Universal Values, Specific Policies

—A Conversation with Henry Kissinger—

THE NATIONAL INTEREST: There are those who assert that the world “changed” after 9/11; that the international system of the 21st century is defined less by nation-states and increasingly by new elements—substate actors, transnational movements and so on—the implication being that the U.S. experience of the Cold War era is increasingly becoming irrelevant as a guide for formulating foreign policy today. What would be your assessment?

HENRY KISSINGER: It is true that entirely new elements have entered into international affairs, but the first question one has to answer is whether there are general principles of foreign policy capable of being applied all over the world, simultaneously and in the same manner. I would question that. Different parts of the world are at different stages in their internal development and at different stages in the structure of the units that are composing it. Our convictions about what we are trying to achieve should be constant, but their application has to be adjusted to specific conditions in different regions.

TNI: What would be your response to those who argue that the domestic nature of any given regime is now the most relevant factor in assessing its relationship with the United States?

HK: The domestic nature of a regime is a factor that has to be considered. I would question, however, whether this can be the sole benchmark. The proposition also implies that we have an unlimited ability to affect the internal structure of regimes. And I would have my doubts about that, too. The difference between the realist and the theoretical or idealistic school is usually not over objectives. The objectives are usually fairly parallel. The difference is in what can be done in a specific period of time; whether a concept is its own legitimacy or whether practical limits should be adapted to culture and circumstances.

TNI: One of the issues of concern is whether a rising China will “buy into” the existing international system, as opposed to overturning it, as its power increases. The question is how do we define the international system? What does it mean to “buy into” the international system; what aspects do we want them to buy into?

Henry Kissinger, a former secretary of state, is chairman of Kissinger Associates. He is also honorary chairman of the Advisory Council of The National Interest.
HK: I question the wisdom of basing policy toward China on the assumption that it is determined to overthrow the international system by the use of military force. A more accurate assumption is that China will seek to play a larger role within the international system, politically and economically, because of its rapid growth. And that is a challenge—of competition—to which we should pay attention.

The frequently made analogy of China to imperial Germany is wrong. Imperial Germany provoked a war because, in a ten-year period prior to 1914, it challenged Britain’s command of the seas with its naval buildup, and its diplomatic strategy was to humiliate France and Russia, in order to demonstrate to them that they were too weak to coalesce against Germany. As a result they drove them into an alliance eventually joined by Britain.

For the foreseeable future, China is unlikely to use its military forces as the principal element of its foreign policy. And I don’t see why it would be rational to expect that a China that is surrounded by major countries with significant military budgets would challenge the United States militarily and exhaust itself in a military rivalry while it is doing so well economically.

TNI: What should the United States be doing to enhance its global leadership?

HK: I would mute claims of hegemony. Any international system that has lasted rested in part on an equilibrium between powers and in part on consensus among powers. You cannot rest it on one or the other exclusively.

TNI: Is there a danger that other major powers, including China and Russia, may decide to work more closely together to frustrate U.S. interests?

HK: In purely military terms, it is very hard to construct a counter-balancing coalition to the United States. At the same time, the number of issues susceptible to military solutions is also shrinking.

Equilibrium has to be seen in terms of who lines up with whom on international issues. In the Iran negotiations we certainly cannot say that we have had an easy time achieving consensus. There is a sort of counter-balancing—not in direct confrontation—but in toning down what we are proposing.

Russia may be tempted to pursue tactical rapprochement with China. But any meaningful strategic rapprochement with China would move Russia further away from the United States and into a position of dependence on Chinese support. This would run counter to the strategic realities Russia faces on its far-eastern border, given the decline in its population and negative demographic trends.

We cannot be fixated by things that are in the power of Russia and China to do. The wise American policy is to establish close relations with both Russia and China. And we should conduct it on the basis that whenever possible there should always be at least equal—if not greater—incentives or prospect of risks to cooperate with the United States than with each other. I think that should be doable.

I do not see any sense in speculating how we should keep two countries from working
with each other that have the power to do so and who believe it is in their benefit to do so. Our concern should be, what is our relationship with these countries.

TNI: What is your assessment of the new U.S. approach to India?

HK: It is an important and positive relationship. But we must understand what it is about. The common purpose is converging national interests, not an alignment against China. India will not be manipulated by us as a foil to China. At the same time, as India gets stronger it will become a more important factor in the balance—not as a favor to the United States but in pursuit of its own interests. But the strategic goal of U.S.-India rapprochement, and how it is carried out, should not be aimed against China. We have many other important shared purposes.

I imagine that India will try to have close relations with China and Russia. Our challenge is whether at any point the advantages of cooperating with us on what matters to us outweigh other temptations. That is, after all, the meaning of foreign policy. And we are making good progress on that.

TNI: How does this approach play out with regards to Iran?

HK: We have big decisions to make on Iran in the next year—how far we will press the anti-proliferation strategy, and by what means. We cannot succeed diplomatically against Iran unless India, Russia, China and other powers are sympathetic to what we are trying to do.

The first thing we should do is to get a consensus of the nature of the Iranian program. Do we have one year or ten? Then we need consensus on pressures and incentives available by diplomatic action. Military action is the last resort. The Bush Administration is right to keep it on the table.

TNI: You were an architect of the international system during a period when the danger to the United States was apocalyptic in nature, but when there was a mechanism in place for managing the threat. Is the world safer today than during the days of the Cold War?

HK: Today, I do not think there is a consensus on whether there is one overriding threat. The international system is less dangerous but less organized then it was in that period. Now it is less immediately dangerous, but it is more structurally dangerous. The threat, say, of a nuclear attack on the United States may be less apocalyptic now, but it can come today from many more sources than twenty years ago. ☐
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COMMENTS:

5/10 - Copy faxed to file in Budapest

5/11 - HAK said to tell Arch to have edits by Friday am.

5/11 HAK said text is okay (via CBN). Therese conveyed msg to Rich. TO BE FILED ✓
From: Christie Neumann [CNeumann@csis.org]
Sent: Thursday, May 11, 2006 2:38 PM
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are you handling or is Jody (who's out at the moment for an appointment). HAK gave me a message that the text/edits are ok.
From: Thomas M. Rickers [mailto:trickers@nationalinterest.org]
Sent: Wednesday, May 10, 2006 11:54 AM
To: jjeporin@kmaglobal.com
Subject: TNI article

Dear Jessee:

Attached is a PDF of the page proofs for Dr. Kissinger's interview in our magazine. Any changes have been limited. Due to a number of circumstances beyond our control, we are on a very compressed schedule. As such, I must impose on Dr. Kissinger to return any changes by noon Thursday, May 11. I know this is a very short timetable. We're grateful for your help.

If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to give me a call. Many thanks.

All the best,
Tom Rickers

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