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SECRETARY HENRY KISSINGER

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INTERVIEW

As national security adviser from 1969 to 1975, Henry Kissinger was instrumental in paving the way for President Richard Nixon's historic trip to Beijing in February 1972, and the subsequent establishment of formal diplomatic relations between the two governments. As Secretary of State from 1973 to 1977, Kissinger continued to cultivate the new relationship, among many other diplomatic initiatives.

For this special issue of the Foreign Service Journal, he graciously agreed to reflect on the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing, U.S.- China relations today, and other topics, in an interview conducted by AFSA President Susan Johnson at his New York City office on July 25.

Q: What is your assessment of the state of Sino-American relations today? How do you see them evolving, and what do you think their impact is on the global situation?

KISSINGER: Sino-American relations may be the single most important relationship, in terms of its impact on the international situation. If China and the United States are in a cooperative relationship, it will be easier to construct an Asian and global system on the basis of common objectives and purposes. If we are in a confrontational position, many if not most countries in Asia will have to choose sides. This will strain their domestic structure and lead to stagnation in international politics -- and if it were to lead to war, it would result in the exhaustion of both sides.

At the same time, global cooperation with equals is not the national style of either country. There's a difference in cultural perspective, in the sense that we believe our values are relevant to the entire world, and the entire world are aspirant Americas. As a result, there's a strong missionary spirit in American foreign policy.

Chinese believe that their values are exceptional but not accessible to non-Chinese. And, therefore, the Chinese concept of world order is one in which their importance is recognized and respected by other countries.

We are both challenged to modify our historical approach. It's a new experience for both countries.

Where is the relationship today? Formally, the statements of both sides are very positive; and almost certainly, they are sincere on both sides. But in both countries there are significant elements who argue that the traditional pattern of international relations, which dictates confrontation between an aspirant country and an established country, is going to reassert itself and who are therefore advocating a more confrontational approach. That is the challenge of American foreign policy. It's also the challenge of Chinese foreign policy.

The current administration has understood the importance of the Sino-American relationship. It cannot always bring itself to apply these principles in every concrete case. But they are basically moving in the right direction, and the Chinese are trying to also move.

There are many unsolved issues, but the most positive thing is that for eight American administrations and for four generations of Chinese leaders, the main lines of diplomacy established in the 1970s have been maintained and elaborated.

Q: Do you see any significant changes in the way we define our national interests and the way the Chinese define theirs in these last four decades? To what extent do you think we have gotten what we were expecting and they feel they have gotten some measure of what they were hoping for?

KISSINGER: We both achieved what we were aiming for at the beginning. Our challenge was, we had to end the war in Vietnam. We had to restore American confidence that a global policy was possible. We had to show to the American public that peace could be the overriding objective of American foreign policy. And we had to conduct the Cold War. So, to the extent that we restored fluidity to the international system, and that we brought in a country that had been excluded, we affected the calculations of the key players and we limited the confrontational aspect of the Cold War.

China was facing the concentration of a large Soviet army on its borders and had some real reasons, which become more and more apparent today as more documents appear, to fear an imminent invasion of their territory. So they operated in the classic Chinese style of getting the distant barbarian to confront the nearby barbarian. We attempted to be closer to each side than they were to each other. They attempted to line us up on their side in a quasi-alliance posture. We couldn't go that far, but we found enough common ground so that a good part of the design was achieved.

Now we are in a different world. There is no common security danger, but a whole set of common problems -- like energy, environment, proliferation. There is the issue of China emerging as an economic competitor, as well as a growing military power, side by side with other emerging countries like India and South East Asia.

Therefore the key problem becomes: Is it possible for each of us to achieve basic national objectives without turning the relationship into a military confrontation? And is it possible for us to sustain this over an extended period of time, so that in time, cooperation becomes a fundamental commitment on both sides? Or are we doomed to irritate each other for such an extended period that, at the end, it winds up in a conflict? And as I said, to me the model of World War I is the one that we must avoid.

Q: Four decades after your historic initiative to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, is there anything you have found particularly surprising? Or have most developments followed along expected lines?

KISSINGER: During the Cold War, except for a little hiccup when the Gang of Four was dominant in China, things moved in the direction we were hoping they would move -- almost the optimum direction in which we were hoping they would move. The current period was not expected; if someone had shown me a picture of Beijing today in 1971, and said this is what Beijing will look like in 40 years, I don't pretend that we foresaw any of that. We did foresee that China would become a more important country and that it would grow. That was not surprising; but the speed and magnitude of it are surprising to me.

Q: Let me shift gears a little bit. Against that backdrop, how do you assess the importance of diplomacy for the United States today since we are also the world's premier military power?

KISSINGER: I don't like to treat diplomacy and military power as alternatives. We are in the habit of saying that the military fight up to a certain point, and then the diplomats take over, or the other way around. I think the two should be linked. At all times, diplomacy is extremely important, and should be pre-eminent. In the present world, where the number of problems that one can even imagine solving with military means is shrinking, the role of diplomacy is even greater.

Where I sometimes get into disagreement with the Foreign Service, as much as I admire its talents, is the temptation to turn diplomacy into a sort of a technical exercise consisting entirely of day-to-day negotiations. Diplomacy has to start with a strategic vision of where the country and the world should go. The day-to-day problems should be seen in relation to this overall strategy. Of course, this is difficult to achieve when there are thousands of cables coming in every day, and most of them are framed as issues requiring immediate attention.

I was talking the other day to a German, head of the Pirate Party, and their motto is "every document should be public." I said, "Answer me this question: when I was Secretary of State, and it's the same for today's Secretary of State, thousands of cables come in during the day. He or she sees maybe 50, if they're lucky. So then how do you turn the urgent into something important and long-range?"

That's the big challenge that we have in designing our diplomacy. We are very good at the day-to-day stuff; we have more trouble with the long-range design.

Q: That's a very interesting observation. From your perspective, how important is it to have a strong, professional, career Foreign Service for the conduct of diplomacy?

KISSINGER: It is essential. All of us who have worked with the Foreign Service, even though we might be at times exasperated, know that it is crucial to American foreign policy. Without the people willing to go all over the world and to make huge sacrifices, our international efforts could not function. And their competence is the indispensable intellectual resource for the Secretary of State.

We need a career Foreign Service with a high morale. We have to focus it more on the strategic aspects of the work, so that officers don't get too absorbed in the daily flow of cable traffic, which threatens to drown everybody.

As Secretary of State, what I found was that in any crisis, in any fast-moving situation, the Foreign Service is indispensable, because they know how you respond, to whom and in what way. They are essential to guide you through the crisis. I know all my fellow Secretaries of State, with whom I'm in close touch, feel the same way.

What needs to be done more is to get a conceptual apparatus geared to day-to-day policymaking. I know there is the policy planning staff, but that sometimes becomes a sort of an academic enterprise that writes abstract think papers. The question is how to relate these two to each other. A professional Foreign Service is not only essential; it needs to be fostered and further developed.

When people write about me, they usually say that I preferred to act on my own. But if you look at the people who worked with me as Secretary of State, an overwhelming majority were Foreign Service officers, especially on the Middle East troubles.

Q: What would you say to someone considering a career in diplomacy today?

KISSINGER: You have to know what you want to do with your life. If you want to be able to say at the end of your life that you left things better than they were and that you worked every day on something that made a contribution, then you should become a diplomat. But if you want comfort, and if you want to raise a typical family, and if the material possibilities of this country are your principal objective, you should not do it.

Q: Well, that's an interesting thing we're wrestling with today ... who joins and who doesn't, and at what point do they decide that this is something that they want to do with their life, or that it isn't.

KISSINGER: You might know Winston Lord. Well, Winston wanted to quit when we went into the sanctuaries in Cambodia, and I said to him: "Winston, if you want to make yourself feel good, then go out there and march around with a placard. If you want to help end the Vietnam War, stay with me." And to his enormous credit and sacrifice, and to the country's benefit, he stayed.

Q: Turning to another topic, would it be fair to say that you see human rights as an important, but not necessarily determinative, facet of our bilateral relations with China?

KISSINGER: That would be correct.

Q: And how do you think U.S. policymakers should balance competing national interests, in particular our human rights interests and others?

KISSINGER: It depends. I don't know the exact balance. If somebody does, he's wiser than I am. Human rights are an important element in our policy. So the first thing you have to decide, of course, is if it's best achieved by confrontation or by engagement.

I lean toward engagement, but I wouldn't say that as an absolute principle -- when you deal with Hitler, you cannot achieve progress with engagement. I wrote an article on Syria, in which I agree with the strategic objective. I do not think it rises to the level of using American military force to achieve it, but that's a question of judgment.

Q: On another issue, today there was an article in the New York Times about the International Crisis Group's report on the rising risk of fighting in the South China Sea. How do you see tensions over these conflicting claims unfolding, and is there any particular advice that you would have for policymakers in Washington or for our diplomats in the field?

KISSINGER: The dotted line that was put forward by a previous Chinese government some years ago reflected a view of where the Chinese empire had traditionally projected its influence across the sea. But they didn't frame the issue then in terms of the modern concept of freedom of the seas. It's a traditional Chinese view, but how it applies to contemporary circumstances has not been made fully clear.

I think we have two problems in the South China Sea. One is the freedom of navigation; the second is the future of the various archipelagoes that dot the region. We should try to separate those two issues, and try to get all the concerned parties to agree on some concept of freedom of navigation as a first step.

The easiest would be for all of us to ratify the Law of the Sea Treaty. This would remove the freedom of navigation issue. On the issue of these archipelagos, I would try to avoid dealing with them as a coherent issue. I think we should resist the use of force in settling it. I would hope that in the evolution of our Asian policy, a way could be found to deal with them one by one as they come up.

Q: Do you think that the Chinese, in light of how far they've come and what they've done in other situations, would prefer or be willing to forswear any use of force?

KISSINGER: Probably not. They may be willing to *not* use force, but they may not be willing to forswear it. Nor would we.

Q: Which analysts or agencies do you find to be the most reliable sources of information on developments in China, during your time in government and now?

KISSINGER: In my time in government, there was so little contact with China at first. We had no diplomats there. I occasionally would talk to visitors who had been in China, and also learned something on visits to Hong Kong and from Hong Kong reporting. The CIA was fairly good, as well. Although as late as July 1971, when I was already on the way to Beijing, they published a report that said: "Yes, the Chinese may want to open

toward the United States, but never while Mao is still alive.”

I relied mostly on State Department personnel, with some reliance on the CIA. But when I was in government, the CIA wasn't very elaborated in China. When George W. Bush was president, he arranged for me to get CIA briefings, and I thought the CIA was very good. But so was the political division at the embassy. They work so closely together anyway.

Q: Is there any final point you'd like to make, either about our relationship with China or the importance of diplomacy?

KISSINGER: I've made my basic point on the need for a conceptual apparatus, and for creating a core of people who are nonpartisan and who can provide continuity in American foreign policy. Certainly one of the key aspects of foreign policy has to be reliability, so that other countries can gear their actions on the expectation of your own, or our own, conduct. And for that, the Foreign Service is essential.

Q: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with us, Dr. Kissinger.

End of interview