

Former US Secretary of State Kissinger points to danger of “catastrophic” conflict between US and China

Nick Beams
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Former US Secretary of State and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger has warned of an inevitable “conflict” between the US and China, with a potentially “catastrophic” outcome.

Speaking at an event organised by the National Committee on US-China Relations in New York on Thursday, Kissinger said “the future of the world depends” on the US-China relationship.

“There is no doubt many aspects of the evolution of China are challenging to the US,” adding, “What is imperative is that both countries understand that a permanent conflict between them cannot be won. There will be a catastrophic outcome if it leads to a permanent conflict.”

If no resolution is achieved, the ensuing conflict “will be worse than the world wars that ruined European civilisation,” he said.

“It is no longer possible to think that one side can dominate the other,” he said. “They have to get used to the fact that they have that kind of rivalry.”

Kissinger, who said he was “confident” leaders on both sides would realise the issues at stake, knows that historical experience speaks against such an outcome.

Kissinger’s warning came after Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, toured Asia in September and called the region the top priority for the US military amid rising “great power competition” between the United States and China.

In his book *On China*, published in 2012, Kissinger referred to the memorandum issued in 1907 by British Foreign Office official Eyre Crowe, who had been tasked with examining relations between Britain and Germany. Crowe concluded that whatever the intentions of Germany’s rulers, its economic rise meant

that conflict was inevitable. It broke out, as Kissinger noted, just seven years after the memorandum had been issued.

Kissinger cited this experience in his book to warn against US-China relations heading in the same direction, with the same outcome. But in the time since then, tensions have steadily increased. Starting under the Obama administration, the view has steadily developed in both the military-intelligence and political establishments that the rise of China constitutes an existential threat to the economic and military hegemony of the US.

Thus, the increasing bellicosity of the Trump administration and its escalating trade war against Beijing is the expression of forces emanating from deep within the very foundations of the American state.

Kissinger represents a tendency that saw the interests of American foreign policy as being best served by an engagement with China, initially directed in the 1970s towards collaboration against the Soviet Union.

In the 1990s, following the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 and the turn by the Chinese regime towards the ruthless restoration of capitalism through the suppression of the working class, this engagement was continued and deepened on the basis that the opening up of China’s cheap labour resources would provide enormous benefits to American capitalism.

This led to the promotion of China’s accession to the World Trade Organisation by the Clinton administration, finalised under the George W. Bush administration in 2001. It was carried out on the basis that extension of “free market” capitalism in China and its integration into the capitalist world market, under the domination of the US, would lead to the emergence

of a Chinese regime prepared to subordinate itself to US interests.

But in recent years, especially since the ascendancy of Xi Jinping to the leadership of the Chinese state, there has been a fundamental shift in the US strategic orientation. “Engagement” has been replaced by what the *Wall Street Journal* called, in the headline of an article published earlier this month, “The Great Confrontation with China.”

Outlining the shift in US policy, it noted that there had “long been hope that the Chinese party-state would become a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in the international system, as then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick expressed in 2005.”

In other words, that Chinese capitalism would continue to operate as an adjunct to the accumulation of profit by US corporations by serving as the supplier of cheap labour for the production and assembly of consumer and electronic goods, without in any way challenging American dominance in high-tech areas.

However, the development under Xi of the “Made in China 2025” program, aimed at lifting the Chinese economy up the value chain through the advancement of the new technologies of the future, has brought about a fundamental shift in the US strategic orientation. This is because such a development is seen as an existential threat to American “national security,” that is, to its economic and military dominance, and something that must be prevented by all means possible—tariff wars, bans on Chinese tech companies such as Huawei and, if necessary, military force.

The new US orientation, supported by all sections of the political establishment—if anything the Democrats are more aggressive against China than Trump—was outlined in remarks by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cited by the *Wall Street Journal* in its “Great Confrontation” article.

Speaking at a Hudson Institute dinner earlier this month, he said: “It is no longer realistic to ignore the fundamental differences between our two systems and the impact... those systems have on American national security.” The Chinese leadership, he continued, belonged to a system “focused on struggle and international domination.”

Kissinger’s remarks and warnings point to the enormous dangers of war. But his “hope” that this can be averted by pointing out the threat to civilisation that

would result from such a conflagration is without foundation. Neither in World War I nor World War II did the devastation cause the imperialist powers to pull back. Rather, they pushed on, with the US dropping two atomic bombs at the end of World War II.

Kissinger’s call for an acceptance of competition and rivalry as an antidote to the growing danger is likewise empty. The dominant view in US ruling circles, based on the now more than three decades of globalised production, is that the longer such competition continues, the more the position of American imperialism will be weakened. The conclusion is that it is necessary to act sooner rather than later.

While all kinds of tactical shifts and manoeuvres will be undertaken, no appeal to the ruling classes to see “reason” can halt the elemental drive to war because it arises from objective contradictions within the capitalist profit and nation-state system.



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