
RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Review of on China by Henry Kissinger: Insights into Diplomacy and History and its Implications for Afghans

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ABSTRACT

This book review critically examines *On China* by Henry Kissinger, exploring its significance in the fields of international relations, diplomacy, and history. The review summarizes the book's key themes and sections, with a focus on Chinese foreign policy and the evolution of Chinese leadership. Additionally, it contextualizes the book's relevance for Afghan scholars, policymakers, and students by highlighting China's expanding influence in Afghanistan. The review emphasizes the importance of understanding China's geopolitical strategies and concludes with insights into how the book can inform future policy decisions.

KEYWORDS

Henry Kissinger, *On China*, Chinese diplomacy, Afghan foreign policy, International relations.

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1. Introduction

"The Task of the leader is to get his people from where they are to where they have not been." (Henry Kissinger). There are many good books on China; nonetheless, in this review paper, we have chosen the work of somebody who remains probably the most charismatic—and easily the most controversial—secretary of state of the 20th century – Henry Kissinger-. We have chosen to review his most fecund book, "On China." The book 'On China' is a detailed account of Chinese history, politics, and foreign relations. Consequently, in this review article, we have first introduced the book and its author. Secondly, we have contextualized the book, the need for this book, and why it is relevant for Afghan scholars, academicians, and foreign policy practitioners; in the third part of this book, we have summarized the entire book in a very explicit manner. The book is divided into 18 chapters, but in order to make it easy, we have divided the book into five sections- China before Mao, Mao's China, Deng's China, Fourth Generation Leadership, and Hu's China-. Moreover, in this article, we have endeavored to illustrate the relevance and importance of this book, and finally, we have presented the conclusion.

'On China' is one of the most detailed, fascinating, and prolific books written by an American statesman who not only understood China but also was practically involved in Chinese affairs. 'On China' was written by Dr. Henry Kissinger in 2011. It has 18 chapters. Kissinger was a German-born American diplomat and statesman who worked as a Secretary of State and National Security Advisor in the Richard Nixon Administration. Moreover, he has also served as a Secretary of State in the Ford Administration. Mr. Kissinger was a strong advocate of realpolitik and has played a vital role in world politics. His most copacetic achievement as an American diplomat was the re-establishment of relations with communist China. He was a crucial figure in the Chinese-US diplomatic maneuvering. 'On China' and its Portrait of China is informed by Mr. Kissinger's intimate firsthand knowledge of several generations of Chinese leaders. *On China* is a historical account of Chinese political history with reference to its foreign policy and diplomacy.

The book 'On China' was published in 2011. It was published at a time when China sought its hegemony not only in the region but also around the world. Since the inception of the relations between the two countries- the USA and China have come a long way, with some twists and turns. The two sides have conducted extensive exchanges and cooperation in political, economic, military, cultural, people-to-people, and sub-national areas, as well as on international affairs. The China-U.S. relationship assumes more significant global implications and strategic dimensions. It has become one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. Thus, it has become necessary for everyone to understand the Chinese world in order to deal with and cope with it. Kissinger's publishing of this book in 2011 gives insights into the relationship and helps us to predict the relations between both countries. The book uses a dual approach in describing China. While one approach rests on Chinese history, another emphasizes US-China relations, especially Kissinger's personal experiences. Moreover, Kissinger, in his book, urges the policymakers and leaders of both sides to cooperate and has a very optimistic view.

Furthermore, this book is relevant in the Afghan context, where China has increased its footprint. 'On China' becomes vital in Afghanistan. Since China is highly keen on Afghanistan for its geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic agendas, in this regard, in order to achieve its objectives, China has (re)mapped and (re)implicated Afghanistan in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Afghanistan is never an end for China; it has been seen and treated as a means by Chinese thinkers and authorities. Chinese objectives in Afghanistan are security, energy geopolitics, and geoeconomics.

China feels threatened by the spillover of terrorism, extremism, and separatism from Afghanistan's Wakhan border. China does not want the three evils to spill over from Afghanistan into its already uneasy and restive province of Xinjiang. China's primary objective in Afghanistan is security concerns. In addition to that, China is interested in Afghanistan for its Central Asia and West Asia policy. Afghanistan provides an easy route for China to connect to West Asia and Central Asia. Not only is Afghanistan important for Chinese connectivity to Central Asia, but it is also crucial for the security of Central Asian countries. Since unstable Afghanistan will have repercussions in Central Asia as well. In addition, China in Afghanistan is interested in the sphere of influence, balance, and containment of the other countries. Finally, China is interested in the Afghan mineral resources and has already invested in different projects. The most remarkable Chinese investments are different extraction projects, such as the Mes Aynak copper field and oil exploration in the Amu Darya.

Since 2021, China has increased its presence in Afghanistan. Hence, this book is quintessential for ordinary Afghans, students of social science and international affairs, policymakers, diplomats, and foreign officials to understand Chinese history, diplomacy, strategic thinking, and its relations. This book is essential for every Afghan because it introduces the Afghans to Chinese diplomacy, thinking, strategy, history, warfare, and behavior. Moreover, this book also engages us with complicated Chinese-centric concepts and ideas. This book would help us to deal with China in Afghanistan. Finally, China shares a border with Afghanistan and is on a path towards superpower status. It has become important for every student of IR and global politics to understand China. 'On China' is a prolific book to start with. Furthermore, Kissinger deals with how China opens itself to the world. The Afghans can learn from the policies and pathways the Chinese leadership took to open itself up to the world, which helped China grow its economic development.

The book 'On China' consists of 18 chapters. The first three chapters of this prolific book deal with China before Chairman Mao. He talks about ancient China, its policies, leadership patterns, and different wars. Dr. Henry Kissinger perceives that contrary to popular belief, China was not an isolationist, but China's conception of International politics was different where China was the 'Middle Kingdom.' Moreover, Kissinger, from chapter 4 to chapter 11, talks about Chairman Mao's China. Kissinger delineates China's foreign policy during Mao. He talks about Mao's personality, his vision for China, and his motives for an independent and assertive China. After reading chapter four, one can conclude that Mao was more of a Sun Tzu advocate. He broke all his relations with the past and asked for a world revolution. In the first years of the emergence of the PRC, China established good relations with the USSR. Nonetheless, due to differences and power politics, it could not consolidate itself. Moreover, Henry brings Mao's strategy as follows: "With respect to the rest of the world, Mao introduced a special style that substituted ideological militancy and psychological perception for physical strength. It was composed of a Sino-centric view of the world, a touch of world revolution, and a diplomacy using the Chinese tradition of manipulating the barbarians, with great attention paid to meticulous planning and the psychological domination of the other side."

China's new foreign policy, Kissinger added, could be best understood from Zhou's aphorism:

1. China would set up a separate kitchen.
2. Sweep the house clean before inviting the guests.
3. China's strategy towards the superpower was like the "Empty City Stratagem."

In the book on China, Dr. Kissinger served as the NSA and Foreign secretary, and during his time, the negotiation between the US and China started. Thus, he presents comprehensive details about the start of an informal friendship between these two great and giant nations. In the chapters about Mao, the author of the book talks about the Korean War, the Taiwan Strait Crisis, Mao's enmity and friendship with the USSR and the US, and so on. The author calls the Sino-US friendship that took place under his leadership and watches "The Quasi alliance." In addition, from chapter 12 onwards till chapter 16, Dr. Kissinger illuminates the indestructible and towering personality of Deng Xiaoping, his pragmatic foreign policies, and his path-breaking economic and internal policies. Kissinger starts the Deng section by saying, "Only those who experienced Mao Zedong's China can fully appreciate the transformation wrought by Deng Xiaoping." In addition, Deng was the originator of the idea of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." Doctor Henry Kissinger differentiated Chairman Mao and Chairman Deng by saying, "Where Mao took issues into the stratosphere of ideological parables, Deng subordinated ideological pursuits to professional competence."

Moreover, Kissinger talks about Deng's economic policies, and we quote, "The people, he said, needed to be given a stake in what they produced. Consumer goods had to have priority over heavy industry, the ingenuity of Chinese farmers had to be liberated, the Communist Party needed to become less intrusive, and government would have to be decentralized." Deng was in favor of decentralization in a vast country like China. Deng's guiding principle was "Seeking truth from the fact," which channeled his entire career. Furthermore, Kissinger elucidates different incidents that took place during Deng's leadership. For instance, the Third Vietnam War, his encounter with the Reagan administration, the Tiananmen incident, and so on and so on. Finally, Dr. Henry ends the Deng era by talking about his last Southern tour. After reading Deng's section, China's strategy and foreign policy can be concluded as "to support the American military buildup against Soviet expansionism and to attack superpower rivalry as the major cause of global tension. As a result, China is able to pursue parallel strategic interests with the US and, at the same time, to strengthen its relations with what it perceives to be an ascendant Third World bloc."

Chapter 17 is about the third-generation leaders in general and the 'paramount leader Jiang Zemin' in particular. Kissinger calls Zemin a different leader from his predecessors. He calls him a leader who managed to navigate China out of isolation and restore the weak link between China and the Western world. He concludes Zemin by saying that "he oversaw one of the greatest per capita GDP increases in human history, consummated the peaceful return of Hong Kong, reconstituted China's relations with the United States and the rest of the world, and launched China on the road to becoming a global economic powerhouse." Moreover, in the last chapter of the book, which is chapter 18, Dr. Kissinger introduces the fourth generation- President Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao- leadership and their internal and external policies. The author's observation regarding the generation leadership could be concluded as "was now in a position to conduct its foreign policy not based on its long-term potential or its ultimate strategic role but in terms of its actual power." Finally, the former National Security Advisor ends his book with optimism that the US and China should endeavor to work together since, if they work together, they both will benefit.

The book 'On China' is important for the students of IR, practitioners, and foreign policymakers for many reasons. It helps us to understand the history of China, starting from ancient times till President Hu-Jintao's period. The book connects different internal phenomena as the foreign policy determinants of China. In this book, Henry Kissinger does not impose meanings and create narratives; it explains China and its culture the way it is. At the same time, the author explains China's copious policies and strategies. For instance, the policy of 'Barbarian against barbarians,' 'middle kingdom,' 'wei qi,' and so on. This book is fundamentally different from most of the books on China. 'On China' is the brainchild of somebody who has guided eight American presidents and four generations of Chinese leaders- Henry Kissinger-. Most of the books that deal academically with China have been written by IR and Chinese scholars.

This book is considered different because Henry Kissinger, who was involved in the restoration of Chinese and US relations, wrote it. Thus, the information and data that he has used come from his own experience and working in the US and Chinese bureaucracy. He was an outsider. However, practically, due to his influence and work in China, he can be considered an insider. Finally, the book 'On China' is a product of many conversations between the Chinese leaders- Mao, Deng, Zemin, and Hu- and American ones; the book is a product of many policies that he has made, implemented, and dealt with. Consequently, this book is considered to be important and different. In addition, this book is essential for Afghans who want to understand China, deal with it, and maintain cordial relations.

In conclusion, On China offers a detailed analysis of China's political history and foreign policy, drawing from Kissinger's personal involvement in diplomacy. This book provides valuable insights for scholars and policymakers alike, especially in Afghanistan, where understanding China's geopolitical strategies is increasingly essential. Through this book, readers can better comprehend China's role on the global stage and develop informed approaches for future diplomatic engagements. As students of International Studies with no prior deep understanding and knowledge of China, this book helped us to grasp what China has been doing and what it is going to do. This book cleared many of our misconceptions about China and its politics. It helped us to understand different debates about Chinese Foreign Policy inside and outside the country. The language that Kissinger used in this book is

easy to understand, thus making it an overall perfect book on China. Moreover, Kissinger's take on the US-China relationship is relevant for the present times, when there is increasing confrontation between the two due to the pandemic, the digital age, and China's rise as a great power. It only indicates that long-term confrontation is not in the interest of the two countries, and building a cooperative relationship in the world order should be the way forward.

In the Afghan context, its relevance can be understood in different ways. Chinese geopolitical influence is growing in Afghanistan. Hence, this book has become essential for Afghans to understand China's historical perspective and foreign policy in order to navigate its relations with China. China has been investing in infrastructure and development projects in Afghanistan, demonstrating a substantial economic interest in the country. Afghan officials may benefit from this book's insights on how to interact with China reasonably and beneficially. The book's teachings on stability, economic prosperity, national unity in a varied population, and effective governance are also crucial ones for Afghans, their leaders, and politicians. Finally, this book provides background information about China's lengthy history and relations with its neighbors.

Given Afghanistan's longstanding ties to China, this can aid Afghans in understanding their history and the nuances of regional interactions. To sum it up, as Afghan scholars, this book helped us understand Chinese thinking, strategy, diplomatic and military relations, and history. If given the opportunity in foreign policy to deal with China, this book will help us make rational policy choices.

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