

Study of Kissinger's Realist Diplomatic Thought and Practice

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Keywords: Kissinger, realism, diplomatic thought, diplomatic practice

Abstract: Kissinger's diplomatic ideology is firmly grounded in the theoretical foundations of realism, advocating a calm and rational approach to international affairs. His diplomatic practices during the Nixon and Ford administrations not only reshaped American foreign policies but also exerted profound influence on the global political landscape. This paper explores Kissinger's realistic diplomatic thought, revealing its unique value and limitations in both theory and practice, offering new perspectives and insights for contemporary international relations studies. The high degree of flexibility and pragmatism exhibited by Kissinger's diplomatic thought in addressing complex international relations makes his theory still relevant in today's multipolar world. Nevertheless, Kissinger's realist diplomacy, criticized for its excessive pursuit of power balance, has also faced controversy, even being accused of neglecting moral and human rights issues. This article aims to provide a comprehensive and objective analysis of Kissinger's diplomatic thought and its practice, in hopes of offering valuable lessons for the formulation of future diplomatic policies.

1. Introduction

Henry Kissinger, a diplomat and theorist of paramount importance on the international political stage, has played a crucial role in the formulation and implementation of both domestic and foreign policies in the United States, marked by his realist diplomatic philosophy. Realist diplomacy underscores power dynamics and national interests, an approach which Kissinger has adeptly applied, notably by facilitating the normalization of Sino-American relations and concluding the Vietnam War during the Nixon administration, while maintaining significant diplomatic influence throughout the Ford administration. Kissinger's diplomatic thought is not merely a theoretical framework but also a pragmatic methodology. This paper aims to delve into Kissinger's realist diplomatic philosophy and its impact on international relations from various dimensions, including theoretical foundations, substantive content, and practical case studies. Kissinger's diplomatic practice has demonstrated that in the face of intricate international situations, realist diplomacy can achieve the maximization of national interests with a highly flexible and pragmatic stance. Nevertheless, this diplomatic philosophy has also drawn criticism due to its inclination towards power struggles. Through a comprehensive analysis of Kissinger's diplomatic thought, this paper seeks to offer new insights and perspectives for contemporary studies in international relations.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Kissinger's Realist Diplomatic Thought

2.1. Origin and Development of Realism

The diplomatic ideology of realism, deeply rooted in an astute understanding of the essence of international relations, derives its insight from the summation of historical experiences and the grasp of the fundamental nature of human beings. As a significant theory of international relations, the development of realism has evolved from classical realism to neorealism, and subsequently to offensive and defensive realism. Each phase presents distinct representative figures and theoretical emphases. However, the core of this intellectual current invariably emphasizes the distribution of power among nations and the pursuit of national interests. It posits that the international system is fundamentally anarchic, compelling states to adopt a range of pragmatic strategies and means for self-preservation and expansion. In the classical realism era, figures such as Edward Carr and Hans Morgenthau highlighted the importance of power politics and national interests, asserting that the disorder in international relations stems from the idealistic misjudgment of human nature and state behavior. As neorealism emerged, Kenneth Waltz introduced structural realism, positing that the structure of the international system dictates state behavior rather than merely the intrinsic attributes of nations. This innovation invigorated realism, prompting academia to delve deeper into the complexities of international relations. Post-Cold War, with changes in the international order, scholars further developed offensive and defensive realism, exploring state behavior patterns in the quest for security and power from different perspectives. Henry Kissinger's realist diplomatic thought is profoundly influenced by this spectrum of theories. He integrated the core principles of realism into practical diplomatic operations, forming a unique strategic vision and policy stance. His successes not only mitigated tensions between the U.S. and Soviet Union during the Cold War but also showcased remarkable wisdom and finesse in handling Sino-American relations. Kissinger's diplomatic practice can be seen as a profound illustration of realism, reflecting a keen grasp of historical dynamics and the essence of international politics. This legacy warrants thorough study and emulation by subsequent generations [1].

2.2. Main Views of Kissinger's Realism

Kissinger's realist diplomatic thought is centered on a profound understanding of the complexities of international relations and the balance of power; he believes that every nation on the international stage is a rational actor pursuing its own maximum interests, a perspective that remains highly enlightening in today's world. Kissinger emphasizes the importance of equilibrium, arguing that only through checks and balances can the stability of the international order be maintained, thereby preventing the turmoil caused by the hegemony of a single nation. He has repeatedly pointed out that historical powers such as Britain and France successfully maintained decades of peace by skillfully adjusting their alliances and implementing policies of balance. From a realist perspective, Kissinger does not deny the importance of morality, but he asserts that in dealing with international affairs, moral ideals must never be placed above national interests. History has shown that idealistic policies often lead to more conflicts and suffering. Therefore, he advocates for a pragmatic and flexible diplomatic strategy, suggesting that in the complex and ever-changing international environment, nations should adjust their policies according to specific circumstances, maintaining openness and diversity in their foreign relations. Kissinger also places particular emphasis on the role of leadership and wisdom in diplomacy, believing that a skilled diplomat must possess foresight and the ability to accurately assess situations and take appropriate actions. In Kissinger's view, nations not only compete but also have room for cooperation, and it is through the skillful combination of confrontation and cooperation that a win-win situation can be

achieved. His insights remain highly relevant in the context of today's globalized world.

2.3. Comparison between Kissinger's Realism and other schools of thought

Kissinger's realist approach to diplomacy exudes a unique charm and profound insight compared to other schools of thought. Contrasted with idealism, Kissinger's realism emphasizes practical interests and the balance of power rather than vacuous moral preaching or the constraints of international law. He firmly believes that international cooperation must be grounded in mutual interests, not in the illusory notions of global peace and justice. Kissinger's pragmatism allows him to address intricate international issues with greater flexibility and effectiveness. Unlike constructivism, Kissinger places a stronger emphasis on material power and objective interests in the realm of international relations rather than on subjective identities and cultural factors. While he acknowledges that cultural and historical contexts significantly influence state behavior, he maintains that the ultimate determinants of foreign policy are a nation's strength and interests. In comparison to Marxism, Kissinger's realism focuses on the anarchic nature of the international system and inter-state competition rather than class struggle and economic foundations. Kissinger posits that the distribution of power and strategic equilibrium among nations are the keystones of maintaining international order. Such multidimensional comparisons highlight the comprehensiveness and profundity of Kissinger's diplomatic thought, as well as its practicality and efficacy in navigating complex international landscapes. Kissinger's perspectives offer a distinctive lens for understanding and addressing contemporary international relations, worthy of deep study and reference.

3. Specific contents of Kissinger's realist diplomatic thought

3.1. Power structure in international relations

Kissinger, in his exploration of the power structures within international relations, invariably carries with him a profound sense of historical mission and a pragmatic, dispassionate realism. He posits that the international system is fundamentally governed by the power dynamics among nations, which are fluid and ever-evolving, with the distribution of power constituting the very crux of international politics. Kissinger underscores that the equilibrium of power among major nations is pivotal to maintaining global stability; any attempt by a single nation to dominate the world stage would invariably provoke a concerted counterbalance from other nations, thereby precipitating international turbulence. Consequently, he advocates for the establishment and maintenance of a relatively balanced multipolar world through diplomatic means [2]. In Kissinger's view, as a superpower, the United States must, while preserving its own preeminence, engage in collaboration with other major powers to avert unnecessary conflicts. This perspective was amply validated during the Cold War, as Kissinger's dialogue and cooperation with the Soviet Union successfully alleviated the tensions between the two superpowers. Today, Kissinger's insights remain profoundly relevant, particularly against the backdrop of increasing globalization and multipolarity, where the management of relations among major powers has become a complex and pressing issue. Kissinger's theory of power balance not only offers a robust framework for understanding international relations but also delineates a clear path for practical diplomatic practice.

3.2. Formulation and implementation of foreign policy

Kissinger displayed a precise and thoughtful strategic thinking in the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. He believed that the primary task of foreign policy is to safeguard

the core interests of the country, rather than chasing after ephemeral moral high grounds or idealistic peace fantasies. Kissinger particularly emphasized that policy-making must be based on a comprehensive analysis of the international situation and a balance of various interests, not just surface phenomena. In the implementation of foreign policy, Kissinger advocated flexible and adaptable strategies, employing different diplomatic means for different countries and situations. He firmly believed that diplomacy is not only an art but also a science that requires continuous adjustment and optimization. Especially in dealing with major power relations, Kissinger always managed to find a middle path that could both protect national interests and avoid conflicts. For example, during his tenure as US Secretary of State, he successfully facilitated the normalization of Sino-US relations, which not only broke the US's isolation on China issues but also had a profound impact on the international landscape later on. Kissinger's diplomatic wisdom lies not only in his deep understanding of the power structure but also in his ability to translate this understanding into concrete actions. Many of his policy recommendations and decisions are still regarded as classic case studies by international political scientists today. Kissinger's diplomatic thoughts undoubtedly provide a valuable reference for the contemporary world, especially in the increasingly complex background of globalization and multipolarity, where how to formulate and implement effective foreign policies has become even more critical.

3.3. The combination of power and diplomacy

In Kissinger's realist approach to diplomacy, the integration of power and diplomacy represents a central tenet. This integration aims not only to showcase a nation's military and economic might but also to achieve long-term strategic objectives on the global stage. Kissinger maintains that the formulation and implementation of foreign policy must be grounded in a robust national strength, yet this strength is neither to exist in isolation nor to be merely flaunted. Instead, it should be skillfully employed in diplomatic maneuvers to safeguard national interests and foster international stability. He underscores that diplomatic means and soft power often prove more effective than brute military force, as diplomacy can build international trust through dialogue, negotiation, and cooperation, thereby reducing unnecessary conflicts and confrontations. Kissinger perceives a nation's strength as comprising not only military and economic capabilities but also cultural influence, diplomatic finesse, and strategic acumen. The adept use of these soft powers can render a country more agile and influential on the international stage. His practical application of these principles is evident in his tenure as U.S. Secretary of State, during which he adeptly leveraged America's various resources of power. Through diplomatic channels, he succeeded in easing tensions with the Soviet Union and advancing the normalization of Sino-American relations amid the Cold War's strained atmosphere. These accomplishments not only highlight his mastery of diplomatic strategy but also substantiate the efficacy of the synergy between power and diplomacy. Kissinger believes that the success of diplomacy lies not solely in the rhetoric at the negotiating table but also in the formidable national strength and strategic foresight that underpin it. Diplomacy devoid of substantial support is impotent; conversely, power devoid of diplomatic wisdom is brutish. In today's world, characterized by the complexities of globalization and multipolarity, Kissinger's insights remain pertinent. Nations must not only bolster their strength as a foundation but also employ versatile and adaptive diplomatic strategies to realize their long-term goals [3].

3.4. Flexibility in diplomatic strategy

Kissinger attached great importance to the flexibility of diplomatic strategy, believing that foreign policy must be adjusted in accordance with changes in the international situation, rather than adhering to a set of rigid principles. This view of Kissinger is not only reflected in theory, but

also verified in his actual diplomatic practice. He emphasized the need for diplomats to have keen insight and a high degree of adaptability, and to be able to make quick and wise decisions at critical moments. Kissinger demonstrated great diplomatic flexibility in dealing with the Vietnam War and the Middle East. In the Middle East, Kissinger also used flexible and versatile diplomacy to successfully mediate many conflicts between Israel and Arab countries, especially after the October War in 1973, he gradually re-established peace and stability in the Middle East through “shuttle diplomacy”. Kissinger believes that diplomatic flexibility is not only a means, but also a kind of wisdom. In the international arena, the interests of all countries are diversified and complex, and it is difficult for any single diplomatic strategy to meet all the challenges. Therefore, foreign policy must be adapted to the ever-changing international environment to ensure that the core interests of the country are protected to the greatest extent possible. This concept of Kissinger's has provided valuable guidance for the diplomatic practice of future generations, especially in the face of the complex challenges of globalization, how to flexibly respond to a variety of international issues has become an important issue in front of policymakers. Kissinger's diplomatic thinking emphasizes not only the use of power, but also the intelligent use of power, and this combination makes his diplomatic philosophy richer and more practical.

4. Kissinger's diplomatic practice during the Nixon administration

Henry Kissinger's diplomatic endeavors during the Nixon administration are nothing short of exemplary, etching a vivid chapter in the annals of American diplomatic history with his strategic acumen and operational finesse. During his tenure as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, Kissinger adeptly employed realist diplomatic principles, propelling a series of significant foreign policy decisions. Confronted with the tense dynamics of the Cold War, Kissinger recognized that the United States could not rely solely on military might but rather needed to engage in multifaceted diplomatic efforts on the global stage. He championed the policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union, resulting not only in the signing of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty but also orchestrating President Nixon's historic visit to Moscow. These initiatives not only eased tensions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union but also laid the groundwork for subsequent international security cooperation. In addressing the Vietnam War, Kissinger exhibited remarkable diplomatic dexterity, gradually shifting American policy from direct military involvement to phased withdrawal and peace negotiations, culminating in the signing of the Paris Peace Accords [4]. Throughout this process, Kissinger not only safeguarded American national interests but also skillfully leveraged international pressure and various diplomatic tactics to bring an end to the protracted conflict, conserving substantial resources and lives. On the issue of the Middle East, Kissinger conducted "shuttle diplomacy" between Israel and Arab nations, particularly his peace efforts following the October War of 1973. He personally traveled to multiple Middle Eastern countries, mediating ceasefire agreements and gradually restoring regional stability. Kissinger's diplomatic practices not only reflect his strategic wisdom but also underscore his profound understanding of international dynamics and steadfast commitment to national interests. His diplomatic methods and philosophies remain highly relevant today, particularly in the context of multipolarity and globalization, offering a valuable exemplar for navigating the myriad international challenges.

5. Kissinger's Diplomatic Practice during the Ford Administration

Henry Kissinger's diplomatic practices during the Ford administration continued to demonstrate his exceptional strategic acumen and diplomatic prowess. Despite the political turbulence and international trust crisis following Nixon's departure, he managed to navigate the complexities of

various international affairs with ease. During his tenure as Secretary of State, one of Kissinger's most remarkable achievements was his sustained efforts on Middle Eastern issues, particularly in the peace process following the October War of 1973. He actively mediated the conflicts between Israel and Arab nations, making multiple visits to Egypt, Israel, Syria, and Jordan, and successfully reaching two significant ceasefire agreements. This endeavor not only infused new hope into Middle Eastern stability but also laid the groundwork for subsequent peace negotiations. Kissinger also fostered a policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union, further enhancing dialogue and cooperation between the U.S. and Soviet during Ford's administration. Although the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty had already been signed, Kissinger maintained frequent contact with the Soviet Union through multiple channels to ensure effective implementation of these agreements. He was also actively involved in the 1975 Helsinki Conference, where the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe was signed, fortifying European security cooperation and providing an essential opportunity for further easing of U.S.-Soviet relations. In his diplomatic practices, Kissinger consistently emphasized policy flexibility and pragmatism, eschewing rigid ideologies and principles in favor of the most effective measures based on evolving international circumstances. This diplomatic style was fully manifested during the Ford administration; whether dealing with the intricate Middle Eastern issues or the policy of *détente* with the Soviet Union, Kissinger showcased profound strategic wisdom and unparalleled diplomatic skills. His practices not only secured valuable international standing for the United States but also bequeathed a rich legacy of diplomatic experience for posterity [5].

6. Evaluation and Impact of Kissinger's Realist Diplomatic Thought

Kissinger's realist diplomatic thought has exerted a profound influence within the realm of international relations. His strategic acumen and diplomatic praxis have not only garnered the United States a pivotal position on the global stage but also provided a valuable reference for future diplomatic decision-making. Kissinger's realist doctrine underscores the paramountcy of national interests; he firmly believed that amidst the complex and ever-changing international landscape, only flexible and pragmatic policies could ensure a nation's security and development. This philosophy was validated in several significant diplomatic episodes during the Cold War era, such as his handling of the Vietnam conflict and U.S.-Soviet relations, which showcased his extraordinary diplomatic finesse and strategic sagacity. Kissinger's diplomatic praxis was not merely an application of theory but a profound insight into and precise response to real-world issues. However, his diplomatic thought and practice have been the subject of considerable controversy, particularly in matters pertaining to human rights and democracy. His realist approach often entailed the sacrifice of short-term humanitarian interests in pursuit of long-term strategic objectives, an example being his policies in Pakistan and Chile, which have been critiqued for supporting undemocratic regimes. Nonetheless, Kissinger's realist diplomatic thought remains incontestably valuable, especially in today's era characterized by multipolarity and globalization, where the interests of nations on the international stage are intricately interwoven. Kissinger's ideas serve as a reminder to policymakers that foreign policies must balance pragmatism and idealism, and must not pursue one goal at the expense of overall interests. Kissinger's realist diplomatic thought has not only shaped U.S. foreign policy but has also been widely emulated across the globe. His numerous works, including "Diplomacy" and "World Order," have become essential readings for diplomatic scholars and policymakers. These works not only encapsulate his personal diplomatic experiences but also delve deeply into the critical issues of international relations. Kissinger's thought and praxis have undoubtedly enriched the corpus of realist diplomatic theory, serving as a crucial reference for subsequent studies in international relations.

7. Conclusion

Kissinger's realist diplomatic thinking, with its profound theoretical connotation and rich practical experience, occupies an important position in the history of international politics. Although Kissinger's diplomatic tactics have achieved remarkable results in promoting the realignment of U.S. global strategy, his overly pragmatic and power-oriented approach has also sparked much controversy. From the *détente* of Sino-American relations to the end of the Vietnam War, Kissinger's diplomatic practice demonstrated the unique value of realism in international affairs. However, the limitations of realist diplomacy should not be overlooked, especially when dealing with moral and human rights issues, which often seem to be out of reach. In view of the complexity and volatility of the current international situation, Kissinger's diplomatic thinking provides us with a rational and dispassionate perspective that deserves in-depth study and reflection. In today's world of globalization and multipolarity, how to balance morality and human rights while pursuing national interests is a challenge that every diplomat needs to face, and Kissinger's realistic diplomatic thinking may provide valuable lessons in this process.

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