



---

---

**book review : (عرض كتاب)**

**Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis.** By Asaf Siniver. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. xviii, 252 pp., ISBN 978-0-521-89762-4

Prof. Dr. Ammar Saadoon Salman Albadry

أ. د. عمار سعدون سلمان البدری

College of Political Science / Al-Mustansiriya University

[ammartt@uomustansiriyah.edu.iq](mailto:ammartt@uomustansiriyah.edu.iq)

**Introduction**

Dr. Asaf Siniver, a lecturer of International Relations at the Department of Political Science and International Studies at University of Birmingham, United Kingdom, has published his doctoral dissertation, 'Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis'. This work differs from another book that he edited, '[International Terrorism Post-9/11: Comparative Dynamics and Responses](#)'<sup>1</sup> in that it brings together both western and non-western approaches to counter-terrorism in the post-9/11 era. This multi-cultural study of counter-terrorism strategies identifies common lessons from both successful and unsuccessful attempts to counter the terrorist threat and offers guidelines as well as effective strategies to counter terrorism. On the other hand, in Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis, Asaf Siniver provides a critical analysis of the structures and processes of the Nixon administration's foreign policy making especially within the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) in four international crises: the incursion into Cambodia in spring 1970, the Jordanian crisis in September 1970, the India-Pakistan War in December 1971, and the Yom Kippur War in October 1973. The WSAG was an interdepartmental group within the National Security Council (NSC), tasked with anticipating, monitoring, and managing international crises and providing the President with the relevant information and advice (p.3). In this worthy book for those interested in U.S. foreign policy making, Asaf Siniver specifically analyses the cognitive and personal interaction between Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger and its impact on the decision-making structure they set up for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Their period of close association is often referred to as the 'Nixinger' years (p.42).

---

Asaf Siniver, '[International Terrorism Post-9/11: Comparative Dynamics and Responses](#)'. Routledge, 2010'



---

## The Approach

Asaf Siniver uses the case-study method based on some four years of work relying on the newly released collections of the declassified National Security Council Institutional Files series at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland. Previously, the study on foreign policy making during the Nixon years was limited to depending on journalists' and participants' account, but this release made Asaf Siniver among the first to examine and construct a more comprehensive narrative of the making of Nixon administration's foreign policy during international crises by examining six components of the crisis decision-making process that pertain to distinct phases of 'rational' decision-making process: How were objectives surveyed? How were alternative courses of action evaluated? How was information searched for? How was new/contradictory information integrated into the process? How were potential benefits/costs evaluated? How were implementation and monitoring mechanisms developed? By using all these six components, even though each crisis is unique with variations in contexts of time, geography and content, some valuable causal inferences on the linkage between structure and process can be drawn (p.7).

In this book, Asaf Siniver provides a substantial, fascinating, and well-written investigation of the development, implementation, and consequences of the organizational apparatus constructed by Nixon and Kissinger to direct U.S. foreign policy. He shows how Nixon and Kissinger transformed the structure and substance of U.S. foreign policy, and how the bureaucracy or personalities influenced crisis decision-making, despite the highly personalized policies of the imperial presidency. His book is also a timely reminder that Presidents can benefit from close attention to the policy process and the advice produced by a well-organized analytical machinery in government. It can also serve as a reminder about what can or may happen when a flawed decision making is made.

The author displays opinionated views from those that he interviewed apart from the documents that he inspected. It can be alleged that this book differs from other books written on Nixon and Kissingers and U.S. foreign policy because Siniver's book provides a fresh analysis of the important relationship between individuals and the advisory system in the making of U.S. foreign policy during international crisis. On the other hand, Robert Dallek's *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power*<sup>2</sup> delivers a classic of modern history: the definitive analysis of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's complex, often troubled partnership in running American foreign policy from January 1969 through

---

Dallek, Robert, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power*. HarperCollins, 2007<sup>x</sup>



August 1974 based on unprecedented access to major new resources, including transcriptions (20,000 pages) of Kissinger's telephone conversations as Secretary of State, unreleased audio files of key Nixon telephone conversations and Oval Office discussions, and previously unexamined documents from the archives of Nixon, Kissinger (who served first as National Security Adviser, then as Secretary of State) and White House hands Alexander Haig and Haldeman.

### **The Making of U.S. Foreign Policy During Nixon-Kissinger Years**

The book demonstrates how Kissinger came to dominate the national security agenda by making himself indispensable to the President as a source of information and advice. Much to the dismay of the public service, they were often than not ignored in decision-making process, showing that psychological make-up of Nixon and Kissinger played a particularly important role in shaping the nature and outcome of the decision-making process. Three so-called gatekeepers: Nixon's Chief of Staff, Bob Haldeman, John Ehrlichman and Henry Kissinger made sure that there was strict access to the President. Haldeman shielded the President from 'the unending flow of government officials who 'just wanted to see the President'... or worse" long, time-wasting discussions of some minor departmental gripe.' Ehrlichman controlled the cabinet and staff members' access to Nixon on the domestic front whereas Kissinger prevented department heads from taking the President's time.

The hub of foreign policy machinery has also been shifted to the White House when Kissinger started his duty as the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (henceforth the National Security Advisor in the National Security Council (NSC)) to centralize decision-making. The NSC was designed to make certain that 'clear policy choices reach the top' since Nixon refused to be confronted with a bureaucratic consensus that left him with no options but acceptance or rejection without knowing what alternatives exist (p.47). It can also thus be observed that Kissinger chaired almost all the Nixon Administration's NSC structure that includes Defense Program Review Committee, 40 Committee, Verification Panel, Vietnam Special Studies Group, Intelligence Committee, WSAG, Under Secretaries Committee and Inter-Agency Regional Groups. There were serious discrepancies between theory and the implementation of NSC process as envisaged by both Nixon and Kissinger. Albeit having limited bureaucratic interference and having Kissinger at the top of the NSC system, Kissinger's position also proved to be the greatest obstacle to the smooth and efficient policy-making process. He has difficulty in attending many meetings of the NSC sub-structure, nevertheless he alone enjoys the



intimate day-to-day contact and confidence of the President as pointed out by the author.

As to WSAG, it was institutionalized early in the life of Nixon's new administration in July 1969 which comprised of interagency groups for future crisis management which heightened the tensions between the NSC and the State Department. WSAG convened whenever an international event threatened to escalate into a full crisis. Between July 1969 and November 1973, the group met nearly 200 times and addressed a range of issues, from Middle East crises to developments in the Vietnam War (p.69). As time went on, WSAG got more important as compared to other groups in the NSC. Siniver posits that although Nixon favoured orderly procedures, in reality, the most important decisions were made during informal, outside-the-system deliberations. Hence, the NSC was more as a discussion forum, not a decision-making body as a result of Nixon and Kissinger's personality traits and cognitive schemes, such as their appetite for secrecy especially following the dramatic disclosure of WSAG minutes by a syndicated columnist and power and mistrust of the bureaucracy. One may ask, if that is the case, why both of them bother to set up an advisory system that they had no intention to use. Siniver deduces that evidence suggests that the system worked well during the first eighteen months of Nixon's administration and when Nixon wanted to utilize it to its full potential, showing that personalities did dominate the advisory system.

### **The Incursion into Cambodia, Spring 1970**

The first task for Nixon upon entering the White House was to end the Vietnam War. A Gallup-poll in 1969 showed that 52% Americans believed that the United States made a mistake by sending troops to fight in Vietnam. On the other hand, Nixon feared that withdrawal might be interpreted as a sign of weakness, thereby resulting in Vietnam policy based on three pillars: the Vietnamization programme (VP), the 'madman theory' and linkage diplomacy. VP was born by the Defense Secretary, Melvin Laird which aimed to gradually transfer to the South Vietnamese the primary responsibility for their own defense and replace military assistance with financial aid. This helped Nixon to achieve the objectives of appeasing anti-war critics and sending a clear signal that the United States would never abandon its allies. Kissinger however disagreed and suggested a two-tier approach by separating the political and military elements of future settlement. He recommended negotiation with the North Vietnamese to cease-fire and a political solution negotiation with the South Vietnamese, doubting that the VP would weaken U.S. leverage in future negotiations with Hanoi. In spite of that, VP was carried out successfully much



to Kissinger's irritation. According to Siniver, this was truly a rare episode when Kissinger's view was overlooked by Nixon in favour of cabinet members' advice. Siniver said that the reason might be that Kissinger paid little attention to the importance of public opinion whereas Nixon and Laird owed their jobs to their constituents.

In addition, Kissinger had not yet at that point established his solidified position as the President's key advisor. The NSC machinery was used more fully before Kissinger's authority was confirmed, but later on, tactical decisions were increasingly taken outside the system in personal conversations with the President. As to 'the madman theory', it suggested the importance of threat as a reliable tool in foreign policy. During secret negotiations with the North Vietnamese, Kissinger often played the role as the 'good messenger', deliberately playing off against Nixon's well-established reputation as an anti-communist and referring to the President's volatile and unpredictable personality (p.76). The linkage diplomacy, on the other hand aimed more at Moscow than Hanoi since Nixon believed that the road to peace in Vietnam must pass through Moscow. On the contrary, Nixon thought otherwise but later changed his mind.

Siniver highlights several issues that the inability to work out a feasible plan to end war in Vietnam goes some distance in explaining the flawed-decision making during the Cambodia crisis. In 1969 itself, Nixon ordered the bombing of the Cambodian sanctuaries without proper consultation among the President's top advisors. The fourteen-month long bombing of Cambodia was kept under heavy secret from the American public and Congress. The White House only acknowledged the bombing in May 1970 when U.S. ground troops were already operating in Cambodia. The incursion was the result of the gradual disintegration of Cambodia that later experienced the over-throw of Prince Sihanouk, a civil war with the Khmer Rouge, relentless American bombing and clashes between Cambodian, South Vietnamese, and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). This Cambodian crisis proved that Nixon's management style was aversion to reach down for information and avoiding confrontation with his cabinet. Only Kissinger was sought to work out a plan to help Lon Nol. Aware of the political cost of his decision, Nixon according to Siniver, clearly suggested to the Americans that they were not occupying Cambodia but only to drive out the enemies and would withdraw after their military supplies were destroyed.

The WSAG few meetings were only of little substance since the President himself made the decision based on his gut feelings and personal anxieties (p.89) without evaluating alternative contingencies within a defined decision-





---

making group much to the worrying Kissinger about Nixon's almost reckless management of the crisis. On 30 June, the Senate passed the meaningless Cooper-Church amendment which prohibited any American activity in Cambodia since on the very same day the last American soldier left Cambodia. Nevertheless, the Congress decision was significant since it was the first-ever decision by Congress to restrict Presidential war powers.

### **The Jordanian Crisis, September 1970**

Siniver articulates that the Jordanian crisis (JC) is widely considered to be the highest quality of management of international crisis during the Nixon administration as compared to other international crisis. The JC happened simultaneously with other major foreign crisis in Chile and in Cuba following the recovering of the nation from the traumatic foreign adventure in Cambodia. Consisting of three phases, the JC began on 6 September following the hijacking of three western airliners into Jordan by Palestinians, followed by a bloody civil war between the Jordanian Army and Palestinian factions, which prompted a Syrian invasion of Jordan that transformed the conflict into a regional crisis. In this regard, the President sought WSAG's advice and relied heavily on formal NSC procedures. Nixon's tendency as well as that of Kissinger's on the Middle East was lacking during the first year of administration since the Middle East was not Nixon's top priority. The five big issues that came to his immediate intention were only concerning East-West relations, the Soviet Union, China, Eastern Europe, and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). Even the first diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East were handled by the State Department, not by the White House. Therefore, the JC was successfully and effectively managed by WSAG.

Although the causes of the civil war in Jordan were domestic in nature, Kissinger and Nixon feared potential confrontation with the Soviets but it was difficult to find the evidence. They thought that the key stability was the survival of King Hussein that had good rapport with the White House but if the United States intervened by force, that would jeopardize the king's status in the Arab world. Because of the potential high implications of another likely Arab-Israeli war, Washington felt that it needed to interfere. The WSAG convened on this matter no less than fourteen times until the abatement of the crisis on 24 September. Siniver highlights that even the management of the JC began months before the situation deteriorated into a crisis, ensuring that the administration was not surprised by subsequent events such as an assassination attempt on the king in June and his failure to crack down on the fedayeen. WSAG meetings following the attempt on Hussein's life included to consider contingencies



including evacuation of U.S. citizens and military options. Kissinger in the WSAG meeting concluded that U.S. troops will only be used in Jordan if American citizens were in imminent danger and if King Hussein asked for protection from outside intervention. Citing minutes of WSAG meeting on 11 June 1970, Siniver states that Admiral Moorer was ordered to define objectives and draw up scenarios for possible military action. There was great emphasis on setting forth the pros and cons of military intervention at the invitation of a friendly Arab government. The WSAG was well prepared and was quick to respond to unfolding events (p.127) and earlier on, Nixon had instructed that plan be prepared for three contingencies: a punitive attack in Jordan if the plane was destroyed and passengers were killed, a military evacuation if the security situation in Amman had broken down, and a plan for U.S. military support for Hussein if he decided to go to war with the fedayeen.

There were informal and close consultations between Nixon and Kissinger particularly during the last stages of the crisis, but they were not as frequent as that during the Cambodian crisis. WSAG was able to perform and implement the formalistic, hierarchic procedures and proven effective in providing the President with the information and advice he was seeking during the crisis. In the JC, the hostages were released without any concessions, the Syrians and fedayeen were defeated, relations with Israel and Jordan were strengthened with Arab bitterness towards Moscow stronger due to inept support of Soviet during the crisis.

### **The India-Pakistan War, December 1971**

Siniver expresses that the management of the India-Pakistan crisis proved to be one of the most controversial foreign policy episodes of the Nixon administration particularly when excerpts from four WSAG meetings began to appear in the Washington Post and the New York Times, highlighting the decision-making process and Kissinger's control of the bureaucracy and also the U.S. pursuing a policy in South Asia that favoured Pakistan in its third war with India in a generation, a policy commonly known as "The Tilt"(p.149) - Nixon's decision to ignore the advice of the bureaucracy and the reports from the ground. There were Nixon and Kissinger's personification of the decision-making process and their blatant lies about priorities during the crisis.

In the 'tilt' towards Pakistan, this was due to two reasons: the first was Nixon's debt to the Pakistani leader, General Yahya Khan for his role in opening a back channel to Beijing compared with his awful relations with the Indian Prime Minister Indira Ghandi, and the second was that policy choices were ultimately constrained by Nixon and Kissinger's proclivity to interpret developments in the



subcontinent as a U.S.-Sino-Soviet conflict by proxy. As Hanhimaki in *The Flawed Architect* suggests, Kissinger apparently only saw one reality that India was a friend of the Soviet Union and Pakistan a friend of China's and thus, the United States needed to side with Pakistan to safeguard the opening in China which amounted to a false reading of South Asian realities in 1971.

Analyzing the performance of the WSAG during the crisis, Siniver illustrates that it convened frequently during the crisis but was not given the tools to adequately perform its most basic tasks. In the three months leading up to the war (September to November 1971), the WSAG convened only on a monthly basis to monitor the situation and discussed on the humanitarian effort to stop the flow of refugees to India, the provision of aid packages and the suspension of U.S. economic aid to India. Following the military escalation along the eastern border Indo-Pakistani during the last week of November, the WSAG began meeting on an almost daily basis. The group was in the dark about the nature of escalation and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) relied on press reports in Pakistan, making the task of policy making difficult. Kissinger was eager to punish India even though there was not enough evidence to suggest that the Indian army had launched a military campaign against Pakistan. The bureaucracy resisted Kissinger's suggestion to cut off aid in India and moved diplomatically. Once again, like the Cambodian crisis, the WSAG became a victim of Nixon and Kissinger's tactics of secrecy, lies and manipulation.

The public, the Congress and the bureaucracy were sympathetic to India's difficult position due to the devastating cyclone in East Pakistan that led to an influx of millions of refugees to India combined with the atrocious manner in which the regime of Yahya Khan dealt with the political situation in East Pakistan with evidence from Archer Blood, the Consul General in Dacca, in a telegram to Washington, that the Pakistan 'authorities have a list of Awami League supporters whom they are systematically eliminating by seeking them out in their homes and shooting them down', raising human rights concerns in U.S. missions in Pakistan. He then sent another critical cable that openly criticized U.S. policy suggesting the U.S. government had demonstrated 'moral bankruptcy', making waves in Washington. He was later reprimanded and was transferred from his post and placed into virtual exile within the State Department.

On 3 December, the war between India and Pakistan began though CIA concluded that it was impossible to determine which side initiated the hostilities (p.169). With India informing Moscow that it targeted a time frame of ten days to liberate East Pakistan, Kissinger thought that Yahya's decision to go to war was suicidal since Indian military was quantitatively and qualitatively superior.





Nixon directed that India be depicted as the aggressor and should be deterred from launching an offensive against West Pakistan as well. Secretary Roger was the first to be communicated by Kissinger on this matter but the former raised his own objections asking whether the U.S. should take a judicial role themselves and decide who was guilty and that it should be better to place the matter at the UN Security Council. Nixon was not concerned about the lack of facts to support his cause, rendering the advice by the bureaucracy inconsequential. Yahya appealed for military support but constrained by the 1965 arms embargo, Kissinger suggested to Nixon that they might be able to do so through third parties such as Iran and Jordan. Nixon liked that idea, but on 6 December the CIA established that it was Pakistan that initiated the hostilities on 3 December with air strikes in India. According to Siniver, the WSAG performed badly in managing the crisis because of the limited boundaries set by the President which is consistent with the analysis of the Cambodian crisis. The war ended with Mrs. Gandhi accepting Pakistani call for a cease-fire on 17 December, not because of U.S. military resilience, saving her country from diplomatic isolation in the United Nations.

### **The Yom Kippur War, October 1973**

Siniver underscores that the resolution of the JC even though favorable to the U.S. was disastrous in the long term because of Washington's reluctance to pressure Israel to withdraw from occupied territories, driving Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat to war with Israel in October 1973. There was failure of the U.S. intelligence to anticipate the war because of the assumption that the Arabs would not dare go to war until acquiring air power and more effective ground-to-air missiles.

In this year, Nixon was having some domestic issues to handle such as the resignations of the Vice President Spiro Agnew due to charges of tax evasion and bribery, the Attorney General Elliot Richardson and his Deputy William French Smith and the dismissal of Special Prosecutor John F. B. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman also resigned due to their involvement in the Watergate cover-up. Secretary Rogers too resigned two weeks before the outbreak of the October War after four years of being marginalized by Nixon and Kissinger, with Kissinger then sworn in as the new Secretary of the State, thereby giving Kissinger unprecedented control over foreign policy. Nixon believed that it was paramount for him to take care of the domestic issues first. As Secretary of the State and the national security advisor to the President, Kissinger created an absurd situation in the bureaucratic politics (p.187) because he was arguing for



different policy preferences while representing the interests of the two institutions of the State Department and the NSC.

In this Yom Kippur War, Siniver enunciates that Kissinger was the chief architect of the U.S. foreign policy. It was Kissinger who manipulated the bureaucracy, the Israelis, and even the President by firstly deciding to involve the military airlift to Israel which began on 14 October. During the NSC/WSAG meeting in the final stages of fighting, Kissinger ordered the placing of American armed forces on the highest level of war readiness since the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and this decision was taken by Kissinger when Nixon was in bed who was later informed of the decision in the following morning and approved it post factum. Even though Nixon retained the final authority, it can be perceived as Siniver indicates that it was a startling fact that the important decisions of enormous magnitude were taken by Kissinger rather than by Nixon. The formulation of the U.S. objectives during the Yom Kippur War included to stop the fighting, to prevent the Soviets from intervening and to end the Arab oil embargo. According to Siniver, there was a rational decision-making process in the sense that there was the use of diplomatic channels to back-channel Moscow, referring the case to the UN and ultimately using the threat of American force to bring the war to an end. Comparing the decision in Yom Kippur to that of Cambodia and the India-Pakistan War, Siniver postulates that even though the WSAG met regularly with no evident cases of bureaucratic dissent during the crisis, the most important decisions were still taken either by Kissinger alone or in ad hoc consultation with Nixon.

## Conclusion

By far and large, Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis has been successful in presenting the interplay between structures, processes and personalities especially between Nixon, Kissinger and the bureaucratic departments particularly the WSAG in determining the U.S. foreign policy during international crisis; thus depicting the importance of psychology and personalities in decision-making process. Despite only the analysis of four case studies due to unavailability of data for other international crisis that the U.S. was involved in during the Nixon-Kissinger years, Siniver has aptly shown the 'balance of power' between Nixon and Kissinger and that U.S. presidents particularly and other leaders generally should take into account of the lessons learned from this useful book.