

Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. foreign policy making: The machinery of crisis. By Asaf Siniver. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 252 pp. ISBN 978-0-521-89762-4

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In *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. foreign policy making: The machinery of crisis*, Asaf Siniver provides an excellent analysis of the structures and processes of the Nixon administration's foreign policy making especially within the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) while dealing with the following 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 Arab-Israeli War in October 1973. Asaf Siniver's book is based on four years of research and relies on the newly released collections of the de-classified 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 the Nixon administration's foreign policy during international crises. He did so by examining six components of the crisis decision-making process pertaining to distinct phases of 'rational' decision-making process: How were the objectives surveyed? How were the alternative courses of action evaluated? How was the information searched? How was the new/contradictory information integrated into the process? How were the potential benefits/costs evaluated? How were the implementation and monitoring mechanisms developed? By using all these six components, even though each crisis was 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).

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 the decision-making process, showing that the 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 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" (p. 46). 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.

Under Nixon, the hub of foreign policy machinery was shifted to the White House where 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). Under the Nixon administration, Kissinger was put at the top of the NSC system to ensure 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 is worth mentioning that Kissinger chaired almost all the Nixon administration's NSC structure that included the Defence Programme 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 the theory and implementation of the 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 had difficulty in attending many meetings of the NSC sub-structure, nevertheless, he alone enjoyed the intimate day-to-day contact and confidence of the President as pointed out by the author.

As to the WSAG, it was institutionalized early in the life of Nixon's new administration in July 1969 and comprised of inter-agency groups for future crisis management. The 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 the Middle East crises to developments in the Vietnam War (p. 69). As time went by, the WSAG became 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 of a discussion forum than a decision-making body because of the personality traits of Nixon and Kissinger. One may ask, if that is the case, why both of them bothered to set up an advisory system that they had no intention to use. Siniver opines that evidence suggests that the system worked well during the first eighteen months of the Nixon administration and when Nixon wanted to utilize it to its full potential, demonstrating that personalities did dominate the advisory system.

Siniver highlights the point that the inability of the Nixon administration to work out a feasible plan to end the 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 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). The management of the Cambodian crisis proved that Nixon's management style was designed not to reach down for information and avoid 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.

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 crises. 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 inclination 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 attention were concerning with the East-West relations, the Soviet Union, China, Eastern Europe and the 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.

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, hierarchical 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, and relations with Israel and Jordan were strengthened with Arab bitterness towards Moscow stronger due to the inept support of the Soviet during the crisis.

According to Siniver, the management of the 1971 India-Pakistan crisis proved to be one of the most controversial foreign policy episodes of the Nixon administration. This became quite apparent when excerpts from four WSAG meetings handling the crisis began to appear in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, highlighting the decision-making process marked by Kissinger's control of the bureaucracy. The administration received flaks from

the media and opinion-makers when the excerpts showed how Nixon was in favour of Pakistan that became known as “The Tilt”(p. 149).

Analyzing the performance of the WSAG during the 1971 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 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 West Pakistan’s eastern borders with India and Indo-East Pakistan border 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.

Siniver underscores the point that the resolution of the Jordanian Crisis though favourable 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.

Kissinger, who had taken over as the Secretary of State in 1973, was the chief architect of the U.S. foreign policy during the 1973 October War (also known as the Yom Kippur War in Israel and the Ramadan War in Egypt). 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. This decision was taken by Kissinger when Nixon was in bed who was later informed of the decision 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.

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 crises; thus depicting the importance of psychology and personalities in the decision-making process. Despite only the analysis of four case studies due to the 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.