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Kissinger's Wisdom . . . and Advice

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Henry A. Kissinger, Does America Need A Foreign Policy?: Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 318 pp., $30.

When Henry Kissinger asks Does America Need A Foreign Policy?, the question is obviously rhetorical. For a global superpower like the United States, the answer is certainly "yes." But Kissinger has a reason for choosing such a title for his newest book. He means to imply that the United States has not had a coherent and effective foreign policy since the Cold War ended, and that it needs one badly as it enters the 21st century. And it will surprise no one to discover that Kissinger thinks he knows what that foreign policy should be.

It behooves us to pay careful attention to Kissinger's views on foreign policy; few are better qualified to write on the subject. Not only was Kissinger, as both National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, the driving force behind U.S. foreign policy during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history (1969-1977), but he is also a deeply learned man who has written extensively and intelligently about international politics for nearly five decades. Indeed, never has there been a statesman with Henry Kissinger's credentials as a scholar, or a scholar with his credentials as a statesman.

Does America Need A Foreign Policy? is a tour d'horizon in which Kissinger analyzes U.S. interests in five regions of the world-Europe, the Western Hemisphere, Asia, the Middle East and Africa-and offers policy prescriptions for each area. Kissinger also devotes separate chapters to globalization and human rights. The most important parts of the book, however, deal with U.S. policy toward Europe and Asia. These two regions, which contain other great powers and in which the United States still maintains a large military presence, are of the greatest strategic importance to America. Hence, Kissinger's emphasis on them is understandable.

Kissinger's prescription is a simple one: the United States must strive to preserve the core alliances it created and directed during the Cold War. Regarding Europe, he wants to see a formidable NATO united around a clear strategic purpose, and he therefore advocates maximally harmonious transatlantic relations. In Asia, he recommends maintaining close relations between the United States and Japan. In essence, Kissinger is bent on preserving the Cold War order in Asia and Europe, even though its original raison d'e tre-the U.S.-Soviet rivalry-disappeared more than a decade ago.

Given these goals, it is hardly surprising that Kissinger is distressed by the growing signs that America's diplomatic position is eroding. He is especially disturbed by the situation

in Europe, where he sees abundant evidence that the United States and its NATO allies are headed for a messy divorce.

Kissinger is well aware that U.S.-European relations have been plagued by disputes since nato's inception in 1949. One might even say he wrote the book on this subject 36 years ago, under the apt title, The Troubled Partnership. But the current tensions are much more serious, as revealed by the willingness of European leaders to criticize U.S. policy in ways that would have been unthinkable during the Cold War. Thus, Kissinger is dismayed that French President Jacques Chirac, speaking as the representative of the European Union, stood alongside Russian President Vladimir Putin in October 2000 and "attacked the Clinton administration's plan to explore revision of the ABM Treaty." He also finds the eu's recent move to challenge the Bush Administration's hardline policy on North Korea even more egregious. Europeans have become so hostile to America, Kissinger notes, that their identity is now defined largely in terms of an "almost congenital opposition to the United States."

According to Kissinger, these tendencies have been exacerbated by errors on the American side. He accuses U.S. policymakers, especially from the Clinton Administration, of exhibiting "overbearing triumphalism", and being guilty of either "self-indulgence or self-righteousness" when dealing with other states. His distaste for the Clinton team even leads him to a certain sympathy for the anti-American views of French Foreign Minister Hubert Ve drine. Kissinger cannot bring himself to blame Ve drine and others for being irritated when American leaders convey their belief that "the United States was chosen by providence as the 'indispensable nation' and that it must remain dominant for the sake of humankind."

Kissinger also warns that friction within the Alliance has been accompanied by a loss of strategic purpose. Instead of focusing on its traditional strategic mission of protecting its members from an external threat, NATO has become a "mini-United Nations" and a "multilateral mishmash", primarily concerned with "a plethora of multilateral collective security enterprises of vague purpose." NATO may remain in name well into the 21st century, but given its present trajectory, Kissinger doubts that it can remain a serious military alliance for much longer.

The situation is not much better in Asia. Kissinger thinks that "Japanese-American political relations are on the verge of a sea change" due to Japan's growing reluctance to remain a ward of the United States. Japan is already shedding its pacifist veneer and is likely to acquire more formidable military forces and to take greater responsibility for its own defense. Because Americans are accustomed to dealing with a subservient Japan, this process is certain to strain relations between Tokyo and Washington.

Kissinger's explanation for these centrifugal tendencies is straightforward. The taproot of the problem is the collapse of the Soviet Union, which means that the United States and its allies no longer face a serious threat to their security. Consequently, they have no good reason to act according to the hard-nosed dictates of realpolitik. Instead, diplomacy has become the prisoner of misguided domestic political forces, which produce foreign

policies that make little strategic sense.

Kissinger blames three groups of domestic actors in particular. The main culprits are the liberal or left-wing elites who believe that power is a dirty word and that the United States, to quote William Jennings Bryan, is "the supreme moral factor in the world's progress and the accepted arbiter of the world's disputes." Thus, liberal idealists advocate a foreign policy that concentrates on promoting human rights around the globe. Unfortunately, a foreign policy based on such blatant self-righteousness invariably generates profound resentment abroad in countries with different cultures and traditions and poisons relations with allies as well as adversaries.

Yet Kissinger is also critical of the right-wing neo-conservative elites who call for the United States to act unilaterally to establish a benevolent global hegemony or Pax Americana. Although he credits them with appreciating the importance of power, he correctly faults their failure to recognize that there are limits even to American power, and that, in any event, other states will not view American hegemony as benevolent. Wielding power unilaterally will encourage the other major powers to join together in a balancing coalition against the United States, "and force it into impositions that would eventually leave it isolated and drained." In short, Kissinger thinks that elites from the Left and the Right are pushing the United States to adopt unilateralist policies that will undermine multilateral institutions, like NATO, that he wants to preserve.

The third villain in this story is the American public. Kissinger emphasizes that the public's interest in foreign policy is at "an all-time low", as revealed by the scant attention that foreign policy issues received in the last three presidential elections. This worries him, because he understands that it is difficult to sustain an intelligent foreign policy without broad-based support in the body politic, a lesson he learned well during the Vietnam War and its debilitating aftermath.

Although Kissinger does not say so explicitly, he surely understands that this public apathy is a dangerous wild card. Elites from both ends of the political spectrum continue to support an activist foreign policy (albeit for different reasons), but the public at large is becoming less supportive of our world-girdling array of global commitments, and it is certainly not interested in global crusades. If the economy erodes and the costs of empire rise, public apathy today could quickly turn into a call to bring the troops home tomorrow.

Of course, given that the Soviet threat is gone and there is no similar sort of adversary in sight, these arguments imply that domestic politics will continue to distort the conduct of U.S. foreign policy and make it impossible for the United States to follow Kissinger's advice. Kissinger backs away from this pessimistic conclusion, however, and offers a single ray of hope. If a smart and clever statesman-a Bismarck or even a young Kissinger-is put in charge of U.S. diplomacy, and if that individual understands the dangers of unilateralist behavior, then the United States might be able to adopt the "ideological subtlety and long-range strategy" that Kissinger advocates.

To be fair, Kissinger recognizes that statesmen are always constrained by the broad structural forces that shape international politics. He drives this point home by quoting Bismarck's famous dictum that, "The best a statesman can do is to listen to the footsteps of God, get hold of the hem of His cloak, and walk with Him a few steps of the way." Nevertheless, Kissinger also believes that individuals can shape history in important ways, and that "great statesmen" can be a powerful force for good on the world stage. Personal diplomacy and leadership skills matter a lot in international politics; given the right circumstances, they might trump the malign structural forces that are currently leading U.S. foreign policy astray.

What is one to make of Kissinger's analysis? On the one hand, his diagnosis of the problem is acute and his concerns about our ability to surmount it are probably justified. On the other hand, his prescription for what to do about it is neither consistent nor persuasive. The Cold War order that he so desperately wants to preserve is doomed to collapse sooner or later-probably sooner-and a foreign policy that fails to recognize this fact is doomed to fail.

A close look at the Clinton Administration's policy toward Europe illustrates the problem nicely. As noted above, Kissinger sees the Clinton team as misguided idealists whose unilateralist policies damaged relations between the United States and its European allies and seriously weakened NATO. The evidence, however, does not support this description of events in the 1990s.

There is no question that the Clinton Administration used highly idealistic rhetoric to justify its foreign policy, and some of its members were irritatingly self-congratulatory. The United States also engaged in a handful of small-scale humanitarian interventions on Clinton's watch, although it did so with great caution. Indeed, the administration turned a blind eye toward the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which prompt action might well have prevented or ameliorated. As is usually the case with U.S. administrations, realistic calculation trumped idealistic aspiration.

More importantly, however, the Clinton team paid careful attention to the global balance of power and diligently pursued the very policies Kissinger now advocates. The leading lights in the Clinton Administration were unabashed multilateralists who were deeply committed to preserving America's alliances in Europe and Asia. They expanded NATO eastwards, an idea strongly endorsed by Kissinger and most Europeans, and negotiated a new and more extensive security partnership with Japan. Indeed, it is hard to imagine an administration more committed to maintaining the Cold War order.

Despite these efforts, however, transatlantic relations deteriorated steadily over the course of the 1990s and were at an all-time low when Clinton left office earlier this year. Kissinger's description of how Americans and Europeans view each other these days is right on the money. Yet this sad state of affairs is hardly the result of the Clinton team's idealistic rhetoric, since that kind of language is music to the ears of most Europeans. The occasional preaching by Madeleine Albright and others surely irritated many Europeans, especially the French, but not enough to create the present state of disharmony.

Furthermore, it is hard to blame the problem on the U.S. penchant for humanitarian interventions, since the Europeans are publicly committed to creating their own force for precisely that purpose. Also, the United States and its NATO allies worked closely-if not always intelligently-over the past decade to curb ethnic violence and protect human rights in the Balkans.

As Kissinger admits, the primary cause of the problem is neither the ineptitude of the previous administration nor the fecklessness of the American people; it is the disappearance of the Soviet threat. More than any one factor, this change explains why Americans and Europeans (and Asians) now view each other differently. Although Kissinger properly highlights this fact in his analysis, he underestimates its impact and fails to recognize how hard it would be for even the most clever statesmen to overcome it.

The problem is simple. The European allies no longer need the United States to protect them from a dangerous external threat. They can provide for their own security, even in the unlikely event that Russia gets its house in order and threatens aggression in eastern Europe. Germany alone could probably deal with a resurgent Russia. But if Germany needed allies, it could get help from Britain, France and Italy, all wealthy and populous countries.

Now that Europe no longer requires American protection, European leaders are going to be much less reticent about challenging U.S. policies that they do not like, regardless of who is running American foreign policy. Even Kissinger would have serious trouble selling national missile defense to the Europeans. The fact is that the two sides have numerous minor to medium-size conflicting interests, but no longer have a major common interest-that of containing the Soviet Union. It is hardly surprising, then, that the Europeans are more willing to part company with Washington on issues like landmines, the International Criminal Court, missile defense or the death penalty.

There is a special dimension to this problem that Kissinger briefly mentions. Germany, like Japan, has not been a "normal state" since the final days of World War II. For the past half century, it has not had an independent military capability, but instead has subordinated its army to NATO control. More generally, it has depended largely on the United States for its security. In effect, it is a powerful but only semi-sovereign state, trapped in a straitjacket that prevents it from throwing its weight around in Europe.

Germany's impotence is unnatural and unlikely to last much longer. Germany has a large population and the most powerful economy in Europe, and the burdens of its past are diminishing as the generations born after 1945 rise to power. U.S.-German relations, which have long been at the core of NATO, will grow more distant and more contentious once Germany becomes a truly independent state. No American policymaker, even one with velvet gloves on both hands, will find it easy to maintain consistently friendly relations with a normal Germany.

Turning to the other side of the Atlantic, the main problem that Kissinger's proposals face

is that there is no compelling reason for the United States to remain militarily engaged in Europe. Historically, America has acted as an off-shore balancer in Europe (and Asia), which means that it has committed military forces to that region when there was a potential hegemon that the local powers could not contain by themselves. This logic explains why the United States: (1) entered World War I in April 1917 against Wilhelmine Germany; (2) began massively rearming in the summer of 1940 in anticipation of going to war against Nazi Germany; and (3) remained in Europe after 1945 to contain the Soviet Union. For sound strategic reasons, the United States will not tolerate a European hegemon. But no state is threatening to overrun Europe today or will so threaten in the near future.

One might challenge this perspective by arguing that the United States has effectively become a European power over the course of the past century and, therefore, it has no choice but to keep its forces on the other side of the Atlantic and maintain peace among its purported neighbors. But this line of argument is not persuasive. As a cursory look at a map reveals, the United States is neither a European nor an Asian power. It is safely located in the Western Hemisphere, far away from Europe and Asia, and it has a long history of avoiding military commitments in those regions when it was not needed to check an aspiring hegemon. And we should not forget that this policy served the United States well, keeping us out of many unnecessary wars and allowing us to fight the two world wars on favorable terms. There is no potential peer competitor today, however, and no alternative justification for placing American troops in harm's way in Europe-or, for that matter, in any other place. This benign strategic environment explains in large part why most Americans do not want their soldiers dying in combat and why they show little interest in foreign policy issues.

Does Kissinger provide a compelling strategic rationale for continued U.S. military involvement in Europe? No, and some of his arguments actually reinforce the case for withdrawal. In his words: "In Europe, two world wars and the insufficient scale of the European nation-state in the face of global challenges have made the 19th-century balance of power irrelevant. The nations of Europe no longer treat one another as strategic threats." But if security competition and great-power war have been eliminated from Europe, as Kissinger claims, then there is no good strategic reason to maintain NATO and keep 100,000 American troops in the region.

Kissinger's claims about the peacefulness of Europe notwithstanding, he suggests that NATO should still be preserved as a hedge against the possibility of "a new Russian imperialism." But, as noted above, the states of western Europe have the military potential to deal with any conceivable threat from a resurgent Russia on their own. Why should the United States expend blood and treasure to defend states that are eminently capable of defending themselves? There may be a realist case for perpetuating the Cold War order in Europe, but Kissinger has not made it.

Kissinger is on firmer ground to argue for maintaining American troops in Asia, but even here his case is unconvincing. He clearly recognizes that great-power war is possible in Asia, and that the logic of off-shore balancing provides an appropriate rationale for

keeping the United States militarily engaged in that volatile region. "It is in the American national interest", he writes, "to resist the effort of any power to dominate Asia-and, in the extreme, the United States should be prepared to do so without allies." The problem, however, is that there is no potential hegemon in Asia today. In Kissinger's own words: "No Asian nation-not even China-is in a position to threaten all its neighbors simultaneously, as the Soviet Union was able to do until the very end of the Cold War." Consequently, his case for an American military presence in Asia is no more persuasive than his justification for preserving the U.S. role in Europe.

The bottom line is that Kissinger's prescription-that the central focus of U.S. foreign policy should be the preservation of its Cold War alliances-is not feasible. The principal obstacle is not misguided domestic political forces. It matters little who occupies the White House or which party controls Congress. After all, George Bush, whom Kissinger contrasts favorably with Bill Clinton, is having even more trouble dealing with America's allies than did his predecessor. Despite his unparalleled credentials and still-impressive powers of analysis, Kissinger's proposals do not persuade. Why? Because one cannot maintain the Cold War order in the absence of the Cold War itself.

Kissinger's own scholarship leads to the same conclusion. He has emphasized over many years that effective statesmanship requires working with, not against, the driving forces of international politics. This is why he has preferred Bismarck to Metternich. According to Kissinger, Metternich's efforts to create a stable order in Europe after Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 were doomed by his failure to accommodate nationalism, the awesome force unleashed by the French Revolution. In effect, Metternich was locked in time. He sought to rebuild the 18th-century political order in Europe, but its underlying political structure had disappeared.

Bismarck, on the other hand, understood that a successful foreign policy must accommodate change, neither resisting it nor surrendering to it. He recognized the potency of nationalism and he used it both to build a powerful Germany and to foster a favorable political order in Europe. In his new book, Kissinger sounds more like the reactionary Metternich than the forward-looking Bismarck. It is as though Kissinger is marching in place as the ground beneath him hurtles forward. His policy prescriptions thus violate a major tenet of his own impressive scholarship: any effort to base U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century on structures created to wage the Cold War is bound to fail.