

The Legacies of Westphalia

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Published online: 14 April 2015
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Abstract With new international challenges facing the globe from the Ukraine to the Middle East to the South China Sea, two of the West's most respected authors on international relations argue that the principles of Westphalia are still as relevant as ever. While the context may be different, and the roles of an ambivalent United States and Europe may be uncertain, the balance of power and the nation-state model remain operative. This review of recent works by Henry Kissinger and Robert Kaplan make the case for Westphalian principles on a worldwide scale.

Keywords International relations · Westphalia

Robert Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific*. New York: Random House, 2014. 256 pp. \$26.00. ISBN: 978–0812994322

Henry Kissinger, *World Order*. New York: Penguin, 2014. 432 pp. \$36.00. ISBN: 978–159420 6146

Over the past year, international geopolitical events have assumed significance for the broader public that they have not enjoyed for some time, especially when contrasted with domestic economic effects that continue to impact many western nations. Russian aggression towards Ukraine, ISIL's advances in Iraq and Syria, ebola in West Africa and, on a less immediate but perhaps more consequential plane, China's tensions with its neighbors, have all thrust the international order into the spotlight. In this context, two of America's most

prominent commentators on international affairs – Henry Kissinger and Robert Kaplan – have published their thoughts on the world as they see it.

Given the tendency of Kaplan and Kissinger to fall broadly into the realist camp on matters international, it is not surprising that both books take a similar view, philosophically and practically, when it comes to assessing the evolving world order. The main difference between the two is that of focus with Kaplan restricting himself to the South China Sea while Kissinger takes on the whole global sweep in order to survey the world's key players. But beyond this difference, the two authors, each in their characteristically engaging prose, view the world in similar shades.

The similarity between the two works extends not only to their philosophic outlook but also their presentation. The bulk of both books is taken up by a sequential tour through the major players on each stage. Kaplan's interest lies in the nations bordering the South China Sea: Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Taiwan. The key geopolitical question for this region is that of the dominant player, the ancient civilization of China, up against the reigning guarantor of world order, the United States as it struggles to come to terms with a multipolar world made new. Kissinger engages on a broader journey beginning with a trek through European history, followed by a survey of the key cultures that constitute today's power centres: Europe, Russia, the Middle East and Iran, China, India, Japan, and finally the United States, once again acting in its role of ambivalent guarantor of world order.

As to the precise nature of modern international order, both authors rely heavily on a theme that has permeated their previous writings, especially that of the elder statesman: classical Westphalian equilibrium on a global scale. Indeed, Kissinger goes so far as to assert that even with all our efforts to build a common humanity, the only principle of global order that enjoys any respect today is Westphalia's balance of power.

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Kaplan reflects this perspective in his analysis of the South China Sea, surrounded as it is by relatively successful nation-states on a European model, but with a penchant for authoritarian rigor as opposed to democratic revolution. In a certain regard, harkening back to Westphalia seems somewhat odd given that the Europeans, the original crafters of the system of equilibrium, have apparently rejected the amoral balancing act of nations – the presumed source of so much of the twentieth century’s devastation – for a unified Europe beyond warfare and national strife. On the other hand, the international scene seems, to use a popular appellation these days, far more multipolar since the fall of the Soviet Union. It would appear that, in the cradle of the nation-state and Westphalia, Europe’s traditional principles stand condemned, while across the remainder of the globe, nations of all sorts are asserting their interests, though with varying degrees of success.

Such an assessment; however, is somewhat superficial as regards both the meaning and the history of Western Europe, along with our more recent globalized order. It is on this point, that Kissinger’s work is the most informative and far-ranging as he provides the reader with a primer on the origins, operations and adaptations of the balance of power that in so many ways remains indispensable.

To begin Kissinger takes us back to our origins, to the treaties and arrangements that constitute the Peace of Westphalia. Notable in Kissinger’s presentation is the conviction that Westphalia itself was something that only could have come about in Western Europe. No other part of the globe would have produced this particular arrangement of forces. Europe, with its multiplicity of states, large and small, was different from what came to dominate among the world’s other civilizations. While the history of most of the rest of the globe was that of the rise and fall of empires and their dynasties, the history of Western Europe was the sustained effort by a number of players to prevent unification, precisely to prevent empire. Charlemagne’s empire was a short-lived affair; Charles V ended his imperial efforts when checked by Francis I and his protestant and Turkish allies; Napoleon ultimately fell before the combined forces of Western Europe with Russia thrown into the mix. Even today’s European Union, the long-delayed and pacified European imperium, remains little more than the sum of its parts, leaving Kissinger unconvinced on how much unity there is this particular Union.

Equally important for Kissinger’s presentation is the question why such fractiousness became the norm in Western Europe when most other great civilizations – Chinese, Muslim, Russian – clearly favoured one or another version of empire. Kissinger’s answer is Christianity: a transcendent and universal religion that rendered temporal political unification impossible. While occupied ordering souls, Christianity left the political realm to do more or less as it pleased as long as the political realm never deigned to replace the unity of the City of

God. Christendom would make space for the work of nations, while also holding out a spiritual good as model to all.

As a result, Western Europe formed the unique instrument of the nation-state as its preferred means of self-government. By Kissinger’s account, one could say that the balance of power was precisely the *international* order that would come about in circumstances where multiple self-governing polities were the dominant political form. In principle and origin, at least, the balance of power was not simple self-interest contained, but the real effect of a cause which was the actualization of self-government within a Christian context. By conscious effort, Western Europe was the alternative to empire.

On an operational level, Kissinger’s presentation demonstrates that the balance of power was more than mere shackles to restrain aggressive self-interest. It was an order that worked on the principle of equilibrium. The nations of Europe collectively understood that they could retain their independence only if they ensured that the balance was not disturbed. The mechanisms that maintained the equilibrium were essentially two: 1.) Britain gained such prominence on the seas that it could remain aloof from the continent, needing to enter with its balancing influence when one continental grouping was in danger of submerging another; and 2.) France acted to ensure that the various German states between itself and Austria would never unify to become an unwieldy threat to the rest of the continent.

Along with these mechanisms, the balance of power also relied on a degree of flexibility, allowing it to shift territories, reintegrate rabble rousers (Louis XIV’s France) and integrate newcomers (Prussia). Such flexibility was made easier where the rulers of the nations tended to be aristocrats who, whatever their differences, were of one mind on the need to retain the balance.

Historically, the balance of power worked relatively well from the Peace of Westphalia until the French Revolution, the period of what might be called the nation of the Christian monarch. But with the Revolution came a number of changes. As a direct result of the Revolution, the flexibility of the balance of power was increasingly replaced with the more democratic and far less forgiving notion of the nation as an inviolable people. Where national monarchs and aristocrats once traded swathes of land in the name of balance, the democratic fury of nationalism would fight relentlessly for the smallest piece of real estate deemed essential to national culture.

Additionally, a new player, a primarily imperial player, would find its armies in the heart of Paris following Napoleon’s ultimate defeat. As Kissinger notes, the arrival of Russia in Western Europe, having originally made its presence felt in the Seven Years’ War, was now at the heart of the European balancing act, in a global order it neither desired nor particularly understood. Ultimately, a number of factors, including democratic revolution and Russian imperialism, undermined the flexibility of the balance of power. At the same time, when

that system was on the verge of complete destruction due to total war and the fallout from total war, balance of a sort was ultimately restored by the American republic with an almost imperial moral compass. And eventually, the United States, despite all its pretences to overcoming the old balance of power system, found itself playing much the same game in a bipolar world with the Soviet Union, that nonetheless, was not without multiple smaller power centres.

This was the world of Secretary of State Kissinger. Move forward to today and we find some important differences, but as both our authors ably show, many of the same paradigms abide. For Kaplan and Kissinger, the world has not yet left the Westphalian order. There certainly are new considerations, including threats of nuclear proliferation alongside global economic and communications infrastructures, but for these two analysts, we have not yet become post-modern. While these differences greatly impact how the world achieves its equilibrium, and while there are significant actors on the world stage that wish to markedly change the very principles of balance of power, the analyses of both Kissinger and Kaplan suggest that Westphalia has a permanent place in a world where national populations resist the notion of empire. What is most interesting about Kaplan's presentation in this regard, is that it is precisely in the South China Sea, so central to global maritime commerce, where a China re-invigorated after over a century of submission is pushing its boundaries and bumping up against a ring of smaller nations relying, in part, on larger powers like the United States and India to protect them from "Finlandization".

Ultimately, the emergence of regional factors within a globalized world, still somehow subject to international law, and beyond that, a sometimes ambivalent *pax Americana*, defines the contemporary world. Within those regions, there are powerful and sometimes destructive players seeking to undo both the international legal regime and American power. In this scenario, the nation endures; and the United States, for the time being, appears to be the ultimate intervener, balancing the interests of small and medium-sized states against those great and diverse imperial contenders that would challenge and remake the emerging order. Both Kissinger and Kaplan provide important insight into this new order that, despite its imperial forces, the uncertainties of American moral intervention and the vagaries of the European construct, cannot be understood or appreciated without Westphalian principles. Principles which themselves are markers of self-government born from the wars proper to Christendom. Whether this latest iteration of Westphalia will achieve a flexibility and balance to allow it to thrive, or calcify into intransigence and repeat on a regional scale what transpired among nations in the twentieth century, is up to the players themselves and the history they all make.

Collin May is a corporate lawyer in Calgary, Alberta specializing in corporate governance and finance. He serves on the federal Minister of Justice's Judicial Advisory Committee for the Province of Alberta and has published numerous reviews on topics ranging from political philosophy to securities regulation.