

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **WORLD ORDER: HENRY KISSINGER**

Reviewed by

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It is given to very few to have been an eminent academic, lecturing, researching and writing on foreign policy and to become a policy maker and statesman himself in later life. Henry Kissinger, arguably the most accomplished practitioner of realpolitik in the last century, is perhaps the paradigm of such a life and career. He has the further distinction of having been one of the two American Secretaries of State born in a foreign land- he once jocularly said that his ancestors had missed Mayflower – the other being the less redoubtable Madeline Albright. Indeed there cannot be much comparison between the two in terms of their impact on America and the world.

Kissinger has authored this book at the ripe old age of ninety one. It is part history and part reflections on the nature of the present world order and its probable direction in the next fifty years. His writing retains the stamp of a rare lucidity of mind and heft of intellect although in parts lacking the masterly touch he had shown in “White House Years”. The book has, however, predictably won much acclaim especially in the U.S. and to an extent in China for which Kissinger has a certain fascination if not a blind spot.

Kissinger sets out four universal concepts of order- the Westphalian in Europe characterized by sovereign states with equal status within the system, the Islamic order with the Ummah or universal Islamic community as the mainstay, the Chinese system centred on the traditional conception of the Middle Kingdom as a peerless regional power and the American order given over both to the European-designed dispensation of the world and to the achievement of peace through the spread of democratic principles.

The centre piece of Kissinger's analysis, however, is the traditional view that today's world order has its origins in the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 at the end of the Thirty Years' War. Respect for national sovereignty, primacy of the national interest and a system of balance of power to maintain peace among the major states of Europe were the principal features of the Westphalian order which came to be extended to other parts of the world through western colonialism. Much as the US stood outside this European system of balance, its advent in the international order beginning with World War I, the emergence of the Soviet Union at the head of the world communist movement in the inter-war period and the series of momentous post-second world war developments like decolonization, the birth and evolution of Communist China and finally Cold War transformed the nature of the Westphalian system, with the US eventually becoming 'the indispensable defender' of the Europe-designed order. Alongside, there has also been an enduring ambivalence about the position of the US which has alternated between defending the Westphalian system and assertion of the "universal relevance of American values in building a peaceful world". But for all that, argues Kissinger, the Westphalian principles continue to be the sole basis of what exists of a world order at present, even if none of the major powers considers itself the natural defender of the system.

In all this, there is hardly anything that is new or original, but where Kissinger's book grabs the readers' attention is in its pellucid treatment of the world views and foreign policy predispositions of some prominent nations that figure on the global scene. His own perceptions of the world are essentially from the American perspective, but acquire importance only because the US is very much 'the indispensable hegemon' to the international order and the anchor of the residual Westphalian system, its dominance all but accepted by friends and foes alike. The world order continues to be bound up with American power in various forms and manifestations despite the impact of globalization, terrorism and failed states on the Westphalian system as it prevails today.

Kissinger's exegesis of the Westphalian system as it has evolved through different historical phases abounds in insights, as could be expected of someone who has worked on the theme all through his academic career. The importance of this part of

the book is the parallelism that it evokes of Britain's role as a guardian in maintaining the balance of power in Europe with America's role in the contemporary world in ensuring a comparable equilibrium as a protector of general stability. With the EU having ended the European balance of power system, Kissinger raises several penetrating questions about the prospects of what comes between a state and a confederation of Europe in the future world order: the interplay of national and regional impulses in the Union, the complex nature of its present cohesion, the uncertainty of its future orientation and the choices that the Union would need to make as to the definition of its global role, whether as part of an Atlantic Community, a posture of neutrality or a tacit compact with an extra-European power or grouping of them. The advocate of *realpolitik* that he is, Kissinger expresses the fear that Europe's characteristic soft power approach, much as it is inspiring, is out of kilter with the mode of the other regions, thereby raising the prospects of an 'imbalance'. Rather ominously, he sees Europe turning inward just as the quest for a world order faces a fraught juncture. No doubt these are all questions of great moment for the EU.

On the Islamic conception of world order, Kissinger avers that Islam besides a religion is also a multi-ethnic superstate and a new world order. There is the traditional Islamist view of a state of war between the areas that Islam had conquered or controlled, *dar al Islam*, and the lands beyond, *dar al harb*, with the ideal of Islamic peace to be achieved through *jihad*. This binary concept of world order provides the official mission for Iran and constitutes both the rallying cry of armed minorities in Islamic countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan and the ideology of terrorist groups active across the world including ISIL. With the Islamic order representing truths contrary to the rules and norms of the Westphalian order, the conflict of the two divergent concepts of world order is manifested in the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Kissinger believes that much as Israel is by definition a Westphalian state and its principal ally, the US, a key defender of the Westphalian international order, both the core countries and factions in the Middle East view the international order "to a greater or lesser degree through an Islamic consciousness". All of which appears quite logical to Kissinger, but to the Arabs, from the proposition that Israel – a state created in the territory belonging

to another people – is a Westphalian state to the argument that the issue involved is one of conflicting views of the international order, the entire thesis is open to question. Equally so is Kissinger's picturization of the long term consequences of the vivisection of the Middle East into different states in the post-World War I period and the abandonment of Muslims "between the victorious Westphalian international order and the now-unrealistic concept of dar al Islam". The Arabs are bound to see the whole process more as a cynical and self-serving division of the region with little regard for the interests of the people involved.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, Kissinger is on surer grounds when he says that to Saudi Arabia the conflict with Iran is existential and involves the survival of the monarchy, the legitimacy of the state and the future of Islam. So the US attitude towards Iran and Saudi Arabia cannot be simply a balance of power or a democratization issue; "it must be shaped in the context of what is above all a religious struggle, already lasting a millennium, between two wings of Islam." As to Syria and Iraq, Kissinger finds within them the prospect of disintegration into warring tribal and sectarian units or of being manipulated by competing outside factions in a Hobbesian state of nature. Probably true, but Kissinger fails to mention the US invasion of Iraq as a significant contributory factor. About Libya, he says quite rightly that the overthrow of the murderous dictator Qaddafi has had the practical effect of removing any semblance of national governance, but there is mutism on the role of the US in the overthrow of the dictator even as several other dictators in the past have been left in power by the US as a matter of conscious policy. On Iran Kissinger has a more comprehensive take including that Iran has perhaps the most coherent experience of national greatness and the longest and subtlest strategic tradition – an acknowledgement that becomes a profound student of world diplomatic history. His view on an eventual settlement of the US problems with Iran is sound in as much as he believes that the US should be open to a genuine reconciliation and make substantial efforts to facilitate it, but points out that for such an effort to succeed a clear sense of direction is essential, especially on the issue of the nuclear programme.

The chapter on Asia, while containing no significant insights on Japan other than what is being said by commentators these days about an imminent redefinition of her broader role in international order, has interesting observations about India. With some detailed references to Gita and Arthashastra he brings out the unique blend of soaring spirituality and rugged practicality that has traditionally characterised the Indian approach to issues of power and international relations. India, he says, “will be a fulcrum of twenty first century order; an indispensable element based on its geography, resources and tradition of sophisticated leadership” – high praise indeed from the man who sought to stymie India at a historic moment in the management of its South Asian neighbourhood.

In keeping with his conspectus of the emerging world order as an ensemble of regional orders with dominant players in each, Kissinger visualises two balances of power emerging in East Asia, with neither possessing the characteristic integral to the European balance, that is, a country capable of establishing an equilibrium by shifting its weight to the weaker side. Hence the need for an active role for the US in re-establishing a regional order lest a vacuum is created. As for China which tends to inspire some of his most felicitous writing, Kissinger makes the point that its rise to eminence in the twenty-first century is not new but re-establishes historic patterns, the distinctive aspect of the scenario being that China has returned as both the inheritor of an ancient civilization and as a contemporary great power on the Westphalian model, combining the legacies of a Sino-centric view of the world with technocratic modernization in a synthesis. He reiterates his by now well-known point of view that while the Chinese realists have agreed to adhere to the rules of international order they had no part in making (so haven't we all?), they expect – and act sooner or later on the expectation – the international order to evolve in a way that enables China to become centrally involved in international law-making, even to the point of revising some of the rules that prevail (that is where ruptures may happen).

As for the US itself, Kissinger holds the view that both the US and China are indispensable pillars of the world order, that they are similar to the extent that both of them have an ambivalent attitude towards the international system that they now

anchor and that there is need of a balance of power between the two, a balance that needs to be mitigated “by agreement on norms and re-inforced by elements of cooperation”. Such a new type of great power relations remains in Kissinger’s view the only road to avoid “a repetition of previous tragedies”.

As regards the US, Kissinger highlights the different facets of its self-conception, a superpower that has shaped the contemporary world bringing into the process two contradictory legacies – one, that of “the empire of liberty” a` la Jefferson and the idealism of Woodrow Wilson and the other an unsentimental use of its vast power for purposes ranging from the Monroe doctrine to its self-appointed role as the eliminator of WMD in Iraq. Speaking of the five wars that the US has fought since World War II with such dreadful loss of life and treasure, Kissinger feels that historians will probably conclude that the setbacks of the US foreign policy derived from “the inability to resolve an ambivalence about force and diplomacy, realism and idealism, power and legitimacy, cutting across the entire society”.

Kissinger had his own part in that sombre record of American foreign policy, a fact that has aroused much hostility to him in the academic and intellectual circles in his own country. To his credit he concedes that America has been searching its soul about the moral worth of its efforts to anchor the international order. But then it is not only them, but millions outside the US who have also paid a heavy price for those efforts, raising disturbing questions about America’s role in the international order.

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