

ON CHINA, PAST AND FUTURE

Hubert Vedrine

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What will China do with its newfound power? This is one of the most important questions of the 21st century. Henry Kissinger, who designed the strategic reorientation of Washington's China policy forty years ago and remains unsurpassed as an analyst of international relations in the long term, has sought to answer it in a book released in 2011 and recently published in French, under the title "De la Chine". With the help of a first-class research team, Kissinger has produced a work of prodigious importance, both historical and prospective. The first hundred pages provide a fascinating overview of Chinese history and remind us that China, a timeless entity, never needed to deal with other powers, which it traditionally either ignored or expected to pay tribute, let alone on equal footing, until the violent shock of Western colonialism. In the modern era, after the historical upheavals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the U.S. found itself allied with the Chinese nationalists who fought the communist armies and, defeated by Mao, sought refuge in Formosa (Taiwan). Hence the «Who lost China?» debate. Looking to the future, in January 1950 the Secretary of State to President Truman, Dean Acheson, proposed to the latter with prescient foresight that relations between the United States and China, which was now communist but would in fact become Titoist, be based on national interest rather than on ideology (anti-communism). Unthinkable at the time for America! It would take another twenty years for Mr. Kissinger to arrive and, exploiting Mao's fear of the USSR, design a quasi alliance between the United States and China. His strategy was embraced by a much-maligned President Nixon, whom Kissinger has the courage to describe as having, among the ten presidents he has known, "a unique grasp of long-term international trends". This led to Nixon's historic visit to China and the seminal "Shanghai Communiqué" of 1972. Kissinger's descriptions of the protagonists in this story of Shakespearean proportions are familiar - perhaps even too indulgent? - : The Titan, Mao, the Confucius-hating architect of China's perpetual revolution, a sort of ogre, a cruel emperor who killed tens of millions but reunified China; Nixon, the cunning, pessimistic strategist somehow able to transcend all of his prejudices; Zhou Enlai, «the most fascinating statesman [Kissinger] ever met in [his] life", but with a tragic destiny; Deng Xiaoping, «less refined», «abrupt», and «rustic» but indestructible, the ubiquitous and invisible emperor who unleashed the ferocious economic energy of China; Lee Kuan Yew, the founder of modern Singapore, Deng's soulmate and the inspiration for his «modernizations» Kissinger goes on to relate the normalization of Sino-American relations under Reagan, then the diplomatic earthquake unleashed by the Tiananmen crackdown, which led to a near collapse of the de facto alliance under G. H. W. Bush. G. H. W. Bush and General Scowcroft were desperate to save this strategic partnership. The President asked Deng to understand that human rights are an «article of faith» for the West. He even went so far as to appeal to his «compassion» But relations between the two countries were never the same. Writing in 2011, Kissinger notes that the void left by the disappearance of a common enemy - the USSR - has not been filled by other objectives; that under the Clinton, G. W. Bush and Obama administrations, the bilateral relationship between a now triumphalist China and a less confident United States has become an end in itself, with all of the attendant risks, and that the complex entanglement between economic interdependence and competition only further complicates things. The situation worries him. It may be why he wrote this book, beyond a desire to transmit a unique legacy. The real risk, he writes, with the authority of someone who has studied and shaped U.S. policy in Asia for forty years, is a conflict between a United States determined to curb China's rise, which it fears won't be peaceful, and a China that wishes to expel it from the Pacific. He compares it to the dangerous relationship between Germany and Great Britain before 1914. Warning against this disastrous scenario, Kissinger urges the creation of a «Pacific Community», a partnership through which the United States and China can work together, rather than compete, to create a new world order. This is Kissinger at his best, the long-term thinker, at once ultra-realistic and idealistic, who understands that American leadership is in relative decline and must evolve. Food for thought for other powers who have no role in this scheme, the stakes of which are global. * Hubert Védrine is the recent author of «Dans la mêlée mondiale» (Fayard)



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