

Kissinger in a World Not Yet Restored

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Further NATO enlargement, writes former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, “should be kept on the table without forcing the issue to determine the possibilities of making progress on other issues,” particularly of enlisting Moscow’s help to thwart Iranian nuclear ambitions. Such a policy would be bad for Georgia, Ukraine...and America. Moreover, it would contradict the lessons of Kissinger’s own meticulous scholarship, which founded his brilliant diplomatic career.

“The movement of the western security system from the Elbe River to the approaches of Moscow,” writes Kissinger in the July 2 *International Herald Tribune*, “brings home Russia’s decline in a way bound to generate a Russian emotion that will inhibit the solution of all other issues.” We should pause, Kissinger believes, “because in many ways we are witnessing one of the most promising periods in Russian history.”

This is not now mainstream thinking in either American political party. However, unchallenged, its attraction could grow by some combination of Kissinger’s stature, presidential election politics, popular frustration with the protracted Iraq conflict and American foreign policy establishment obsession with nuclear proliferation.

Kissinger’s argument is flawed.

On his recent visit to Moscow, Kissinger writes, “I met no Russian in or out of government who doubted that some kind of redistribution power is taking place.” No serious observer doubts that the Medvedev-Putin duumvirate will be some kind of change from the Putin tsardom.

However, the real question is whether that change in Russian domestic politics will be sufficiently salutary to withdraw the Russian jackboot from the throat of neighbors like Georgia.

On this, Kissinger asserts, “The presidential election marked a transition from a phase of consolidation to a period of modernization.” The duumvirate may “in retrospect, appear as the beginning of an evolution toward a form of checks and balances lacking heretofore.”

Meanwhile, the jackboot remains, and deferring NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine means leaving their genuine independence on the table too. It also defers western geopolitical interests in the Black Sea, Caucasus and Caspian in hope of a positive evolution in Russian politics.

To encourage that, Kissinger writes that the west, particularly America, should alter “the policy of assertive intrusion into what Russians consider their own sense of self ... We can affect [Russia] more by patience and historical understanding than by offended disengagement and public exhortations.”

Perhaps Washington should douse the rhetoric, but there is a causal connection between domestic politics and foreign policy. Today, Russia’s sense of self thrives upon overrunning other peoples’ sense of self. The west, particularly America, must offer no succor here.

Moreover, Russia is loath to help the west with the exigencies of contemporary diplomacy.

Here, Kissinger joins the crowd of workaday western diplomats chasing the chimera of Russian cooperation on nuclear proliferation, asserting that there is an emerging consensus between the US and Russia “on the nature of the challenge posed by the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran.”

If that were true, we would not need such carefully crafted diplomacy to secure Moscow’s assistance. The reality is that Russia does everything possible to safeguard its commercial interest in the Iranian Bushehr nuclear plant while delaying and diluting western attempts to derail Iran’s nuclear weapon program.

Why? Because Russia enjoys Iran’s challenge to the western-dominated international order more than it fears an Iranian missile hurtling toward Moscow.

Russia’s protestations over the existing international order reach beyond clichéd complaints about NATO and American missile defense. Addressing the glitzy Saint Petersburg Economic Forum on June 9, for example, Medvedev denounced “The aggressive financial policies of the biggest economy in the world” and railed against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Moscow even dragged its feet on international action to relieve the human tragedy in Darfur! The list goes on...

“Whenever there exists a power which considers the international order or the manner of legitimizing it oppressive,” writes Kissinger in his 1957 masterpiece, *A World Restored*, “relations between it and other powers will be revolutionary ... Diplomacy, the art of restraining the exercise of power, cannot function in such an environment ... Diplomats can still meet but they cannot persuade, for they have ceased to speak the same language.”

Professional diplomats may scoff. “The chief difficulty of a revolutionary period [is],” Kissinger continues, “to convince the uncommitted that the revolutionary is, in fact, a revolutionary.”

In time, dumvirate Russia may evolve to be at peace at home and abroad, to participate in shaping the legitimate international order instead of trying to hobble it.

Meanwhile, in a world not yet restored, Kissinger should know not to expect much help from Moscow. Russia will strike out where it can—Georgia, for instance. It will feign common interest on matters like nuclear proliferation, but swing between guardedly helpful and obstructionist.

Reading in Tbilisi, Kissinger’s book remains a classic.

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