ON CHINA[1]

REVIEWED BY LIEUTENANT COMMANDER TODD KLINE[*]

We cannot enter into alliance with neighboring princes until we are acquainted with their designs.[2]

I. Introduction

On July 9, 1971, in the midst of the Cold War and the latter days of the Vietnam Conflict, a delegation of American officials arrived in Beijing on a secret mission. The goal: to explore the opening of formal diplomatic ties with the People's Republic of China.[3] As National Security Advisor to President Richard Nixon and leader of the team, Henry Kissinger[4] was in a unique position to directly observe and participate at the inception of the United States' formal relationship with the most populous communist country on the planet.[5]

In *On China*, Kissinger applies his version of *realpolitik*[6] to U.S.–Chinese political relations; a subject made timely by China's more recent economic and military ascendancy. He asserts that China's foreign policy is based on pragmatic self-interest and that any effort to gain insight into China's modern and future diplomatic strategy must "begin with a basic

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[1] HENRY KISSINGER, ON CHINA (2011).

[2] SUN TZU WU, THE ART OF WAR (The Military Service Publishing Co., 1957).

[3] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 236–37; WALTER ISAACSON, KISSINGER 339–45 (1992).

[4] WALTER ISAACSON, KISSINGER 135–53, 502–10 (1992) (Kissinger served as National Security Advisor to President Richard Nixon from January 20, 1969, to November 3, 1975, and Secretary of State under President Nixon and President Gerald Ford from September 22, 1973, to January 20, 1977.); ROBERT DALLECK, NIXON AND KISSINGER 515–16 (2007) (Kissinger won the Nobel Peace Prize in October 1973 for his role in ending the Vietnam Conflict).

[5] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 236–37.

[6] HENRY KISSINGER, DIPLOMACY 137 (1994). The author defines *realpolitik* as "foreign policy based on calculations of power and the national interest." As the most well-known adherent of *realpolitik*, Kissinger's application eschews national strategy based wholly or in part on philosophical, ideological, or ethical principles in favor of practical considerations of national security and projection of State power. "In paraphrasing Goethe, Kissinger states that 'If I had to choose between justice and disorder, on the one hand, and injustice and order, on the other, I would always choose the latter,' as 'Moral crusaders . . . made dangerous statesmen.'" ISSACSON, *supra* note 4, at 653.

appreciation of its traditional context."[7] Kissinger combines a digestible survey of China's ancient cultural history[8] with a first-hand account of the interaction between Chinese and U.S. leaders from 1971 to the present.[9] He succeeds in illustrating China's attempts to separate itself from its more than two thousand year history through violent revolution and country-wide intellectual purges,[10] only to be drawn inexorably back to its original cultural foundations.[11]

Considering China's unique culture to be its greatest strength,[12] Kissinger argues that its approach to foreign policy is grounded in its own unique development. However, as the author transitions his narrative into the modern era, when the majority of China's purges occur,[13] what began as a seemingly objective and incisive first-person view of American–Chinese diplomatic history is marred by a progressively simplistic approach, fawning praise of China's 20th century leaders, and Kissinger's own adherence to a *realpolitik* worldview. Mr. Kissinger's extended coverage and emphasis solely on perceived Chinese political triumphs—without providing any meaningful discussion or analysis of its failures—ultimately detracts from Mr. Kissinger's overarching goal of providing a compelling strategy for future U.S. relations with China.

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[7] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 3.
[8] *Id.* at 5–32.
[9] *Id.* at 202–13, 306–20, 322–27, 396–407, 428–34.
[10] JONATHAN SPENCE, THE GATE OF HEAVENLY PEACE 341–51 (1981). Many of the government-instituted purges resulted in the forced removal of so-called intellectuals (teachers, administrators, scientists, military officials of all ranks, etc.) from public positions in China's primarily urban centers. Those that were not killed outright were transported into China's rural hinterlands so that they could learn a more proletarian trade from the farmers and peasants who worked the land by hand. The purges resulted in extensive and widespread violence as the Chinese government's policy fostered an extreme prejudice within the worker class toward members of the intellectual group. Ultimately, Mao's efforts created a disastrous lack of specialized expertise in essential industries, particularly food production.
[11] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 107, 181, 193–94, 196, 209–10.
[12] *Id.* at 2–32.
[13] JOHN KING FAIRBANK, THE UNITED STATES AND CHINA 369–75, 392–400 (1971).

II. "Those Who Cannot Remember the Past Are Condemned to Fulfill It"[14]

Kissinger opens *On China* by describing a 1962 strategy meeting between Mao Zedong (Mao), China's Communist leader, and his primary military and political heads.[15] In proposing a specific course of action, Mao cites a war that China fought with India over 1300 years earlier.[16] Only in China, argues Kissinger, could a speaker refer to such an ancient historical event and expect such to not only be instantly understood by his listeners, but also considered highly relevant.[17] China's history, its cultural tradition, is completely ingrained in its social fabric. Often stated as a negative, Kissinger attempts to repurpose Satayana's frequently misquoted maxim – those who cannot remember the past are condemned to fulfill it—as China's core strength. He is persuasive in stating that China's cultural history is simply too pervasive and long–lasting for one man to stand up against, even one who was responsible for enormous social, cultural, and political upheaval.[18] Despite Mao's explicitly stated efforts[19] to violently separate China from its historical

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[14] GEORGE SATAYANA, REASON IN COMMON SENSE 284 (Dover Publ'ns, Inc., 1980).

[15] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 1. At the time, "Chinese and Indian troops were locked in a standoff over the two countries' disputed border. The dispute arose over different versions of history: India claimed the frontier demarcated during British rule, China the limits of imperial China." Desiring to end the dispute, "Mao told his commanders . . . [that China and India] had previously fought 'one and a half' wars." The fact that '[t]he first war had occurred over 1,300 years earlier. . ." signified that "China and India were not doomed to perpetual enmity."

[16] *Id*.

[17] *Id*. at 2 (Mr. Kissinger fails to note that another aspect of Mao's audience's rapid acceptance of his strategy could be ascribed to their general fear of the often unpredictable leader. The author's tendency to ascribe the positive to China's leaders rather than the negative continues throughout the book.).

[18] *Id*. at 111–12.

> An ambivalent combination of faith in the Chinese people and disdain for its traditions enabled Mao to carry out an astonishing tour de force: an impoverished society just emerging from a rending civil war tore itself apart at ever shorter intervals and, during that process, fought wars with the United States and India; challenged the Soviet Union, and restored the frontiers of the Chinese state to nearly their maximum historic extent.

Id.

[19] ANDRE MALRAUX, ANTI-MEMOIRS (Terence Kilmartin trans., American ed. 1968) (Malraux quotes Mao: "The thought, culture, and customs which brought China to where we found her must disappear. . . . Thought, culture, customs must be born of struggle, and the struggle must continue for as long as there is still danger of a return to the past.").

traditions through bloody revolution and savage cultural purges,[20] in Mao's personal view, he is unsuccessful.[21]

III. Do Not Pass *Go*, Do Not Collect Two Hundred Dollars

Additionally, Kissinger argues the key to understanding and predicting the actions of this resilient culture may be found in the rules of one of its ancient board games. [22] In 2004, Dr. David Lai[23] authored *Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China's Strategic Concept, Shi*.[24] Per Dr. Lai, *Go* is a micro-physical extension, in the form of an ancient Chinese board game, of the principles espoused by Sun Tzu.[25] Mr. Kissinger heavily relies on Dr. Lai's premise that the rules of *Go* provide insight into Chinese strategic thinking[26] as they serve as "a living reflection of Chinese philosophy, culture, strategic thinking, warfare, military tactics, and diplomatic bargaining."[27] Mr. Kissinger uses Dr. Lai's premise to bolster his argument of Chinese culture as supreme. While Dr. Lai writes that *Go* should be used as one tool among

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[20] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 93–94.

[21] *Id*. at 110 (In response to a compliment by President Nixon during a February 1972 meeting that he had changed an ancient civilization, Mao stated, "I haven't been able to change it. I've only been able to change a few places in the vicinity of Beijing.").

[22] *Id.* at 23–25.

[23] Dr. David Lai is a Research Professor of Asian Security Studies at the Strategic Studies Institute at the United States Army War College. At the time of publication, Lai served as faculty of the International Security Studies Department at the US Air War College.

[24] David Lai, *Learning from the Stones: A Go Approach to Mastering China's Strategic Concept, Shi* (U.S. Army War Coll. Strategic Stud. Inst.) (2004).

[25] *Id*. at 3–8. Per Lai, *Go* represents "a concept, shi, putatively a strategy China uses to exploit the 'strategic configuration of power' to its advantage and maximize its ability to preserve its national independence and develop its comprehensive national power." The primary principle in *Go* concerns strategically surrounding one's opponent. It may be described as overwhelming encirclement. Lai writes, "Indeed, *shi* is such an important concept that Sun Tzu . . . uses it for the title of a chapter in his *Art of War*, the world's oldest military treasure." As Sun Tzu puts it, "those skilled at making the enemy move do so by creating a situation to which he must conform." *Id.* at 1–3.

[26] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 23–25, 89, 103–04, 131, 156, 188, 309, 342, 345–46, 354–55, 367.

[27] Lai, *supra* note 24, at v. The author writes: "The basic objective of the game is to secure more space on the board (or more territory). The players do so by encircling more space on the board. The competition for more territory thus leads to invasion, engagement, confrontation, and war fighting. Sun Tzu's thoughts and the essential features of the Chinese way of war are all played out in the game. As the game unfolds, it becomes a war with multiple campaigns and battlefronts. Or in terms of internationals affairs, it is a competition between two nations over multiple interest areas." *Id*. at 8.

several when analyzing Chinese strategic thinking,[28] Mr. Kissinger posits that *Go* strategy is the secret key to the analysis and on a fundamental level, informs and motivates all Chinese policy, foreign and domestic. Equating *Go* strategy with Sun Tzu, Kissinger goes so far as to state that "[O]ne could argue that the disregard of [these] precepts was importantly responsible for America's frustration in its Asian wars."[29] While an interesting proposition, he provides little justification or rationale for such a sweeping opinion.

Kissinger's application of *Go* is surprisingly simplistic for someone of his stature and professional experience. He argues that just as the Chinese operate along the rules of *Go*, America functions along the rules of chess.[30] His argument is very attractive at first read—that a board game may hold the secret key to Chinese thinking.[31] However, instead of approaching the idea critically, he accepts it de facto and expects the reader to do the same through the selective use of historical events.[32] To bolster this absolute view of *Go* as the key, Kissinger applies it to his own personal experiences with Chinese leadership.[33]

IV. Mao and Me[34]

Notably pleased with his own role, Kissinger is at his best when detailing his first-hand involvement in diplomatic efforts between the United States and China.[35] These summits, beginning with the secret meeting in 1972, provide a fascinating internal view into historical diplomatic process in action. His vivid description of the global political environment in which these discussions took place creates a necessary context in which the reader must consider them. Kissinger's depiction of

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[28] *Id*. at 27–31.
[29] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 25–26.
[30] *Id*. at 23–25, 103 (Kissinger states, "The chess player aims for total victory. The [*Go*] player seeks relative advantage.").
[31] *Id*. at 23–26.
[32] *Id*. at 89 (Chinese civil war 1945–1949), 103–04 (Cold War), 131 (Korean War), 345–46 (Vietnam conflicts).
[33] *Id*. at 103–04, 309.
[34] While it is traditional in many Western cultures for an individual's surname to follow their given name, in many East Asian countries such as Japan, Vietnam, and China, the order is reversed.
[35] *Id.* at 202–478.

Chinese diplomatic processes is quite effective at illuminating the overwhelmingly nuanced world of inter-governmental relations.[36]

Comprised of diplomatic nuances so subtle as to appear practically unintelligible to the outside observer, Kissinger portrays a world that redefines notions of modern court intrigue.[37] He serves as both guide and translator for the reader as he describes meetings with Mao[38] and subsequent Chinese leaders, Deng Xiaoping (Deng)[39] and Jiang Zemin (Jiang).[40] Kissinger's respect for these men is unequivocal as he describes the various political and personal challenges that each faced during their tenure as China's leader.[41]

Previously only lurking in the background, Kissinger's *realpolitik* world view intrudes more obviously as he transitions from observation to analysis. Often referring to leaders such as Mao, Deng, and his personal favorite, Zhou Enlai (Zhou),[42] in a state of naked awe, he praises the political successes of each leader. This praise is unlimited even when their successes came at great cost in international diplomatic capital or human lives.[43]

This one-sided tendency begins during his coverage of Mao's largest revolutionary efforts, the Great Leap Forward and the intellectual purges of the Cultural Revolution. By some estimates, these two events cost China up to fifteen million lives,[44] yet Kissinger spends little time critiquing the leadership decisions that led to such enormous loss of life. First assumed to be purposeful for brevity's sake, what began as an

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[36] *Id.* at 13, 160, 356, 365–66, 383, 426 (discussing the necessity of ambiguity in diplomacy, the importance of form in ambassadorial talks, and the impact of effective statesmanship).
[37] *Id.* at 13, 160, 356, 365–66, 383, 426.
[38] *Id.* at 257–62, 283–85, 306–17.
[39] *Id.* at 301, 338–39, 399–400, 430–44.
[40] *Id.* at 430–34, 451–56, 483–84.
[41] *Id.* at 342 (describing Deng, Kissinger writes, "As time went on, I developed enormous respect for this doughty little man with the melancholy eyes who had maintained his convictions and sense of proportion in the face of extraordinary vicissitudes and who would, in time, renew his country.").
[42] *Id.* at 241–42.
[43] *Id.* at 195–96, 422–27, 500.
[44] JUDITH BANNISTER, CHINA'S CHANGING POPULATION 85 (1984) ("[T]he official data imply that those four years [1958–1961] saw 15 million excess deaths attributable to the Great Leap Forward."); *but see also* MAURICE J. MEISNER, MAO'S CHINA AND AFTER: A HISTORY OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC 237 (1999) (noting that some scholars place the total death figure at thirty million).

unsettling theme in his analysis evolves into a truly frightening approach to incidents at Tiananmen Square in 1989.[45]

V. Televised for All the World to See

Kissinger's reluctance to judge or criticize certain decisions made by Chinese leaders is exemplified in his treatment of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crisis.[46] Despite devoting thirty-one pages to a chapter titled "Tiananmen," Kissinger obstinately refuses to pass any level of judgment upon the Chinese government's response to the civilian demonstrations.[47] In a book where the author takes great care to explain the potentially hidden meaning behind each action or gesture of Mao,[48] in his treatment of Tiananmen, an event that had enormous geo-political consequences for China,[49] he provides only the following concerning the event itself:

> This is not the place to examine the events that led to the tragedy at Tiananmen Square; each side has different perceptions depending on the various, often conflicting, origins of their participation in the crisis. The student unrest started as a demand for remedies to specific grievances. But the occupation of the main square of a country's capital, even when completely peaceful, is also a tactic to demonstrate the impotence of the government, to weaken it, and to tempt it into rash acts, putting it at a disadvantage.[50]

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[45] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 408–39.
[46] *Id*.
[47] *Id*. at 410–13.
[48] *Id*. at 256–57. Kissinger recounts his first meeting with Mao,

> [W]e were taken directly to Mao's study, a room of modest size with bookshelves lining three walls filled with manuscripts in a state of considerable disarray. Books covered the tables and were piled up on the floor. A simple wooden bed stood in a corner. The all-powerful ruler of the world's most populous nation wished to be perceived as a philosopher-king who had no need to buttress his authority with traditional symbols of majesty.

Id.
[49] *Id*. at 411–22.
[50] *Id*. at 411.

He cold-bloodedly describes the event exclusively as "a harsh suppression of the protest"[51] with no further description or elaboration, except "Over Tiananmen, the Chinese leaders had opted for political stability."[52] A reader who may be unfamiliar with the events of June 4, 1989, will have to look outside of *On China* for the facts.[53] In this book, Kissinger writes extensively on the international political repercussions that China encountered following the event. He notes that China was very surprised at the international reaction, as it viewed the event as a wholly internal affair.[54] China's leaders were not interested in how other nations maintained order within their respective borders; they expected the same indifference in return. Kissinger focuses solely on how the Chinese leadership addressed the aftermath of Tiananmen and moved past it.[55] While certainly relevant, this one-sided approach, to include the purposeful omission of even the most basic recitation of the facts, is inexcusable. Kissinger's entire analysis is colored irrevocably by his chilling advocation of a *realpolitik* world view.

VI. Future "Co-Evolution"[56]

Throughout the book, Kissinger highlights instances in which China exercised a disciplined and forward-thinking pragmatism.[57] From its

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[51] *Id*.
[52] *Id*. at 422.
[53] *See* JAMES A. R. MILES, THE LEGACY OF TIANANMEN: CHINA IN DISARRAY (1997) (The Chinese government's internationally televised forceful removal of protesters from Tiananmen square resulted in approximately five thousand deaths across Beijing.). In the spring of 1989, Chinese students began conducting democracy-oriented protests in and around Tiananmen Square in Beijing. By early June, after being joined by a significant number of non-students (workers and teachers), the student protesters numbered in the tens of thousands. Chinese Government efforts to forcibly remove the protesters with the Chinese military rapidly escalated into the violence on both sides. United States diplomatic cables describe Chinese troops shooting indiscriminately into crowds to include shooting fleeing civilians in the back. The cables estimate the civilian death toll at "500 to 2600 deaths, with injuries up to 10,000." http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB16/documents/index.html#d12.
[54] KISSINGER, *supra* note 1, at 411–16.
[55] *Id*. at 408–39.
[56] *Id*. at 526 ("The appropriate label for the Sino-American relationship is less partnership than 'co-evolution.' It means that both countries pursue their domestic imperatives, cooperating where possible, and adjust their relations to minimize conflict. Neither side endorses all the aims of the other or presumes a total identity of interests, but both sides seek to identify and develop complementary interests.").
[57] *Id*. at 227–28, 335–36, 456, 508–13.

historical reluctance to enter into treaties[58] to Mao's references to mutual interests—state to state cooperation that falls short of formal alliance—[59] Kissinger seems to imply China will be an asset to the United States as long as it is in China's national interest. It is difficult to separate the factual accuracy of this assertion from Kissinger's view of China through the *realpolitik* lens, but it does warrant consideration. Kissinger does provide examples in China's relationship with its neighboring states of its tendency to shift international priorities when it deems such opportune.[60] He advocates the potential for China as a strong strategic partner, yet provides evidence that this may be untenable over the long term due to the United States' emphasis on international human rights.[61] Kissinger notes that "The United States and China have been not so much nation-states as continental expressions of cultural identities. Both . . . have assumed a seamless identity between their national policies and the general interests of mankind."[62] In international cooperation with China, ideology must be "relegated to domestic management,"[63] and, he argues, should remain fully exempt from foreign policy. Kissinger asserts that "ideological slogans" concerning such issues as human rights and democracy should always be subordinate to pragmatic needs for international cooperation.[64]

VII. Conclusion

Ultimately, Kissinger cannot separate his world view from his own experiences. The extent to which this world view impacts Kissinger's ability to analyze geo-political events, even events in which he participated personally, renders *On China* a book best reserved for those who are specifically interested in the author's application of his personal political philosophy, which is one that highly prizes the practical over the

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[58] *Id*. at 283 ("Mao suggested that each side develop a clear concept of national interest and cooperate out of its own necessity. . . . In other words, each side could arm itself with whatever ideological slogans fulfilled its own domestic necessities, so long as it did not let them interfere with the need for cooperation against the Soviet danger.").
[59] *Id*. at 306–17.
[60] *Id*. at 113–18, 392–94, 434–35.
[61] *Id*. at 414–39.
[62] *Id*. at 520.
[63] *Id*. at 284.
[64] *Id*. (referencing a personal discussion with Mao regarding setting aside philosophical differences between the United States and China in order to oppose the "Soviet danger").

ideological. While China remains a topic of immediate relevance to the military officer, those expecting a balanced recitation and explanation of the creation and development of foreign relations between the United States and China will ultimately be disappointed.