

On china book review

[Business](#), [Strategy](#)



Book Review of Henry Kissinger's

MEMORANDUM

This book review aims to analyse the content of Henry Kissinger's On China. The content will include critical evaluation of arguments, theories and viewpoints presented in the book as well as summarize the geopolitical and strategies mentioned therein.

1 On China – Points to be noted

For over two decades before Henry Kissinger visited China as president's Nixon's delegate, no high level diplomatic interaction had taken place between the U. S. and China. Very little was known about the nation and its foreign policies. However, post the cold war and the dissolution of the U. S. S. R., China has rapidly transformed itself into a global power. The country's growth has not been limited to any sector but it has gained crucial ground in the arena of global politics as well as world trade. Hence, China is no longer a country that can be ignored. What was once a near non-existent Sino-American foreign relation has now transformed into a delicate balance of trade and power.

In his book, On China, Kissinger attempts to bring an 'Insider's View' on China and make it common knowledge. He presents Chinese history, sprawling 2500 years, with a focus on diplomacy and foreign policy. Needless to say, this is quite a task. However, this approach allows the reader to better understand Chinese culture and traditions, values that play a crucial role in China's political decisions even today. According to Kissinger, American exceptionalism is missionary while Chinese exceptionalism is

culture.

Kissinger tries to show how China, once a nation almost entirely cut off from the rest of the world, has emerged over the last four decades by adopting practices that are comparatively liberal yet conservative by American standards. However, Kissinger seems more engrossed in promoting his brand of ‘realpolitik’ and glorifying his own role as Nixon’s secretary of state, going to the extent of downplaying Mao’s tyrannical rule that lasted for decades while questioning modern day American initiatives to talk to China on human rights issues.

He also chooses to appreciate the thinking of Chinese leaders who shared his sentiment-free practice of power politics. Kissinger states that, following his theories, China was able to remain a ‘geopolitical free agent’ during the cold war and formed a tactical partnership with the U. S. to subdue its fellow communist neighbour. He says that the Chinese continue to display this tactic, as is evident when, post 9/11 “China remained an agnostic bystander to the American projection of power across the Muslim world and above all to the Bush administration’s proclamation of ambitious goals of democratic transformation.”

Kissinger’s keenness to link China’s rise to power with his own political theories often leads him to praise events that have otherwise been universally condemned. He calls Mao ‘the philosopher king’, comparing him to Confucius. While he acknowledges that ‘for some people’, Mao’s achievements will always pale in comparison to his tyranny, should China remain in its current state of unison and growth, the Chinese may actually begin to view him as an equal to emperor Qin Shihuang, “whose excesses

were later acknowledged by some as a necessary evil.”

Kissinger tries to give due credit to Deng Xiaoping, attributing transformations towards modernization to him. He also implicitly agrees with historian Robert Dallek who claimed that Nixon undertook diplomatic initiatives towards China and the U. S. S. R. only to mask his utter defeat in Vietnam. Kissinger avoids sensitive issues such as U. S. debts being held by China and its increasing global influence. However, he does concede that, especially post the 2008 economic downturn, the Chinese are no longer tied down by the notion of partnering with the West.

With the Chinese youth becoming educated and the country making advances in technology, this new found confidence in the country’s potential to become an independent super power could mark a fundamental shift in the global power structure. Kissinger notes that this is the main reason why Sino-American cooperation and diplomacy has become paramount, as the world’s economies cannot afford another cold war. With nuclear proliferation, environmental conservation including climate change and energy becoming increasingly global disputes in nature, two radically different political cultures such as America and China could divide the world in two.

2 Critical Evaluations

Kissinger, at the very beginning of this work, notes that Chinese politics is defined, more than anything else, by its culture and heritage. He remarks that China may be the only country today that bases most of its major decisions on strategies that are over a millennium old, quoting Master Sun’s grand strategy maxim: Ultimate excellence lies not in winning every battle but in defeating the enemy without ever fighting. It cannot be denied that its

reliance on age old strategies have kept China more or less sheltered when the rest of the world was under went tremendous turmoil, even if these strategies did not convert the country into a global power.

Yet, Kissinger attributes much of China's present success to Americanization of its policies, most accurately, the adaptation of his own philosophies. It should be noted that the ruling party of China, the Chinese Communist Party or CCP, although exercising caution in its policies, is still fundamentally communist. The country, a nuclear power, has a 3 million strong military governed by the People's Liberation Army, a unified military organization (Martin 2010, pg. 10). China has been able to build its military strength despite growing concerns, regularly voiced, by the U. S. administration. China has never adopted American ' missionary' mentality, it still stays away from commenting on global political strife, not taking a stand even where its immediate neighbours are concerned. It uses its international presence in bodies such as the UN to safeguard its own interests, including signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty or NPT. While it does not interfere in the political matter of other countries, it also expects non-interference in its own conflicts, the issue of Tibetan freedom being a good example.

3 Conclusions

While Henry Kissinger's On China provides the reader with some interesting insights into the development of Nixon era Sino-American diplomatic relations, the author, very obviously, shares only selected facts, aimed at supporting his own views and philosophies. At several places, he blatantly promotes his own achievements, making the content sound biased and heavily influenced by personal views. It is the fast paced development of

China over the last two decades that most lacks reliable analysis in this book. While the book may prove to be a good read for those who are not acutely aware of Chinese political history, students of history and geopolitics will be able to find obvious loopholes in the tale being weaved by Mr. Kissinger.

References

Martin, M. F., 2010, Understanding China's Political System, Congressional Research Service. Washington.