Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why Diplomacy?

One of the new necessities is that a world comprising several states of comparable strength must base its order on some concept of equilibrium – an idea with which the United States has never felt comfortable.

- Diplomacy, Henry Kissinger

This book is a terrific primer on the principles of diplomacy as described by one of the greatest secretaries of state. (Historians usually rank Kissinger in the top five, along with John Quincy Adams, Charles Evans Hughes, George Marshall, and Dean Acheson.) Though Kissinger wrote Diplomacy as a guide to the foreign policy challenges of 1994, when the book was published, he had, in fact, defined timeless themes in American diplomacy. Though this book is long, it is easy to read. Kissinger writes clearly and directly and uses apt historical examples to illuminate his points. Although he covers several centuries of international relations, the majority of the book focuses on the twentieth century through the end of the Cold War.

For officers involved in the making of grand strategy or advising those who do, this is a fine resource. Kissinger uses history to explain major foreign policy approaches or schools of thought. He concludes that two contradictory impulses have always composed American diplomacy. One is policy based on the realities of power, largely excluding moral or ethical considerations. The other, which emerges from the American belief that it is unique or exceptional in its moral nature, privileges idealism and values in the making of policy. Kissinger comes down on the side of a realist perspective (called Realpolitick) as the most useful. That said, he recognizes that values have a role.

While reading Diplomacy, you might think about why American foreign policy has flip-flopped between Realpolitik, exemplified by Theodore Roosevelt, and the idealism of Woodrow Wilson. What is there about the United States that causes the duality? Moreover, Diplomacy is a practitioner’s history, focused largely on great leaders and their most senior advisors, and on the interaction of governments. Even in a long book, Kissinger did not have space to detail the sweeping social, economic, and other forces influencing leaders as they shaped policy. You might consider how industrialization, for example, triggered a search for overseas markets that in turn stimulated trade rivalries. Or how securing strategic resources for industrial (and military) development drove some nations, such as Japan in the 1930s, to expand regionally.