

Kissinger at 90: Still a Force to Be Reckoned With?

Written by Thomas A. Schwartz

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THOMAS A. SCHWARTZ, JUL 10 2013

Henry Kissinger, the former Secretary of State and the most famous living American diplomat, turned 90 on May 27, and his birthday provided the occasion for several writers and analysts to reflect on the significance of Kissinger's career and the continuing influence of his ideas. Robert Kaplan, in an extensive defense of the elder statesman in the *Atlantic*, argued without any trace of irony that Kissinger was "the 20th century's greatest 19th century statesman" and that his "classical realism" remains "emotionally unsatisfying but analytically timeless." Robert W. Merry in the *National Interest* echoes this praise for Kissinger's realism, defending the German-born academic from "much of the thinking that passes for conventional wisdom these days, particularly on the left." Canadian journalist Brian Stewart began his reflection by noting that it is "astonishing to consider the full arc of Henry Kissinger's influence on the U.S. and world politics, spanning as it does close to six decades, 11 presidents and four generations' worth of dangerous events," adding that "Kissinger's cold-eyed realism [is] still a force to be reckoned with."

But what exactly is the "cold-eyed realism" which must still be reckoned with? Is it still relevant to today's foreign policy challenges? History can help in understanding Kissinger's realism and its contemporary implications, as well as its limitations and potential dangers. When he became Richard Nixon's National Security Adviser in 1969, Kissinger was identified as a realist in the field of international relations, based primarily on his writings, including his doctoral dissertation, which had examined the 19th century Austrian leader Klemens von Metternich. Praising Metternich's role in negotiating the Congress of Vienna, which brought stability to Europe after the Napoleonic wars, Kissinger outlined an approach to international politics which put him squarely in the realist camp. Simply put, realists operate from the assumption that international politics is anarchic – there is "no controlling legal authority" as Al Gore might have said. In such a world the United States should behave like any other state, something that has always been difficult for many Americans, who adhere to a belief in their country's exceptional history and mission, to accept. Realists argue that the United States must determine its policies toward other countries based on its own "national interest." That national interest is, of course, its survival, but also its relative power and strength within the international system. In the Cold War era, with nuclear Armageddon a real possibility, realists saw great virtue in seeking a balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union that would serve to restrain the behavior of both and foster stability, or as Kissinger preferred to say, "equilibrium" among nations. Realists like Kissinger regarded their approach as something akin to a new "golden mean" between the two recent and rival traditions of American foreign policy: Wilsonian crusades for democracy and the short-sighted isolationism of the 1930s. They wanted a foreign policy that was not concerned with the domestic policies of other states, communist or non-communist, and was simply designed to promote America's interests, which realists defined narrowly as the protection of important strategic and economic positions.

Realism During the Nixon-Kissinger Era

What gave this type of realism extraordinary appeal in the late 1960s – and one of the parallels with today's political environment – was the mood of the American people. In contrast to the early 1960s, when President John Kennedy's called on Americans to "pay any price, bear any burden" in the defense of liberty, by the end of the decade Americans were a war weary people, tired of a stalemated conflict in Vietnam that produced more than a thousand casualties a week. 1968 was a year of great violence and social division, with political assassinations and racial conflicts leading some to believe that America was suffering a "nervous breakdown." Richard Nixon proclaimed in his inaugural that an era of confrontation should give way to an era of negotiations. A more modest foreign policy

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geared toward peace and recognizing America's limits was both desirable and politically essential. At one of his first news conferences, Nixon used words which could have come from Kissinger's pen when he said, "I do not want an American boy to be in Vietnam one day longer than is necessary for our national interest." Indeed, some scholars such as Hans Morgenthau, considered the father of realism, believed the Administration should end American involvement in the "losing enterprise" of Vietnam as quickly as possible with an immediate American withdrawal. Neither Nixon nor Kissinger embraced this, as both felt a precipitous withdrawal would damage American credibility abroad and stir a dangerous right-wing reaction at home. Present day analysts like Kaplan and Stewart often overlook the domestic political limits to applying Kissinger's "cold-eyed realism," especially in Vietnam, where Nixon refused to accept defeat on his watch, expanding the war to Laos and Cambodia, pushing his Vietnamization program, and using extraordinary airpower to prevent a North Vietnamese victory in the Easter offensive of 1972. Kissinger's famous "Peace is at hand" press conference in October 1972, followed by the Christmas bombing and the short-lived Paris Peace Agreements were less about the triumph of realism than the political need to escape Vietnam with a "decent interval" between American withdrawal and the ultimate North Vietnamese victory.

But Nixon and Kissinger did embrace the concept of realism in other respects. In the 1970 "First Annual Report on United States Foreign Policy," an innovation pushed by Kissinger to educate the American public, the Nixon Administration called its approach the "new realism" and argued "we have no permanent enemies and ... will judge other countries on the basis of their actions and not on the basis of their domestic ideology." In July 1969 Nixon proclaimed a new foreign policy doctrine. The "Nixon Doctrine" called for the allies to take the primary burden of military defense, with America providing political and economic support but not US soldiers. Ultimately the doctrine became a way to out-source American responsibilities, with countries like Israel and Iran being equipped as surrogates to defend American interests. The hallmark of this new realism came with Kissinger's secret trip to China and the opening of relations with the communist regime. The "triangular diplomacy" of using Communist China to balance the Soviet Union was a mark of political genius to realists. Compared to the dictatorship on Taiwan the US was abandoning, the China of Mao's Cultural Revolution was a human rights nightmare, but those issues never arose, either in the high-level negotiations or the American public's enthusiastic response to the opening. The same held largely for détente with the Soviet Union and the first SALT treaty, all of which were popular measures which helped Nixon to campaign and win overwhelmingly in 1972 as the "peace candidate."

But Kaplan's remark that Kissinger's realism is "emotionally unsatisfying" helps explain what happened after the 1972 triumphs. The domestic political conditions favorable to the new realism slowly began to change after America finally left Vietnam in early 1973, and Kissinger was unable or unwilling to adjust to the new political realities. Watergate may have accelerated the process of change, but both liberals and conservatives began to focus on the moral and political compromises embodied in both the Nixon Doctrine and Kissingerian realism. Presidential aspirants like Senator Henry Jackson led the charge on the issue of Soviet Jewry and emigration, which morphed into a larger critique of whether détente served Soviet interests, either in such agreements as Helsinki or in the continuing buildup of nuclear arms. Liberals like Senator Frank Church focused the human rights abuses and arms sales to America's Cold War allies such as Iran, as well as criticizing the use of the CIA to carry out covert actions against countries such as Chile and Cuba. Although Kissinger enjoyed a brief ascendancy from his successful role in the shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East, the collapse of South Vietnam, the Church Committee's report on CIA abuses, and the declining popularity of détente dimmed his luster. The congressional rejection of the plan to use the CIA to intervene in Angola in December 1975 symbolized this rejection of Kissingerian realism. By election year 1976 Kissinger's brand of realism was caught in a political pincer movement, under assault from Ronald Reagan on the right and Jimmy Carter on the left. Although Gerald Ford continued to support Kissinger until the end of his Administration, the President stopped using the word détente during the presidential campaign, and his gaffe about "No Soviet domination of Eastern Europe" during his debate with Carter may have cost him the election.

Kissingerian and Obama-style Realism: The Importance of Domestic Politics

Comparisons between the era of Kissinger's influence and today's world are tricky, but there are clear parallels. As in 1969, the domestic political environment of the last few years has been supportive of the type of realism associated with Kissinger. The frustrations of the "war on terror," coupled with the financial crisis created a climate in 2009 that favored reducing America's overseas involvements and defense spending, as well as a type of "Obama

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Doctrine” like Nixon’s of relying on allies to take the initiative. Whether “leading from behind” in Libya, withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, resetting relations with Russia, and avoiding involvement in Syrian civil war, the Obama Administration has pursued policies which parallel the realism of the Kissinger era. Obama’s initial certainty that he could negotiate with the dictators of Iran, Syria, and North Korea did draw quite explicitly from Kissinger’s advocacy of such cold-blooded diplomacy. The use of drones against terrorists, the willingness to violate Pakistani sovereignty in the Osama Bin Laden raid, and the widespread use of electronic surveillance also demonstrate a willingness to use American power in a way that realists advocate. That all of these policies are now associated with the man who was the candidate of the antiwar wing of the Democratic Party – a group which still reviles Kissinger – is a particular irony. Kissinger’s words in defense of his policies in 1975 could easily be placed in an Obama speech: “Truth compels recognition of our limits... For Americans, then, the question is not whether our values should affect our foreign policy but how. The issue is whether we have the courage to face complexity and the inner conviction to deal with ambiguity, whether we look behind easy slogans and recognize that great goals can only be reached by patience and in imperfect stages.”^[i]

Ultimately Stewart is correct that Kissinger’s realism retains great value today, both in analyzing international affairs and in providing guidance to policymakers. But looking back at Kissinger’s actual historical experience might also provide a cautionary note to the Obama Administration, particularly in recognizing the intricate relationship between domestic politics and American foreign policy. The domestic climate which supported realism in 2009 may change dramatically over the next few years, and the Administration will be compelled to adjust if it wants to retain its effectiveness. As in Kissinger’s case, Obama could face an attack from both the right and the left. The President’s recently expressed conviction that the war on terror is coming to an end has already complicated his defense of the Administration’s wide-ranging electronic surveillance. Future terrorist attacks like the Boston Marathon bombings would have a powerful effect on that debate. Patience and multilateral diplomacy with Iran may not stop that country from crossing the nuclear threshold. The rising Syrian death toll may make American inaction seem callous and unwise rather than a careful assessment of the dangers of intervention. Egypt’s increasingly severe crisis along with Iraq’s recent instability could lead to the accusation of the Administration “losing the Middle East.” Russian and Chinese obstruction of American initiatives may further a narrative of American impotence and decline.

Certainly in the wake of Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans remain leery of military adventures. But the underlying beliefs in American exceptionalism and primacy which were used against Kissinger have not disappeared from American political life, and could be captured again by the right leader. A perception of weakness, humiliation, and ineffectiveness in standing up for American values and human rights could be exploited against the Administration. As Kissinger learned in the 1970s, the domestic politics of American foreign policy can often trump “cold-eyed realism.”

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[i] Henry Kissinger, “The Moral Foundations of Foreign Policy, Address to the Upper Midwest Foreign Policy Council, Minneapolis,” July 15, 1975, *Department of State Bulletin*, August 4, 1975, p. 163.

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