

Kissinger, Henry. 2014. World Order. New York: Penguin Press, 432 pp. \$ 22 (Hardback).

At the age of 91, prominent realist and former secretary of state Henry A. Kissinger has demonstrated the lasting ability to provoke vigorous academic – and, for that matter, practical – debate on important international issues. Some of his famous works include a rewrite of his doctoral thesis entitled *A World Restored: Castlereagh, Metternich and the Problems of Peace 1812–1822*, seminal *Diplomacy*, three-volume memoirs (*The White House Years*, *Years of Upheaval*, *Years of Renewal*), as well as the recent study *On China* (2011). His most recent, seventeenth book, with a concise albeit somewhat pretentious title *World Order*, has been the subject of several dozen academic and journalistic reviews, ranging from harsh critique (Anne-Marie Slaughter in *The New Republic*) to favorable endorsement (Kissinger’s biographer Walter Isaacson in *Time*). Various points of the book have caught the attention of different discussants, depending on their respective interests and opinions of the depth of Kissinger’s analysis. Packed with history and theory alike, as well as descriptive and prescriptive passages and pages, the book stands as yet another, perhaps more systematic, statement of Kissinger’s well-known creed on the laws and principles of international politics.

The book is segmented into nine chapters, placed between the introduction and the concluding section. Kissinger briefly outlines the history and notion of the concept of world order, before proceeding to analyze different ideas of order in Europe, the Islamic world, Asia (with an understandable emphasis on China) and notably the United States of America, all of the above understood not only as political units, but also distinct civilizations and cultures. The final chapter and concluding passages bring about a contribution to the discussion of order in the digital era, era of nuclear arms, cyber-technology and growing role of what the author defines as “the human factor”. It also presents an overview of the evolution of world order and prospects for reconstruction of the international system as the “ultimate challenge to statesmanship of our time”.

It has been stated that, given the amount of attention Kissinger pays to various regions and cultures, he has actually made a turn as an International Relations theorist – a turn away from realism and towards social constructivism (Marc Lynch of *Washington Post* has therefore titled his article on Kissinger’s book “Kissinger the Constructivist”). However, it seems that, rather than Alexander Wendt, it was Samuel Huntington who inspired Kissinger’s assessment of the contemporary world. “Regions and cultures” which Kissinger analyzes in the book are in many ways analogous to Huntington’s clashing “civilizations.” The author’s endorsement of such a civilization-based approach and its interconnectedness with regional political-historical dynamics, suggest the presence

of regional-level analysis, although a rudimentary one, in this study. His aim is “to deal with the regions whose concepts of order have most shaped the evolution of the modern era” (p. 9). The author himself describes world order as “a concept held by a region or civilization about the nature of just arrangements and the distribution of power thought to be applicable to the entire world” (p. 9). The notion of world order is therefore different than international order, which means “application of these concepts to a significant part of the globe – large enough to affect the global balance of power”, as well as regional orders, which designate “same principles applied to a defined geographic area” (*Ibid.*). Two common components lie at the core of every one of these “levels of order”, the first one being the set of commonly accepted rules (which would “define the limits of permissible action”); and the second one being the balance of power, which would prevent any single political unit to prevail, by enforcing “restraint where rules break down” (*Ibid.*).

Europe, in Kissinger’s vision, is the birthplace of the only kind of world order the modern era has seen: the one based on the principles of the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the Thirty Years’ War. The value-free concepts of state sovereignty and non-interference have essentially been the only values that nations worldwide could willfully agree upon. As such, the Westphalian system, designed to end a long period of political and religious conflicts in Central Europe, has evolved over the centuries into what Kissinger calls “the global Westphalian system,” spanning through every region of the world. Underneath that layer, different cultures have kept and moderately transformed what has been traditionally known to them as the concept of order, based on godlike features of the Emperor in China or Japan, or religion as both a means and an end to world order in the case of most of the Islamic world.

While analyzing different civilizational concepts of order, Kissinger leisurely navigates through centuries of world history, illustrating his claims by scenes involving statesmen from Kautilya to Richelieu, from Charlemagne to Peter the Great and from Suleiman the Magnificent to Deng Xiaoping. The historical episodes are an alluring read, but they predominantly serve the main purpose of the study: to emphasize the need for balance between legitimacy and power on the quest for desired order.

It is Kissinger’s finding that today’s fragile order is at stake, given the trends of contemporary world and its “increasingly contradictory realities”. Redefinition of legitimacy or shifts in the balance of power are two tendencies that arise sooner or later within any order (pp. 365–367); it is the ability of key actors to find the right answers to these challenges that is crucial. In our times, the Islamist assaults on “the fragile state structure in the Middle East” is an example of the former; the emergence of China of the latter. Kissinger argues that the structure of contemporary order is lacking in for crucial features: the changing and contested nature of states as political units; the discrepancies in the efficacy of economic and political international institutions; the absence of an effective mechanism for great powers to consult and cooperate on important issues; and the nature of American engagement in world affairs (pp. 365–370). The goal is to establish orders *within* important regions of the world, which would subsequently enable them to

connect *among* themselves. Should such an effort fail, the penalty could come about in the form of struggling spheres of influence, further hampering the possibility of creation of viable world order (p. 371). A special role is reserved for the United States, provided it calculates its priorities carefully and establishes firm criteria for (non-)engagement in either unilateral or multilateral capacity.

Despite his somewhat grim image of contemporary world, Kissinger comes out as a moderate optimist: he assumes that the horrible experience of the war was what made the creators of Peace of Westphalia succeed in their endeavor. In the world of today, the stakes could prove to be even higher, yet the quest for world order still seems dramatically uncertain.

Mladen Lišanin is a research assistant at the Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade. He is also the secretary of scientific journal *Serbian Political Thought*.
E-mail: mladen.lisanin@sbb.rs.