Why did the United States pursue a network of bilateral alliances in East Asia following the end of World War II rather than the multilateral security alliances it preferred in Europe, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific? In East Asia the United States cultivated discrete and exclusive postwar relationships with the Republic of Korea (ROK), the Republic of China (ROC, or Taiwan), and Japan. Famously referred to by John Foster Dulles as the “hub and spokes” system, these bilateral arrangements still constitute the most striking and enduring element of the security architecture of East Asia. Many international relations scholars have advanced explanations for Asia’s bilateralism, but these theories are both overdetermined and, in some cases, contradictory. They all overlook the critical causal variable of U.S. preferences: the desire for maximum and exclusive control over potentially dangerous allies.

I argue that bilateralism emerged in East Asia as the dominant security structure because of the “powerplay” rationale behind U.S. postwar planning in the region. I define “powerplay” as the construction of an asymmetric alliance designed to exert maximum control over the smaller ally’s actions. The United States created a series of bilateral alliances in East Asia to contain the Soviet threat, but a congruent rationale was to constrain anticommunist allies in the region that might engage in aggressive behavior against adversaries that could entrap the United States in an unwanted larger war. Underscoring the U.S. desire to avoid such an outcome was a belief in the domino theory—that the fall of one small country in Asia could trigger a chain of countries falling to communism.

Although alliances with European countries were also designed to establish control, the extent of this control was limited to shaping the postwar political development and economic recovery of these countries under the U.S. and

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The author wishes to thank the Smith Richardson Foundation for its support and numerous colleagues for comments on earlier drafts including Muthiah Alagappa, Philipp Bleek, Michael Brown, Thomas Christensen, Bruce Cumings, John Duffield, David Edelstein, Michael Green, John Ikenberry, Robert Jervis, David Kang, Peter Katzenstein, Robert Lieber, Daniel Nexon, Jeremy Pressman, Alfred Ritter, Richard Samuels, Randall Schweller, Hyon Joo Yoo, and the anonymous reviewers. Research assistance was provided by David Shin Park and Tianjing Zhang. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the East-West Center in Honolulu, the Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University, the Korea Colloquium at Yale University, and the Mortara Center at Georgetown University.

NATO security umbrella. In East Asia, however, the United States encountered the additional problem of potential “rogue allies”—that is, rabidly anticomunist dictators who might start wars for reasons of domestic legitimacy that the United States wanted no part of as it was gearing up for a protracted global struggle against the Soviet Union. This concern, which initially emerged during President Harry Truman’s administration, became particularly pressing for President Dwight Eisenhower following the cessation of hostilities in Korea in July 1953. Both the Truman and Eisenhower administrations calculated that they could best restrain East Asia’s pro-West dictators through bilateral alliances, rather than through a regionwide multilateral mechanism. East Asia’s security bilateralism today is therefore a historical artifact of this U.S. choice.

The United States employed its strategy in the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China, and Japan in the postwar period. It established bilateral alliances with the ROK and the ROC not only to defend against communism, but also to inhibit the highly unpredictable leaders of both countries from provoking conflicts with North Korea and mainland China that might embroil the United States in a larger war on the Asian mainland. To minimize this risk, the Eisenhower administration chose to exercise direct, sometimes draconian, control by creating ROK and ROC economic and political dependency on the United States. U.S. policy planners correctly believed that they could not exercise similar control in a larger multilateral regional framework, which would have diluted U.S. material and political influence. Although in Europe there were some U.S. concerns about countries dragging the United States into a larger war with the Soviet Union (e.g., a potential conflict in Germany), they did not register the same level of intensity as in Asia, where authoritarian leaders of questionable legitimacy used rabid anticomunist rhetoric to validate their rule.

The powerplay theory applies slightly differently to Japan, because only in that country did the United States attempt to reshape internal institutions to prevent the Japanese from engaging in unilateral aggression. The Truman and Eisenhower administrations understood that Japan was the only country in the region that could seek great power status after World War II. U.S. policymakers initially attempted to embed Japan in a regional framework to assist in its postwar recovery, just as they were doing with Germany in Europe. But when this failed, they opted to develop a tight bilateral alliance with Japan. The powerplay in this relationship was to “win Japan” as an ally—that is, to exercise decisive influence over Japan’s transformation from a defeated wartime power into a status quo power supportive of U.S. interests in the region, thereby limiting the potential for renewed aggression.
The powerplay theory contributes to scholarly work on multilateralism and the uses of power. It supplements the prevailing causal proposition put forward by liberal institutionalists and foreign policy internationalists that multilateral structures and rules constitute the most effective way to control a state’s power and dampen its unilateralist inclinations.1 Many scholars have argued, for example, that embedding China in multilateral institutions offers the most prudent path for managing the country’s rise and integration into the international system.2 Others have claimed that U.S. power and leadership is most effective when the United States allows itself to be bound by multilateral institutions and rules that it helped to create.3 I seek to contribute to this discussion by showing that power asymmetries “select” for the type of structures, bilateral or multilateral, that offer the most control. If small powers try to control a larger one, then multilateralism is effective. But if great powers seek control over smaller ones, bilateral alliances are more effective.

After laying out the research puzzle, I introduce the powerplay theory in alliance politics. I then examine U.S. strategic beliefs and strategy in Asia at the end of World War II. This is followed by application of the theory to explain how the Truman and Eisenhower administrations opted for the creation of bilateral alliances with Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan. I then show how the United States discouraged multilateral structures in Asia in the immediate postwar period and during the Korean War. I conclude with a look at counter-arguments and avenues for future research.


The Puzzle—Why No Asian NATO?

Why did the United States opt for bilateralism in East Asia rather than the multilateralism it pursued elsewhere in the world? By the early 1950s, NATO’s twelve members had agreed to a common bureaucratic apparatus, integrated military planning, and a command structure. In parts of Asia, the United States also pursued multilateralism, albeit less well defined than NATO, with the creation of the Australia-New Zealand-United States treaty alliance (ANZUS) in 1951 and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954.4 In East Asia, by contrast, the United States chose to create a network of bilateral alliances, known as the “San Francisco system” or hub-and-spokes system, with the United States as the “hub” and no apparent connections between the “spokes”: the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty of September 1951, the U.S.–Republic of Korea defense treaty of October 1953, and the U.S.–Republic of China security treaty of December 1954.5

International relations scholars have offered many explanations for the United States’ choice of this path in East Asia. Unlike Europe, for example, East Asia comprised a land and a maritime theater with no clear dividing line between East and West, let alone 200 Soviet divisions positioned along its borders.6 Moreover, unlike in Western Europe, the United States lacked allies in East Asia both during and immediately after World War II. With no friends and no single border to defend, the United States faced less-than-ideal conditions for forming a collective defense coalition in Asia. In addition, the region’s deep distrust of Japan argued against reintegrating the former adversary in a regionwide coalition.7 Social historians add that U.S. planners prized Europe over Asia after World War II, believing that multilateral security arrangements were a complex form of organization that required a level of sophistication and responsibility that “inferior” Asians presumably did not possess.8

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8. Memorandum by the Regional Planning Advisor (Ogburn), Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs to the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Allison), January 21, 1953, Secret, in Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1952–1954, Vol. 6: East Asia and the Pacific, pt. 1, pp. 260–262. As Bruce Cumings wrote, “The idea of little yellow and brown people sharing a multilateral table as equals with ivy league–educated east coast intellectuals was beyond comprehension.” See
Christopher Hemmer and Peter Katzenstein conclude, “Trust [was] absent, religion and democratic values were shared only in a few cases, and race was invoked as a powerful force separating the United States from Asia. The U.S. preference for multilateral or bilateral security arrangements followed from these different constellations.”

Also in Asia, the levels of postwar intraregional trade, which would have been an important spur to greater multilateralism in the region when compared with Europe, were low. States did not venture beyond their relationship with the United States to secure their material needs. Unlike politics in Europe, moreover, Asian politics ranged from authoritarian to democratic, making it more difficult to organize multilaterally based on common values.

Finally, unlike in Europe, where the singular threat of the Soviet Union called for a collective response, Asian states faced different threats. In Asia some states viewed the Soviet threat as paramount (e.g., Japan); Taiwan prioritized the Chinese threat; the two Koreas were principally worried about each other and Japan; and still others were preoccupied with internal threats.

Scholars have overdetermined Asia’s bilateralism. There are many variables, some of which are contradictory. Moreover, few theorists specifically address the issue of U.S. volition. John Ruggie, for example, claims that the United States did not pursue multilateralism in Asia because “the situation on the ground there made that impossible.” He does not, however, explain why it chose a bilateralist course instead. Hemmer and Katzenstein argue that “available evidence is relatively sketchy and permits only cautious inferences” about the variations in security structures in Europe and Asia that may have
flowed from their disparate collective identities. Knowing that conditions were not conducive to multilateralism is analytically different from understanding why the United States preferred a bilateral approach in East Asia. If multilateralism is a higher form of social organization that offers efficiency gains (e.g., transparency, reduced transaction costs, economies of scale, credible commitments, rules, and information), then why did the United States pursue bilateralism in East Asia?

**Powerplay**

According to the powerplay explanation, the United States established asymmetrical bilateral alliances with the ROK, the ROC, and Japan to serve as *pactum de contrahendo* (pacts of restraint). In East Asia the United States created these alliances not just to contain but also to constrain potential “rogue allies” from engaging in adventurist behavior that might drag it into larger military contingencies in the region or that could trigger a domino effect, with Asian countries falling to communism. In Europe U.S. policymakers were less concerned about the possibility of smaller countries lashing out against the Soviet Union and entrapping the United States in a larger—perhaps nuclear—war. In contrast, the United States had real concerns about unpredictable authoritarian leaders in Asia taking such actions to strengthen their domestic legitimacy and to secure greater U.S. support. President Eisenhower’s response to exhortations by South Korea’s president Syngman Rhee near the end of the Korean War to continue the battle against the communists captures the nature of this concern: “When you say that we should deliberately plunge into war, let me tell you that if war comes, it will be horrible. Atomic war will destroy civilization. . . . The kind of war I am talking about, if carried out, would not save democracy. Civilization would be ruined. . . . That is why we are opposed to war.” Secretary of State John Foster Dulles expressed similar concern when asked by an Asian ally for a “small war” to tip the balance in his country’s direction. Dulles explained the dangers inherent in such an idea: “Any ’little war’ as proposed by [you] would not only turn world opinion against the U.S. but also would inevitably escalate into a general, full-scale war with the Soviet Union, ‘unleashing such terrible weapons’

16. I thank Michael Brown for the term “rogue allies.”
that it would destroy civilization.”¹⁸ U.S. concerns about rogue allies were so real that National Security Council (NSC) directives on Asia included the policy objective of avoiding entrapment, which sat alongside the goal of containing communism.¹⁹

BISMARCK AND ASIA
All alliances seek to shape their participants’ behavior, but power asymmetries between allies determine how control operates within them. German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck once said that the most efficient alliances are those in which one ally is the horse and the other is the rider, not when there are two riders (and no horses).²⁰ Hence, the notion that alliances are instruments of control has been well established in practice. Still, there has been little theoretical work on the dynamics of control, the conditions under which control is effective, and the types of alliance (bilateral vs. multilateral) best suited for establishing and maintaining control.²¹

For bilateral or multilateral alliance partners with equal capabilities, control is usually negotiated through some form of mutual accommodation. For partners with asymmetric capabilities, however, bilateral alliances can become powerful instruments of control; if the smaller ally depends on the stronger member to provide certain benefits (e.g., security and prestige), then the larger patron enjoys a great deal of leverage.

The notion of bilateral alliances as instruments of control challenges arguments about the merits of multilateralism in contemporary international relations and foreign policy.²² Structural liberalism, for example, assumes that

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¹⁹. For example, NSC 48/5 stated that in addition to containment, the United States must “avoid the extension of hostilities in Korea into a general war with the Soviet Union, and seek to avoid the extension beyond Korea of hostilities with communist China.” NSC 48/5, United States Objectives, Policies and Courses of Action in Asia, Top Secret, May 17, 1951 in FRUS, 1951, Vol. 6: East Asia and the Pacific, pt. 1, p. 49.
control is best managed through multilateral institutions. Whether the state is a rising China or even a unilateralist United States, liberals advocate multilateral institutions to bind it into a regime of rules and obligations subject to the consensus of other members of those institutions.23

WHO CONTROLS WHOM?
The liberal conception of control differs from the powerplay conception regarding who seeks control over whom. As a rule, multilateralism is the preferred strategy for exercising control over another country, but it depends on the situation. Figure 1 charts the potential range of situations. If control is sought by a small power over a great power, then the Lilliputian strategy of small countries achieving control by collectively binding the great power is likely to be most effective (see figure 1, quadrant 2). Multilateral constraints, whether in the form of membership in an alliance or in international institutions, are necessary to bind the great power, discourage unilateralism, and give the small powers a voice and voting opportunities that they would not otherwise have.24 Similarly, if control is sought by a great power over another

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great power (figure 1, quadrant 4), then multilateral controls may be most useful. The great power could seek control through bilateral ties, but this would be costly; it also would require bargaining and compromise with the other great power. Embedding the target state in a multilateral alliance reduces the costs borne by the power seeking control, but it also offers the same binding benefits of the Lilliputian strategy. If a small power seeks control over another small power (figure 1, quadrant 1), multilateralism may be the only choice, because small powers rarely have the resources to exert control on their own.

If a great power seeks control over smaller powers, however, then a bilateral alliance is preferable (figure 1, quadrant 3). Liberal institutionalists would argue, though, that great powers might still opt for a multilateral alliance. But the powerplay model shows that great powers can amplify their capabilities and maximize their leverage by forging a series of bilateral arrangements with allies, rather than see that leverage diluted in a multilateral forum.25 As Robert Kagan notes, states that are weak seek multilateralism; those that are strong avoid universal rules and multilateral constraints.26 John Foster Dulles was known to have favored the hub-and-spokes concept of bilateral alliances for these reasons.27

POWERPLAY THROUGHOUT HISTORY
Examples of the powerplay dynamic appear throughout modern history. For instance, the secret 1815 Austro-Neapolitan alliance was formed in lieu of a larger Italian league, affording Austria direct, bilateral control over the smaller entity. In return for providing security, Austria received commitments from Naples that it would not change its form of government without Austria’s permission. Three decades later, Austria signed treaties with Tuscany, Modena, and Parma (1849–50), giving it influence over rulers of all three powers. In 1866, Prussian alliances with Bavaria, Württemberg, and Baden prevented the formation of a South German union that might have undercut Bismarck’s leadership.28 While the world seeks to embed a rising China in multilateral institutions to constrain its hard-power capabilities and shape its preferences, China prefers to cultivate deep bilateral relationships. In Southeast Asia, for example,

Beijing would rather deal bilaterally with members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, so that it can maximize its leverage. When considering the security architecture for smaller Southeast Asian nations at the end of World War II, the United States rejected the inclusion of any European great power that had been a colonizer in the region, because Washington did not want to see its influence diluted. Arguably, the George W. Bush administration favored intense bilateralism over multilateralism, or even unilateralism, for similar reasons. Rather than going it alone or going it with others, the administration opted for intensive one-on-one relationships with handpicked countries that maximized the U.S. capacity to achieve its objectives. In the next section, I demonstrate the powerplay application to the U.S. formation of alliances in East Asia after World War II.

Origins of the U.S. Powerplay System in Asia

Ambivalence toward making major military commitments in Asia was a hallmark of the United States’ global strategy before World War II. Engagement in the region did not extend beyond efforts to open economic markets and to promote missionary activity. The Cold War, however, compelled the United States to form alliances in East Asia as part of its expanding global chain of military bases in Europe (England, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain), the Middle East (Saudi Arabia), the Mediterranean (Greece and Turkey), Oceania (Australia), Northeast Asia (Japan and South Korea), and Southeast Asia (the Philippines and Thailand). Two problems confronted both Truman and Eisenhower presidencies. First, potential rogue allies in Asia with pro-West inclinations—in this case, Taiwan and Korea, with their unpredictable authoritarian leaders, and Japan, with its unreformed domestic institutions—might engage in unilateral aggression that could entrap the United States in a larger regional war. The second problem involved the possi-

29. Robert Jervis, “Explaining the Bush Doctrine,” Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 118, No. 3 (Fall 2003), pp. 365–388; and Michael J. Green, “The Iraq War and Asia: Assessing the Legacy,” Washington Quarterly, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 181–200. A great power may exercise its control for several purposes. First, it may want to control the domestic policies of its partners, as Metternich did during the 1820s and 1830s through the German Confederation. Second, it may want to limit the smaller power’s independent action that it might consider inimical to its interests. Germany’s Dual Alliance of 1879 with Austria-Hungary provided security against the Russian threat. Although Germany bore an inordinate share of the costs of the alliance, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck believed that the value added of the alliance was the ability to slow the growth of Slavic federalism and prevent the junior partner from practicing independent policies. See Schroeder, “Alliances, 1815–1945,” p. 243.
bility of falling dominoes in the event one of these states should fall under communist control. As Gen. Douglas MacArthur was fond of saying, “Victory is a strong magnet in the East.”\textsuperscript{31} John Foster Dulles believed that a military failure in the Korean War would have “grave psychological repercussions upon the Japanese nation and the countries and islands of South East Asia.”\textsuperscript{32} Dean Rusk put it more bluntly, “[I]f Indochina were to fall . . . Burma and Thailand would follow suit almost immediately. Thereafter, it would be difficult if not impossible for Indonesia, India and the others to remain outside the Soviet-dominated bloc.”\textsuperscript{33} National Intelligence Estimates at the time widely accepted the logic of the domino theory as it applied to Asia.\textsuperscript{34} Rogue allies and the threat of falling dominoes combined to produce a dreaded entrapment scenario for the United States: anticommunist, pro-Western adventurism would spark an unwanted war on the Asian mainland that the United States would be obligated to finish, or risk defeat in the region.

To avoid this outcome, the United States fashioned a series of deep, tight bilateral alliances with Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan to control their ability to use force and to foster material and political dependency on the United States. Washington believed that this was the only way it could achieve the extraordinary level of control needed to overrule another nation’s sovereign right to use force (see quadrant 3 of figure 1). At the same time, the United States harbored no desire to expand these alliances into a larger multilateral network in Asia, because doing so not only would have diluted the United States’ ability to control these countries, but would have offered little marginal value in terms of enhanced defense and deterrence.

\textit{Taiwan: Chaining Chiang}

Initially, the United States was prepared to abandon its support for Taiwan and accept the reality of the 1949 communist takeover of mainland China.\textsuperscript{35} The

\textsuperscript{31} Extracts of Memorandum of Conversation by Mr. W. Averell Harriman, Special Assistant to the President, with General MacArthur in Tokyo, August 6 and 8, 1950, Top Secret, August 20, 1950 in \textit{FRUS, 1950}, Vol. 7: Korea, p. 544.


\textsuperscript{33} Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk) to the Deputy Undersecretary of State (Matthews), Top Secret, January 31, 1951, in \textit{FRUS, 1951}, Vol. 6: Asia and the Pacific, pt. 1, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, National Intelligence Estimate–20, Secret, March 20, 1951, in ibid., pp. 27–31.

North Korean invasion of South Korea on June 25, 1950, however, changed U.S. threat perceptions dramatically, by appearing to pose a broader communist challenge to the region. With its intervention in the Korean War on June 25, 1950, and the movement of the Seventh Fleet into the Taiwan Strait in July 1950, the United States effectively declared a new defense commitment to Taipei. This commitment was formalized in 1954, when the United States responded to the first offshore islands crisis by signing a mutual defense treaty with Taipei on September 8, and by passing the Formosa resolution, which authorized the use of force to defend the island.

The United States’ new ally, led by Chiang Kai-shek, made no secret of its ambition to retake the mainland militarily. Chiang set public timelines for when he would invade, ordered raids into China (by loyalists from Burma); dispatched ROC troops to disputed offshore islands closest to the Chinese coast; and claimed that loyalist guerrilla units planted in China were ready to rise up against the communist government in Beijing.36 Chiang told Eisenhower in 1953 that he could mobilize sixty divisions (500,000 ground forces) as the “spearhead” to an invasion of the mainland and requested that this effort be coupled with a U.S. coastal blockade and bombing plan.37 U.S. military officials in Taiwan cabled home their concerns about Chiang’s efforts to provoke a war with China, with one official warning that the United States had “practically no control over the Nationalist forces on Formosa.”38 State Department officials accused Taipei of “crying panic long before panic is a factor.”39 Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s suspicion and dislike of Chiang’s motives were palpable. He believed that Chiang presented multiple risks; for example, his regime demanded large sums of U.S. economic assistance, but it never heeded U.S. advice and seemed determined to engage the Americans in a direct confrontation with China. Acheson vowed that Chiang would never draw the United States into a second Chinese civil war.40

CONTROLLING A LOOSE CANNON

U.S. efforts to control Chiang first became evident when Truman interposed the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait in July 1950. Secretary of State Acheson’s rationalization was to “neutralize” the strait—that is, keep Taiwan out of com-

munist hands while stopping Chiang’s practice of low-intensity amphibious raids into China, which sparked skirmishes with forces from the People’s Liberation Army and risked opening a second front in Asia. This desire to control Taiwan was formalized in a policy statement by President Truman on July 3, 1950: “The occupation of Formosa by Communist forces would be a direct threat to the security of the Pacific area and to United States forces performing their lawful and necessary functions in that area. Accordingly, I have ordered the Seventh Fleet to prevent any attack on Formosa. As a corollary of this action, I am calling upon the Chinese Government on Formosa to cease all air and sea operations against the mainland.”

U.S. entrapment fears increased dramatically with the end of hostilities in Korea, as the Eisenhower administration became increasingly concerned about Chiang’s unilateralist raids on the mainland and other provocative actions. Eisenhower faced a “dual deterrence” dilemma: he had to signal U.S. resolve to deter China while ensuring that Taiwan did not interpret this resolve as a signal to engage in aggressive action against the mainland.

The United States addressed its concerns by negotiating a secret minute that documented U.S. control over Taiwan’s use of force; the minute accompanied the 1954 U.S.-ROC defense treaty. In conjunction with the Formosa resolution authorizing the United States to use its forces to defend Taiwan, an exchange of notes between Secretary of State Dulles and ROC Foreign Minister George Yeh on December 10, 1954, stated that the use of force required “joint agreement” between Taipei and Washington. The U.S. negotiator who wrote the

43. Eisenhower’s entrapment fears were more pronounced than those of Truman, because he did not want to see a renewal of hostilities in Asia after the Korean armistice was achieved. Truman, on the other hand, disliked Chiang’s provocations but also considered the use of Formosan aggression to open a front on the mainland. See NIE-10, “Communist China,” Secret, January 17, 1951, in FRUS, 1951, Vol. 7: Korea and China, p. 1513. NSC directives that same year considered similar options. See Memorandum by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk) to the Secretary of State, Top Secret, January 17, 1951, in ibid., p. 1517.
45. Memorandum by Green, p. 223.
46. The key portion of the note read: “In view of the obligations of the two Parties Under the said Treaty and of the fact that the use of force from either of these areas by either of the Parties affects the other, it is agreed that such use of force will be a matter of joint agreement, subject to actions of an emergency character which is clearly an exercise of the inherent right of self-defense.” United
note, Assistant Secretary of State Walter Robertson, was polite but firm in presenting Washington’s explicit quid pro quo: “[T]he U.S. has made, and is making, a heavy investment in the training, equipping and supplying of Chinese [ROC] forces. It hardly seemed fair for the Chinese [ROC] to have a completely free hand to move these forces out of the treaty area without any regard for the U.S. viewpoint.” In later negotiations, Robertson deflected Yeh’s attempts to avoid conditionality of the U.S. security commitment by explicitly asserting U.S. intentions: “[T]he U.S. government had to go into the treaty with its eyes wide open, knowing precisely what the risks were, and maintaining control of the risks so far as possible.” In a private note to President Eisenhower after initialing the draft treaty in November 1954, Secretary of State Dulles offered a classic powerplay rationale for the bilateral treaty: “The Treaty covers an attack directly against Formosa. . . . The [conditionality] note will in substance recognize that the Chinese will not use force from either Formosa, the Pescadores or the offshore islands without our agreement. . . . [This treaty] stakes out unqualifiedly our interest in Formosa and the Pescadores and does so on a basis which will not enable the Chinese Nationalists to involve us in a war with Communist China.” Hence, the United States’ defense commitment to the Nationalists was inseparable from its capacity to restrain the Taiwan regime.

When the Seventh Fleet left the Taiwan Strait in early 1953, Eisenhower expressed concern in an NSC meeting that the “real trouble and danger [is not China, but] that Chiang Kai-shek might go on the warpath.” The president therefore called for explicit commitments that Chiang would not act unilaterally. Secretary of State Dulles warned that Chiang might use a pending shipment of U.S. F-84 aircraft against the mainland and called for the secret curtailment of arms shipments to Taiwan until Chiang committed to U.S. demands: “I have your memorandum of March 31 with reference to the worries of the JCS arising from the delivery of US F-84 aircraft to Formosa. I share these worries. . . . We are attempting to get an agreement with Chiang Kai-shek that he will not use the new equipment we give him against the China mainland without our prior consent. . . . I believe that the Defense Department should suspend any deliveries of aircraft capable of attacking the mainland


48. Ibid., p. 921.

until we get the political agreement we want.”

Two action items that emerged from an April 1953 NSC meeting reflected U.S. entrapment fears and a desire to use bilateral ties to exercise control over the United States’ rogue ally: “1) The U.S. Commander-in-Chief of the Pacific should be instructed to expedite obtaining a commitment from the Chinese Nationalist Government that the Chinese Nationalist forces will not engage in offensive operations considered by the United States to be inimical to the best interests of the United States; 2) Pending such a commitment, further shipments to the Chinese Nationalist Government of jet planes from the United States should be stopped and the transfer to the Chinese Nationalist Government of jet planes already shipped should be delayed.”

During the second offshore islands crisis in 1958, Dulles proposed four key guidelines on Taiwan’s behavior that appeared in an internal paper that later formed the basis of U.S. policy: (1) the Nationalist government should conduct itself as though there were an armistice in place with the mainland; (2) it should reaffirm that it will not attempt to forcibly retake the mainland; (3) it should refrain from ordering commando raids and flights over the mainland; and (4) it should not use the offshore islands as “jumping off” bases to conduct attacks against the mainland.

The U.S. embassy in Taipei was instructed to tell the Nationalist government that seeking an expansion of hostilities would be “fatal to their own interests,” and that the United States would not be led down the path to nuclear war. Indeed, even though Eisenhower ordered the mobilization of U.S. air and naval forces to break China’s attempted blockade of the offshore islands during the crisis, he turned down requests by Chiang to bomb Chinese artillery positions on the mainland, rejected his assertion that the 100,000 Nationalist troop deployments on the offshore islands constituted “fortified stepping stones to retake the mainland,” and personally demanded that Chiang evacuate all of his troops to avoid an escalation of the crisis.

50. For Eisenhower’s and Dulles’s remarks, see Memorandum by the Deputy Under Secretary of State (Matthews) to the Secretary of State, Top Secret, March 31, 1953, in ibid., p. 170; and 139th meeting of the National Security Council, April 8, 1953, in ibid., p. 181.

51. Memorandum of Discussion at the 139th meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, D.C., April 8, 1953, Top Secret, in ibid., pp. 181–182; and Chief of the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Formosa (Chase) to the Chief of General Staff, Republic of China (Chow), Top Secret, February 5, 1953, in ibid., pp. 193,144–145.


53. Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in the Republic of China, Top Secret, September 25, 1958, in ibid., p. 274.

CONTINGENCY PLANNING
The powerplay argument is also represented in U.S. operational planning, which posited a three-phase contingency plan in response to a Chinese attack against Taiwan. In phase 1, the United States would provide logistics and material support, but it would withhold military action pending evidence that aggression from the mainland was not provoked by Chiang. A contingency plan that envisaged some form of Chinese aggression at the height of the Cold War but did not stipulate a hair-trigger U.S. response seems extraordinary only if one does not consider the U.S. desire to use the bilateral alliance to control Taiwan’s behavior. During the 1958 crisis, Eisenhower stipulated that any U.S. air attack on the mainland in a Taiwan emergency would require his personal approval. As one China expert observed, the objective of the alliance was not just to defend Taiwan, but to “circumscribe [Chiang’s] reach and ability to wreak havoc in international affairs.” The United States could exert this level of control more effectively through a bilateral alliance than through a larger multilateral alliance.

South Korea: Rhee-straint
The Republic of Korea’s first president, Syngman Rhee, ruled from 1948 to 1960 and made no secret of his desire to unify the Korean Peninsula by force. Rhee’s official policy was pukch’in t’ongil (or march north for unification), a policy that rejected peaceful coexistence with North Korea.

Rhee knew no restraint. After the end of World War II, he told the U.S. occupation commander, Gen. John Hodge, that the United States should leverage its nuclear monopoly to force the Soviets to withdraw from the North. During the U.S. occupation of the South after Japan’s defeat in August 1945, the fiery Korean leader proposed a military plan that would have pooled Taiwanese and South Korean forces for a ground assault on mainland China, backed by U.S. airpower, to roll back communism. After the U.S. entry into the Korean War in June 1950, Rhee saw an opportunity to unify the peninsula. In a letter to President Truman in July 1950, he called for starting the “victorious march north,” arguing that it would be “utter folly to attempt to restore the status quo ante, and then to await the enemy’s pleasure for further attack when he

57. Tucker, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States, p. 4.
had time to regroup, retrain, and reequip. The time has come to cut out once and for all the cancer of imperialist aggression...by the world communists.”59 When the United States entered into armistice negotiations in 1953 for a cease-fire, Rhee openly expressed his opposition, chiding the Americans and asking, “[How] you can win from a political conference by persuasion, what you could not win on the battlefield by force?”60 In April 1953 Rhee demanded that Eisenhower withdraw all U.S. troops from the peninsula if an armistice was to be signed, declaring that the ROK would rather fight alone against the North Koreans, Chinese, and Soviets than agree to a cease-fire. Rhee undertook actions designed to reignite hostilities, the most provocative of which occurred in June 1953, when he unilaterally released 25,000 prisoners of war (POWs) being held in the South. This extraordinary act constituted a deliberate attempt to undermine the armistice talks (of which the repatriation of POWs was a major point of negotiation).

OVERTHROW OR UNDERWRITE?

Thus, as in the Taiwan case, the United States feared entrapment in South Korea. It did not want a wider conflagration in Asia and feared that Rhee’s reckless actions could cause the South Korean government to collapse and produce a domino effect in the region. A U.S. alliance with South Korea would consequently have three functions. First, it would serve as part of a network of alliances and military installations designed to ring the Soviet threat in the Pacific. Second, it would deter a second North Korean attack, with U.S. ground troops serving as the “tripwire” guaranteeing U.S. involvement. Third, it would restrain the South from engaging in adventurism.

The restraining rationale became evident immediately in U.S. postwar planning. Both the U.S. ambassador to Korea, John Muccio, and Secretary of State Acheson were wary of Rhee’s constant talk about a “march north” and “unification or death.” Muccio’s cable to Washington in November 1949 framed the dilemma: “We were in a very difficult position, a very subtle position, because if we gave Rhee and his cohorts what they wanted, they could have started to move north the same as the North started to move south. And the onus would have been on us.”61

59. President of the Republic of Korea (Rhee) to President Truman, Restricted, July 19, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, Vol. 7: Korea, pp. 429–430.
60. Syngman Rhee through Western Eyes (Seoul: Office of Public Information, Republic of Korea, 1954), p. 2.
The U.S. commander in Korea, Gen. Mark Clark, was so concerned about ROK unilateralism that he complained about being engaged in a two-front diplomatic battle—with the communists at Panmunjom and with Rhee in Seoul—and that the “biggest trouble came from Rhee.” Secretary of State Dulles, who was equally worried about Rhee’s constant entreaties for just a “little more war” to liberate the North, warned the ROK leader that his pleas for a so-called little war would inevitably escalate to a U.S.-Soviet confrontation, potentially unleashing nuclear weapons that could destroy not just the Korean Peninsula but civilization itself. Eisenhower summed up U.S. fears of entrapment regarding the ROK: “[Rhee] wants to get his country unified, but we cannot permit him to start a war to do it. The consequences would be too awful. But he is a stubborn old fellow, and I don’t know whether we’ll be able to hold him in line indefinitely.”

The Truman and Eisenhower administrations initially contemplated an overthrow of Rhee to deal with his intransigence. But both administrations soon learned that the best way to restrain the ROK was to threaten the very things that Rhee valued most from the United States, beginning with a threat to withdraw from the United Nations Command (UNC). Robert Bowie, the State Department’s policy planning director at the time of the armistice talks, argued, “[Not to] threaten Rhee with the possibility of UNC withdrawal eliminates the most effective weapon at our disposal for dissuading Rhee from taking unilateral action.” As an additional restraint, both Secretaries of State Acheson and Dulles were wary of providing tanks or other offensive weaponry to Rhee. Dulles, in particular, opposed the transfer of jet aircraft as part of the U.S.-sponsored military modernization program in Korea on the grounds that these “mobile instruments of war” should not be given to a country that “has a vested interest in starting a third world war.” Dulles wanted Rhee to commit—as Chiang Kai-shek had done—not to use the planes against the North without explicit permission from the United States. Later, when the U.S. military withdrew four divisions from the Korean Peninsula following the declaration of a cease-fire, the question arose as to how much equipment the United States would leave behind as part of South Korea’s military modernization program. The Koreans wanted it all, but Secretary of Defense

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63. Quoted in Kim, Master of Manipulation, p. 177.
64. Quoted in ibid., pp. 175–176.
65. Plan EVERREADY was devised in 1952 and called for the arrest of Rhee and the declaration of martial law in the name of the United Nations. See ibid., pp. 90–91.
66. Quoted in ibid., p. 141.
68. Quoted in Kim, Master of Manipulation, p. 181.
Charles Wilson bluntly stated: “Well, we will try to figure out what we think you need, what we think we can let you have, and tell you what it is. . . . Of course, frankly, we don’t want to give you enough equipment so you start the war up again.”

With the signing of the mutual defense treaty in October 1953, the United States sought written guarantees from Rhee. In November Vice President Richard Nixon traveled to Seoul carrying a letter from Eisenhower that warned the United States would not submit the defense treaty to Congress for ratification unless Nixon received written confirmation from Rhee that he would not act independently. The president wrote, “If I should be forced to conclude that after the coming into force of the Treaty you might unilaterally touch off a resumption of war in Korea, I could not recommend its ratification and I am certain that the Senate would not ratify it. When I formally submit the Treaty to the Senate next January, I must be in a position personally to give a clear assurance on this point.”

OPERATIONAL COMMAND—EISENHOWER’S CONTINGENCY PLAN

U.S. archives reveal that the Eisenhower administration’s desire to control its South Korean ally was so intense that the United States opted to retain operational command authority of all ROK military forces on the peninsula within the alliance. Rhee originally gave operational command authority of ROK forces to the commander in chief of UN Forces (i.e., the United States) during the Korean War on July 14, 1950. But after the signing of the mutual defense treaty, the two governments signed a memorandum of understanding continuing this arrangement. The rationale for this extraordinary usurpation of state sovereignty was not only to facilitate combined warfighting capabilities, but also to restrain South Korea from undertaking aggressive unilateral actions against the North. In addition, NSC 170, titled “U.S. Objectives and Courses of Action in Korea” and dated November 20, 1953, stated that if the

70. Dulles told Nixon, “[I]t is necessary to get some explicit written assurance from Rhee that he is not going to start the war up again on the gamble that he can get us involved in his effort to unite Korea by force.” Letter, Secretary of State to the Vice President, Top Secret, November 4, 1953, FRUS, 1952–1954, Vol. 15: Korea, p. 1590.
72. I believe this is the first treatment of U.S. contingency plans against the South Korean government based on evidence in the Eisenhower administration’s archives.
73. In 1961 this understanding was delimited to UN control over ROK forces only vis-à-vis an external communist invasion.
ROK unilaterally initiated military operations against Chinese or North Korean forces, then (1) UN Command ground, sea, and air forces would not support such operations directly or indirectly; (2) the United States would not furnish any military or logistics support for such operations; (3) all U.S. economic aid to South Korea would cease immediately; and (4) the UN commander would take any action necessary to prevent his forces from becoming involved in the renewal of hostilities and to provide for their security. In White House deliberations in the late 1950s, President Eisenhower candidly laid out possible U.S. responses to South Korean unilateral aggression, including covert action to support the forcible removal of Rhee, a new leadership, or even abrogation of the alliance:

If we became aware that President Rhee was moving north to attack North Korea, we would simply have to remove Rhee and his government. . . . Such a move would simply have to be stopped. Again Secretary [of State Christian] Herter agreed with the President but asked how we proposed to keep the Communists from counter-attacking and seizing South Korea. The President stated with emphasis that everything possible must be done to stop a unilateral South Korean move on North Korea before it started, including deposing Rhee. Thereafter, if South Korea wanted to go on to commit suicide, we would say go ahead and do it. . . . If ever this attack on North Korea occurred, the President said that the military alliance between the U.S. and the Republic of Korea would be broken at that moment.

The United States’ retention of operational control of ROK forces, therefore, was as much a tool of alliance restraint as it was a tool of deterrence and warfighting. This command arrangement could not have been put into place in a multilateral alliance system. It was unique to South Korea and to the bilateral alliance.

75. The provision regarding covert support of Rhee’s overthrow was first contained in a presidentially approved revision of a 1953 NSC policy document on Korea (NSC 170/1 Annex A). See ibid., pp. 1620–1624. The revision stated: “D. To select and encourage covertly the development of new South Korean leadership prepared to cooperate in maintaining the armistice, and if Rhee initiates or is about to initiate unilateral action, assist such new leadership to assume power, by means not involving overt U.S. participation until and unless U.S. overt support is necessary and promises to be decisive in firmly establishing such new leadership.” This provision was circulated only to the secretaries of state and defense, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and director of central intelligence. Subsequent NSC policy reviews on Korea made reference to the annex (later known as Annex F), but the actual contents were kept separate. The provision about U.S. unilateral abrogation of the treaty came about a couple of years later in a revision of NSC 5817 (revised as NSC 5907).
Missed Opportunities for Asian Multilateralism?

A “hard” test for the powerplay theory requires looking not merely for evidence of U.S. efforts to create bilateral alliances in Asia, but for the absence of efforts to build NATO-type multilateral arrangements when opportunities were present. The United States opted against the later course because doing so would have been detrimental to its powerplay objectives.

The United States’ desire to avoid overextension at the end of World War II created incentives to pursue multilateralism in both Europe and Asia. In Western Europe the United States initially promoted the establishment of a multilateral European Defense Force (EDF) and the rearmament of Germany, which together would balance against Soviet power in Central Europe.77 This would then allow the United States to scale back its military presence, along with Britain and Canada, to a symbolic force while the West European states would contribute the core forces. The postwar situation in Asia presented the United States with similar incentives. Nevertheless, U.S. planners rejected all proposals for an Asian NATO from allies such as the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Following the formation of NATO in April 1949, Asian leaders began to argue that their region needed a “Pacific pact.” The ROK and the Philippines raised the issue with State Department officials, claiming that such a pact would enhance security, economic growth, and development in Asia.78 In July 1949 Philippine President Elpidio Quirino hosted a summit with Chiang Kai-shek that endorsed the Pacific pact proposal. Syngman Rhee followed suit, hosting a summit with Chiang and proclaiming “full agreement . . . on the idea of a union as conceived in the joint statement issued by [Quirino and Chiang].”79 Following the outbreak of the Korean War, Chiang offered to send 33,000 soldiers to the peninsula as a demonstration of his commitment to a Pacific pact, an offer that MacArthur supported in late 1950, when main-

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78. Telegram, Charge in the Philippines (Lockett) to the Secretary of State, Confidential, March 22, 1949, in FRUS, 1949, Vol. 7: The Far East and Australasia; and Telegram, Charge in the Philippines (Lockett) to the Secretary of State, Confidential, March 24, 1949, in ibid., pt. 2, pp. 1125–1127; Memorandum of Conversation, Director of the Office for Far Eastern Affairs (Butterworth), with Dr. John M. Chang, Ambassador of the Republic of Korea, Secret, April 8, 1949, in ibid.; and Memorandum of Conversation, Counselor of the Embassy in Korea (Drumright), Confidential, May 28, 1949, in ibid., pp. 1141–1142, 1145–1146.
79. Telegram, Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Secretary of State, July 12, 1949, in ibid., pp. 1152–1153; and Telegram, Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Secretary of State, Priority, August 8, 1949, in ibid., p. 1184.
land China’s intervention shifted the tide of the war.\textsuperscript{80} MacArthur’s successors in Korea, Generals Ridgway and Clark, also endorsed Chiang’s proposal, as did U.S. military officials in charge of operations in Taiwan, who feared a communist victory on the peninsula.\textsuperscript{81}

As in Europe, one would have expected the United States to embrace an anticommunist bloc in Asia. Instead it opposed such action. In May 1949 Secretary of State Acheson tried to dispel this idea in a formal press statement.\textsuperscript{82} He reiterated this position in July in cables to all U.S. embassies.\textsuperscript{83} Acheson argued that NATO was the product of a long, deliberative process, that West European powers had carefully developed their plan for collective defense before asking for U.S. help, and most revealing, that the United States viewed NATO as a mutual collective defense arrangement. In contrast, the proposed Pacific pact would amount to a unilateral security commitment that could only entrap the United States.\textsuperscript{84} State Department internal cables revealed Acheson’s concerns in this regard: “Dept considers Chiang-Quirino proposal for Pacific Union result primarily Chi Nationalist and Rhee initiative seeking supplementary means appeal for US mil aid and influence US public opinion [to] that end.”\textsuperscript{85}

The day before Rhee hosted Chiang in the port city of Chinhae to discuss the Pacific pact, U.S. officials met secretly with the ROK president, counseling him to abstain from committing to collective defense pacts with China or the Philippines.\textsuperscript{86} In a direct effort to exert bilateral control, Acheson threatened that Rhee’s support for a Pacific pact could jeopardize U.S. economic assis-

\textsuperscript{80} U.S. intelligence assessments judged that China could not capitalize on Taiwan’s military position if these proffered forces were diverted to Korea. Memorandum of Conversation by the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs (Rusk) and Chinese Ambassador (Koo), Confidential, July 3, 1950, in \textit{FRUS, 1950, Vol. 2: Korea}, pp. 285–286.
\textsuperscript{85} Telegram, Secretary of State (Acheson) to Certain Diplomatic and Consular Offices, p. 1170. Acheson angrily cabled the U.S. embassy in Seoul about Chiang’s motives: “[It is] inescapably evident to all concerned that Natlist Chi, far from being positive force in FE [Far East], constitutes pol & mil liability which would foredoom [Pacific] Union to failure. . . . Secy has given definitive answer on question US support Pacific Pact from which position US. not likely to be moved by maneuvers which appear designed extract mil commitments.” Telegram, Secretary of State to the Embassy in Korea, Top Secret, July 29, 1949, in ibid., p. 1177.
\textsuperscript{86} Telegram, Ambassador in Korea (Muccio) to the Secretary of State, Top Secret, Priority, August 3, 1949, in ibid., pp. 1181–1182.
tance packages to South Korea under review in Congress. At the same time as the Chiang-Rhee summit, State Department officials in Washington cautioned Quirino not to raise the issue of the pact during Acheson’s visit.

Furthermore, the United States consistently rejected every proposal for bringing Nationalist troops into the Korean War. President Truman, Secretary of State Acheson, and Secretary of Defense George Marshall believed that Chiang wanted to extend the war to mainland China. Truman rejected the idea and sent his special adviser, Averell Harriman, to the region in August 1950 to warn both Chiang and MacArthur to end their talk of introducing Nationalist troops into the Korean conflict. Eisenhower held the same position. A memo from the top Asia diplomat in the State Department in 1952 to Secretary-designate John Foster Dulles laid out U.S. entrapment anxieties: “The introduction of Chinese Nationalist troops into Korea would immediately throw Korea into the Chinese civil war and would make it much more difficult, if not impossible, for us to maintain the position that we have so far maintained that in any political talks on Korea after an armistice there would be no discussions of any matters outside of Korea.”

Acheson’s opposition to the Pacific pact contrasted sharply with his support for creating a multilateral grouping in Southeast Asia. While Chiang was pushing the pact in 1949, the Philippines’ ambassador to the UN, Carlos Romulo, was advocating the idea of a union of Southeast Asian nations. Internal State Department memoranda noted that the Pacific pact would saddle the region with Chiang’s unsolvable military problems, yet referred to Romulo’s ideas as “more promising.” One of these memoranda concluded, “Our objective would seem to be to wean Quirino from the Chiang plan and influence him to espouse the [Romulo plan].” Indeed, in an oral message delivered to Romulo, Acheson instructed the U.S. embassy in Manila to make clear Acheson’s interest in a Southeast Asia pact, which he did not want to

89. Extracts of Memorandum of Conversations, Mr. W. Averell Harriman, Special Assistant to the President with General MacArthur, Tokyo, August 6 and 8, 1950, Top Secret, FRUS, 1950, Vol. 6: East Asia and the Pacific, pp. 427–430.
91. Romulo’s plan called for the creation of a wider Southeast and South Asia union that would have included Australia, Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Korea, New Zealand, the Philippines, and Thailand. Romulo’s proposal reproduced in Memorandum by the Policy Information Office of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs (Fisher) to the Director of the Office (Butterworth), Secret, July 15, 1949, in FRUS, 1949, Vol. 7: The Far East and Australasia, p. 1164.
92. Ibid., p. 1162.
be confused with his disinterest in the Quirino-Rhee-Chiang proposal. When Quirino again raised the Pacific pact in his February 1950 summit with President Truman, Truman turned to Acheson, who stated bluntly that “he did not believe that the course suggested by President Quirino was the wisest one to pursue”; he then talked enthusiastically about Romulo’s plan for Southeast Asia. When it became clear that Quirino was distancing himself from Chiang’s plan, Acheson immediately instructed the U.S. embassy in Manila to widely publicize U.S. support of Romulo’s proposal. When the Manila pact creating SEATO was signed in September 1954, Rhee sought membership for South Korea in this new multilateral grouping but was rebuffed by Washington. This sequence of events illustrates two aspects about the powerplay theory. First, the U.S. preference was for multilateralism, as evidenced in Southeast Asia, with East Asia being the exception. Second, the United States opposed multilateralism in East Asia primarily because of its fears of entrapment by rogue allies.

Win Japan

The United States viewed the postwar rise of Japan, the only major power in East Asia, as inevitable. After Japan’s surrender in 1945, the United States conducted its military occupation with the goal of permanently demilitarizing Japan and making it forever safe from fascism. With the advent of the Cold War, however, the United States from about 1947 was compelled to think more strategically and long term about Japan as a frontline state in the war against communism. For U.S. occupation commander Gen. Douglas MacArthur in Tokyo, Policy Planning Chief George Kennan in Washington, and Presidents Truman and Eisenhower, the choices ranged from continuing the extensive demilitarization of the occupied country to signing a peace treaty and letting Japan stand on its own. Ultimately, the United States chose something in be-

93. Acheson asked the embassy to tell Romulo that the United States “shall be glad discuss with Romulo upon his return to Washington appropriate means by which US might make clear its appreciation of value of a regional approach without creating misunderstanding of the sort indicated. As Romulo . . . aware problem complicated by confusion in most quarters resulting from divergent concepts of Association now under discussion.” Telegram, Secretary of State to the Embassy of the Philippines, Secret, August 23, 1949, in ibid., pp. 1190–1191.
95. Telegram, Charge in the Philippines to the Secretary of State, Confidential, August 4, 1949, in FRUS, 1949, Vol. 7: The Far East and Australasia, pp. 1182–1183; and Telegram, Secretary of State to the Embassy in the Philippines, NIACT, August 4, 1949, in ibid., p. 1183.
etween, which was to effect a “reverse course” in its occupation of Japan, focusing more on rebuilding the country as an anticommunist bulwark than emasculating it. Initially, it tried to implement this strategy by reintegrating Japan in Asia in a multilateral grouping of states that included Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand, and the Philippines. The effort was short lived, lasting about eight weeks, as some members of the group were not yet ready to enter into a pact with the wartime aggressor, and Japan expressed little interest. The United States then turned toward creating strong bilateral alliance ties with Japan to contain the Cold War threat, as well as to exert U.S. control and to build a politically stable state that would act consistently in the advancement of U.S. interests. Kennan aptly described the prevailing security situation: Japan was the key to Asia, just as Germany was the key to Europe. The U.S. objective was therefore “to win Japan as an ally.”

The United States executed its powerplay strategy toward Japan with greater subtlety than it did toward Taiwan and South Korea. The strategy was not explicitly tied to fears that, like Chiang or Rhee, Yoshida Shigeru, Japan’s first postwar prime minister, might try to start a new war in Asia. At the same time, though, controlling Japan did not mean emasculating it. The choice was to shape Japan through one of the following three options: the “alpha” option, the “gamma” option, or the “beta” option.

THE ALPHA OPTION

The alpha option called for a harsh treaty settlement that would have confined Japan to its home islands and allowed it to maintain only modest defense capabilities. MacArthur supported this position and told Kennan that the only permanent solution for Japan was complete demilitarization under international security guarantees. He believed that this option would be in keeping with the original intentions of the July 1945 Potsdam Declaration outlining the terms of Japan’s wartime surrender; moreover, he viewed it as a clearly defined endpoint to the occupation (after which the ambitious general hoped to return to the United States and seek the Republican presidential nomination).

The Chinese and the British also leaned toward this option, proposing to Dulles in September 1948 that a pact among the United States, China, and Britain would have guaranteed the long-term disarmament of Japan.

97. This was known as the Pacific Ocean pact and is the subject of a later section.
100. The Chinese foreign minister, Wang Shih-chieh, conveyed this view to Dulles in September 1948. See Memorandum by John Foster Dulles to the Secretary of State, Secret, October 1, 1948, in ibid., p. 856.
U.S. officials found this strategy undesirable, because it assumed that Japan would not reemerge as a major power, and that it would not become susceptible to Soviet influence. Kennan believed that the Russians could not be trusted to respect a demilitarization arrangement for Japan, as it had already put forces in the neighboring Sakhalin and Kurile Islands, as well as in Vladivostok. Ominously, he warned that Korea would first be overrun in a matter of months, and that it was “obvious that the Russians would exercise a good deal of pressure against a demilitarized Japan.” It was these geostrategic realities that turned U.S. planners away from the alpha option.

**THE GAMMA OPTION**

The gamma option encouraged the development of a militarily independent Japan capable of defending itself against communism and projecting force in the region. It called for an early end to the occupation, a favorable peace treaty settlement, and the acceleration of Japan’s buildup as a bulwark against communism. Initially favored by Dulles, the strategy would have reduced longer-term U.S. defense burdens in the region if Japan could be shown to stand against the communist threat (Dulles later shifted to support Kennan’s views on Japan). But this option, too, was rejected by the United States because the prospect of a rapidly reconstituted Japan still frightened other states in the region. For Kennan, a strategy based too much in Cold War expediency would ultimately hurt U.S. interests if Washington were perceived to be encouraging a remilitarized Japan that could destabilize the region. The gamma option, in Kennan’s view, “[ran] contrary to our solemn most international commitments and basic principles of SCAP [Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers] policy, and would be impractical from the military-economic point of view.”

**THE BETA OPTION**

Emerging between the alpha and gamma options, the beta option sought to create a postwar Japan that was not too weak but not too strong. The strategy sought to create deep, robust ties to the United States and thereby modulate
Japanese growth and development in a direction beneficial to U.S. interests. A November 1949 paper presented to President Truman highlighted this objective: “Make every effort to see to it that political and economic progress in Japan is such as to demonstrate the advantages of close association with the United States and our ability as a democracy to deal with the [development and security] problems in Asia.”\textsuperscript{105} The collaboration’s scope would encompass all sectors of Japan’s politics and economics. The objective, as Kennan observed, was to mold Japan into the Britain of Asia.\textsuperscript{106}

The beta strategy unfolded with the U.S. decision to avoid a harsh treaty settlement against Japan at the end of the war. If the objective was to control Japan’s reintegration in a manner that benefited the United States, then promoting a revisionist Japan unhappy with the status quo was not the answer.\textsuperscript{107} Eisenhower later observed that a harsh treaty settlement would have pushed Japan into the arms of the communists and “then instead of the Pacific being an American lake, believe me it is going to be a Communist lake.”\textsuperscript{108} The resulting San Francisco treaty, signed on September 8, 1951, was one of the most generous ever offered by a victor over a defeated enemy. In the lead-up to the San Francisco treaty deliberations, the NSC issued a memorandum on May 17, 1951, that outlined the four basic tenets of the beta strategy for reintegrating and shaping postwar Japan: “(1) assist Japan in the development of appropriate military forces; (2) aid Japan in the development of low-cost military materiel in volume for use in Japan and in other noncommunist countries in Asia; (3) take all practical steps to assure Japan’s membership in the United Nations and participation in a regional security arrangement; and (4) establish [a] psychological program design to further orient the Japanese toward democracy and away from Communism.”\textsuperscript{109}

A critical step was the conclusion of a bilateral security treaty in 1951 separate from the peace treaty that effectively legitimized and enshrined U.S. control of Japan’s internal and external affairs.\textsuperscript{110} According to Dulles, U.S.


\textsuperscript{110} Dulles once confided to British officials that the 1951 treaty was a voluntary continuation of the military occupation, but in the guise of a normal political relationship between two nation-states. See LaFeber, \textit{The Clash}, p. 316.
objectives for postwar Japan were best accomplished not through a multilateral security system as in Europe, but through a bilateral alliance where the United States exercised absolute control. Symbolizing this operational control was the presence of U.S. sea and air bases on the home islands and on Okinawa, where the United States would, in Dulles’s words, “permanently assume the principal responsibility for sea and air defense of the Japan area.”111

The United States therefore saw the mutual defense treaty with Japan, signed on September 8, 1951, as serving two purposes. One was to build a bulwark against communism. The other was to control, manage, and restrain Japan’s reintegration into the international system. Dulles wrote that the alliance was legitimized in a regional context because it provided a “shield” for former colonies against a resurgent Japan. In conversations with the Australian and New Zealand foreign ministers, Dulles encapsulated the U.S. powerplay strategy toward Japan: “We have got to use delicate methods, a light tackle. We are absolutely confident that if Japan is basically committed to the free world and accepts U.S. troops in and about its territories we will have complete control over any rearmament plans Japan may adopt.”112 The United States foresaw Japan eventually playing an important role as a U.S. proxy in the region, with responsibility, for example, over the Korean Peninsula.113

The United States’ powerplay strategy vis-à-vis Japan was never formalized, but it was evident in Washington’s decided preference for heavy-handed bilateralism in all aspects of the relationship. After deciding to adopt the beta strategy, the United States started to marginalize the Far East Commission (FEC), which was the primary multilateral commission set up to oversee the terms of Japan’s 1945 surrender. Washington stopped bringing proposals before the FEC, where action was sure to be slow, and worked instead directly with the SCAP commander, angering FEC members Australia, Britain, and Canada. The State Department dismissed FEC complaints by citing the “unique position” of the United States vis-à-vis Japan’s recovery and the need for tight U.S.-Japan bilateralism: “It would be manifestly undesirable and impracticable for an eleven-nation body in Washington to attempt to do more than set the broad framework within which the Japanese occupation should proceed. . . . It is necessary that the Supreme Commander should have broad discretionary powers

113. Memorandum by the Counselor (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, Secret, August 21, 1950, in FRUS, 1950, Vol. 7: Korea, pp. 623–628, especially p. 625. Kennan quoted author Tyler Dennett’s rendering of Roosevelt’s policy to Korea in 1905, agreeing that Japan’s control of Korea was preferable to “Korean mis-management, Chinese interference, or Russian bureaucracy.” Ibid.
to take action with regard to problems arising in Japan which must be promptly and decisively dealt with if the occupation purposes are to be successfully accomplished.\textsuperscript{114}

Bilateralism was also evident in the relatively lopsided relationship between the United States and different branches of the postwar Japanese government. Given the large sums of bilateral assistance being provided, U.S. authorities dealt more with Japan’s ministry of finance than with its foreign ministry. The flow of monies to Japan did not stop with official assistance or military payments. The Central Intelligence Agency also provided tens of millions of dollars to conservative political elements in Japan and to the Liberal Democratic Party to ensure that Japan’s domestic politics did not move in a direction inimical to U.S. interests.\textsuperscript{115}

The United States also sought to control Japan’s relationship with China, fearing that a recovering Japan would see China as its natural economic partner. Some U.S. officials, including Dulles, were concerned that this economic logic could cause Japan to gravitate toward the communist bloc. Dulles flew to Tokyo in December 1951 to obtain a commitment that Japan would not conclude a bilateral treaty with communist China.\textsuperscript{116} The resulting “Yoshida letter” was an extraordinarily powerful example of the exertion of U.S. control over an ally, the scale of which did not become fully known until it was later revealed that Dulles actually drafted the letter.\textsuperscript{117}

Washington also sought to control Japanese private-sector dealings with China. Dulles grew concerned that Japanese business conglomerates were signing a series of trade agreements with China that by 1953 had the effect of doubling the two countries’ bilateral trade. In July 1952 the U.S. government called on Japan to join the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export

\textsuperscript{114} Department of State to the Australian Embassy, Aide-Memoire, June 12, 1948, in FRUS, 1948, Vol. 6, p. 813.


\textsuperscript{116} The concerns about a Sino-Japanese rapprochement were shared by a pro-Taiwan group of fifty-six U.S. senators, led by William Knowland (R-Calif.), who opposed a Japan peace treaty with communist China and issued a threat to Dulles that they would not ratify the U.S.-Japan bilateral defense treaty.

\textsuperscript{117} LaFeber, The Clash, p. 293.
Controls (COCOM) as well as the China Committee (CHINCOM); both bodies aimed at coordinating allied trade embargoes in certain goods and services with communist countries. In an effort to stifle all Sino-Japanese trade, Dulles dispatched a delegation in August 1952 to “[force] Yoshida to accept a secret agreement imposing even harsher restraints on Japan in its China trade than other CHINCOM members had accepted.”

Again, the powerplay in U.S.-Japan relations was never made explicit. The closest it came to being officially acknowledged was in the Yoshida doctrine, which stated that Japan would maintain a small self-defense force limited to protection of its home islands and would focus its national efforts on economic development. The United States wanted Japan to play a larger military role than the Yoshida government, which held power from 1948 to 1956, was willing to commit to, but Yoshida’s focus on industrial development in the post-war liberal economic order and his acceptance of Japan’s subordinate place within the U.S.-Japan alliance constituted an embrace of the powerplay rationale. This was an informal empire arrangement in which Japan fared well.

The Logic of Powerplay and Bilateralism: Investing in the “Hub”

Once the ROC, the ROK, and Japanese bilateral alliances were created around the United States as the “hub,” they required material and political investments that both maximized U.S. influence and minimized the incentives for building connections between the “spokes.” In Taiwan’s case, from 1950 to 1965, the United States provided assistance on an annual average basis that contributed 34 percent to Taiwan’s total gross investment, financed approximately 40 percent of its spending on imports, and contributed 6.4 percent of its gross national product (GNP). The United States provided South Korea with $12.6 billion in economic and military assistance from 1946 to 1976, which amounted to more dollars per capital of aid than that given to any other country except South Vietnam and Israel. From 1953 to 1962, this aid financed 70 percent of South Korea’s imports and contributed 5 percent of its national GNP. This aid gave the United States inordinate influence in both Taipei and Seoul. Indeed, when Presidents Truman and Eisenhower occasionally threatened termination of U.S. aid or military assistance to rein in Chiang and Rhee,

118. Ibid., p. 305. Eisenhower ultimately chose a middle path, allowing the private trade with China of some goods, including even those on the restricted CHINCOM lists, in an effort to reduce any pique that might endear the Japanese to initiatives being made by Khrushchev.

119. Tucker, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States, p. 54.

both leaders were cowed into submission. In November 1953, for example, when Eisenhower told Rhee that he would not ask Congress to authorize economic assistance for South Korea if it unilaterally attacked the North, Rhee admitted to Vice President Nixon, “In my heart I know that Korea cannot possibly act alone.” Similarly in 1953, Eisenhower withheld U.S. military assistance until Chiang agreed not to use it to attack Beijing. The United States could not have made similar threats as costly or as credible through multilateral channels. Building the bilateral alliances into a NATO-type collective multilateral security institution in East Asia, therefore, offered little value added for three reasons: (1) U.S. military capability was far superior to that of any grouping of other countries in East Asia, and therefore not significantly enhanced by a collective-security arrangement; (2) multilateralism would not enhance deterrence, because the U.S. security commitment had already been demonstrated by the United States’ intervention in the Korean War; and (3) the United States would face an “entrapment discount” if it pursued multilateralism in East Asia (i.e., any appreciable gains in security had to be discounted by the increased likelihood of entrapment as alliance decisions were taken out of U.S. hands and put in a larger collective body).

The perceived costs for the United States of pursuing multilateralism were heightened by Eisenhower’s deep belief in the domino theory in Asia. The 1949 victory of the Chinese Communist Party, the June 1950 North Korean invasion, the 1954 Quemoy offshore islands crisis, and the conflict in Indochina constituted a broad-based challenge not only for one or two countries, but for the entire Asian continent and Pacific. The fear of falling dominoes would have compelled the United States to intervene on behalf of Taiwan or the ROK if either country had started a war. Although the United States may have feigned indifference or muted support to discourage Chiang and Rhee from becoming overconfident, Washington understood the importance of this strategic imperative even before it formed alliances with these countries. The United States could have tried to alleviate these entrapment fears through a strategy of “distancing,” but this option was considered suboptimal on two counts. First, the lack of U.S. commitments could embolden the adversary to take action; and second, Chiang or Rhee might still miscalculate and attack based on ambiguous U.S. statements. Given the stakes, it was more sensible to

121. Eisenhower wrote to Rhee, “To turn now to economic matters, … if I believed that those [economic assistance] funds would merely create new targets in a war renewed by you, I could not, consistently with my duty, request Congress to authorize this appropriation.” Letter, President Eisenhower to the President of the Republic of Korea (Rhee), Top Secret, November 4, 1953, in FRUS, 1952–1954, Vol. 15: Korea, p. 1592. Rhee’s response is quoted in Kim, Master of Manipulation, p. 145.
122. Tucker, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the United States, p. 36.
display both clarity of commitment (vis-à-vis the adversary) and clarity of control (vis-à-vis the allies).

Finally, creating a multilateral institution that facilitated greater interaction among Asian countries would have further increased U.S. entrapment fears. The idea that Chiang and Rhee might jointly conspire to force the United States into trying to roll back communist China and North Korea was a serious concern. And if these two rogue allies moved forward with military operations that failed, U.S. belief (rightly or wrongly) in the domino theory meant that allied adventurism could lead to a chain reaction of collapsing anticommunist regimes in Asia more broadly. In the view of the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, control through direct bilateral ties, with no connections between the allies, was the best option.

Diplomatic historians might point to the 1951 proposal by the United States for a Pacific Ocean pact as evidence that counters the powerplay argument. Spurring this change from its opposition to such a pact in 1949 was a desire to end the occupation of Japan as the United States became more focused on the communist threat to Indochina and to Burma. The United States considered a variety of possible security arrangements in Asia, with Truman’s special envoy, John Foster Dulles, in 1951 proposing a regional defense arrangement involving the “island nations” of Asia: Australia, Indonesia, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the United States. Dulles saw the proposal as constituting an example of “collective security,” in the sense that it was designed not only to deter attack by external aggressors, but also to guarantee member states that they would not be the target of aggression from any other member (particularly postwar Japan). This appears to be a clear case of U.S. interest in a NATO-type multilateral security institution for Asia.

On closer analysis, however, the Pacific Ocean pact proposal does not contradict the powerplay argument. Even as it talked about forming the pact, the United States was still considering bilateral military agreements that assured U.S. control of Japan and Okinawa as a base of operations in the Pacific. In this regard, the Pacific Ocean pact was window dressing: it offered a collective-security institution that in theory could give Japan security, reduce U.S. security burdens, and integrate Japan into Asia. But in the end, as the primary U.S. objective, securing bilateral control of Japan was nonnegotiable. Truman’s in-
uctions to Dulles prior to his historic mission to Asia in February 1951 as the president’s special adviser were clear in this regard. The president told Dulles to negotiate the terms of the peace settlement with Japan and the accompanying bilateral pact assuring U.S. control. Truman mentioned the Pacific Ocean pact idea as a way to reassure allies that Japan would be embedded in a larger regional institution, but he added that the multilateral pact was not a quid pro quo for bilateral control: “[T]he United States government should agree to this [Pacific Ocean pact] course of action only as the other nations accept the general basis on which the United States is prepared to conclude a peace settlement with Japan.”125 In internal U.S. government discussions during the February 1951 mission, Dulles carried out the president’s instructions, making clear that his primary objective was securing the bilateral peace settlement and security arrangements with Tokyo, not the Pacific Ocean pact: “Mr. [John] Allison [ambassador and Dulles’ deputy] inquired how much the Mission could tell the Japanese about the contemplated Pacific Pact in order to help the Japanese to buy our proposal. Ambassador Dulles replied that we would not want to dangle the pact before them since we did not yet know whether the idea of a pact would be realized. He said that he had informed certain Japanese at one of [acting U.S.] Ambassador [to Japan] [William] Sebald’s receptions that the military agreement would initially be just between the United States and Japan but that it might later be broadened out.”126

Once Dulles secured bilateral control of Japan through a series of five U.S.-Japan annexes to the peace settlement, signed by diplomats John Allison and Sadao Iguchi in February 1951, his interest in the Pacific Ocean pact waned. During Dulles’s follow-on travel to Canberra, Australia, Foreign Minister Percy Spender remarked that “the idea of a Pact seemed to have dissipated in the course of Ambassador Dulles’ travels.”127 After about eight weeks, Dulles abandoned the idea and reverted to the beta strategy of promoting tight bilateral ties with Japan. He rationalized his actions in a confidential note to General MacArthur in March 1951, when members of the Far Eastern Commission (e.g., Britain) were chafing at the degree of U.S. unilateral control: “The United States and Japan are the only significant sources of power in the Pacific, we actual, they potential. If we can work in accord, the lesser Pacific powers will get security and will sooner or later, formally or informally, endorse that

125. Ibid.
accord. If the United States and Japan fall apart, the situation in the West
Pacific is grave for a long time.  

The Pacific Ocean pact proposal was significant for those it excluded—South
Korea and Taiwan. If the defining criteria for membership comprised (1) major
maritime territories in the region; (2) countries supportive of a Pacific pact;
and (3) key powers that could, through the pact, be persuaded to accept a post-
war military capability in Japan, then South Korea and Taiwan (both former
Japanese colonies) should have been included. The United States omitted them
for the same reason it balked at including Hong Kong and Indochina—the fear
of entrapment.

The Pacific Ocean pact failed ultimately for a confluence of reasons, all of
which in some way validate the powerplay theory. First, Truman never really
embraced the idea. For Truman, the pact was instrumental; the U.S.-Japan alli-
ance was foundational. He saw the pact as a tool that could achieve U.S. bilat-
eral objectives vis-à-vis Japan, but not as critical for building the postwar
security architecture of Asia. Thus, when the proposal met with criticism, he
and Dulles dropped their support once their bilateral objectives vis-à-vis Japan
were met.

The pact also failed because Japan did not want to become a member, and
because of opposition to the pact by Australia, Britain, and New Zealand. This
is perhaps the ultimate irony of Dulles’s proposal as it relates to the powerplay
argument. The United States ostensibly wanted Japan included because Dulles
and Acheson believed that this was the only way to accelerate the peaceful re-
integration of a rearmed Japan into Asia (i.e., with military capabilities that
were part of a regional security institution rather than with an autonomous ca-
pability that would unnerve regional states). Japan, however, feared becoming
entrapped in contingencies against communist China (e.g., in Indochina,
Korea, or Taiwan), despite the best efforts by Dulles to exclude these countries
from the pact. According to the memoirs of Kumao Nishimura, who was di-
rectly involved in the Dulles negotiations, Yoshida refused to discuss the pact
with Dulles in early 1951, boycotting talks with Truman’s envoy for three days:
“[Yoshida’s] inflexible stance and two or three more days of fruitless negotia-
tions with Foreign Ministry officials at last convinced the Americans that
Japanese participation in a regional security organization would be, for some
time, difficult to realize. Dulles made one last plea . . . on 2 February. The mat-
ter was then dropped. When the Foreign Ministry produced the plan for a sim-

128. Personal Letter, Mr. John Foster Dulles, Consultant to the Secretary, to the Supreme Com-
mander for Allied Powers (MacArthur), Confidential, March 18, 1951, in ibid., p. 931.
ple Japanese-American treaty drawn up in October 1950 the Americans, conscious also of the lack of enthusiasm among all their Asian-Pacific allies except Taiwan and South Korea, temporarily shelved the idea of a regional organization.  

Meanwhile Britain opposed the pact because the United States did not include it as a member, despite the potential risk to its commonwealth brethren and interests in Hong Kong and Malaya of renewed Japanese aggression. But more important than its inclusion, Britain advocated for tight bilateral U.S. control of Japan as the preferred option (Japan opposed British membership because it did not want to become embroiled in British interests against the communist Chinese). Australia and New Zealand opposed the pact because they believed that a multilateral institution would dilute U.S. responsibility over rearming Japan. In a meeting in February 1951, New Zealand’s foreign minister, Frederick Doidge, told Dulles that “Japan has been a nightmare to New Zealand and that the possibility of its resurgence was regarded with horror. Ambassador Dulles’ explanation of the [multilateral] controls to which Japan will in any event be subject . . . is highly convincing for the short-run period. But New Zealand must live alongside Japan for a long time to come. Ambassador Dulles’ exposition does not seem to cover the long-term possibilities.” In the same meeting, Australia’s foreign minister, Percy Spender, stated his country’s concerns even more bluntly: “Australia still feared Japan,” and the inclusion of Japan was a “no-hoper.” These constraints doomed the pact and moved the United States closer toward adopting the beta strategy for Japan and shaping Tokyo’s postwar recovery through tight bilateral controls. It was in the meetings with Doidge and Spender that Dulles first used the term “spokes on a wheel” (or hub and spokes) to describe the emerging architecture in Asia.

Upon returning from Asia, Dulles recommended to Truman that bilateral alliances were in his judgment preferable in East Asia to a NATO-type organiza-

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130. See Memorandum of Conversation by the Special Assistant to the Consultant (Allison), Secret, January 12, 1951, in FRUS, 1951, Vol. 6: East Asia and the Pacific, pp. 139–140; and Telegram, United States Political Adviser to SCAP (Sebald) to the Secretary of State, Secret, February 2, 1951, in ibid., pp. 143–145. The United States opposed any European power inclusion in the pact.
131. See Memorandum on the Substance of Discussions at a Department of State-Joint Chiefs of Staff Meeting, Top Secret, April 11, 1951, in ibid., pp. 192–201.
132. Memorandum of Conversation among Ambassador Dulles, Ministers for External Affairs of Australia and New Zealand, February 17, 1951, in ibid., p. 171.
tion. In a memo to the president, Secretary of State Acheson and Secretary of Defense Marshall reiterated Dulles’s conclusion:

Consideration of this matter [of the Pacific Ocean pact], particularly during the course of Ambassador Dulles’ visit to Japan, the Philippines, Australia and New Zealand, made apparent that the desired results can be better achieved by a series of [bilateral] arrangements rather than by a single [multilateral] arrangement. . . . It is believed that the three arrangements contemplated, one with Japan, one with the Philippines, one with Australia and New Zealand, and possibly one with Indonesia, will in fact achieve what your letter of January 10, 1951, described as the “dual purpose of assuring combined action as between the members to resist aggression from without and also to resist attack by one of the members, e.g., Japan, if Japan should again become aggressive.”

Conclusion

International relations scholars offer a multitude of geopolitical, developmental, and cultural variables to explain why bilateralism emerged in post–World War II East Asia instead of multilateralism, which took hold in Europe and other parts of the world. These scholars overlook one critical variable, however: U.S. powerplay preferences. Why did the United States expressly seek to create a hub-and-spokes architecture for East Asia? In this article I have argued that postwar U.S. planners had to contend with a region uniquely constituted of potential rogue allies who, through their aggressive behavior, could potentially entrap the United States in an unwanted wider war in Asia. U.S. fears of entrapment were heightened by the belief that a small spark in the region could precipitate a domino-like collapse of weak, unstable regimes and a turn toward communism. To avoid this outcome, the United States created a series of tight, deep bilateral alliances with Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan through which it could exercise maximum control and prevent unilateral aggression. Furthermore, it did not seek to make these bilateral alliances multilateral, because it wanted to amplify U.S. control and minimize any collusion among its partners.

The powerplay theory augments scholars’ understanding of East Asia, because it offers specific explanations (rather than permissive conditions) for certain empirical and conceptual puzzles regarding the region’s postwar bilateral tradition. It explains why the Korean War, the first conflict of the emerging Cold War, did not push the United States into promoting an Asian version of

NATO. Such an institution would have only diluted U.S. control. The theory also explains why the United States eschewed the efficiency gains typically generated by sophisticated multilateral alliances. Specifically, the potential gains of multilateralism in East Asia would have been lowered, if not negated, by the entrapment costs of losing control over Chiang Kai-shek or Syngman Rhee. Unilateral aggression by Taiwan or South Korea could have then precipitated a string of Asian dominoes falling through the region.

The powerplay theory also shows how U.S. decisions contributed to a vicious circle regarding Japan’s inability to reconcile and reintegrate itself into postwar Asia. Washington chose tight bilateral control over Japan’s postwar reemergence, but by treating Japan as its “favorite son” in Asia, the United States unintentionally removed any pressure for Japan to seek atonement in the region. Japan could obtain whatever it needed to aid in its postwar recovery from the United States, whereas the costs of reconciling with the region would have been extremely high. Thus, there were two reinforcing cost-benefit calculations on the U.S. and Japanese sides against multilateralism that emerged from the powerplay rationale.

There are three avenues of future research that can help to refine the powerplay theory. To begin, the powerplay strategy for the United States in East Asia succeeded: neither Taiwan nor South Korea provoked a war, and Japan emerged as a postwar status quo democracy. But what are the conditions under which this control strategy could fail? An a priori understanding of these conditions would be helpful to policymakers in deciding whether to take a multilateral or bilateral approach in a particular region. The effectiveness of a bilateral strategy rests on whether the patron can exercise control through credible threats or credible support. This in turn could be a function of (1) regime type, (2) legitimacy, or (3) intra-alliance bargaining. Large-n studies of alliance formation and commitment, for example, suggest that alliances between large and small democracies are likely to benefit the larger power’s ability to exert control, because democracies tend to believe the threats and promises made by their democratic allies. A large power’s control will be enhanced if the smaller ally derives significant legitimacy gains from the alliance.


Finally, the large power’s successful control will also hinge on complex bargaining and leverage dynamics that emerge within the alliance.  

Second, the powerplay theory offers new avenues of deductive inquiry into the concepts of abandonment and entrapment. Alliance theory holds that states fearing entrapment generally employ “distancing” or “hedging” strategies vis-à-vis their ally. These strategies include (1) withholding material support for the ally, (2) castigating the ally’s overzealousness, (3) appeasing the adversary, or (4) abrogating the alliance. This article shows, however, that when faced with entrapment fears, states may actually draw closer or adhere to the ally to alleviate this fear. Specifying the conditions under which states choose “distancing” versus “adhesion” strategies would thus be a useful contribution to the literature. “Adhesion” may be preferred, for example, when entrapment fears (1) are intensely held, (2) are accompanied by power asymmetries (i.e., the larger power seeks control over the smaller one), or (3) when the smaller power has a revisionist agenda. Additional variations of the adhesion dynamic deserve further investigation. For example, knowing the conditions under which adhesion can “backfire” would be useful to policymakers. After North Korea’s second nuclear test in May 2009, for example, China could have considered “distancing” strategies by terminating its support of Pyongyang to stop Kim Jong-il’s nuclear drive. Avoiding entrapment by “distancing,” however, could lead to the perverse effect of either heightening the North’s perceived need for nuclear weapons or causing the regime to collapse and precipitating a loose-nuke scenario. So China has opted for an adhesion strategy to try to exercise control over Kim, but this has been effectively exploited by Pyongyang to extract more assistance with minimal changes in its behavior. This “big influence of small ally” dynamic, first introduced by Glenn Snyder and Robert Keohane more than three decades ago, may constitute conditions under which multilateral control mechanisms such as the six-party talks (involving China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korean, and the United States) may be the most effective choice.

138. For example, if patron A makes commitments to B such that B knows that patron A is “locked in” (i.e., unconditionally obligated to intervene on B’s behalf), then control may fail because bargaining leverage effectively shifts to B.


A third avenue of research would involve more work on the legacies of these initial choices by the United States to pursue bilateralism in East Asia. This bilateralism led to Japan’s recovery but also to its isolation from the rest of Asia, and an absence of reconciliation with the region. Japan’s total reliance on the United States and its lack of postwar integration with the region, in turn, made multilateralism difficult. The history of bilateralism continues to hamper Japanese foreign policy as Tokyo unsuccessfully seeks broader initiatives (e.g., permanent UN Security Council membership), because it cannot acquire the support of its Asian neighbors.

Powerplay rationales clearly are less relevant for U.S. relationships with contemporary Taiwan and South Korea, but the legacy of bilateralism remains deeply ingrained in the thinking of successive postwar generations in both countries, which naturally weakens the enthusiasm for new multilateral structures. The bilateral architecture in East Asia continues to be effective, sustained in part by a level of comfort that makes these institutions difficult to uproot. That many of the nascent multilateral groupings in the region, such as U.S.-Japan-ROK, U.S.-Japan-Australia, the “Quad” (U.S.-Japan-India-Australia), and the six-party talks are largely built atop underlying bilateral alliance relationships attests to how old ways of thinking die hard.