

Henry Kissinger, *World Order; Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History* (Yew York: Penguin Press, 2014), 420.

Reviewed by Hajira Asaf Khan

“In every era, humanity produces demonic individuals and seductive ideas of repression. The task of statesmanship is to prevent their rise to power and sustain international order.” The aforementioned excerpt, perhaps sums up the political thinking of Henry Kissinger in the field of diplomacy. A staunch realist and a seasoned practitioner of international relations, Kissinger has, in his ninety-first year of life, written yet another book among numerous others, including ‘*On China*’ and ‘*Diplomacy*’ being his most-read works around the globe. He has served as Secretary of State to both Presidents Nixon and Gerald Ford and has on many occasions been sought by the US leadership for insight and advice on varying issues regarding US strategic and foreign policy. Needless to say, his profound knowledge and long experience of dealing with various world powers, along with his deep insight on interstate relations and conduct of great powers in history, put him in a unique position to write on the evolution of regional and global political systems—their strengths and weaknesses, their wisdom and peculiarities.

Spread over an exciting four hundred and twenty pages, the book explores not only the shifts in political practices over the past two millennia, but also explores the interplay of parallel cultural, religious and social structures of evolving powers and then interacting with each other. He begins by tracing back the evolution of the modern world order to the fall of the Holy Roman Empire which he, reaffirming the words of Voltaire, says was “Neither holy, nor Roman, nor an Empire”. The evolution of Europe from being a battleground for two conflicting yet highly influential Christian ideologies, to the modern day European Union is spread over two chapters. The first, dealing with the establishment of Westphalian Peace and the emergence of *Raison d’etre*, claiming it to have most often,

“brought about the wars that it simultaneously limited in conduct”. The second chapter, looks into the failure of Westphalian peace and subsequent events, leading all the way up to the two World Wars and the fall of many an Empire that had previously maintained the balance of European power.

Kissinger then moves on to explore the expansion and subsequent shrinking of the Islamic Empire all the way down to contemporary conflicts among Middle Eastern Islamic states, in the chapter titled “Islamism and the Middle East: A World in Disorder”. He touches upon the concepts of *Dar ul Harb* and *Dar ul Islam* [sic] and discussions of philosophical and political conflicts within the Islamic ideology of a world order. His understanding of the multifaceted nature of Islamic social structure is evident when he says “Islam was at once a religion, a multiethnic superstate, and a new world order”. A world order, which saw glorious and unprecedented achievements before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, making way for the modern-day concept of states and sovereignty. However, desire and support for the pan-state Islamic Empire are still seen in many Islamic countries—Pakistan among them. According to the author, it was the divergence between Islamic countries and their lack of desire to come to terms with this divergence that has caused the Muslim world to remain in a constant state of disorder and chaos.

Moving on to the Chinese evolution, one cannot help but notice a sense of fascination that the author seems to have with the history and culture of the Chinese people. Indeed Henry Kissinger on a visit to China had stated that their culture and society was a mystery to the entire world, to which the Chinese premier Zhou Enlai explained that it was not because of an inherent mystery in Chinese culture but the general ignorance of the outside world which made it seem so. Kissinger draws an extensive historical picture of the early Dynastic Rulers to the colonization of China, Communist revolution and finally as the modern-day active participant and economic giant of international politics.

Kissinger finally comes to addressing the role of the US in international politics and how it envisions a world order which could be conducive to peace and allow states to practice sovereign authority within their borders. However, he candidly states that the role of the US in international politics has been ‘paradoxical’ in practice saying that “[America] expanded across a continent in the name of ‘Manifest Destiny’ while abjuring any imperial designs; exerted a decisive influence over momentous events while disclaiming any motivation of national interest; and became a superpower while disavowing any intention to conduct power politics.”

Although there is a sense of defensive endorsement of the greater vision of the United States, Kissinger also recognizes the failings of the idea of freedom that American policymakers so vigorously profess. This does not come as a surprise as he has often declared his displeasure with the exit strategy employed by the US in Iraq, among more recent events. Kissinger however, stands firm on his support for initial US intervention of Iraq. This is an apt example of his realist inclinations in matters of strategy. He quotes Bismark—a realist himself—in the earlier chapters on European history proclaiming, “Woe to the statesman whose arguments for entering a war are not as convincing at its end as they were at the beginning”.

The book is—all things considered—a thorough study in the evolution of political systems and the emergence of the one that exists today, while simultaneously diagnosing the weaknesses of each that led to the failure and subsequent replacement of that order with a new world order. Furthermore, it goes on to identify many issues such as geo-political aspirations leading to conflict, failure to effectively counter insurgencies around the world and rising challenges to the concept of nation-states among others that confront the current order. After the extensive discussion on these issues spread over the entire book, he proposes a fallback to the Westphalian principles modified and tailored to contemporary events. Dr. Kissinger however, cautions that the challenges in adopting such an order would

be complex, considering there were no transnational threats like Cyber-terrorism or indiscriminate weapons of mass destruction when the Peace of Westphalia was established.

It is a thorough analysis of the competing histories of different cultures and empires and a testament to the dictum that said history continues to form the basis for the present identity of states in the international order, more or less arguing that we are far from reaching 'The End of History'.