

Demystifying China

John Shipp reviews Henry Kissinger's latest foreign policy tome

At home: Kissinger with China's State Councilor for foreign affairs Dai Bingguo. **Source:** AAPONE

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The 'fundamental shift in the structure of the international system' brought about by the resurgence of China is a familiar story.

An occasionally neglected part of this story is that such a state of affairs was made possible when US president Richard Nixon opened high-level contact and normalised relations with communist China in the early 1970s. For two decades prior, the United States had recognised the Republic of China, based in Taiwan, as the sole legitimate ruler of all China. Less than ten years after rapprochement, China would begin a program of 'Reform and Opening Up' under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, which would set China on a course to be the world's largest economy by 2016.

Henry Kissinger was central to these events as National Security Adviser to Nixon, then Secretary of State to both Nixon and Gerald Ford.

Strategic and economic rapprochement between the United States and China was spurred by mutual mistrust of Soviet intentions and the need to balance against them. In such a context, finding common cause was relatively easy: 'That China and the United States would find a way to come together was inevitable given the necessities of the time.'

Kissinger reveals in cogent narrative how Chinese society has oscillated between openness and autarky, and the divergent pursuits of modernisation and tradition. These oscillations are a common thread running through Chinese history since Western contact until the present day.

Much of his assessment of Sino-American relations immediately prior to and since rapprochement draws upon notes and correspondence between Kissinger and Chinese leaders from his many visits to Beijing, both while he served the Nixon and Ford administrations and afterwards as a private citizen.

His experience negotiating high-level visits and discussing the nature of international affairs with leaders from Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai to Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao runs throughout *On China*. As do flashpoints over Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam and Tiananmen.

Kissinger finds the origins of tension in misperception:

When the Chinese view of preemption encounters the Western concept of deterrence, a vicious cycle circle can result: acts conceived as defensive in China may be treated as aggressive by the outside world; deterrent moves by the West may be interpreted in China as encirclement.

Kissinger also faults Western leaders for perceiving 'Communism as a monolith', and in doing so failing to take advantage of Sino-Soviet tensions before Nixon and Kissinger's initiatives.

In the final pages, Kissinger switches from historian to analyst, offering his own authoritative take on what China's rise in relative power means for international order, and what approach will reduce the risks of intense security competition.

According to Kissinger, commentators on both sides are revisiting twentieth century rivalry between Great Britain and Germany as an 'augury' of future Sino-American relations. China, as



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a resurgent continental power with an authoritarian political culture, draws comparison with Germany pre-World War I: while the United States, 'primarily a naval power' with a democratic form of government draws comparison with Britain. The emergence of China as a 'strong, unified state' might, it is proposed, elicit similar responses as those of Germany's neighbours: 'Such a system has historically evolved into a balance of power based on equilibrating threats.'

Kissinger goes on to draw parallels between contemporary American arguments for confrontation with the 1907 Crowe Memorandum. Like British Foreign Office official Eyre Crowe, advocates of confrontation conclude that conflict is inevitable.

Crowe concluded that German leaders' avowed peaceful intent was irrelevant to the prospects of war and peace whether or not they were sincerely meant. Crowe found the inevitability of conflict rested on strategic necessities, in Germany's case the necessity of challenging Britain's naval superiority and in Britain's case the necessity maintaining naval superiority lest it lose its empire.

Classicists might recognise similar themes in the fifth century BC power struggle between Sparta and Athens as documented by Thucydides.

Kissinger promptly dismisses his own analogy. He rejects the notion that security competition between China and the United States is inevitable: '[r]elations between China and the United States need not—and should not—become a zero-sum game.'

The practitioner and devotee of *realpolitik* offers advice on how to integrate China into a peaceful regional and international order that will sound very familiar to Australian audiences.

He dismisses containment, lest it be interpreted in China as encirclement, potentially making the assumed propensity of the system towards conflict self-fulfilling. Instead he proposes a Pacific Community, explicitly consisting of the United States, the People's Republic of China, Japan, India, Vietnam, Indonesia and Australia, but presumably including others.

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Australian audiences will recognise elements of then prime minister Kevin Rudd's abortive 2008 attempt at an Asia-Pacific Union in Kissinger's prescriptions. Like Rudd, Kissinger places faith in diplomatic architecture as a means to avert conflict, although the latter does also call attention to the need for 'wise statesmanship on both sides'.

His advice is also consistent with Rudd's decision to unilaterally withdraw from the Australia-US-India-Japan Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (which Gillard has since rejoined).

Kissinger's analysis is uncharacteristically optimistic about the prospects for stable integration. His solution, of a multilateral regional organisation for security cooperation including China, is inconsistent with traditional *realpolitik* scepticism regarding multilateral organisations.

He also credits the Chinese elite with peaceful intent based solely on their public statements, largely ignoring their military and diplomatic deeds. This is a weakness in his analysis. What revisionist power hasn't sought to allay fears by routinely declaring peaceful intent? And will the intent of current leaders have any bearing on the attitudes of their successors?

He draws on Chinese history to conclude that rather than expanding via force, threats or 'missionary zeal', China has traditionally increased its influence in a process of 'cultural osmosis'. But will the rise of a modern Chinese nation-state definitely follow the same course?

While Kissinger is right to declare that conflict is not inevitable, it is still plausible. As Crowe recognised in 1907, the plausibility of conflict creates its own defensive necessities on both sides which, if they go unchecked due to strategic mistrust, will increase the likelihood and intensity of security competition. In the context of bipolarity, an Asia-Pacific Union would likely become a catalyst for bloc-formation and encirclement.

Any hope for stability must therefore rest on bilateral cooperation and mutual deterrence. The US–China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, or, as Niall Ferguson has advocated, the creation of a G-2 for formal economic and security cooperation between the two superpowers, might serve these ends better than Kissinger's suggestions.

On China is an authoritative addition to the current debate about China's rise and will help demystify the often opaque nature of Chinese politics and society for us lay readers. R