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Henry Kissinger saw his world fall apart

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The leading advocate of world order died at a time when it all appeared to be coming undone. Henry Kissinger spent the last months of his century-long life travelling to China to temper escalating tensions with the United States, pushing for negotiations to end a war begun by Russia in Ukraine (he made his first intervention on this war in *The Spectator* last year), and watching as Israel and Hamas entered a new death struggle. Even more discouraging, isolationist tendencies were ascendant again in the US, and American democracy seemed crippled by divisions that shut down Congress repeatedly. Kissinger's last book, co-authored with Google's Erich Schmidt, warned that artificial intelligence was on the verge of supplanting human control of the planet – a challenge to consciousness 'not experienced since the start of the Enlightenment.'

But all was not lost. Kissinger remained convinced that the leaders of the biggest states could hold it together. He had spent his tireless career building relationships, habits, and tools that would keep the world from careening into another apocalypse like the one he experienced as an adolescent, and always feared again.

Winston Churchill, one of Kissinger's heroes, had spoken about the 'sinews of peace'; Kissinger created what he frequently called a 'structure' for global stability. That structure is the master work that will outlive the statesman. It makes Kissinger the architect not only of the career endlessly dissected on his death, but also of the international politics that continue to keep our world stable and free from a third world war, despite destructive conflict in numerous regions. Kissinger's architecture has its weaknesses, particularly the inequalities and injustices that it not only tolerates, but promotes in the name of geopolitical 'reality'.

How did Kissinger design the world order of our time? It all began with the nuclear arms race in the 1950s. He was one of the original nuclear strategists, memorably lampooned in Stanley Kubrick's 'Dr. Strangelove'. Kissinger's 1957 bestseller, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy*, laid out the case for large nuclear stockpiles and deterrence. The United States would need to develop the most powerful bombs with delivery vehicles and deploy them widely to convince the Soviet Union that they could not win a new war.

Kissinger advocated a vast nuclear umbrella to shield Western Europe, East Asia, and other regions from conventional probes by large communist armies. The United States had to be willing, Kissinger contended, to make credible nuclear threats if it wanted to convince potential aggressors to back down. Nuclear weapons were not to be used recklessly, but they were to be brandished for sobering effect.

President Dwight Eisenhower was one of many world leaders to take Kissinger's ideas seriously. Together with his Nato allies, he built the American nuclear posture of 'overkill' which gave adversaries no chance of winning a full-scale

war. It also made Soviet or Chinese aggression in disputed areas – especially Berlin and Taiwan – too risky for them to contemplate. Nuclear deterrence prevented a third world war. Kissinger relied on it when he was secretary of state and raised the American nuclear readiness condition (Defcon) to signal to Moscow that it better not intervene to widen the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.

Fifty years later, a large nuclear stockpile remains the cornerstone of American and Nato defence strategy. The modernisation of that arsenal is continuous, as it offers the ultimate deterrence to major adversaries challenging key strategic positions. China's recent expansion of its nuclear arsenal and Russia's nuclear threats around Ukraine have, if anything, made nuclear deterrence even more important for the United States.

New nuclear states, especially North Korea, have created their own threats, but they cannot challenge America's overwhelming deterrence. Nuclear weapons are a proven stabilising force in the international system, and no one better understood that than Henry Kissinger. The big bombs are here to stay.

Although they have deterred a third world war, they clearly have not prevented smaller wars. Kissinger and President Nixon frequently encouraged limited, proxy wars (the 'Nixon Doctrine') as substitutes for more dangerous direct superpower confrontations. Throughout his career, Kissinger supported arms sales abroad and other military assistance to Israel, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, Argentina, Brazil, South Africa, and many other regimes. These countries, often undemocratic in governance, fought brutally and locally to push back communist and other threats. Kissinger understood that local proxies could fight more effectively than Americans, especially after the debacle in Vietnam. Proxies allowed leaders in Washington to sidestep anti-war and isolationist sentiments within the United States.

The Kissinger Way of War, through proxies, is the story of Ukraine's resistance to Russian aggression in Europe. Vladimir Putin launched this war, but Washington is leading the western alliance's extensive support for Ukraine. The US has developed, thanks in part to Kissinger, a long experience with this kind of conflict, and Washington is capable of sustaining foreign soldiers in the field for quite a long time, even as members of Congress and others express reservations. Kissinger helped western leaders learn to fight contained wars with the blood of others.

In the Middle East, Israel, and to a smaller extent Egypt, have done this work for Washington. Here Kissinger was clearly a pioneer. He turned the destruction of the 1973 war into an opportunity to strengthen Israel's hand in the region,

The current generation of foreign policy officials lack Kissinger's depth of perspective and his creative energy.

separate Egypt from its Arab neighbours, and isolate the Palestinians and other perceived radical groups.

Israel and Egypt, with occasional help from Saudi Arabia, held the Middle East together and protected American oil access for a quarter century until Washington decided, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to break its own system and fight a needless war of occupation in Iraq. The abject failures of that American deviation, which Kissinger supported but would never have authorised if he were in charge, made Washington even more dependent on its more competent regional proxies. From the War on Terror until the recent Hamas terrorist attacks, the United States gave Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia virtual free hands to pursue their ambitions with American largess guaranteed. President Joe Biden hoped to stitch that arrangement together with an Israel-Saudi peace treaty, modelled on the Israel-Egypt peace treaty pushed by Kissinger in the 1970s.

Hamas had other plans. Just as terrorists exploded Kissinger's Middle East schemes in the 1970s, this group did the same for the twenty-first century's extension of Kissinger's architecture. But Hamas, like its predecessors, will not dislodge the American-supported dominance of Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. And those regimes will continue to protect vital American interests in oil and access. The Palestinians and other people of the Middle East will remain under repressive regimes, excluded from power. That is the enduring bi-product of how Kissinger re-made the region.

The region that Kissinger changed in the most dramatic and enduring ways was East Asia. Before his time in office, the United States had no relations with the communist regime that had ruled China for two decades. Kissinger and President Nixon understood that this was a self-defeating posture with the world's most populous country at the time, especially as the United States was losing a nearby war in Vietnam. Like a desperate suitor, Kissinger reached out to Chinese leaders in numerous ways, most of which were rebuffed, but he kept trying. Finally, in 1971, he received an invitation that he seized upon to open dialogue and build personal relations with leaders, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.

This opening to China largely excluded human rights, Taiwan, or even Vietnam. It focused instead on cooperation against the Soviet Union (what Kissinger called 'triangular diplomacy') and openings for trade. American businessmen were eager to sell to the Chinese market and Beijing was desperate for foreign capital. This arrangement would fuel Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms in the 1980s. Kissinger was the first in a long line of American leaders to promote Chinese authoritarian capitalism, fuelling the Middle Kingdom's growth, Western consumption, and continued repression on the mainland.



Henry Kissinger accepts food from Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai during a state banquet in Beijing.

Kissinger transformed the United States from the chief adversary of the Chinese Communist Party into one of its most consistent economic partners. That did not change even with the bloody repression of Chinese students in Tiananmen Square in 1989, or the smothering of Hong Kong after 1997, or the expansion of Chinese military aggression in the last decade. Kissinger created and defended the current American policy of markets over democracy in East Asia.

The Kissinger world order of nuclear deterrence, global proxies, and Chinese market access was a big success. It worked to build American power and prosperity, and it still does. That power and prosperity is shared with other Western allies, particularly in Europe.

When the order has come undone, during the War on Terror and perhaps today, it is partially because Kissinger's successors fail to manage it as he would. President George W. Bush overreached terribly and current Western leaders risk digging a grave for themselves in the sands of stubborn, populist isolationist sentiments. This was Kissinger's final worry, in his last months of life, as he reminded audiences – astonished at his centenarian energies – of the need to keep his system going. It could not run itself.

But maybe we should let it die with the old man. Kissinger's 'structure' of peace is only peace for some. It offers little to entire continents: South America and Africa. It neglects India and favours China. It excludes human rights. And it keeps the United States on a perch that it might no longer deserve. Kissinger wrote in *A World Restored*, almost 70 years ago, that a system of international politics can only survive if it is perceived as legitimate by key actors. His architecture has endured, but has its perceived legitimacy? Perhaps not.

Few leaders today have the energy, will, or insight to manage the complex machinery he helped to put into place. Long ago, the men of Whitehall learned that running an empire is hard work. Managing the post-imperial global system is even harder. From his early days to his end, Kissinger passionately believed

that someone needed to do it. But who is left? The current generation of foreign policy officials in the United States and Europe might be serious people, but they lack Kissinger’s depth of perspective and his creative energy. They will not take the same risks. We can expect the world after Kissinger to be a largely leaderless community. Even Kissinger’s critics might come to miss him a little.

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