

Opinion **US-China relations**

US and China must heed Kissinger's stark warnings

Cold war strategist says artificial intelligence poses far greater challenge than nuclear weapons

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Henry Kissinger visits the Summer Palace in Beijing in 1971, when he was head of America's National Security Council © Bettmann Archive/Getty

Edward Luce 2 HOURS AGO

As the diplomat who did most to capitalise on the cold war Sino-Soviet split, Henry Kissinger is dismissed by some as a China apologist. Yet his alarm at the risks of what is rapidly turning into [a second cold war](#) should be taken very seriously. The veteran of US-Soviet arms control warns today of “unrestrained competition” between the US and China that has “no precedent in history”.

Instead of negotiating threat reduction, as the US and USSR did after the 1962 [Cuban missile crisis](#), America and China are steadily becoming more ignorant of each other's capabilities and intentions — the opposite to how the first cold war evolved. “The [US-China] relationship has moved from partnership, to co-operation, to uncertainty to near or actual confrontation,” says Kissinger in an interview with the Financial Times. “In the absence of dialogue, to expect that wise decisions will be made on all sides is an act of faith in the future that I don't accept.”

Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, [said](#) that whoever led in artificial intelligence would dominate the world. Kissinger, who, with Eric Schmidt, former chief executive of Google, is co-author of a new book, *The [Age of AI](#)*, says we have not yet begun to grasp the impact it is having on future warfare and geopolitical stability. The FT [recently reported](#) that China had tested a hypersonic missile, which could enable it to evade US missile defence systems. The Pentagon this week [estimated](#) that China planned to quadruple its nuclear arsenal by 2030. Nicolas Chaillan, the former head

enough about AI on either side even to determine if China is ahead, or what it could do if it were. He likened today to [the period before the first world war](#) in which Britain and Germany were so ill-informed about each other's aims that a seemingly unrelated incident — the assassination of an archduke in south-eastern Europe — triggered what at the time was the bloodiest war in history.

The US and China are showing no appetite to bridge their own gulf of ignorance. “We need to learn about these AI capabilities while simultaneously understanding that they produce a level of uncertainty in the world within which permanent peace is very difficult to sustain — probably impossible,” Kissinger said.

He pointed to the contrast between today's opacity on AI's strategic impact and the intensive work done on nuclear weapons during the first cold war. As a young professor, Kissinger was among a large group of scholars who studied nuclear doctrine. Their work eventually fed into arms control treaties in which Moscow and Washington shared details on the accuracy and force of their arsenals.

The US and China are not close to understanding the potency of each other's AI — and there are no plans to start a formal dialogue, he says. The scope for confusion and escalation is thus greater than during most of the cold war. Yet the appetite among US scholars to work on it is considerably lower. “The philosophical ballast in many societies is evaporating for the kind of dialogue [on nuclear weapons] from which I and my colleagues learned so much,” Kissinger said.

It will be easy for many Americans on the left and right to dismiss Kissinger's warnings. The left cannot forgive him for the Nixon administration's [secret bombing of Cambodia](#), support for the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende's socialist government in Chile and other covert actions. The right views him as untrustworthily dovish on China. Yet Kissinger's analysis should be separated from moral evaluations of his cold war record.

At 98, he is [among the few living figures](#) to have played a leading role grappling with the last century's existential threats. Each side eventually acquired an intimate knowledge about their nuclear capacities and doctrines that may be impossible to match on AI, he argues. There are no spy planes that could take pictures of China's AI. There is no clear way of deterring attacks, or of knowing where they come from.

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