

TRACING THE DECLINE OF U.S. POWER

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developed & developing countries on India's interests

In A New Cold War: Henry Kissinger and the Rise of China, edited by Sanjaya Baru and Rahul Sharma, academic and diplomat Kishore Mahbubani explains America's place in the world in his essay 'Evil Liberalism versus Moral Pragmatism'. He asserts that by abandoning Kissinger's realist pragmatism, the U.S. has become "severely weakened both domestically and externally". An excerpt:

The year 2021 marks the [50th anniversary of Henry Kissinger's famous visit to China in July 1971](#). It also marks, more or less, the 30th anniversary of the end of the Cold War. With some risk of being accused of over-simplification, one can say in the 20 years after Kissinger's visit to China, U.S. foreign policy was guided by the philosophy of realist pragmatism. By contrast, in the 30 years after the end of the Cold War, it was guided by the philosophy of liberal idealism. The results are clear. Realist pragmatism delivered the greatest victory of American foreign policy: a victory over the mighty Soviet Union without the U.S. firing a shot at Soviet armed forces. By contrast, the past 30 years have generated a lot of evil.

Between 2004 and 2019, the U.S. Air Force dropped 175,842 bombs on several countries, according to the U.S. Air Forces Central Command. Bombs dropped from the air are often not accurate. Hence, many innocent people were killed. The Brown University Watsons Institute's Cost of War Project estimates the total casualties from all post-9/11 wars at 770,000 to 801,000 casualties. The results are clear: when ethical do-gooders take over the U.S. foreign policy, evil is generated: \$5.1 trillion wasted; almost 800,000 lives lost.

Yet, the biggest damage done by the abandonment of Kissingerian realist pragmatism is that the U.S. has become severely weakened both domestically and externally. Internally, the 30-year period of liberal-idealist domination of the U.S. foreign policy has coincided with a 30-year period of stagnation of working class incomes. Externally, the U.S. literally fell asleep at the wheel while China rose dramatically. In 1980, in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, China's gross national product (GNP) was 10% of that of the U.S. By 2014, it had become bigger. Now there is no doubt that the biggest foreign policy challenge the U.S. faces in the next three decades is China.

So, how should the U.S. manage China? The main argument of this essay is that the U.S. needs to engage in deep reflection on what went drastically wrong. The U.S. made a major mistake in abandoning realist pragmatism and switching to liberal idealism. A return to Kissingerian realist pragmatism would be the best way to manage a rising China.

Kissinger's celebrated 'secret' visit to Beijing in July 1971 is widely and justifiably regarded as a major move that swung the 'correlation of forces' in America's favour and led to the ultimate victory over the Soviet Union. What was remarkable about the widespread applause that this visit received, including from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, is that so few Americans mentioned that the U.S. was embracing a regime in China led by Mao Zedong, which had only recently created havoc in the country, leading to enormous human pain and suffering through the disastrous policies of the Great Leap Forward (1958-61) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-76).

In short, human rights were a secondary consideration when realist pragmatism reigned. Indeed, at the International Conference on Kampuchea of July 13-17, 1981, the U.S. delegation, led by Alexander Haig, actually supported China against the ASEAN countries, when China said that

the Khmer Rouge should be allowed to return to power in Phnom Penh after the Vietnamese withdrawal. I was personally present and shocked when this happened. Yet the same Reagan administration, in a more 'liberal' move, supported the removal of the dictator [Ferdinand] Marcos from the Philippines. In short, even in the realist-pragmatic era, there were liberal elements.

Kissinger wasn't the only major figure advocating realist pragmatism. Other major thinkers of that era did so, including George Kennan and Zbigniew Brzezinski. While Kennan is often associated with the harsh policy of 'containment' of the Soviet Union, John Mearsheimer reminds us that Kennan was a shrewd and sophisticated thinker. Firstly, he emphasised that the outcome of the Cold War would not be determined by the size of their respective armed forces. Instead, it would depend on the 'spiritual vitality' of their domestic societies. This is what he had said: 'It is rather a question of the degree to which the U.S. can create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a World Power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time.' He also called for 'greater humility in our national outlook.' According to Mearsheimer, his call for humility was in response to a strong claim made by then Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in February 1998, when she had said, 'If we have to use force, it is because we are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future, and we see the danger here to all of us.'

Kennan lived to the ripe old age of 101 and died in 2005. Hence, he lived through the first 15 years of the post-Cold War era. Significantly, he also disapproved of the many key moves when the U.S. switched from realist pragmatism to liberal idealism. He disapproved of the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet bloc. Kennan also disapproved of the invasion of Iraq.

Dick Cheney confidently asserted that U.S. troops would be welcomed in Iraq. He said, 'I really do believe that we will be greeted as liberators.' Mearsheimer observes that in contrast to such beliefs that the U.S. was morally superior, Kennan did not believe that the U.S. was more virtuous in any meaningful way. Indeed, Kennan observed that Americans were suffering from 'delusions of superiority'. Kennan strongly argued against the U.S. taking a 'paternalistic responsibility to anyone, be it even in the form of military occupation'.

Many of the points raised here will be disputed. Yet, there is no doubt that the policies of restraint and pragmatism, advocated by people like Kissinger and Kennan in the Cold War era, contrast significantly with the liberal idealism of the post-Cold War era, as demonstrated by the statement of Democrats like Albright and Republicans like George W. Bush. These contrasting approaches also explain American success of the Cold War era and the failures of the post-Cold War era.

Excerpted with permission from HarperCollins

[Our code of editorial values](#)

To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

END