

BOOK REVIEW

A Personal, Debatable and Timely View on World Order: Henry Kissinger

Henry Kissinger – World Order, Penguin Press, New York, 2014

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The concept of World Order had been much more present in the scientific debates and mass-media before 1990 when the world economy were more or less bipolar and the ideas of a dynamic balance of power and of spheres of influence were logically justified. After 1990 at the end of the Cold War a rather false perception became prevalent, particularly in the Western countries, projecting a unipolar world gradually witnessing a universalization of the Western style liberal democracy. This was epitomized in Francis Fukuyama's book "The End of History and the Last Man".

According to this perception the concept of World Order disappeared to a large extent from the public debate. However, this approach was not validated by reality because a world order existed anyway and significant changes took place within it continuously, such as the dramatic events of September 11, 2001. During the 25 years that have passed since 1990 the world became truly multi-polar, with China a serious actor just reaching in October 2014, according to IMF, the status of first economy in PPP (purchasing power parity) terms², while the recent developments in Ukraine suddenly remembered the rest of the world that the Russian Federation is a significant player for more reasons than one.

It is exactly under these circumstances that Henry Kissinger published, in September 2014, his view on the World Order³. At 91, Henry Kissinger has had an unparalleled direct experience related to World Order, a long term perspective, an US bias and a detachment that comes with the age. For all those reasons his view on World Order is **personal, debatable and timely**. As for the debatable side, some aspects may be helpful. His book generated a lot of comments, some of them very positive (like those belonging to Hillary Clinton⁴), some of them appreciating the perspective and personal experience of the author⁵ and some of them rather critical^{6,7}. By coincidence or not, soon after the publishing of the book some information on Kissinger's position during the Cuban missiles crisis have been declassified and heavy criticism has been renewed on his support and advocacy for US military interventions⁸. Leaving these sometimes opposing views on Henry Kissinger's career and his most recent book we may focus our attention on the topics and the arguments, on the hypotheses and the possible outcomes that are suggested. And it is from this perspective that the reader discovers the book from some statements in its introduction (page 9): the Western world assumed that there is one model and one set of rules, but reality is far from this; the growing interdependences and instant communication determine implications that were difficult to foresee and requirements for instant reaction from the part of the leaders of nations that they can not fulfill in due time because they are weak or not prepared but because it may not be humanely possible. Despite these frightening and impressive conditions humanity needs a world order and Henry Kissinger attempts to provide some historical lessons and some prospects for the future.

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² www.imf.org, World Economic Outlook database, October 2014.

³ Henry Kissinger – World Order, Penguin Press, New York, 2014

⁴ Hillary Clinton reviews Henry Kissinger's 'World Order', Washington Post, September 4, 2014,

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/hillary-clinton-reviews-henry-kissingers-world-order/2014/09/04/b280c654-31ea-11e4-8f02-03c644b2d7d0_story.html

⁵ Rana Mitter, World Order by Henry Kissinger – review, October 1, 2014, The Guardian,

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/01/world-order-by-henry-kissinger-review-account>

⁶ Bruce Fein, Henry Kissinger's imperialism, |The Washington Times, October 5, 2014,

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/oct/5/fein-henry-kissingers-imperialism/>

⁷ David Adesnik, Henry Kissinger's 'World Order': An Aggressive Reshaping of the Past, The Washington Free Beacon, October 11, 2014, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/henry-kissingers-world-order-an-aggressive-reshaping-of-the-past/>

⁸ Elias Isquith, Henry Kissinger's dark secret: Why the warmonger's even worse than we thought, The Salon, October 2, 2014, http://www.salon.com/2014/10/02/henry_kissingers_dark_secret_why_the_warmongers_even_worse_than_we_thought/

An adept of real politik Kissinger stresses from the very beginning that “no truly global World Order has ever existed”. This statement is important because a lot of the debates today are based on the assumption that there is a single world order (in the sense of a multilaterally accepted agreement) and that some actors are bending the rules or at least questioning them. The distinction between “world order” as *a state of fact* and “world order” as *a multilaterally accepted agreement or system* is extremely important not only for a better understanding of the world of today but also for the attempt to design a more stable and feasible world of tomorrow. Also at the beginning of his book Kissinger draws the limits of his approach: he is not writing about world order in itself, but about the regions of the world with different concepts of world order that inter-acted and shaped the world of today and will continue to do so with the world of tomorrow.

In Kissinger’s view the characteristics of the world of today may be approximated by the situation in Europe after the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648) and the Westphalian Peace that followed. That order was based on the acceptance of “division and multiplicity” (page 11) and, very important, had not been conceived as a global order and, in this context, did not include Russia, China or the Islamic world (that included Arabia, Middle East, North Africa, the Mediterranean area, the Balkans and Eastern Europe) that were governed by quite different political philosophies. If those were the initial limitations of the European order, the American view on this subject had started to emerge based on the idea of achieving peace by the spread of democratic principles. Given this historical framework Henry Kissinger is fully justified to speak about “varieties of world order”. At the same time he notes that the Westphalian principles (even if they were not designed for the world scale) were the only ones that allowed, at least in principle, for a world application. The Westphalian approach was a state based system that recognized national independence, sovereign statehood, national interest, and noninterference. This approach was not perfect but flexible and effective enough to accommodate more than 400 years of history and the emergence of the globalized world of today.

Anyway, as it appears, the Westphalian system has reached its limits and the new realities seem to make it unable to provide a reasonable stability to the world. Some changes that press for this change are notable: Europe decided to renounce the state system, at least to a certain extent, by creating the European Union; the stability of Middle East is affected by Islamic revolution; Asia is economically rising but these have, in many cases, original approaches to the idea of world order which differ from European ones; America is trying to come to terms with the realities of its limited powers in a globalized and inter-connected world where the principles it advocated for so long may be longer fully applicable. Kissinger remarks that none of the major players rejects the Westphalian order as a whole. A yet they understand the idea of order in different ways because their cultures, their histories and their approaches to the concept of order are different.

One relevant idea presented by Henry Kissinger in his book pertaining to any future world order system deserves to be stressed: because order and freedom should be conceived as interdependent, any world order system should be accepted as just by leaders and citizens alike (page 16). So far as the world order is involved the challenge of our times consists in finding a way in which different histories and values “can be shaped into a common order” (page 18). Based on this conceptual framework Kissinger addresses in a large part of his book the experience with world order of Europe, Islam and the Middle East, Asia and United States. Because the book is not a history manual the structure of his approach is not entirely streamlined and also not equal in its depth of analysis. After the presentation and analysis of the European and Islam order models, he introduces the topic of United States and Iran, and then comes back to Asia, United States and the forces that influence today the world order debate (particularly technology and human consciousness, among others).

The relevance for the global world of today of the European historical experience regarding the concept of order is found in the European **acceptance of fragmentation and division as well as the possibility to progress under these specific conditions**. Kissinger is rather brutal in explaining this European characteristic but he is right: none of the European entities had the strength to impose their will on the others in a decisive manner. **Therefore pluralism was a de facto situation that had been accepted rather than chosen**. And this Western European situation gradually influenced and molded the whole known world starting with the 15th century as result of several historical events, among which Kissinger quotes the geographical discoveries, the printing press and the emergence of Protestantism (page 27). For those interested in the 17th century Western European history and the emergence of modern state mechanisms (such as foreign policy based on the balance of power or the idea of state as an abstract and permanent entity) the chapter on the Thirty Years War (1618 – 1648) is very illustrative and can be read as a distinct part of the book.

In this part the century old philosophical and political ideas are blended in a captivating way that may still be useful to explain the world politics of today. A quote from Richelieu can substantiate that: “Man is

immortal, his salvation is hereafter. The state has no immortality, its salvation is now or never.” (page 30). For those willing to better understand the state behaviour within a given world order Kissinger distils 3 principles from Richelieu prodigious activity: a successful foreign policy needs a long term strategic concept; the disparate elements have to be concentrated into a coherent and purposeful direction; political decisions should bridge the gap between experiences and aspirations.

Based on these developments of political thinking and under specific historical conditions the Peace of Westphalia brought about the modern and down to earth idea of reaching peace by balancing rivalries instead of invoking universal principles, religious solidarity or natural allies. The Peace of Westphalia brought about also other important principles on which the world order of today is based: the equality of sovereign states, regardless of their power or domestic system and even some forms of (religious) minority rights (page 34 - 35). The importance of the Peace of Westphalia as Kissinger clearly points out resides in the fact that it represented “the first attempt to institutionalize an international order on the basis of agreed rules and limits and to base it on a multiplicity of powers rather than the dominance of a single country”. Reading this statement we may wonder if the issues of today’s world are not coming exactly from the fact that these essential ideas are more or less forgotten. The problems are expanded by globalization that allowed for more and more nations and groups to express their interests while having very different perceptions about the same reality. Kissinger dedicates a detailed part of his book to analyzing how the Westphalian principles were implemented in (Western) Europe during the 17th and 18th centuries and reveals the existence of an uniform perception on the values and unwritten international rules at a time **when aristocrats from all state entities belonged in fact to a single elite.**

The Enlightenment period further developed the foundations of Western democracy among others with the significant contribution of the rationalist approaches of Montesquieu and Kant. The rationalist approaches were anyway confronted by a new reality once with the French revolution that demonstrated that **international order can be challenged not only from the outside of a state but also by internal forces.** In Kissinger’s view the theories formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau during the French Revolution prefigured the modern totalitarian regimes. The major change in comparison with the Westphalian principles that was brought about by the French Revolution was the stating of “the impossibility of permanent coexistence between countries of different religious or political conceptions of truth, and the transformation of international affairs into a global contest of ideologies to be fought by any available means and by mobilizing all elements of society” (page 50). Reading this part of the book one may wonder if it was the lack of general knowledge on the French Revolution details that allowed two centuries later larger scale replicas of eliminating all real or presumed opponents during the early stages of Soviet Russia or during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The later consequences of the French Revolution determined (in the impersonation of Napoleon) another important idea that may influence to this day the world order: **the idea of a “Great Man” that creates history and is the guarantor of its creation.**

The implications of this idea were tremendous both from a positive and a negative point of view. Leaving aside other commentaries a parallel arises to the mind of the reader: it was the result of Napoleon’s wars that brought Russia into Europe (to the point of its participating to the occupation of Paris in 1814) and, in a similar way, it was the result of Hitler’s wars that brought back Russia into Europe in 1945.

In the context of the consequences of the Napoleonic wars and of the presence of Russia in Europe Kissinger draws a number of important conclusions regarding the long term regularities to be found up to this day in Russia’s manifestation as a significant power. He also points out how history, and particularly the geographical location and the two and a half centuries of Mongol suzerainty shaped Russia into “a uniquely Eurasian power, sprawling across two continents but never entirely at home in either” (page 56). Kissinger’s view on the historical becoming of Russia is of particular interest for the understanding of its contemporary behaviour. He makes thus a clear distinction between the Western world where the Westphalian concept of order based the security on the balance of power and restraint on using power and the Russian experience after the Mongol invasions in which the restraints on power could lead to a catastrophe and as a consequence the domination of the surroundings is an absolute must. It is interesting to remark that geography allowed Russia to have no natural borders except the Arctic and Pacific oceans and thus its expansion was on average every year with 100,000 square kilometers between 1552 and 1917. Quite an amazing and less known fact.

In his historical presentation of the milestones of world order Kissinger outlines the importance of the Congress of Vienna in 1814 that marked both the end of Westphalian order and a continuity of some of its principles. As Kissinger formulates, maybe the main task of the Congress of Vienna was to “achieve some

reconciliation of perspectives shaped by substantially different historical experiences” (page 68). A blunt observation in the context is that “Germany has for much of history been either too weak or too strong for the peace of Europe.”

An important idea related to world order that resulted from the Westphalian Peace and the Congress of Vienna was that the reliability of a world order system is reflected by the degree to which it achieves a **balance between legitimacy and power**. Having in view this idea we may explain quite easily the present day geopolitical situation using Kissinger’s words:” When that balance is destroyed, restraints disappear, and the field is open to the most expansive claims and the most implacable actors; chaos follows until a new system of order is established” (page 72).

As world order is dynamic by definition, the system proposed by the Congress of Vienna was affected in the middle of the 19th century by the rise of nationalism, the 1848 revolutions and the Crimean War. A lesson drawn from that period was that “in international affairs a reputation for reliability is a more important asset than demonstrations of tactical cleverness”. Unfortunately, such lessons are too often forgotten and the price paid is the repetition of the respective lessons. Or, as Hegel formulated: “What experience and history teaches us is that people and governments have never learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it.”

The unification of Germany in 1871 opened the way simultaneously to less flexibility in the international order, need for more diplomatic activity and an increased risk of conflicts that ultimately led to the First World War. The starting of the war itself is regarded by Kissinger as the result of a series of miscalculations of important European leaders that did not understand the full consequences of their planning. We may wonder again, in today’s globalized world, what would be the prize of miscalculating some plans or overlooking some consequences. At the end of the First World War the Peace of Versailles in 1919 aimed at securing peace but the new world realities as well as peace construction were way less reassuring than those of both the Westphalian Peace and the Conference of Vienna. The major weakness was that there were no serious consequences for any violations of the rules, something that Germany, Japan or Italy took advantage of. The Second World War was a consequence of this weak European based world order system and the enormous destructions determined by the war asked for a new approach, this time definitely broader than the geographical limits of Europe. As for Europe, the post-war world order had as a prime objective to transcend centuries of history and overcome divisions that were no longer sustainable (such as the French – German traditional rivalry) while accepting the division of Germany.

For the first time after one thousand years, after the Second World War the world order was primary based on the existence of two superpowers outside Europe (the United States of America across the Atlantic and the Soviet Union at the geographical borders of Europe). This time Western Europe took part in the world order only within the consultation mechanism represented by NATO. As Kissinger expressed it, in the bipolar world, America acted “as the managing director of a joint enterprise”. As result, the world order during the Cold War implied two sets of balances: the nuclear balance between United States and Soviet Union and the internal balance within NATO.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the disappearance of Soviet Union and its sphere of influence have been regarded as a triumph of democracy. But from the point of view of world order it created a new challenge because the Cold War world order was no longer applicable. In this new context Kissinger raises a number of questions regarding the future role of Europe both within European Union and in the globalized world without omitting the American interests. The challenge is that in order to have a voice in the shaping of the new world order Europe needs to be coherent and consistent, while the reality is that no such Europe (as a single, coherent entity) exists. The dilemma is that in order to have a voice Europe needs to strengthen its internal construction, but if Europe dedicates too much time to itself it may miss the opportunity to be at the negotiating table (page 100).

After the extensive analysis of the European contribution to the shaping of the world order the next topic in Kissinger’s book is related to Islam and the Middle East. The main challenges of this part of the world which are complex and with deep historical roots consist in achieving a regional order (something which is dramatically lacking now) and ensuring the compatibility of that regional order with the rest of the world. The presentation of the evolution of the Islamic world order reflects its fundamentally different characteristics as compared to the European experience. Due to a rapid expansion on three continents Islam became at the same time “a religion, a multi-ethnic super state, and a new world order” (page 104). The main mission of Islam was to incorporate all regions of the world into a universal system and therefore world order. Anyway, such a

universal approach did not pass the test of time and the Islamic world has been divided in variable geometries, despite some periods of glory such as during the Ottoman Empire. The period after the Second World War up to present day preserved this division of Islamic world in frequently changing configurations, some of them at times opposed to the rest of the world, particularly when they considered religious purity as the essence of their proposed world order.

Misunderstandings of the fundamental differences between Islamic and Western approaches, as well as differences in the interests of the members of the Security Council of the United Nations led often to ineffective positions and proposals, more recently during the Arab spring and up to the present. And the blunt result, in Kissinger's view is that: "If order cannot be achieved by consensus or imposed by force, it will be wrought, at disastrous and dehumanizing cost, from the experience of chaos" (page 133).

Another topic of interest in explaining the *de facto* world order of today is that of the Palestinian issue with all its complexity, an issue that reflects a confrontation between the Westphalian concept of world order and that of the Islam. The complexities of the Middle East also include Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iran. Kissinger dedicates an entire chapter to the approaches to order of United States and Iran because this last state represents a key position in the Islamic revolution but also because of its desire to become a nuclear power. In his opinion United States represents the key factor that may influence the orientation of Iran towards the revolutionary Islam or towards a great nation participating in a Westphalian system of states.

Another area of the world economy that receives attention in Kissinger's book is Asia. And an important message is sent to the reader even from the title of the chapter, "The Multiplicity of Asia". It simply says that there is no such thing as "Asia", that is a single entity in the sense we speak about "Western Europe", nor that it ever was. What we call Asia is a complex area, with no sense of common identity, characterized by "major ethnic, linguistic, religious, social, and cultural differences" that rather deepened than diminished in time (page 177). Anyway, what is clear is that the 21st century sees a rise of this complex space and Europe can no longer shape the world order that includes Asia only from its perspective. At the same time, the rise of Asian countries and their position in international matters are perceived as a sort of heritage and reinterpretation of the Westphalian system based on sovereignty and equality to which strong, millennia old cultural legacies are added. The case studies selected by Kissinger for supporting his view are Japan and India. In both cases Kissinger aims to present how the specifics of each culture and traditional political decision making shaped their strategies and definitely will influence their 21st century options. Both historical experiences are vastly different from each other and from European ones, but they are to be taken into account in any conceivable design of a 21st century world order.

The geographical and historical diversity of Asia determines a particular challenge if one thinks about an Asian order. Kissinger himself summarizes that in the title of the chapter: "Asian Order: Confrontation or Partnership ?" Whatever that Asian order will be, China will play a major part in it. At the same time, dealing with China as a relevant global actor requires understanding of traditional Chinese approaches to the rest of the world and the fact that: "China had not sought to export its political system; rather, it had seen others come to it. In that sense, it has expanded not by conquest but by osmosis" (page 217).

As United States and China are *de facto* key players in the contemporary world the need of each one to make efforts to understand the other is of paramount importance. And given the size and the complexity of both Chinese present power and millennia long traditions, as well as the huge diversity of the participants in the Asian space Kissinger draws the conclusion that in Asia order "must combine a balance of power with a concept of partnership". (page 232).

Kissinger dedicates, quite understandably, the largest part of his book to the position and role of United States in shaping the existing world order and in exploring its potential role in the future one. Understanding this role and the so-called American exceptionalism means understanding both the American conviction that "its domestic principles were self-evidently universal" and its "perception that foreign policy was an optional activity". The chapter on America include all significant historical moments (among which we quote, "Woodrow Wilson: America as the World's Conscience", "Franklin Roosevelt and the New World Order" or the post-war period with "The United States: Ambivalent Superpower").

The readers have permanently to keep in mind that "World Order" neither represent the absolute truth, nor pretends to be a history book. The book reflects an American opinion and a personal opinion at the same time. It is from this position that we should note that the belief of all post second World War American presidents was that American principles are applicable to the whole world and that actually America is not representing its interests but fight for some universal truths aiming at "world peace and universal harmony" (page 271).

In the larger context of presenting the post war evolution of world order Kissinger explains the current transition from an unipolar to a multipolar world, meaning simply that America is no longer what is used to be in a rather philosophical manner: “the American setbacks derived from the inability to resolve an ambivalence about force and diplomacy, realism and idealism, power and legitimacy, cutting across the entire society”(page 275).

This part of the book seems more subjective than others but maybe it is so because it describes the direct experience of the whole professional life of Henry Kissinger. Anyway, the presentation of America’s post war position clarifies the essence of the American position on the world stage: America is exceptional and different because “American policies were ... a disinterested effort to advance the general interests of humanity”. At the same time, “other nations had “selfish interests” while America had “principles” and “destiny” (page 283). Reading these statements that defined the way America saw itself in the world order context creates the feeling that in the contemporary, post industrial, globalized, internet based world they are less adequate and far from being efficient. In a diplomatic manner Kissinger himself admits that such approaches may have led to the unsuccessful campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan (page 322). As Barack Obama recently recognized, America makes mistakes and is not able or intends to solve all conflicts and tensions in the world.

The final part of the book deals with the implications of science and technology, of instant communications and interactivity on politics and world order. Kissinger fears that the qualities required for being a media star and those necessary for a wise statesman may become too different to allow an efficient and effective governance: “Can democracy avoid an evolution toward a demagogic outcome based on emotional mass appeal rather than the reasoned process the Founding Fathers imagined? If the gap between the qualities required for election and those essential for the conduct of office becomes too wide, the conceptual grasp and sense of history that should be part of foreign policy may be lost” (page 349). At the same time, science and technology have opened unprecedented prospects and perils for the humankind. At worst, in Kissinger’s opinion, this world based on science and technology may lead to a situation characterized by no limits and no order and lacking even the ability to understand its crises. He explores the implications starting with the nuclear age and the concept of nuclear balance to the challenge of nuclear proliferation (actual these days in relation with countries like Iran or North Korea) and to the present when cyber technology influences the world order in many different and subtle ways, making it more and more ambiguous. The huge challenge is that while cyber space needs some regulations due to its strategic importance, there are for the moment no internationally accepted rules of conduct. The design of such rules is difficult as long as there is no clear and common understanding on the dimensions, implications and risks associated to cyber space. Similar with the real, tangible world, the cyber space or virtual reality is characterized by asymmetries in new ways and with new meanings. Kissinger suggests that a future crisis may arise exactly from this domain (page 343).

Towards the end of the book, one very impressive albeit short part deals with the role of the human factor and, particularly, that of the political factor under the impact of science and technology and of instant communication, access to enormous quantities of data and almost disappearance of privacy. Kissinger suggests that the hypothesis that under such circumstances history will run on auto pilot is fundamentally wrong because “...philosophers and poets have long separated the mind’s purview into three components: information, knowledge, and wisdom” (page 345). He also recommends caution in shaping foreign policy in the digital era. Reasons may be replaced by attitudes that reflect “the moods of the moment” and that brings short term vision and all the risks that accompany short sightedness. The danger of the emergence of leaders that try to capture and rely on mass consensus is greater than ever. Particularly one statement is very apt for explaining a lot of the current Ukraine situation: “As diplomacy is transformed into gestures geared toward passions, the search for equilibrium risks giving way to a testing of limits” (page 355).

Conclusions. The book’s conclusion’s are at the same time philosophical and operational in the sense that they may be used immediately in designing foreign policy responses. The World Order structured after the Second World War is under a profound change in which the Western and non-Western approaches are confronting not only theoretically. The optimistic beliefs of the early 1990 “that the spread of democracy and free markets would automatically create a just, peaceful, and inclusive world” (page 360) are seriously put into question. A key observation is that these differences do not mean only multi-polarity but also “contradictory realities” that may lead not to a new order but rather to a lack of it. Historically speaking such circumstances ask for either a redefinition of legitimacy or for a new balance of power. The most difficult part consists in what Kissinger believes to represent the essence of statesmanship: reaching a balance between power and

legitimacy. The statesmen of 21st century face issues on a scale larger than ever because of globalization, because of almost universal communication and interaction among the people on Planet Earth, because we are more than 7 billion and because science and technology can make or break the world. Above all, in Kissinger's words: "history's meaning is a matter to be discovered, not declared". And maybe that is why the key task of politicians is to "explore the outer edge of what is possible".

After reading Kissinger's *World Order* the reader remains with a sense of reality, sometimes in a cynical sense, with a lot of questions more clearly formulated than before reading it, with more respect for history and its becoming and with a dilemma that Kissinger solved for himself during his whole existence: "If I had to choose between justice and disorder, on the one hand, and injustice and order, on the other, I would always choose the latter"⁹.

⁹ Rachel Halliburton, Henry Kissinger's *World Order*: The outer edge of what is possible, *The Independent*, October 16, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/henry-kissingers-world-order-the-outer-edge-of-what-is-possible-9752563.html>