



Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia

by Victor D. Cha.

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In the wake of the 1954 mutual defense treaty between the United States and Taiwan, Chinese premier Chou En-lai fiercely condemned American belligerency, denouncing the pact as a “treaty of war and aggression” meant to “legalize [American] armed seizure of China’s territory of Taiwan and extend its aggression against China and prepare a new war.”¹ Most Americans, of course, saw the agreement as purely defensive, a way to protect a valued ally from Communist perfidy. Both sides were wrong, writes political scientist Victor Cha² (Georgetown Univ.) in his compelling new book, *Powerplay*. He argues that the Taiwan treaty, like much American East Asian policy in the early Cold War period, was designed not just to defend US allies and check the advance of communist powers, but also to prevent any aggressive leader in an allied state from dragging the United States into an unwanted war. The consequent bilateral agreements and economic and military policies were calculated to keep America’s Asian partners both subservient and independent from each other. This “hub and spokes” network (Cha’s phrase) stood in stark contrast to Europe’s multilateral alliance system and had an “enduring impact” on East Asia’s long-term security (3). The author dubs this hierarchical and bilateral network of relationships the “powerplay.”

Cha’s study of the immediate post-World War II years in East Asia will interest both diplomatic historians and political scientists. His detailed analysis of evolving US relations in the region in the early Cold War focuses on Korea, Japan, and Taiwan. He shows that, particularly after the start of the Korean War, American officials moved from a general ambivalence about the importance of East Asia to a conviction that involvement there could forestall the spread of communism, without ignoring apparent larger threats in Europe or allowing leaders like Syngman Rhee and Chiang Kai-shek to venture on military provocations that might require US intervention in an unwanted conflict. The result, in Cha’s telling, was a series of intricate carrot-and-stick bilateral agreements that brought limited but not insignificant economic, military, and political benefits to the partner nations, while ensuring an informal American hegemony.

The United States faced cross-cutting pressures as it emerged as an Asia-Pacific power at the dawn of the postwar era. [It] needed to defend against dominoes falling in Asia; at the same time, Washington’s best thinkers believed that US military engagement in the region should be delimited to the maritime perimeter. The United States had to manage these security concerns amidst incessant attempts by unpredictable local leaders to drag the United States into war with China, as well as uncertainty about how to contend with Japan’s eventual re-emergence as the only major power in Asia. The answer was the powerplay ..., [which] played to the US obsession with achieving an unprecedented level of control that reeked of neo-imperialism. (161).

1. *Atlanta Constitution* (9 Dec 1954) 7.

2. Cha was Director of Asian Affairs in George W. Bush’s White House National Security Council.

Powerplay, however, concentrates on advancing a larger geopolitical framework more than simply charting the historical path of Asian-American relations. Cha uses his case-studies to demonstrate why America's relations in East Asia differed so sharply from those it cultivated in Europe; in so doing, he contests certain accepted tenets of international relations theory. Specifically, he rejects liberal internationalism with its stress on embedding rogue states in multilateral frameworks in order to steer them along the "right" path of development. Such control and guidance were, Cha contends, better achieved through bilateral arrangements. In some circumstances, he concludes, great power control is plainly the best approach.

As for the "alliance security dilemma"—that states fearful of being drawn into a conflict by a reckless ally will seek to sever the alliance—he maintains that nations can instead resort to exerting greater control over that ally. Hence, American policy towards Asia in the early Cold War exemplified "how great powers design bilateral security institutions to manage risk and make their environments more predictable. In the case of postwar Asia, the powerplay took the form of asymmetric bilateral relationships that allowed the great power patron to control the actions of smaller allies" (188). Though Cha acknowledges that his powerplay model applies more neatly in Asia than elsewhere, his central thesis nonetheless challenges many of the conclusions drawn by international relations scholars.

I disagree with Cha's argument in a few areas. He overstates the uniqueness of the Asian alliance system while understating that of the European model. Bilateral agreements favoring greater over lesser powers are hardly unusual; complex, long-lasting multilateral alliances like NATO represent the exception. Cha also dismisses race as a factor in alliance making. He never explores the influence of engrained American biases about the supposed inherent untrustworthiness of Asians and the "primitive" developmental stage of their nations (16–17). He also exaggerates the long-term impact of the powerplay on state-to-state relations in East Asia, which "had the effect of isolating Japan from the rest of Asia, making historical reconciliation with its neighbors difficult" (5). This ignores the fact that Japanese actions leading up to World War II had already made such reconciliation extremely difficult. One could argue that American influence in fact expedited Japan-South Korean normalization in the wake of the horrific Japanese colonial occupation.

Cha too often takes the acquiescent statements of dependent powers at face value, rarely considering whether their actions always conformed to their pledges. For instance, he cites Chiang's complaint that the 1954 Defense Treaty bound his nation "hand and foot" (83), but downplays the generalissimo's occasional unapproved operations in the Taiwan Strait and his flouting of American demands (for almost a decade) that he cease cross-border forays into Yunan province through Burma. So, too, in the face of North Korean provocations, South Korean leaders Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee authorized occasional retaliatory operations that flew in the face of American opposition but proved almost impossible to stop. Moreover, Cha disregards the relevant historical literature on small-power agency in the Cold War in creating his image of US dominance.

Despite these shortcomings, Victor Cha presents an exciting and original argument. His analysis is convincing, his research thorough, and his writing clear, if blemished by political science jargon. Cha's detailed historical case studies and solid policy evaluations have salutary present-day resonances, as well. For anyone looking to understand why the American alliance system in Asia emerged so differently from the one in Europe, *Powerplay* should be required reading.