Revolution - he was exiled to perform manual labour, and his son was "tormented by Red Guards and pushed off the top of a building at Beijing University" and denied admission to a hospital for his broken back. Upon his return to government, Deng worked to replace the Revolution's emphasis on ideological purity with the values of "order, professionalism and efficiency", and Kissinger credits him with fashioning the modernisations that would transform "Mao's drab China of agricultural communes" into a bustling economic giant. Overall, the author describes Chinese leaders as practitioners of power politics that enabled China, "despite its insistent Communist propaganda, to conduct itself as essentially a geopolitical 'free agent' of the cold war," making a tactical partnership with the United States in order to contain the Soviet Union. In chapters 11 and 12 we see the end of the Mao Era. Zhou Enlai falls and Deng's first return to power begins.

When at the end of the book Kissinger discusses present trends and challenges he deals with the essential question of the future of Sino-American relations: With no common enemy to bind them, what will keep the peace and cooperation between them? China has become an industrial powerhouse with global ambitions and continues to grow. The radical shift in the balance of power turned the two nations into mutually dependent economic giants, but it left them without an overarching strategic design that could sustain a working partnership. While both governments officially emphasise cooperation, Kissinger is not yet ready to rule out a return to strategic competition and conflict.

Kissinger addresses this question by looking to the "Crowe Memorandum" of 1907.[2] Crowe argued that it was in Germany's interest to "build as powerful a navy as she can afford" and that this

would itself lead to "objective" conflict with the British Empire, no matter what German diplomats said or did. There is today a "Crowe school of thought" in the United States, Kissinger observes, which sees China's rise "as incompatible with America's position in the Pacific" and therefore best met with pre-emptively hostile policies. 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 warns that a new resulting Cold War would arrest progress in both nations and cause them to "analyse themselves into self-fulfilling prophecies" when in reality their main competition is more likely to be economic than military. Rather than preparing for a showdown with China, Kissinger suggests building a Pacific Community along the lines of the Atlantic Community to promote security through inclusivity and mutual respect. For Kissinger, "relations between China and the United States need not-and should not-become a zero-sum game".

Finally, what about human rights and China's poor record? As a true student and practitioner of realpolitik he argues that if America's drive to spread democratic values is made the main condition for a functioning strategic interaction between Washington and Beijing, "deadlock is inevitable". For Kissinger, "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 is not explicit but we know what he advocates and it is unnerving.

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Endnotes

1 Jonathan D. Spence, "Kissinger and China", *New York Review of Books,* 9 June 2011.

2 On the Crowe Memorandum see, J.S. Dunn, *The Crowe Memorandum: Sir Eyre Crowe and Foreign Office Perceptions of Germany: 1918-1925,* Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.