

REVIEW ESSAY

*The Flawed Architect:
Henry Kissinger and American Foreign Policy*
by Jussi Hanhimäki
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REVIEWED BY MATIAS SPEKTOR

In 1973 the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded its Peace Prize to U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in recognition of his extraordinary “experiment.” In a series of secret moves he had achieved the unthinkable: engagement with communist China, a sophisticated détente with the Soviet Union, and the withdrawal of American troops from Indochina. He had also repositioned the United States as the unchallenged and pivotal power in the Middle East. In sum, Kissinger had reversed what seemed to be the steady decline of American influence in the world at the time of nuclear parity with the Soviets and waning domestic support for the war in Vietnam. Few trajectories in the history of modern statesmanship are as impressive as that of the Jewish refugee turned Harvard professor, best-selling author, and diplomat.

Jussi Hanhimäki’s *The Flawed Architect* draws on newly declassified materials to tell a fascinating story of great-power politics in the Kissinger years. Kissinger began his government tenure as national security advisor to President Richard Nixon, becoming also his secretary of state in 1973. It was the first time in U.S. history that one man held the two most senior foreign policy positions simultaneously. Kissinger remained at the helm of foreign policy in the Gerald Ford administration, although the president released him from his national security advisor portfolio in the fall of 1975.

The Flawed Architect presents brilliant sketches of Kissinger’s geopolitical views in action, the daily conduct of business in his office, and his masterful tactics. For instance, we see both Brezhnev and Mao gravitating toward him in search of reassurance when suddenly the status of their nations as world powers seemed to depend on U.S. recognition. Hanhimäki, a professor of international history at the Univer-

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sity of Geneva, argues that the Kissinger era amounted to a “virtual geopolitical revolution” under the most difficult of circumstances.

But the revolution did not deliver all that Kissinger had in mind. The United States’ tilt toward China failed to produce tangible results in the short term. Retreat from Vietnam only occurred after dreadful bloodshed, and it failed to bring peace to Indochina. The new great-power arrangement also failed to pass difficult managerial tests in the Indo-Pakistani dispute of 1971 and the Middle East. Contradictions in Kissinger’s design also led the Nixon and Ford administrations to side with various unsavory regimes from Chile to Indonesia. Superpower détente stalled, and the logic of U.S.-Soviet competition fed violent conflict from Angola to East Timor.

According to Hanhimäki, part of the problem was conceptual. Kissinger’s emphasis on great-power relations was misplaced. For instance, China and the Soviet Union were not particularly successful in inducing North Vietnam to compromise. Kissinger himself found it almost impossible to push the allied regime in Saigon. For all the language of geopolitics that makes Kissinger’s private conversations with other world leaders fascinating (if somewhat theatrical), his views were at odds with the local and regional realities. Furthermore, great powers were willing to trade concessions only to a limited extent. Both Nixon and Brezhnev were deeply motivated by ideology and determined to score victories against each other in the developing world. As a result, events in the periphery—such as Angola’s independence in 1975—took center stage.

Hanhimäki also addresses implementation problems. For instance, Kissinger’s shuttle diplomacy in the Middle East was an attempt to cultivate the trust and dependence of both Israeli and Arab leaders unilaterally. He consciously sidelined the Soviets in spite of protests from Moscow that U.S. behavior was putting détente in jeopardy. The book is also punctuated with several instances when Kissinger ignored triangular diplomacy to acquire greater influence in the Nixon White House. Hanhimäki interprets Kissinger’s support for escalation in Indochina and the tilt toward China as an attempt to achieve the status of foreign policy czar at the expense of his own grand design.

Unfortunately, *The Flawed Architect* does not tackle key questions about the scope of Kissinger’s foreign policy revolution. Was Kissinger’s strategy an exercise in creativity or simply new clothing

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for the traditional Cold War tactics? Did Kissinger really have a new conception of the global balance of power, or was his diplomacy merely an instrumental device to achieve the standard goal of Soviet containment?

Like much of the existing literature on U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s, the book's primary concern is with great-power dynamics. The rest of the world appears in the narrative only to illustrate points about the grand game of the Washington-Moscow-Beijing axis. This is a pity, for in this particular period the wealth of ambition, ideas, and practice in U.S. policy around the globe is truly remarkable. Furthermore, Kissinger did not rely too much on great-power calculus when it came to dealing with individual regions.

Whereas the 1973 "Year of Europe" initiative was ill-conceived and ended up offending European leaders rather than bringing them closer to Washington, its underlying assumptions about the diffusion of power, interdependence, the use of force, and the prospects for a united Europe were unprecedented. From Cuba to South Africa, several relationships underwent significant reevaluation even if the reality did not quite live up to the original expectations. Kissinger also moved fast to establish a series of unusual partnerships with preponderant local powers such as Brazil in Latin America, Zaire in Africa, and Indonesia in Asia, in addition to an emphasis on more traditional alliances with Israel, Iran, and Pakistan. As the declassification of 1970s documents progresses, new research will undoubtedly clarify the precise contours of Kissinger's policies in the wider world.

The Flawed Architect is a useful work that pushes existing knowledge forward and asks many important questions. International relations scholars will find much insight but no theoretical analysis. Historians will find colorful detail but no definitive synthesis. To the general reader, the work offers a refreshing reappraisal of a major, and controversial, figure in contemporary U.S. foreign policy. And all readers will want to know more. ■