

China According to Henry

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US President Richard Nixon's 1972 trip to Beijing was the event of greatest historical import to occur during Henry Kissinger's tenure in US government, and in his latest book, *On China*, Kissinger revisits the site of the rapprochement. But the book is no attempt by Kissinger to strengthen his legacy as architect of the rapprochement; the man who once told us that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac is not cast here as the central character in bringing Mao Zedong and Nixon together and thus changing the course of cold war history. Indeed, the book is something of an oddity. Not a memoir, nor a compact history of China, it is instead Kissinger's distillation of his own understanding of China's political leadership in recent decades. As with anything associated with Kissinger, it will enrage as well as educate. But it largely avoids the self-importance often associated with the former secretary of state.

The book's initial chapters set the stage for understanding the cultural and economic legacy of China's imperial past. The reader will be drawn in by Kissinger's easy display of knowledge and the fluency and philosophical compassion with which he recounts China's greatness. For Kissinger, Chinese civilization is a magnificent specimen, and he writes of it with a certain (albeit never fawning) awe.

We then move quickly through what the Chinese call the "century of humiliation"—when their country was dominated by European powers and then suffered under Japanese occupation. In subsequent chapters, when his focus shifts to the emergence of the People's Republic, Kissinger no longer appears as a historian weaving together strands of fact to create a complex understanding of people, time, and place. Instead, Kissinger the strategist is at work, determined to help us understand how Mao's China, when it came to geopoliti-

cal issues and the conduct of diplomacy, was not so different from the China that had flourished over the previous 3,000 years.

GREAT MEN, GREAT NATIONS

Two of Kissinger's strategic discussions stand out as helpful in trying to speculate how US-China relations might evolve in the future. (The Washington-Beijing relationship is of course a central concern for Kissinger, who may be considered a founding father of the relationship.)

The first such discussion, which draws on material published since the end of the cold war, is a detailed examination of China's decision to enter the Korean War. This examination is objective and nuanced. It concludes—as one might expect from a master of realpolitik—that Mao decided to enter the war on the basis not of ideology, but of strategic calculation. (And also miscalculation, according to Kissinger, as Mao expected greater Soviet aid than in the end was forthcoming from Stalin.)

Curiously, Kissinger then jumps to the end of the Korean War, paying little attention to the fighting itself. He appears interested only in the lesson he says we should draw from the conflict—or rather, the lesson that the world, or the United States in any case, did draw from it: that China can fight, and if it does fight, the consequences will be deadly and costly.

Kissinger's apparent lack of concern with the human costs of war and tumult is evident throughout the book, from the Korean War to China's 1962 conflict with India to the consequences of the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square crackdown. In Kissinger's narrative, it is great men and nations that matter, not history's victims.

Why Kissinger at the age of 88 does not explicitly cast himself among these great men, at least in this book, is a mystery. He credits Nixon with the strategic vision that led to his famous handshake with Mao in 1972. In Kissinger's narration

On China
by Henry Kissinger.
Penguin, 2011.

of the secret negotiations and trips he engaged in to bring that handshake about, he appears as merely the custodian of important duties. Of course, this is not to suggest that an egoless Kissinger emerges; he is an actor in historic undertakings, and a certain amount of justified pride shows through.

THE INEXACT PARALLEL

The second important strategic discussion in this book is Kissinger's attempt to combat the common perception that China is the Wilhelmine Germany of the twenty-first century. Here Kissinger retains his long-held preoccupation with the balance of power, but develops a powerful argument to counter those who believe that China's rise must lead to friction, if not conflict, with the world's other dominant power, the United States.

As he notes in the book, those who hold this view believe that the mechanisms of history ride roughshod over the conduct of nations. They point to the rise of a unified Germany at the end of the nineteenth century and its confrontation with Britain as their prime historical example, with the conflagration of 1914 the inevitable result.

Yet, as Kissinger puts it, the question is "whether the crisis that led to World War I was caused by Germany's rise, evoking a kind of organic resistance to the emergence of a new and powerful force, or whether it was caused by specific and, hence, avoidable German policies. Was the crisis caused by German capabilities or German conduct?"

Kissinger observes that Germany's capabilities and conduct could in any case have been countered with a far more powerful, imaginative diplomacy than was conducted by Britain and France. This lesson bears directly on the United States and China today. It should effectively dismiss the arguments of international-relations realists (with whom Kissinger himself is often associated) and neoconservatives who see a rising China as necessarily in conflict with the United States.

"Historical parallels are by nature inexact," Kissinger writes, "and even the most precise analogy does not oblige the present generation to repeat the mistakes of its predecessors."

What then is the way ahead? According to Kissinger, the appropriate path for the Sino-American relationship is less partnership than "coevolution." Drawing on the idea of Joshua Cooper Ramo, coevolution is a strategy according to which the United States and China follow "domestic imperatives." The two countries should cooperate when they can, and work to minimize conflict. Washington and Beijing might not pursue the same interests, but they can nonetheless work together on complementary interests.

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and how to act. This is true. But the prescription leaves unsolved the question of how to respond to the repression that China's security-minded capitalist-Leninist state reflexively enforces. It is

not enough to say, as Kissinger along with members of President George H.W. Bush's administration told the Chinese after Tiananmen, that diplomatic scolding over human rights abuses is a necessary part of US foreign policy.

Instead, crafting a policy that forcefully addresses abuses while nonetheless maintaining the bilateral relationship requires a more subtle, and principled, approach—one that perhaps goes beyond the boundaries of traditional diplomacy. Such a policy could create conditions that lead to conflict and friction, but so could turning a deaf ear to the victims of Chinese repression.

CORRECTION

The May 2011 book review, "Southern Africa Beyond Caricature," incorrectly stated that child soldiers had served in FRELIMO (the Liberation Front of Mozambique). It was RENAMO (the Mozambican National Resistance) that included child soldiers. ■