

ON THE PROSPECTS OF WORLD ORDER

Bryan D. Griffin

A Review of *World Order*

By Henry Kissinger

(New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 420 pages.

Henry Kissinger's *World Order* poses a timely question: How does the world achieve peace and stability among actors whose definition of "order" varies? Kissinger contends that a successful approach to world order must incorporate both the "multifariousness of the human condition" and the "ingrained human quest for freedom."¹

Kissinger's argument begins with an examination of why the world is prone to conflict. When both historical experience and the development of shared values differ among civilizations, conflict is more likely than order.² The leitmotif of our age, he explains, is science and technology.³ Humankind's advancement in both communications and weapons development has redefined conflict. Today's actors must make every decision on a global stage with the entire world watching. Since the Manhattan project, weapons technology has become so advanced and catastrophic that war is no longer a decision that can be made through a mere cost-benefit analysis.⁴ War between nuclear-armed, modern superpowers would mean debilitating destruction of both parties, and one could never be certain that the benefits would outweigh the costs. Thus, the prospect for modern peace necessitates the mitigation of superpower conflict through diplomacy, restraint, and cooperation—in short, a new world order.

With both the question and the impetus clearly posed in the beginning of the book, Kissinger then dedicates several chapters to detailing the historical context for the splintered path of development of various world actors. His approach of dichotomizing actors by region makes the read organized, and his expert knowledge of world history is apparent in his meticulous analysis of each region. He grounds every assertion of an actor's motive or developing world view with a historical event and provides speech excerpts, and even maps, where appropriate.

In his discussion of the European experience, he underscores the uniquely advanced nature of the Peace of Westphalia. Early Europe "thrived on fragmentation" and "embraced its own divisions," which meant, for a period, it staved off the conquest ethic for a balance-of-power system.⁵ Yet later, Napoleonic campaigns came, and Europe was constantly forced back to the drawing board. From the Congress of Vienna to the Treaty of Versailles and beyond a post-Cold War peace, European order was drafted in steps that represented the evolution of the "domi-

nant concept of world order.”⁶ But how will a region of historically headstrong sovereignties define its new status under the European Union when, as Kissinger notes, the EU could become too enmeshed in its regional affairs to remain a significant geopolitical actor on the world stage? And with the United States, China, and other world actors now dominating the international landscape, what will Europe’s role be in the new world order?

The Muslim world finds itself self-embattled. Muslim states that are a productive and cooperative part of the international order must now contend with Iran; armed minority groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; and terrorist groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) that claim to act under the auspices of the same guiding religion.⁷ Additionally, Kissinger asks, how does the world pick a side when citizen demonstrations calling for a transition to liberal democracy in a country are coupled with non-negotiable religious rule?⁸

Kissinger uses his chapter title, “The Multiplicity of Asia,” to highlight the varied experiences of China, Japan, and India, which share a regional category. Yet the modern era requires cooperation. Asian superpowers are each exploring a new internal middle-road of Western influence and national traditionalism. China has maintained its Communist dynasty structure of government for five generations, but Chinese leaders now all are educated in the West.⁹ What balance of new influence and traditional practice will best serve Asian powers, and how can this fit into the new world order? Can Asia achieve partnership among its superpowers, as well as between its numerous rising actors like Indonesia and Vietnam, without hegemony? And what will ultimately become of the culmination of competition between the United States and China?


In his examination of the United States, Kissinger provides a welcomed rebuttal to the newly popular narrative of guilt mantled on America’s international decisions. The United States is an “ambivalent superpower” founded on the affirmation of “freedom of belief, expression, and action.”¹⁰ As Kissinger notes, “...it is important to remember that no other major power has brought to its strategic efforts such deeply felt aspirations for human betterment.”¹¹

America has played a critical role in defending democracy and preserving peace in the face of communism and fascism.¹² The early European notion of nations as inherently competitive stands in contrast to the United States’ view of people as rational actors who can build peaceful and cooperative societies through participatory government and free markets.

However, when evaluating U.S. interventions, complete success was found only in Kuwait, while in Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan, and Iraq, the American people’s consensus on the proper course of action wavered and reined in efforts abroad. As a critique, Kissinger argues throughout the book that the United States must

better incorporate into its foreign policy decisions a “recognition of the reality of other regions’ histories and cultures.”¹³ However, the ideological drive of America to foster freedom worldwide is neither ignominious nor impractical. There is an indispensable need for a constant advocate for human dignity and participatory government in the quest for international peace. In regards to this unrelenting pursuit, “the affirmation of America’s exceptional nature must be sustained.”¹⁴ Yet, to play such a critical role in the new world order, Kissinger aptly notes, America must come to terms “with that role and with itself.”¹⁵

Though Kissinger does spend an important chapter discussing Iranian nuclear proliferation, questions linger about the implications of Iran’s actions that he does not address: Are we truly in a post-Westphalian era? Iran ostensibly seeks to overturn the Westphalian system of nation-states and return the world to a pre-Westphalian world order defined by competing religions. They have the potential to succeed, especially if equipped with nuclear capabilities. How can we prevent their success while the Middle East remains vulnerable to extremist groups?

To Kissinger, the prospects for world order do not seem beyond reach, so long as humankind is mindful of history, hungry for equilibrium, and purposeful in its actions to sustain order. *World Order* is an important read because it illuminates the oft misunderstood or missing historical contexts necessary to understand the decisionmaking process of modern superpowers, and because it states a knowledgeable and compelling case for the world to redouble its efforts for order amid a mutable political climate. 

NOTES

¹ Henry Kissinger, *World Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2014), 8.

² *Ibid.*, 10.

³ Kissinger defines leitmotif as a set of beliefs that explains the universe. E.g., the Medieval period’s leitmotif was religion, the Renaissance’s was Enlightenment, and the 19th & 20th centuries’ was nationalism.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 332.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 328.

¹² *Ibid.*, 327.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 373.

¹⁴ Ibid, 373.

¹⁵ Ibid, 328.