

Book Review
By
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Henry Kissinger, *On China*
(New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), pp 586.

The book by one of the most prominent diplomats of our time, who has held positions of Secretary of State and National Security Advisor in US administrations, is an authentic account of his observations based on his experiences of dealing with China in his official capacity as well as visits in other capacities.

Divided in 18 Chapters the book could be termed a dissertation on historical, social, political and diplomatic relations of China. It reflects keen observation of the author during his personal encounters with Chinese leaders. The book records author understands of China's transformation from turmoil to stability.

In the chapter 'Singularity of China', Mr. Kissinger explains the special features of Chinese civilization which according to him has no beginning, because it appears in history less as a stereo typed nation-state than a permanent natural phenomenon. Chinese history is marked by many periods of peace and progress as well as civil wars and chaos. The words in a fourteenth century Chinese novel quoted by the author beautifully express Chinese experience of its existence: "The empire, long divided, must unite; long united must divide. Thus it has ever been." The author attributes the era of Chinese preeminence, to its strategic location as it has smaller states like Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, and on its periphery Burma which are populated by different societies. Its unique geographical location made China, in its own perception the center of the world "the Middle Kingdom."

The author quotes American political scientist Lucian Pye that in the modern age "China remains a civilization pretending to be a nation state." He maintains that the predominant values of Chinese society are influenced by Confucian thoughts which emphasize cultivation of social harmony rather than the machination of power. In regard of Chinese concepts of international relations, the author observes that the Chinese approach to world order is vastly different from that of the West. China never engaged in sustained contact with another country on the basis of equality for the simple reason that it considered itself incomparable in culture or power. The realpolitik trend in Chinese thinking is fashioned by Sun Tzu's Art of War in the author's opinion. The Kowtow question and the Opium War are explained in the

context of Macartney Mission and the clash of two world orders. Chinese experience of Qiyong's diplomacy in 'soothing the barbarians' was a turning point in their strategic thinking. The realization of their position from preeminence to a weak power status was a shock to the Chinese. According to the author, Managing the decline was a great achievement resulting in the creation of modern China.

The US perception of China according to Mr. Kissinger was that China like the Soviet Union would grow into a world power to compete with the US. The Chinese Communist Party's views as observed by the author were "loosely aligned with the world communist movement in the 1950s." Even though the Party was promoted and supported by Moscow, and Mao Tse-tung considered himself a disciple of Stalin. Mao's political ideology was different as explained by the author. In the continuous revolution of 1950-60s Mao had contempt for the rule of law and for human dignity, and the major reason Beijing is such a difficult entity to deal with is because of Mao's legacy, not Chinese tradition.

In the chapter on triangular diplomacy and Korean War, the author quotes all the developments in minute details, but at the end skipped the US role which makes the account incomplete. The assumed understanding by Mr. Kissinger of the Chinese role in Korean War led him to the conclusion that a different approach to deterrence was needed to deal with the situation. This line of thinking did not allow development of normal relations between the two countries. One obvious flaw here is that the Korean War's discussion by the author is based on US official stance and does not give an objective analysis of the situation.

Criticism of Mao's approach by the author is obvious as Mao in the author's view caused tremendous suffering to Chinese people which overshadowed his achievements in other fields. Events of Tiananmen Square (1989), genocide in Rwanda, and mass killing in Cambodia by Khmer Rouge had made the US to move cautiously towards China. The author predicts growing complexities in US and Chinese societies and fears that they would be intensified in future. He is alarmed at the possibility of the cold war between the two states and thinks that if it happens it would be detrimental to the progress of both. Kissinger draws heavily on notes of his travels to Beijing to celebrate the pragmatism of Mao's successors. He observes that they are content to remain within their restored historic position of preeminence, prepared to await a peaceful reunion with Taiwan and continue their remarkable economic growth and eradicate China's widespread poverty.

This book "*On China*" is like a journey and certainly interesting reading for those who wish to know how diplomacy works in the interaction of nations.