

The Atlantic

The Lessons of Henry Kissinger

The legendary and controversial statesman criticizes the Obama Doctrine, talks about the main challenges for the next president, and explains how to avoid war with China.



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JEFFREY GOLDBERG

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Author's note (November 10, 2016): *Over the past several months, I've interviewed Henry Kissinger, the former secretary of state, numerous times on the subject of America's role in the world. Our conversations took place before this week's election, but were informed by the foreign-policy differences between the candidates. The December 2016 issue of The Atlantic includes [my article on these conversations](#), which you will find published below. In addition, a full rendering of our several interviews, on subjects including the future of Russia, the rise of China, and the chaos of the Middle East, can be found [here](#).*

On Wednesday, the day the country, and the world, were just beginning to absorb the shock of Donald Trump's victory, I spoke with Kissinger by telephone to get his postelection thoughts. He told me that he was expecting other nations, particularly the great powers, to enter a period of intense study, in order to understand how they should respond to a Trump presidency. He also said he expected the Islamic State, or other similarly minded jihadist organizations, to test Trump early by launching attacks, in order to provoke a reaction (or, he suggested, an overreaction).

"Nonstate groups may make the assessment that Trump will react to a terror attack in a way that suits their purposes," Kissinger said.

Here is the transcript of our short conversation, followed by the full article.

Jeffrey Goldberg: Are you surprised?

Henry Kissinger: I thought Hillary would win.

JG: What does this mean for America's role in the world?

HK: Well, it could enable us to establish coherence between our foreign policy and our domestic situation. There is obviously a gap between the

public's perception of the role of U.S. foreign policy and the elite's perception. I think the new president has an opportunity to reconcile the two. He has an opportunity, but it is up to him to seize it.

JG: Do you feel better about Trump's competence, or his seriousness?

HK: We should stop debating that question. He is the president-elect. We must give him an opportunity to develop his philosophy.

JG: Are you going to help him?

HK: I will not reach out to him, but that has been my approach to every president since I left office. If he asks me to come see him, I will.

JG: What's your biggest concern about global stability coming out of this election?

HK: That foreign countries will react with shock. That said, I would like to keep open the possibility that new dialogues could emerge. If Trump says to the American people, "This is my philosophy of foreign policy," and some of his policies are not identical to our previous policies but share their basic objectives, then continuity is possible.

JG: How is China going to react?

HK: I'm fairly confident that China's reaction will be to study its options. I suspect that will be Russia's reaction as well.

JG: Do you think Trump is a Putin apologist?

HK: No. I think he fell into certain rhetoric because Putin said some good words about him—tactically—and he felt he had to respond.

JG: You don't think that their relationship is prebaked in any way?

HK: No.

JG: So no short-term chance that Russia takes advantage of this situation?

HK: It's more likely that Putin will wait to see how the situation evolves. Russia and the United States interact in areas in which neither of us controls all the elements, such as Ukraine and Syria. It's possible that some participants in those conflicts may feel freer to take certain actions. Putin, then, will wait to see what his options are.

JG: So there is some chance of more instability.

HK: I would make a general statement: I think most of the world's foreign policy has been in suspense for six to nine months, waiting for the outcome of our election. They have just watched us undergo a domestic revolution. They will want to study it for some period. But at some point, events will necessitate decision making once more. The only exception to this rule may be nonstate groups; they may have an incentive to provoke an American reaction that undermines our global position.

JG: The threat from ISIS is more serious now?

HK: Nonstate groups may make the assessment that Trump will react to a terror attack in a way that suits their purposes.

JG: How will Iran respond?

HK: Iran will probably conclude—correctly—that the nuclear agreement is more fragile now than it was, but it will demonstrate great resoluteness, even in the face of pressure, while it studies Trump. No one knows much about his foreign policy, so everyone will go into a period of studying. Actually, “a frenzy of studying” is more accurate.

JG: Why do you think this happened?

HK: The Trump phenomenon is in large part a reaction of Middle America to attacks on its values by intellectual and academic communities. There are other reasons, but this is a significant one.

JG: How would you advise Trump to present himself to the world?

HK: First, to demonstrate that he is on top of known challenges. Second, to demonstrate that he is reflecting about the nature of their evolution. A president has an inescapable responsibility to provide direction: What are we trying to achieve? What are we trying to prevent? Why? To do that, he has to both analyze and reflect.

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THE LESSONS OF HENRY KISSINGER

THIS PAST SPRING, shortly after *The Atlantic* published my article “[The Obama Doctrine](#),” about the president’s foreign policy, I got word that Henry Kissinger, the former secretary of state, and the most consequential and controversial American foreign-policy maker of the past several decades (or maybe ever), had been expressing to a number of mutual acquaintances his critical thoughts about the article, and about Obama’s management of world affairs. I called Kissinger, because I was eager to hear those thoughts. He was, at that moment, making a series of cameo appearances in the presidential campaign—Senator Bernie Sanders had recently castigated Hillary Clinton during a Democratic debate for the sin of seeking Kissinger’s approval—and I also wanted to hear his thoughts on the bizarre election season.

Kissinger did indeed have many thoughts. I suggested that we have an on-the-record conversation about them. Even at 93, his desire to convince people of his essential rightness still burns, and he agreed to an interview almost immediately. But, being Kissinger, he outlined a set of immoderate demands and conditions that would govern the public presentation of our conversation. He also asked me whether the article that resulted from our interview would be published at the same length—more than 19,000 words—as my original article about President Obama. “Dr. Kissinger,” I said, “that was an article featuring several interviews with the sitting president of the United States.”

He paused. “Please write the following down, and print it in your story as a first-person observation,” he said. “‘Though Kissinger has been out of government service for several decades, I found his egomania to be undiminished by time.’”

At another point, sensing my frustration with his demands, he said, “I must give you some grounds to write about my paranoia.” Finally we came to an agreement. I would record our conversation, and transcribe it, and then show it to him, and he would, he promised, make changes only in order to clarify points or expand upon his arguments. (He kept his promise.)

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He suggested that I visit him on a weekend in May at his country home in Connecticut. This was convenient, I said, because I would be in the state anyway, collecting my oldest daughter from college. “You should bring her for lunch,” he said. On the drive to Kissinger’s home, my daughter rehearsed for me Kissinger’s achievements. “He did the opening to China, and détente with the Soviet Union, and the Middle East cease-fire, right? What am I missing?” I said, “Well, there was the secret bombing of Cambodia.” She responded, “That was *him*?”

I have never met someone as old as Kissinger who is so keen to impress semi-random strangers, including semi-random 19-year-old strangers. Over lunch, he was relentless in his attempt to win my daughter over to his understanding of the world, and his role in it. This quality makes him exasperating and mesmerizing, and it launches him on flights of self-exculpatory analysis. There is no issue—not the bombing of Cambodia, or his activities in Chile or Argentina, or his role in the Pakistani civil war, which gave birth to Bangladesh and resulted in mass death—that he is not eager to relitigate. Still, we did have time to talk at length about the Obama Doctrine, and about Kissinger’s critique of America’s management of its relationship with China—by far the most important bilateral relationship, he argues convincingly, in the international arena. China has preoccupied Kissinger for five decades. “Not since it became a global power in the wake of the Second World War has the United States had to contend with a geopolitical equal,” he told me. “Never in China’s centuries-long history has it conceived of a foreign nation as more than a tributary to it, the Central Kingdom.” (See [“China’s Great Leap Backward”](#) for an accompanying article on this subject, by James Fallows.)

The presence of my daughter and of Kissinger’s own granddaughter gave him an audience for a disquisition on what he considers to be a crucial problem in the American academy today—the way American history is

taught. He laments that history is not taught consecutively, and that historical incidents are often decontextualized beyond recognition. His argument was compelling, but also self-serving: His core contention, when it comes to the greatest controversies in his career, is that postwar American support for anti-Communist allies is impossible to understand or rationalize without both proper historical context and a baseline sympathy for a pro-Western narrative. Universities, he said, “like to teach history as a series of discrete problems. And they above all don’t want to teach Western history. They believe that the West has committed so many crimes that they are not entitled to single it out. That is a thought that would never occur to a Chinese. To return genuine pluralism to the campuses—to examine even ideas conventional wisdom rejects—has become a major national challenge.”

DEBATING THE LESSONS OF
**HENRY
KISSINGER**

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I asked Kissinger whether there was such a thing as a self-doubting Chinese tradition. “Certainly no tradition so self-doubting as to inhibit necessary Chinese action.”

We also spoke that day—and during subsequent conversations, in his office in New York and on the telephone—about his fears regarding American disengagement from the world. He argued that the U.S. is at a hinge moment in its history, in which it is deciding whether or not to continue playing the role it has played since 1945. “Right now, there is no real debate occurring on foreign policy. People are throwing slogans around,” he said. “I think that America’s recovery of a global strategic view is an absolutely essential element of our foreign policy.”

“The world is in chaos.”

Kissinger’s critique of Obama was mostly measured, but I could sense that he was offended that the president had not seen fit to call him often for advice, as previous presidents had. I could also sense that he took some of Obama’s observations about the foreign-policy decisions of previous presidents as personal criticism. He wasn’t wrong about this. At various moments during my interviews with the president, I could feel the specter of Kissinger hanging over the room, in particular when Obama talked dismissively about the value of “credibility” in the pursuit of national-security objectives, and when he mentioned his unprecedented practice of referring openly, sorrowfully, and sometimes on foreign soil to American mistakes made during the prosecution of the Cold War. What most annoyed Kissinger was the manner in which Obama talked about some other world leaders. “A puzzling aspect about Obama is how someone so intelligent could treat his peers with the disdain he did in your article,” he said. “Someone of that stature usually develops a sense of humility.”

I also asked him about Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. He is close to Clinton, but not to Trump, and it was not difficult to discern that he was appalled by Trump’s behavior and broadly sympathetic to Clinton. Whether or not Kissinger would endorse Clinton had been a subject of great speculation during the campaign. Some in the Clinton camp hoped Kissinger would—but others, I’d been told, worried that his endorsement would only reinforce the Sanders argument that Clinton was too close to various unsavory characters. Kissinger himself was acutely aware of this argument. When I observed that Clinton is dispositionally and ideologically closer to him than she is to Obama, Kissinger said, “If you say that, you’re not going to be kind to her.”

I told him it was not my job to be kind or unkind. “But you will unleash the radical wing—the Sanders wing—against her,” Kissinger said. He made a possibly prescient observation about the way Hillary Clinton would conduct America’s foreign policy: “The uncertainty of Clinton is whether the Sanders wing of the Democratic Party would permit her to carry out what she believes.”

Video: The Art of Interviewing Henry Kissinger

Jeffrey Goldberg on his conversations with the controversial American statesman

What follows is an edited and condensed rendition of our conversations. A much longer transcript, comprising the bulk of our conversations, can be found [here](#).

Jeffrey Goldberg: How would you define President Obama’s foreign-policy doctrine?

Henry Kissinger: The Obama Doctrine described in your *Atlantic* article posits that America acted against its basic values in a number of places around the world, thereby maneuvering itself into an intractable position. Therefore, the argument goes, America contributes to the vindication of its values by withdrawing from regions where we can only make things worse. We must take care lest the Obama Doctrine become an essentially reactive and passive foreign policy.

JG: The animating idea being, in your mind, that Obama's doctrine is about protecting the world from America?

HK: In my opinion, Obama seems to think of himself not as a part of a political process, but as *sui generis*, a unique phenomenon with a unique capacity. And his responsibility, as he defines it, is to keep the insensitive elements of America from unsettling the world. He is more concerned with short-term consequences turning into permanent obstacles. Another view of statesmanship might focus to a greater extent on shaping history rather than avoiding getting in its way.

JG: As president, you get blamed far less for sins of omission than sins of commission.

HK: That's true. It's harder to prove them. But you are blamed for disasters, no matter who caused them.

JG: As a practitioner of diplomacy, how useful is it to go to other countries and make mea culpas about past American behavior? You're a pragmatist. Surely it buys you something.

HK: Foreign countries don't judge us by the propensity of our president to traduce his own country on their soil. They assess such visits on the basis of the fulfillment of expectations more than the recasting of the past. In

my view, presidential reassessment of history, should it occur, should generally be delivered to American audiences.

JG: But what about the practical argument?

HK: It has to be weighed against the impact on governmental procedures and personnel. Should every American public servant have to be worried about how his views will sound 40 years later in the hands of foreign governments? Is every foreign government entitled to a file verified by the U.S. government decades after an event?

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JG: What would you advise the 45th president to do first?

HK: The president should ask, “What are we trying to achieve, even if we must pursue it alone?” and “What are we trying to prevent, even if we must combat it alone?” The answers to these questions are the indispensable aspects of our foreign policy, which ought to form the basis of our strategic decisions.

The world is in chaos. Fundamental upheavals are occurring in many parts of the world simultaneously, most of which are governed by disparate principles. We are therefore faced with two problems: first, how to reduce regional chaos; second, how to create a coherent world order based on agreed-upon principles that are necessary for the operation of the entire system.

JG: Crises always intervene before presidents find time to create a coherent world order, no?

HK: Practically all the actors in the Middle East, China, Russia, and to a certain extent Europe are facing major strategic decisions.

JG: What are they waiting to do?

HK: To settle some fundamental directions of their policies. China, about the nature of its place in the world. Russia, about the goals of its confrontations. Europe, about its purpose, through a series of elections. America, about giving a meaning to its current turmoil in the aftermath of the election.

JG: What are America's perpetual, eternal interests?

HK: I would begin by saying that we have to have faith in ourselves. That is an absolute requirement. We can't reduce policy to a series of purely tactical decisions or self-recriminations. The fundamental strategic question is: What is it that we will not permit, no matter how it happens, no matter how legitimate it looks?

JG: You mean, for instance, if Vladimir Putin were to invade Latvia in 2017?

HK: Yes. And a second question is: What are we trying to achieve? We don't want Asia or Europe to fall under the domination of a single hostile country. Or the Middle East. But if avoiding that is our goal, we have to define *hostility*. According to my own thinking about Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, it is not in our interest that any of them fall under domination.

JG: That perspective is very post-World War II, American-led-international-order sort of thinking. It might not be fully Obama's view. And it was quite noticeable that of the final four major-party

candidates left standing in the primaries earlier this year—Ted Cruz, Donald Trump, Bernie Sanders, and Hillary Clinton—only one was a foreign-policy traditionalist.

HK: Clinton is the only one who fits the traditional, outward-looking, internationalist model.

JG: What does this mean?

HK: That for the first time since the end of the Second World War, the future relationship of America to the world is not fully settled.

JG: Hillary Clinton is much more traditional, in fact, than Barack Obama, on questions related to America's international responsibilities, indispensability, and so on. But have Americans changed so much in terms of understanding of U.S. primacy that even a president like Hillary Clinton would be much more limited in what she could do?

HK: To many leaders around the world, Obama remains a puzzle after eight years in office. They don't know what to make of him or of America's current diversions. If Hillary wins, she'll have the advantage that the world will welcome a familiar, traditional figure. In his interview with you, Obama prided himself most on the things he prevented from happening.

JG: You've been watching American national politics since 1948 or earlier—

HK: As a participant, in some way, since 1955.

JG: There's always been, more or less, a bipartisan consensus, in this period, concerning the importance of deep American engagement in the world.

HK: This is the first time that this consensus has been questioned to this degree. I think it can be restored to some extent. It seems to me that in the Western world, after the Second World War, we had a vision of a peaceful order. There was no question that we would sacrifice for it. We sent a large army to Europe. We spent a lot of money. We need to rediscover that spirit and adapt it to the realities that have emerged since then.

JG: Why is this dynamic changing now?

HK: We've been too indulgent in challenging what used to be considered core national beliefs. I think we can reverse this trend, but it will take a big, essentially bipartisan effort.

Kissinger argues that U.S. foreign policy is at a hinge moment. (Mark Wilson / Getty)

JG: President Obama is someone critics believe is questioning some core assumptions about America's role in the world. In one of my conversations with him, he seemed to be arguing with you. When he was giving me his rationalization for not enforcing the red line he'd publicly drawn regarding President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons in Syria, he seemed to be thinking, *Unlike Kissinger, I'm not going to bomb someone to prove that I'm willing to bomb someone*. When he made statements to me like that, I think he was thinking about Cambodia.

HK: Cambodia has come to play a symbolic role because it's the one place in Indochina where liberals didn't start the war. Our military commitment to Vietnam started with Kennedy and culminated with Johnson. Cambodia, though, was Nixon's decision, in the radical terminology. Here, according to the mythology of the liberals, was a peaceful little country that Nixon attacked. The fact that there were four North Vietnamese divisions within 30 miles of Saigon coming across the border killing Americans—killing 500 a week starting within two weeks of Nixon's inauguration—was ignored in the debate on Cambodia by protesters emphasizing the technical neutrality of Cambodia and ignoring that its ruler had invited our response. The Obama administration has systematically conducted comparable bombings for comparable reasons, but with drones, in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen. I have supported those bombings. But if we are ever going to have a creative foreign policy, we need to disenthral ourselves from the slogans of a generation ago and attempt to overcome our current challenges.

JG: What I mean is that when Obama is thinking about Cambodia, he's thinking that Nixon and Kissinger come to power and they feel they need to establish credibility with Hanoi, so they ramp up the war. This is his analysis of how the U.S. gets itself into trouble.

HK: That isn't true. We had suffered, one month after coming into office, over 2,000 casualties, mostly from sanctuaries in Cambodia. They had to be reduced. We were concerned with controlling and ending the war.

JG: But this is a popular rendering of events.

HK: I know. We come to power, the North Vietnamese start an offensive within two weeks, we have 500 casualties a week—the bombing of Cambodia was a way not to resume the bombing of the North. That was what we thought. It wasn't a matter of starting another war; the war was already in Cambodia. What were our real strategic choices? You could say "Pull out." But you will not find one paper from the end of the Johnson administration that urged anything like immediate withdrawal.

JG: Obama's red-line decision on Syria, he told me, was when he broke with what he called the traditional Washington playbook. He didn't think he would buy the United States credibility by using force. What is your view of the red-line controversy?

HK: I think the red line was, above all, a symbolic issue. It was an unwise decision in a kaleidoscope of ambivalences. But it was a symptom of a deeper problem. Military force should be used, if at all, in the amount most likely to succeed. It should not be a compromise between contending domestic forces.

JG: Describe your view of the relationship between diplomacy and power. As you know, John Kerry spent much of the past year lobbying

Obama to conduct strikes against Assad in order to concentrate his attention on the necessity of a diplomatic solution. This is fascinating, because Kerry is a man who began his career protesting the Vietnam War, and who is now arguing for credibility-enhancing military strikes.

HK: I respect John Kerry for his courage and persistence. In Syria, he is striving for a coalition government composed of groups that have been engaged in a genocidal war with one another. Even if you could construct such a government, unless you identify a dominant actor, you have to answer this question: Who will settle disputes when they inevitably arise? The existence of a government does not guarantee that it will be perceived as legitimate or that its pronouncements will be obeyed. Kerry has come to understand that other pressures are needed to achieve the stated objective—a change from his position in the Vietnam War. The use of force is the ultimate sanction of diplomacy. Diplomacy and power are not discrete activities. They are linked, though not in the sense that each time negotiations stall, you resort to force. It simply means that the opposite number in a negotiation needs to know there is a breaking point at which you will attempt to impose your will. Otherwise, there will be a deadlock or a diplomatic defeat. That point is dependent on three components: the possession of adequate and relevant power, tactical willingness to deploy it, and a strategic doctrine that disciplines a society's power with its values.

JG: Is the idea of American exceptionalism breaking down?

HK: No, the notion of American exceptionalism still exists, but in the sense of “the shining city on the hill,” it’s weakening.

JG: But that's Obama—he has a “shining city on the hill” understanding of American exceptionalism.

HK: Not in the sense that we should stop trying to implement our values. Constitutionalism and dedication to human rights are among the glories of American achievement. To be sure, we went too far in believing that we could bring about democracy in Vietnam or in Iraq by defeating our opponents militarily and by the strenuous exercise of goodwill. We went too far because we didn't bring our military action into relation with what our public could support or a strategy for the region. But the basic effort was an expression of American exceptionalism. Cold War American exceptionalism is gone. An appropriate adaptation is a principal task of the new administration. I instinctively believe that the American public could be convinced, but they would need a different explanation from the one that was valid in the 1950s.

JG: Are Sino–American relations more consequential for U.S. national security than Islamist terrorism?

HK: Islamic terrorism is consequential for the prospects of international order in the short term. Our relations with China will shape international order in the long term. The United States and China will be the world's most consequential countries. Economically, this is already the case. Yet both nations are having to undergo unprecedented domestic transformations. As a first step forward, we ought to try to develop an understanding of how joint Sino–American action could stabilize the world. At a minimum, we should agree to limit our disagreements; more sophisticatedly, we should identify projects we can undertake together.

“A conflict with modern weapons might exceed the devastation of the First World War and leave no winners.”

JG: How should the 45th president make China policy?

HK: After its early years, America was lucky enough not to be threatened with invasion as it developed, not least because we were surrounded by two great oceans. As a consequence, America has conceived of foreign policy as a series of discrete challenges to be addressed as they arise on their merits rather than as part of an overall design.

Not until the post-World War II period did we begin to think of foreign policy as a continuous process, even in seemingly tranquil circumstances. For at least 20 years, we forged alliances as a way to put down markers as much as to design a strategy. Henceforth, we must devise a more fluid strategy adjustable to changing circumstance. We must therefore study the histories and cultures of key international actors. We must also be permanently involved in international affairs.

JG: Constant engagement with China?

HK: China is an illustration. For most of its history, China also enjoyed isolation. The only exception is the 100 years it was dominated by Western societies. It did not have to continuously engage with the rest of the world, especially outside of Asia. But it was surrounded by relatively smaller nations incapable of disturbing the peace. Until the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, China's relationships with other countries were managed by the Ministry of Rites, which classified each foreign country as a relative tributary to Beijing. China did not have diplomatic relationships

in the Westphalian sense; it did not consider foreign countries equal entities.

JG: I think there are countries along its borders that don't feel they are treated as equal entities.

HK: China is undergoing a tremendous process of domestic change. President Xi Jinping laid out two goals called the “Two 100s”—the 100th anniversary of the Communist Party and the 100th anniversary of the Communist state. The first will be in 2021; the second in 2049. By the time the Chinese reach the second 100, they will be, by their own estimate, the equal of any other country in the contemporary world, and will, by their reckoning, be able to insist on absolute material and strategic equality, including with America. Some Chinese strategists are in effect saying, “If we were in the American position, would we not at least consider preventing another country from reaching equality?” So that is a latent source of tension.

The Chinese internal discussions offer at least two answers. The hard-liners will say, “The Americans are visibly declining. We will win. We can afford to be tough and look at the world with sort of Cold War-ish attitudes.” The other position—apparently that of President Xi—is that confrontation is too dangerous: Cold War with the U.S. would keep China from reaching its economic goals. A conflict with modern weapons might exceed the devastation of the First World War and leave no winners. Hence in the modern period, adversarial countries must become partners and cooperate on a win-win basis.

JG: So Xi is a moderate?

HK: President Xi, for his part, has put forward two objectives for China. The first is “Asia for the Asians.” The second is an effort to turn

adversaries into partners. In my opinion, we must try to make this second framework the dominant theme of U.S.–China relations. The Chinese view the world very differently than we do. We have to combine our own diplomatic and military capabilities to respond to this reality. But is that possible in the current world, with its weapons of mass destruction and cyber capabilities?

One obstacle is a cultural gap: The basic American attitude is that the normal condition of the world is peaceful, so if there's a problem, someone is causing it. If we defeat that person or country, everything will become harmonious again.

By contrast, the Chinese do not believe in permanent solutions. To Beijing, a solution is simply an admission ticket to another problem. Thus, the Chinese are more interested in trends. They ask, “Where are you going? What do you think the world will look like in 15 years?”

As a result of this cultural gap, when the American and Chinese presidents meet, there is too often an ambiguous outcome. Progress is made on immediate short-term issues—climate change, some economic concerns. But the basic agenda of developing a common concept for the future is given less priority, in part because of the pressure of time and the impact of the media waiting outside the conference center.

JG: How do you grade President Obama's management of the China portfolio?

HK: I'd say B-plus.

JG: That's a pretty good grade.

HK: Well, B-plus in terms of the present, but somewhat lower in terms of the long-term evolution of Sino–American relations. He has made things somewhat better for the short term, but he has made no major contribution to the relationship’s long-term evolution.

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Kissinger’s conversations with Zhou Enlai, the Chinese premier, in the 1970s were a key to normalizing relations between the U.S. and China. (Bettmann / Getty)

JG: Let’s talk about the “Thucydides Trap,” the notion that a rising power will more often than not come into conflict with an established power. Graham Allison has done important work on this. You buy the basic concept, yes?

HK: To a considerable extent. Graham Allison shows that in the vast majority of historical cases, rising powers and status quo powers have fallen into some kind of military conflict. It is almost inevitable when both countries have global influence. Even with benign intentions, they are bound to interact and occasionally step on each other’s toes in some parts

of the world. It is inherent in the definitions of rising and status quo powers.

Yet there is another paradoxical explanation for conflict. Conflict could occur, on the one hand, because of a gradual escalation of tension, and on the other, because the states have come to expect their ultimate solutions as normal. World War I resulted in large part from the fact that states' impact on one another was, for quite a long period, successfully managed. Suddenly, a crisis comes along that in its essence is not more severe than what had been handled before—indeed, you could argue, less severe than the Balkan wars that had preceded it. But in the assassination of the Austrian archduke and his wife, a number of accidents compounded the crisis. Because the wife was not of royal blood, the heads of state were not obligated to attend the funeral. Had they all assembled, they might have been able to negotiate an informal diplomatic solution to the immediate Serbian problem. Moreover, in pre-World War I Europe, two rising powers were confronting each other. A rising Germany was threatening Britain's command of the seas, while a rising Russia was threatening Germany's role in Central Europe. Germany, after Bismarck, had maneuvered itself into a position of being a fortress surrounded by a hostile France in the west and a hostile Russia in the east. So its strategic objective became, in any war that happened, whatever the cause, to defeat one of these enemies first. The one that was more reachable was France, because it would take Russia longer to mobilize, hence German strategists thought not enough of its army would be available to be destroyed. No matter how a war started, even if it was about some transgression of Serbia against Austria in the Balkans—as it was in 1914—Germany would begin by attacking France. They had built themselves into a system where, subconsciously, the expression of these rising powers was local, but the strategy to defeat them was global, or at least regional.

JG: Is there sufficient understanding of what an actual U.S.-China war would look like?

HK: A military conflict between the two countries, given the technologies they possess, would be calamitous. Such a conflict would force the world to divide itself. And it would end in destruction, but not necessarily in victory, which would likely prove too difficult to define. Even if we could define victory, what in the wake of utter destruction could the victor demand of the loser? I am speaking of not merely the force of our weapons, but the unknowability of the consequences of some of them, such as cyberweapons. Traditional arms-control negotiations necessitated that each side tell the other what its capabilities were as a prelude to limiting those capacities. Yet with cyber, each country will be extremely reluctant to let others know its capabilities. Thus, there is no self-evident negotiated way to contain cyberwarfare. And artificial intelligence compounds this problem. Machines that can learn from their own experience and communicate with one another on their own raise both a practical and a moral imperative to find a way to keep mankind from destroying itself. The United States and China must strive to come to an understanding about the nature of their co-evolution.

JG: Just to be clear: The stability of the planet depends on its two most powerful countries understanding what the other wants.

HK: And that requires transparency toward each other about their motives, which sounds very strange to traditional diplomats.

JG: Does it sound very strange to you?

HK: Somewhat, but if you read the transcripts of my earliest conversations with Zhou Enlai [the Chinese premier with whom Kissinger met secretly in 1971 as part of the effort to achieve détente], you will notice two things.

The first is that we were lucky, because we had no practical day-to-day relationship to talk about—except Taiwan, which we set aside—so, in order to build confidence, we had to talk about our philosophies of world order. And two, as a consequence, we sounded like two college professors discussing the nature of the world and its future.

This sort of dialogue is not apparent in contemporary U.S.–China dialogue. Leaders meet and have useful conversations in the sense that there are practical items—a lot of items—that they have to work through. Yet the Chinese leave such conversations frustrated. The primary subject they want to discuss—philosophical in nature—is never raised, which is “If we were you, we might try to suppress our rise. Do you seek to suppress us? If you do not, what will the world look like when we are both strong, as we expect to be?”

JG: How should the president go about systematically solving problems with China?

HK: It is important to understand the difference between how we and the Chinese perceive issues. Americans think that the normal condition of the world is stability and progress: If there is a problem, it can be removed by the mobilization of effort and resources, and when it is solved, America can return to isolation. The Chinese believe that no problem can ever be finally solved. Therefore, when you talk to Chinese strategists, they talk about process rather than ad hoc issues. When you talk to U.S. strategists, they generally try to look for solutions.

JG: How do you understand China’s strategy at the moment?

HK: There are two possible interpretations of China’s strategy. One: The Chinese think that the world is moving in their direction, that they will

eventually inherit it in some fashion, and that their strategic task is to keep us quiet in the period in between—

JG: That the arc of history is bending in their direction.

HK: Some Chinese strategists may think that. Or one can interpret their actions as “However you interpret the arc of history, a conflict between countries possessing the technologies we do, and their uncertain application, is so dangerous that however you explain its origins, we have a duty to try to cooperate to avoid it.”

I think that this is President Xi’s view. But we will not be able to demonstrate which interpretation is correct for about 20 years. In the meantime, our policies must be broad-gauged enough to allow for both.

JG: Has Obama been too hawkish toward China, then?

HK: Not too hawkish but too short-term. To truly advance our relationship with China, we must speak in trends.

JG: Do you fear all of this talk, energized by Trump, about a trade war with China?

HK: More than anything else, a balanced, peaceful world order depends on a stable U.S.–China relationship. Xi Jinping has described our economic interdependence as the “ballast and propeller” of our broader bilateral relationship; a trade war would devastate both of us.

JG: You talk to the senior Chinese leadership all the time. What was their reaction to Trump’s threat of a trade war?

HK: Their first reaction to Trump was shock—not so much to his personality, but to the fact that America could produce this kind of

political debate about its own nature. “Does this mean that we are inevitably bound to be in confrontation?” That was their first reaction.

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