



## Henry Kissinger on China: The Dangerous Illusion of “Realist” Foreign Policy

A Review of Henry Kissinger’s *On China*.  
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Joseph A. Bosco

Henry Kissinger, an avid student and admirer of the “realist” statecraft of Machiavelli, Metternich, and Mao, is viewed (not least by himself) as the archetypal practitioner of *Realpolitik* in America’s foreign policy establishment. His latest memoir, *On China*, describes how he and Richard Nixon established American relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1971-72, after nearly a quarter-century of mutual isolation, suspicion, and hostility. He touts the China opening as demonstrating the putative success of their “pragmatic” and “non-ideological” approach, and he makes the case with his customary erudition, aplomb, and Churchillian use of the English language. The book is also a richly detailed account of the personal and sometimes philosophical interactions among the four key players: Nixon, Kissinger, Mao Zedong, and Zhou-En-lai.

In an earlier book, Kissinger wrote that the China initiative “marked America’s return to the world of *Realpolitik*.”<sup>1</sup> Despite China’s horrific human rights record and aggressive behavior since the Communists took power in 1949, Washington sought *rapprochement*, convinced that it was “central to the establishment of a peaceful international order and transcended America’s reservations about China’s radical governance.”<sup>2</sup> Kissinger can justifiably claim at least partial results in one important objective of the strategy—relations with Moscow: “[T]he Nixon Administration managed to create a major incentive for Soviet moderation” that led to a brief period of detente and a series of strategic arms control agreements,<sup>3</sup> though it

Joseph A. Bosco served as China country desk officer in the office of the Secretary of Defense, 2005-2006, and previously taught graduate seminars on China-Taiwan-U.S. relations at Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service.

was soon followed by one of the most fraught periods in Soviet-U.S. relations.

But pursuit of the other immediate goal sought by the Nixon-Kissinger diplomacy—China's cooperation in terminating the Vietnam War on "honorable terms" for America—ended in ignominious failure. "We made the withdrawal of our military forces from Taiwan conditional on the settlement of the Vietnam war."<sup>4</sup> Kissinger blames the outcome in Vietnam on Congress's unwillingness to enforce the Paris Peace Treaty. He says that he and Nixon foresaw Hanoi's "massive violations" of the Treaty, but he signed it nevertheless because, if necessary to ensure compliance, the use of air power to enforce the agreement was never ruled out, either in the minds of members of the Nixon Administration or in its public pronouncements.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, Hanoi was not deterred by the administration's warnings that "we will not tolerate violations of the Agreement."<sup>6</sup> As North Vietnam's main army forces poured over the 17th Parallel into the South, the Treaty collapsed along with South Vietnam. Kissinger earned a Nobel Peace Prize for having negotiated the agreement along with North Vietnam's Le Duc Tho, who declined the Prize.

Hardheaded realism requires that the overall China engagement policy be examined over the long-term. Did it attain the peaceful international order Kissinger described as its goal? In this regard, the results of Kissinger's *Realpolitik* with China—which Nixon enthusiastically endorsed but also regarded as a "strategic gamble"—may well be judged as one of the greatest miscalculations in American diplomatic history.

Kissinger, of course, does not see it this way. He seems still to revel in the momentous negotiations that shook the world, even though its aftershocks grow increasingly ominous as time goes by. The Shanghai Communiqué, drafted by Kissinger and Zhou En-lai, was the seminal document in the new Sino-U.S. relationship. It clearly stated the premise of the U.S. position: "[I]mproving communications between countries that have different ideologies . . . lessen[s] the risks of confrontation through accident, miscalculation, or misunderstanding."<sup>7</sup>

Kissinger looks back with satisfaction over the ensuing four war-free decades, during which he continued to play influential roles—often simultaneously—as a successful commercial entrepreneur in

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China and as an unofficial strategic adviser to both the American and Chinese governments. His personal longevity, intellectual vigor, and ongoing involvement in international affairs have enabled him to consult on an intimate basis with each of the four men who have led China since the creation of the People's Republic (and now with Xi Jinping, the designated fifth-generation leader), as well as with the eight American presidents who have largely carried out Kissinger's policies. "Despite occasional tensions . . . [i]n the forty years since [the Communiqué] was signed, neither China nor the United States has allowed the issue [of human rights] to interrupt the momentum of their relationship."<sup>8</sup>

Yet during that period the United States and China have experienced their third Taiwan Strait Crisis; several dangerous clashes at sea; the EP-3 incident; two separate nuclear threats against American cities by Chinese generals; Beijing's undermining of American objectives on nonproliferation, on North Korea, and on a range of rogue state issues; and China's creation of an alternative development model that violates international standards of accountability, transparency, and good governance. Kissinger's massive volume does not do justice to these events, where it mentions them at all. To demonstrate how far U.S.-China relations have progressed since the historic opening, Kissinger writes: "Nixon had to overcome a legacy of twenty years of American foreign policy based on the assumption that China would use every opportunity to weaken the United States and to expel it from Asia."<sup>9</sup> He gives short shrift, however, to China's contemporary demands, backed by their historically unprecedented military strength, that the U.S. curtail its activities in international waters like the Taiwan Strait, the East China Sea, the Yellow Sea, and the South China Sea. He sees Chinese "triumphalist" rhetoric as unreflective of official Chinese policy and merely a hypothetical danger. At a recent meeting with South Korea's defense minister, which occurred too late for inclusion in *On China*, the chief of the People's Liberation Army's general staff, General Chen Bingde "issued an unusual and caustic tirade against . . . America's hegemonic attitudes toward other countries."<sup>10</sup> Such Chinese accusations are not unusual, never having disappeared despite Kissinger's rosy assessment of the achievements of the Shanghai Communiqué. Given the longevity of such Chinese views of Washington's motives, coupled with China's economic and military surge, it is no wonder that, thirty years after his historic opening,

Nixon worried, “We may have created a Frankenstein.”<sup>11</sup> Kissinger, however, remains untroubled over his role in establishing and perpetuating the framework for U.S.-China relations, and unconcerned about what that undertaking has produced. James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence, told the Senate Intelligence Committee in 2011 that China now presents “the greatest mortal threat” to the United States.<sup>12</sup>

*On China*, together with the author’s extensive promotional interviews for the book, may well be Kissinger’s last concerted attempt to establish a favorable historical record for the landmark opening to China. It is certainly a vigorous defense of *Realpolitik* in the crucible of U.S.-China relations. But even on its own realist terms the book ultimately fails in its mission of vindication. This is partly because the story is not over and indeed is worsening as China’s economic and military power continue to grow. But the evidence of long-term strategic failure is now sufficient to conclude that Nixon’s strategic gamble has already failed—nearly a half-century after the opening, the two powers should not still be seriously contemplating scenarios for going to war with each other. But we are.

The issue that had always stymied Sino-U.S. relations until the Nixon-Kissinger overture was the status of Taiwan. As Kissinger approvingly recalls, Washington initially lost interest in Taiwan after Mao’s Communists defeated the Nationalists in 1949, during which the U.S. remained on the sidelines. “Having conceded the mainland to Communist control and whatever geopolitical impact this might have, it made no sense to resist Communist attempts to occupy Taiwan.”<sup>13</sup>

Secretary of State Dean Acheson and General Douglas MacArthur effectively reflected that thinking in late 1949 and early 1950, when they publicly delineated U.S. strategic interests in Asia and excluded both Taiwan and South Korea from America’s security perimeter. In his book, Kissinger criticizes Acheson’s National Press Club statement in January, 1950: “To the extent deterrence requires clarity about a country’s intention, Acheson’s speech missed the mark.”<sup>14</sup> Actually, Acheson was, if anything, too clear in indicating, as MacArthur had done a month earlier, that Washington did *not* intend to use military force to defend Taiwan or South Korea. No wonder, then, that Kim Il-sung, Josef Stalin, and Mao Zedong thought they had a U.S. green

light to pursue aggressive unification. But after North Korea's attack on South Korea converted hypothetical danger to stark reality, a shocked foreign policy establishment changed its perception of the Asian Communist threat: "When American policymakers came face-to-face with an actual Communist invasion, they ignored their policy papers."<sup>15</sup> President Truman mobilized a United Nations defense of South Korea and sent the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait to prevent a Chinese attack there, frustrating Mao's openly stated intentions to do just that. As Kissinger put it regarding the Korean War, "The United States did not expect the invasion; China did not expect the reaction."<sup>16</sup>

After the war ended in a military and negotiated stalemate, President Eisenhower signed Mutual Defense Treaties with both South Korea and Taiwan in 1954. The U.S. military presence maintained the peace for the next decade and a half. Nevertheless, Kissinger expresses disdain for the sterile Sino-U.S. impasse over the island's status that kept the two governments isolated from each other during that period: "China would discuss no other subject until the United States agreed to withdraw from Taiwan and the United States would not talk about withdrawing from Taiwan until China had renounced the use of force to solve the Taiwan question."<sup>17</sup> At that point Nixon and Kissinger entered the scene wielding the sword of *Realpolitik*. They cut the Gordian knot—simply acceding to China's position. Washington informed Beijing that the Seventh Fleet—the primary obstacle to a Chinese attack on Taiwan—was leaving the Taiwan Strait forthwith and all American forces would be withdrawn from Taiwan in stages.

The fact that these commitments were made even *before* the start of the official Sino-U.S. dialogue violated one of the Nixon-Kissinger realist admonitions against making advance concessions and appearing overly eager to please. "We have a tendency to apply our standards to others in negotiations. We like to pay in advance to show our good will, but *in foreign policy you never get paid for services already rendered.*"<sup>18</sup> As Nixon instructed his adviser, "We cannot be too forthcoming in terms of what America will do [by saying] we'll withdraw, and we'll do this, and that, and the other thing."<sup>19</sup> But U.S. actions had already conveyed the impression that Washington craved the *rapprochement* far more than did Beijing. Any fair-minded realist would have to say that this impression weakened American negotiating lan-

guage, strategic clarity, and deterrence in perpetuity. As Kissinger takes justifiable pride in noting repeatedly, seven subsequent administrations have followed the Nixon-Kissinger approach. For more than four decades, consequently, Beijing has taken full advantage of that Western indulgence, deriving the benefits from the international system while enjoying wide latitude in its domestic and international behavior.

Kissinger has presented confusing, and even contradictory, accounts of the origin of the Sino-American “understanding” on Taiwan established during Nixon’s historic meeting with Mao. In *On China*, he writes: “[A]fter decades of mutual recrimination over Taiwan, the subject in effect did not come up” except for some sarcastic banter about Chiang Kai-shek.<sup>20</sup> A few pages later, he reaffirms that “Mao had omitted any substantive reference to Taiwan.”<sup>21</sup> To bolster this point, Kissinger reports his own conversation with Mao *a year after* the Nixon meeting: “[T]o remove any element of threat Mao explicitly delinked the issue of Taiwan from the overall U.S.-China relationship.”<sup>22</sup> Although Mao warned that he did not believe China and Taiwan would be able to effect a peaceful transition,<sup>23</sup> as far as China-U.S. relations were concerned, “Mao made his principal point—that there were no time pressures of any kind.”<sup>24</sup> Mao also told him, “I say that we can do without Taiwan for the time being, and let it come after one hundred years.”<sup>25</sup> Kissinger explains that Mao actually had two principal points of equal importance: First, “that Beijing would not foreclose its option to use force over Taiwan—and indeed expected to have to use force someday.”<sup>26</sup> Second, “for the time being at least, Mao was putting off this day.”<sup>27</sup>

Kissinger’s account of the Mao-Nixon discussion in *On China* is consistent with Nixon’s own description of the meeting in his 1978 memoir.<sup>28</sup> Inexplicably, however, Kissinger told the story quite differently in two books he wrote between Nixon’s *Memoirs* and his own *On China*. In 1979 and again 1994, Kissinger put Mao’s talk of delay in Taiwan’s demise *not* in a one-on-one meeting with him, but in *Mao’s meeting with Nixon*, at which Kissinger was also present: “[T]he Chinese leader wasted no time in assuring the President that China would not use force against Taiwan: “We can do without them for the time being, and let it come after 100 years.”<sup>29</sup> In these earlier accounts, Kissinger saw Mao’s statement to the President as a mani-

festation of large-minded statesmanship: “Mao asked for no reciprocity for the assurance America had been seeking for twenty years.”<sup>30</sup>

Whichever version is accurate, Kissinger’s perception that Mao was making a major unilateral concession is astoundingly innocent. Nixon and Kissinger had *already* given Mao the *quid* for his *quo*—a commitment to withdraw U.S. forces on and near Taiwan. Indeed, they had already given Mao much more. Kissinger remarks that “Nixon and his advisers . . . deemed diplomatic contact with China essential” and, as early as 1969, had publicly committed the United States *to defend China’s independence against a Soviet attack*—a unique security guarantee from an American president to a hostile Communist government.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Kissinger did not even seem to regard Taiwan as a strategic bargaining chip. He once expressed bemused incredulity to Mao that China would wait so long to take Taiwan: “Not a hundred years,” he remarked. Mao responded: “It is hard to say. Five years, ten, twenty, a hundred years. It’s hard to say.”<sup>32</sup> Despite the shifting target dates, Mao’s comments about Taiwan consistently made clear that China *would* use force to take it: “[W]e are going to fight for it.”<sup>33</sup> So, Nixon and Kissinger, the two hardheaded practitioners of *Realpolitik*, knowingly traded a concrete action China wanted—permanent U.S. withdrawal from Taiwan—for a vague and *temporary* expression of the action Washington had sought—China’s commitment not to use force against Taiwan. It is worth noting that on none of the occasions when Mao affirmed China’s intention to attack Taiwan did Kissinger raise any question or objection. Nor did he suggest that the United States would feel compelled to defend Taiwan on the basis of its “interest in a peaceful settlement” as stated in the Shanghai Communiqué. Nixon, Kissinger, Mao, and Zhou, who might be called the Gang of Four Realists, all understood that American public opinion and the U.S. Congress would not tolerate abandonment of Taiwan to Communist China at that time. After a decent interval, however—in Nixon’s expected second term—the deed would be done.<sup>34</sup> China would get its “full meal.” While Nixon shared wholeheartedly in that original *Realpolitik* cleverness, his view significantly evolved as Taiwan itself moved from dictatorship to democracy; unlike Kissinger, he concluded that democratic Taiwan is now permanently divorced from Communist China. (See discussion below.)

*On China* suffers from surprising historical inaccuracies and glar-

ing omissions on some pivotal events in China-U.S. relations. Kissinger recounts the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis, which began in July 1995 when China fired missiles toward Taiwan to protest a U.S. visit by Taiwan's appointed president, Lee Teng-hui. China then conducted military exercises in the Strait during the period leading up to Taiwan's parliamentary elections in December. Chinese officials, clearly intent on avoiding North Korea's 1950 miscalculation, put the crucial question directly to their American counterparts during a November visit of Assistant Secretary of Defense Joseph Nye: How would the U.S. respond if China attacked Taiwan? Here was an ideal opportunity for supposedly realist Washington to provide the strategic clarity and deterrent message Kissinger found lacking in Acheson's Press Club speech.

But Nye, even as he cited that earlier Korean experience, answered equivocally: "We don't know and you don't know; it would depend on the circumstances."<sup>35</sup> Understandably wary of signaling an Acheson-style green light, Nye erred in failing to red-light China's ambitions by a plain commitment to Taiwan's defense. Instead, he gave China a yellow light—what came to be known as "strategic ambiguity"—and it worked for that moment as China decided to proceed with caution for the time being. When asked the same question by American interviewers weeks later, Defense Secretary William Perry enthusiastically adopted Nye's statement, and it has been Washington's official stance ever since. Curiously this pivotal incident does not appear in *On China*, and neither Nye nor Perry is mentioned in the book. Equally surprising is Kissinger's failure to note the extraordinary threat conveyed by a Chinese general to an American scholar at that time: "You care more about Los Angeles than about Taiwan."<sup>36</sup>

Within a month of Nye's statement, the *Nimitz* carrier group passed through the Strait—the first such transit in the 23 years since Nixon had removed the Seventh Fleet. After China protested, Washington explained that this passage was merely a weather diversion, not a warning or a signal of commitment to Taiwan's defense—thereby undermining the impact of "the most significant American show of force directed at China since the 1971 *rapprochement*."<sup>37</sup> Kissinger fails to note the missed deterrent opportunity for the United States: having sent the ships through the Strait, it could have reminded Beijing matter-of-factly that no U.S. explanation or Chinese indul-

gence was required for the exercise of America's freedom of navigation rights in international waters.<sup>38</sup>

Kissinger's account also misstates the date and context of the *Nimitz* Taiwan Strait passage. He places it not in December 1995, when it actually occurred, but three months later in March 1996, prior to Taiwan's first presidential election, when China tested the U.S. again by resuming its missile firings across the Strait. On that second occasion in March, President Clinton deployed both the *Nimitz* and the *Independence* to the area. But when Beijing threatened a "sea of fire" if the ships entered the Strait, they changed course and avoided the Strait. As a result, Washington's attempt to signal deterrence was trumped by Beijing's message of counter-deterrence. This compounded the garbled strategic signals in December. A former senior U.S. official who had been in office at the time later described the 1995-96 confrontations as the Clinton administration's "own Cuban missile crisis," and said they had "stared into the abyss."<sup>39</sup> Kissinger uses similar language to describe the crisis: "Approaching the precipice, both Washington and Beijing recoiled."<sup>40</sup> But his failure to note the mismanaged U.S. messaging during this critical period is surprising given his lifelong career focus on the roles of ambiguity and clarity in international diplomacy generally and in the famously complex and nuanced U.S.-China relationship in particular.<sup>41</sup>

Nor does he remark on the significant lessons China learned from the tense episode. According to subsequent Defense Department reports on China's military power, after 1996 Beijing resolved to develop the capacity to deter or delay U.S. intervention in any future Taiwan crisis. It has done so by deploying a formidable arsenal of "area denial" and "anti-access" weapons, including advanced attack submarines and the world's first ship-killing ballistic missiles. Kissinger takes no notice of these ominous developments. Nor does he mention the existence of the congressionally mandated Pentagon reports on China's dramatic military advances.<sup>42</sup>

*On China* also ignores President George W. Bush's abortive attempt in 2001 to restore the clarity of America's commitment to Taiwan's security that prevailed from 1950 until the Nixon opening to China in 1972. The president said he would do "whatever it took" to defend Taiwan now that it had become a democracy.<sup>43</sup> Shocked China experts within and outside the administration scrambled to walk that

statement back, restoring the ambiguity of the earlier, presumably safer policy. But it was the attacks of September 11, 2001 that put the Taiwan issue on the back burner as Washington managed to convince itself that Beijing was now on the same side with the U.S. in the war on terrorism, counter-proliferation, and even controlling North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

Notwithstanding Kissinger's omissions and historical errors, *On China* offers an illuminating account of the similarities and differences between Kissinger and Nixon on China policy. The two clearly agreed on the compromises and ambiguities that enabled the China opening. They also agreed that their successors should continue the engagement policy because abandoning it would entail seriously adverse consequences. They parted company, however, over the future of Taiwan and the attendant prospects for Sino-U.S. conflict.

Nixon recalled how "the Shanghai Communiqué negotiated by Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai brilliantly bridged the differences between the two governments."<sup>44</sup> But he also wrote:

*Realistic* reappraisals of U.S. relations with Taiwan, and of the relations between the governments in Beijing and Taipei, are overdue. . . . The situation has changed dramatically since then. . . . China and Taiwan publicly have irreconcilable differences. *The separation is permanent politically*, but they are in bed together economically.<sup>45</sup>

He advocated that the two sides simply accept their mutual dependency, and he also recommended that the United States strongly support Taiwan's membership in international economic organizations. He exhorted Washington to "begin extending to Taiwan government officials the diplomatic courtesies that the leaders of one of the world's major economic powers deserve."<sup>46</sup> And he expressed optimism for a long-term peaceful outcome: "The Chinese will not launch a military attack against Taiwan as long as Beijing knows such an attack would jeopardize their relations with the United States."<sup>47</sup>

Kissinger assesses the situation differently. He still believes, as Nixon did, that the "ambiguous formula" he inserted in the Shanghai Communiqué was masterful: "ambiguity is sometimes the lifeblood of diplomacy."<sup>48</sup> Unlike Nixon, however, Kissinger believes that

China *will* use force against Taiwan unless it accepts “peaceful reunification through peaceful means,” as Premier Wen Jiabao put it to President Bush in December 2003.<sup>49</sup> But Kissinger recalls a 2001 conversation with President Jiang Zemin, in which he mentioned the possibility of military action against Taiwan. Kissinger took the remark seriously enough that he “felt obliged to reply to this threat of force” by saying, “In a military confrontation between the U.S. and China, even those of us who would be heartbroken would be obliged to support our own country.”<sup>50</sup> Kissinger did not predict that the U.S. *would in fact* defend Taiwan, and he makes clear in his book that he doubts it will: “The crucial competition between the United States and China is more likely to be economic and social than military.”<sup>51</sup> Given the state of Sino-U.S. economic interdependence and the dramatic increase in China’s military power, it is unlikely Kissinger would find a U.S. defense of Taiwan more palatable today than it was in 1949, when the PLA was a lot weaker. This is why he has publicly urged Taiwan to exercise the “peaceful” option and come to terms with Beijing before China feels compelled to resort to force. This is also the reason Kissinger warns Washington about continued arms sales to Taiwan: “It would be dangerous to equate [China’s] acquiescence to circumstance with agreement for the indefinite future.”<sup>52</sup> Nixon believed that war over Taiwan could be avoided by self-interested Chinese self-restraint; Kissinger believes that peace can be assured only if Taiwan and the United States accept Taiwan’s unification with China—thereby consummating the deal he made with Zhou En-lai in 1972. “[The] series of ambiguities [that] sustained much of normalization for forty years . . . cannot do so indefinitely.”<sup>53</sup>

It may be that Kissinger has fallen victim to the ancient realist principles he admires in Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*, teachings that anticipate *Realpolitik* in emphasizing “subtlety, indirection, and the patient accumulation of relative advantage.”<sup>54</sup> This sort of approach involves “building a dominant political and psychological position, such that the outcome of a conflict becomes a foregone conclusion,”<sup>55</sup> for “strategy resolves itself into a psychological contest” that sometimes requires “subterfuge and misinformation.”<sup>56</sup> Like Sun Tzu, “Mao believed in the objective impact of ideological, and above all, psychological factors.”<sup>57</sup> Mao and Zhou applied these principles adeptly in their interactions with Nixon and Kissinger, and their suc-

cessors have continued the tradition. For example, despite his dissatisfaction with Washington's continued arms sales to Taiwan, Deng Xiaoping skillfully managed his relations with Washington so that, as Kissinger concedes, "the People's Republic achieved another decade of American assistance as it built its economic and military power."<sup>58</sup>

Kissinger also uses *On China* to warn against too much emphasis on China's human rights record. Once called "the American Metternich," Kissinger espouses the realist position that national interest must be based on seeing the world as it is, not as we would like it to be, and certainly not with an over-emphasis on human rights and democratic values (which he calls crusading moralism) important as they are to America's national identity. The best way to influence China on human rights, he informed Fareed Zakaria in a recent televised interview, is to leave it to himself and a few others who have earned the trust and confidence of China over the years and can broach the subject in private rather than embarrassing its leaders in public. But the record of the past forty years reveals that his realist approach has proved to be decidedly *unrealistic*. That is because, contrary to Kissinger's teaching, the counterpoint to realism is not always idealism or excessive morality. Clearheaded pursuit of the national interest can also be clouded by sentimentality, wishful thinking, illusion, grandiosity, even self-delusion. Kissinger long ago convinced himself that he and Chinese leaders shared a hard-nosed pragmatism based on mutual self-interest. "I could not have encountered a group of interlocutors more receptive to Nixon's style of diplomacy than the Chinese leaders."<sup>59</sup> He was comfortable in his assumption that the Chinese perceived their own self-interest as *he* believes he would have seen it if he were in their place. So he constantly projected onto Beijing *his* views of *their* self-interest. It is a variation of a phenomenon Kissinger often decries: American diplomats sometimes contracting what has been called *clientitis*. They become the policy captives of the countries to which they are posted and end up advocating that government's views to Washington instead of the reverse. But Kissinger, with characteristic intellectual complexity, takes clientitis to a new level. He sympathetically presents to his American audience not merely the official Chinese position, but also his own imaginary conception of what the Chinese position would be if they were as rational as he is. Kissinger has written that in "our opening to China . . . [o]ur objective was to purge our for-

eign policy of all sentimentality.”<sup>60</sup> It may be that he and Nixon only replaced one form of sentimentality with their own, though Nixon, unlike Kissinger, apparently recovered his perspective enough to predict a future Taiwan free of Chinese Communist domination.

Some passages in *On China* suggest Kissinger’s knowing psychological susceptibility to China’s advances. Kissinger fully recognizes how “Chinese statesmen historically have excelled at using hospitality, ceremony, and carefully cultivated personal relationships as tools of statecraft.”<sup>61</sup> His chapter on the history of China’s relations with the outside world contains an interesting passage from the Han Dynasty: “*For those who come to surrender*, the emperor [should] show them favor [and] personally serve them wine and food so as to corrupt their mind.”<sup>62</sup> A few hundred pages later, Kissinger describes the lavish banquets his Chinese hosts bestowed on him—and includes in his book a photograph showing Zhou En-lai using his chopsticks to place food on Kissinger’s plate.

Whether Kissinger has been beguiled and seduced by a series of Chinese leaders, or has merely invested so much of his life in vindicating the original flawed Sino-U.S. understanding that he can no longer deviate from his own orthodoxy, the consequences are the same. Or perhaps the explanation for Kissinger’s vulnerability to Chinese influence is more geostrategic and less psychological. Intellectually and professionally, Kissinger’s, and Nixon’s, strong anti-Soviet background doubtless predisposed them to align the United States with China, Moscow’s chief adversary at the time. (“The enemy of my enemy is my friend.”) Kissinger probably exaggerated his own neutrality when he described the debate within official national security and foreign policy circles over which way American policy should tilt. He recalls that there were “Slavophiles,” “Sinophiles,” and those who advocated *Realpolitik*. “Not surprisingly,” he writes, “I was on the side of the Realpolitikers.”<sup>63</sup> Richard Nixon’s seminal thinking on the need to open relations with China was set forth in his October 1967 article in *Foreign Affairs*, in which he wrote: “[W]e simply cannot afford to leave China forever outside the family of nations, there to nurture its fantasies, cherish its hates, and threaten its neighbors.”<sup>64</sup>

When, in 1994, Kissinger reviewed the consequences of his approach to China, he concluded that “[t]he certitudes of physical threat and hostile ideology characteristic of the Cold War are gone.”<sup>65</sup> But

three years earlier, Deng Xiaoping—supposedly the un-Mao, who had already ordered China's military to “shed some blood”<sup>66</sup> in Tiananmen Square—gave fair warning of what lay ahead for the world: “hide our capacities and bide our time.”<sup>67</sup> Given the present state of Sino-U.S. relations, the danger of conflict over Taiwan, North Korea, the South China Sea, Beijing's essentially subversive role on proliferation and third world governance, and a myriad of other issues, it is fair to ask: Who are the true realists?

As he again surveyed China-U.S. relations recently in the context of increasing Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea and elsewhere, Kissinger warned: “Care must be taken lest both sides analyze themselves into self-fulfilling prophecies.”<sup>68</sup> The problem is that there has been too little reflection and fresh thinking in the West regarding Communist China's long-term motives. We are now being forced, belatedly, to reexamine long-held premises and assumptions. Kissinger's *On China* provides abundant evidence of the reasons why reassessment is needed—now more than ever.

## NOTES

1. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1994), 724.
2. Henry Kissinger, *On China*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2011), 447.
3. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 719.
4. Kissinger, *On China*, 249.
5. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 696.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Joint Communiqué of the People's Republic of China and the United States of America*, February 28, 1972, reprinted in Richard Nixon, *Speeches, Writings, Documents* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 225.
8. Kissinger, *On China*, 272.
9. *Ibid.*, 216.
10. Miles Yu, “Inside China,” *The Washington Times*, July 20, 2011.
11. William Safire, “The Biggest Vote,” *The New York Times*, May 18, 2000.
12. Testimony of James Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, before the Senate Intelligence Committee, March 10, 2011.
13. Kissinger, *On China*, 119.
14. *Ibid.*, 125.

15. Ibid., 129.
16. Ibid., 132.
17. Ibid., 159.
18. *The Diane Rehm Show*, Interview with Henry Kissinger, WAMU-FM, April 7, 1994. Emphasis added.
19. Kissinger, *On China*, 266.
20. Ibid., 258.
21. Ibid., 279.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., emphasis added.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 280.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1978), 561-564.
29. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), 1062; and *Diplomacy*, 727. Emphasis added).
30. Ibid.
31. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 723-724.
32. Kissinger, *On China*, 307.
33. Ibid.
34. Kissinger, *On China*, 271. “[Nixon’s] intention, he affirmed, was to complete the normalization process in his second term.”
35. Joseph Nye, *The Boston Globe*, February 7, 1996, 6.
36. William Perry, *The New York Times*, January 24, 1996, 1.
37. Ibid., 476.
38. After China complained about a Strait transit by the *Kitty Hawk* in 2007, Admiral Timothy Keating, the Pacific Commander, replied: “We don’t need China’s permission to go through the Taiwan Straits. It is international water. We will exercise our free right of passage whenever and wherever we choose to.” “Sino-American Showdown in Taiwan Strait: Chinese Navy Confronted USS *Kitty Hawk*,” *Global Research*, January 16, 2008. Kissinger does not mention the incident.
39. Off-the-record Washington speech by a former U.S. official.
40. Kissinger, *On China*, 477.
41. Kissinger is decidedly ambiguous on the role of ambiguity in statecraft, at least as it is practiced by others. Critical of Acheson’s lack of deterrent

clarity in 1950, he takes great pride in his own “one China” formulation in the Shanghai Communiqué, which could be a model of ambiguity as “the lifeblood of diplomacy.” But then he criticizes President Reagan’s Third Communiqué on Taiwan arms sales because it “is quite ambiguous, hence a difficult roadmap for the future.” Kissinger, *On China*, 383.

42. See, e.g., *Annual Report to Congress: The Military Power of the People’s Republic of China, 2005*, Office of the Secretary of Defense.

43. David E. Sanger, “U.S. Would Defend Taiwan, Bush Says,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2001.

44. Richard Nixon, *Beyond Peace* (New York: Random House, 1994), 133.

45. *Ibid.*, 134. Emphasis added.

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. Kissinger, *On China*, 356.

49. *Ibid.*, 492.

50. *Ibid.*, 484.

51. *Ibid.*, 525.

52. *Ibid.*, 385.

53. *Ibid.*, 356. To Chinese readers of Kissinger’s book, the title words *On China* may look very much like “One China.”

54. *Ibid.*, 23.

55. *Ibid.*, 26.

56. *Ibid.*, 29.

57. *Ibid.*, 101.

58. *Ibid.*, 386.

59. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 726.

60. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 191.

61. Kissinger, *On China*, 237.

62. *Ibid.*, 21. Emphasis added.

63. Kissinger, *White House Years*, 182.

64. Richard Nixon, “Asia After Vietnam,” *Foreign Affairs*, 46.1 (1967): 121.

65. Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, 835.

66. *The New York Times*, June 4, 2010, 1.

67. “Deng Initiates New Policy ‘Guiding Principle,’” FBIS-CHI-91-215, quoted in Kissinger, *On China*, 438.

68. “Avoiding a U.S.-China Cold War,” Henry A. Kissinger, *The Washington Post*, January 14, 2011. See also “Our Fraught Place with China,” Joseph A. Bosco, *The Weekly Standard*, January 21, 2011.