



# Understanding and Helping Understand the Kingdom of Heaven

Book Review

## Henry Kissinger: *On China*, Antall József Knowledge Centre, Budapest, 2014<sup>1</sup>

Henry Kissinger, born Heinz Alfred Kissinger, is one of the most widely-known personalities of our days, one of the ‘great old ones’ of the American political life. In 1938, at barely 15, the Germany-born future politician and his family emigrated to New York to steer away from the Nazis. As a Harvard University graduate, he would soon become a member of the American political elite. He became the advisor of several governmental organizations. Following Richard Nixon’s 1968 election victory, Kissinger made it to the Cabinet of the President as a national security advisor. He held his office between 1969 and 1975 during Nixon’s, then Gerald Ford’s presidency, in addition to which, he was simultaneously in office as the United States’ Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in the period between September 1973 and January 20, 1977. Not even the Watergate Scandal could undermine his position.

Henry Kissinger played a decisive role in the preparation and organization of the 1972 U.S.–China summit meeting. His travels in July and October 1971 paved the way for President Nixon’s 1972 visit to China and the signing of the Shanghai Communiqué, which put an end to 23 years of mutual hostilities and diplomatic isolation and set the key parameters of the U.S.–China relations for the following decade. China was given a guarantee that the United States would not co-operate with the Soviet Union in putting into practice the Brezhnev Doctrine, while Washington obtained a commitment from Peking to co-operate in preventing the Soviet expansion. Thus, China re-entered the global diplomatic playground and, what is more, in favour of the Americans, which is Kissinger’s greatest diplomatic victory.

Besides this, yet another highly favourable result was that the national security chief advisor managed to have the SALT contract signed by 1972. This latter

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1 Henry Kissinger: *Kínáról* (On China). Translated by Tamás Magyarics, Ed.: Antall József Tudásközpont, Budapest, 2014.

achievement and his efforts to end the Vietnam War earned him a Nobel Peace Prize in 1973.

At the same time, he was harshly criticized for his activities undertaken during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971 as, despite the war crimes and the human rights violations committed by the Pakistani army, the United States kept on providing military equipment and financial support for Pakistan, a country considered to be a close ally of the People's Republic of China. However, all of these do not actually speak of the American politician's insensibility but rather of his unparalleled consistency adopted in matters of foreign policy and his sophisticated sense of reality, which he made use of to maintain and further improve the strategically important Chinese alliance, even if that required sacrifices.

He played a decisive role in resolving such highly significant conflicts as the Yom Kippur War, following the end of which he led the 1973 peace-negotiations between Israel on one side and Egypt and Syria on the other. His name is also associated with the September 1973 covert intervention in the internal affairs of Chile aimed at removing the democratically elected, openly Marxist pro-Cuba president, Salvadore Allende, while raising Augusto Pinochet to power.

That is why his political activity might as well be regarded as contradictory; setting out of strictly speaking democratic principles, it may even be condemnable, but Kissinger is undeniably one the highest-calibre politicians in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose several-decade-long diplomatic activity aimed at maintaining and occasionally restoring global peace and balance. Amongst others, the significance of his personality is demonstrated by the fact that the American government still seeks the advice of the 'great old one' – who is about to turn 91 years old and whose biography has inspired the writing of nine books so far – prior to taking any step of considerable importance concerning foreign policy matters.

This latest book of Henry Kissinger may be rightly compared to his world-famous work published in 1994, *Diplomacy* (translated into Hungarian in 2002). Just as the latter one, his work entitled *On China* also serves with a large-scale historical tableau of international relations. We can say that we are dealing with another bestseller modelled on the earlier work. This time, however, Kissinger has created an extremely limited monograph describing the political, economic and cultural image of modern-day China on its way to becoming a global power.

Due to the Antall József Knowledge Centre, the volume published in New York in 2011 has recently appeared in Hungarian translation, as well. The more than 600-page-long work, thus become known to us, will most probably turn into one of the basic readings – similarly to the likewise lengthy *Diplomacy* – of those taking an interest in international relations. Its emphatically scientific nature is reinforced by the fact that its well-balanced structure (preface, prologue, 18 lengthy chapters and epilogue) is complemented by notes and indices.

The memoranda of the consultations led by Kissinger and also noted down by him represented the primary sources of the volume. Besides these, the author also made use of original Chinese texts, translations of government documents, published materials of Russian and Chinese archives, transcriptions and synopses of meetings, records of discussions, which all make his work a relevant documentation of an epoch combining several viewpoints.

Kissinger does not provide us a simple event history, but he carries out a multi-criteria analysis. His ambition is not to write the great history of China but to present the development path of the People's Republic of China and explore the power mechanisms of the Mao Zedong system. Therefore, his work fills a void as it offers us first-hand information on the communist China's foreign policy objectives and the methods adopted in the interest of their completion.

The most intriguing and perhaps the most valuable part of the volume is made up of chapters 9 and 10 respectively, where Kissinger writes about his one-time negotiations carried on with Mao Zedong and Premier Zhou Enlai. This is where the text becomes most strikingly fresh and informal in its style and content alike. Kissinger describes and evaluates his visits to China, psychologically analysing the course of his negotiations carried on with the Chinese. He discusses his talks carried on with Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai at great length and provides an excellent portrait of the Chinese leaders, whose perspicacity, good judgement of character and genuine diplomatic nature he attests. Citing the details of the actual dialogues, the author faithfully conveys the atmosphere of the negotiations. The reader has the sensation that the meeting takes place in the now and s/he becomes part of it, too.

Kissinger's relations with China started at the beginning of the 1970s and since then – according to him – he has visited this country of the Far East for more than 50 times. Thus, he has become an expert of the political and economic life of this enigmatical East Asian superpower, and his book bears evidence of a profound understanding and appreciation of China's ancient spirituality. This is what the highly respected American politician would like to convey to the West: make them understand the Chinese way of thinking of war and peace as well as of the issues of international order. At the same time, he tries to outline its relationship with the pragmatic American type of approach that relies on specific cases.

By way of illustration, this is how he expresses his opinion on Mao Zedong's coming to power: "The advent of a new dynasty in China had, over the millennia, developed a distinct rhythm. The old dynasty would begin to be perceived as failing in its mission of protecting the security of the Chinese population or fulfilling its fundamental aspirations. Rarely as the result of a single catastrophe, most frequently through the cumulative impact of a series of disasters, would the ruling dynasty in the view of the Chinese people – lose the "Mandate of Heaven". The new dynasty would be seen as having achieved it, in part by the mere fact of having established itself.

This kind of upheaval had happened many times in China's dramatic history. But no new ruler had ever proposed to overthrow the value system of the entire society. Previous claimants to the "Mandate of Heaven" – even, and perhaps especially, foreign conquerors – had legitimized themselves by affirming the ancient values of the society they took over and governing by its maxims. They maintained the bureaucracy they inherited if only to be able to govern a country more populous and richer than any other. This tradition was the mechanism of the process of Sinification. It established Confucianism as the governing doctrine of China.

At the head of the new dynasty, which set out from the countryside to take over the cities in 1949, there stood a colossus: Mao Zedong. Domineering and overwhelming in his influence, ruthless and aloof, poet and warrior, prophet and scourge, he unified China and launched it on a journey that nearly wrecked its civil society. By the end of this searing process, China stood as one of the world's major powers and the only communist country except Cuba, North Korea and Vietnam whose political structure survived the collapse of communism everywhere else.'

Kissinger's book is very timely as the People's Republic of China is unquestionably one of today's international actors with the utmost global importance. The author himself recognizes China's role as both an economic superpower and a political and military power base of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, the relationship of the United States, as a Cold War victor, with China will be a key issue.

Kissinger estimates that the Chinese–American relationship building initiated four decades ago basically rests upon co-operation up to the present day. That is to say, neither of the parties let their different internal situations or their divergent economic and cultural views make their relationship irresolvably conflictual. And this is where the author played an undeniably huge part, having carried on personal negotiations with the Chinese leaders of four generations (Mao Zedong: 1945–1976, Deng Xiaoping: 1976–1997, Jiang Zemin: 1997–2002 and Hu Jintao: 2002–2013).

Kissinger argues that the People's Republic of China and the United States need each other because they are simply too powerful to be dominated by others, way too unique to be changed and too much dependent on each other to opt for isolation.

In the author's view, the present relationship between China and the USA resembles to that of the pre-World War I between Germany and Great Britain. In turn, instead of being nation-states, the United States and the People's Republic of China may be perceived as expressions of cultural identities of the size of a continent. Both of them dispose of a universal vision.

China – just like Germany at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – is stronger than any of its neighbours taken separately, but if they joined forces against it, they might endanger its integrity. According to this view, should the People's Republic of China fail to become the number one power in the world, it will inevitably

'become a loser destined to be pushed aside'. This is the ever more prevalent view that, according to Kissinger, should not dominate the immediate future as it would lead to a catastrophe. After all, there are such common global issues today (general use of nuclear technology, environment protection, climate change etc.) which they can only resolve together, and if one of the parties emerges as a loser, that will leave the other one stranded as well. That is why the author shares the opinion that efforts must be made towards developing a true strategic trust and permanent co-operation with the People's Republic of China. All the more so since the competition between the People's Republic of China and the United States much rather takes the form of an economic and social 'co-evolution' than that of a military conflict. Both parties cling to their own internal scale of values and structure, but each of them is set to harmonize the interests that can be approximated and essentially avoids any confrontation.

The best way to make this co-operation work would be the establishment of a so-called 'Pacific community,' argues Kissinger, which would eliminate, on the one part, China's concern that the USA will overshadow its development and, on the other part, the USA's fear that the People's Republic of China wants to oust the USA from Asia. In order to achieve this, just like in the early 1970s, they must be able to rise above the daily issues and let no matter come between them. This was easy to achieve at the time since, due to the long-lasting state of isolation prior to that period, there were no incongruous issues with China.

Therefore, Kissinger calls for the same approach as he did four decades earlier, but he does so on a larger scale now. Thus, his attitude is constructive and subjective at the same time as he believes that the only operational scenario can be the one performed with his contribution in those days...

Kissinger brings forward Kant's work entitled *Perpetual Peace* in backing up his opinion, when he explains that universal peace can descend upon the world in one of two ways: as a consequence of human understanding or as the outcome of such large-scale conflicts and catastrophes that leave no other choice for humanity. We have arrived at such a crossroads now – he warns us. One may choose to agree with him or refuse to share his views, but he cannot be left out of consideration by any means.

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