

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia

Public Affairs, Global Ethics Forum TV Series

Victor D. Cha, Joanne J. Myers

Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning, everyone. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us.

It is my pleasure to welcome Victor Cha [back to this program](#). Professor Cha is currently the D. S. Song Korea Foundation Chair in Government and the director of Asian studies at Georgetown University. He also serves as senior adviser at the [Center for Strategic and International Studies](#) (CSIS) in Washington. For more information about one of our country's foremost Asian scholars I would encourage you to read his bio, which was handed out when you checked in this morning. Professor Cha will be talking to us about his new book *Powerplay* in which he investigates the origin of American alliances in Asia, how the system has changed over time, and what must be done to navigate a complex new era of international security.

When [World War II](#) ended, new political and military tensions erupted between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its satellite states. This [Cold War](#) created the new need for security alliances and relationships with guarantees from the United States that were specific to the needs of these Western powers in Europe. And just as Europe wanted commitments from the United States, so it was in Southeast Asia. But Asia was not Europe. What the United States created in Asia was very different and quite distinct from multilateral security arrangements made for the distinct needs of Europe. In East Asia, the United States cultivated a hub-and-spoke system of discrete exclusive alliances with the Republic of Korea, the Republic of China, and Japan.

For more than six decades this alliance system has been quite successful, as it has been fundamental to the region's security and prosperity. However, with China's economic and military rise, along with its activities in the [South China Sea](#), these arrangements have encountered new challenges.

As the rebalance in Asia becomes one of the main epicenters of geopolitical activity in the 21st century, the major issues are: Whether there is a conflict between these bilateral relationships that were established during the Cold War, and with the latest development, the multilateral institutions that are not just about military relationships but economic engagement as well—examples of these are the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the East Asia Summit; and secondly, whether the United States can continue to play a major role in this ongoing geopolitical shift.

To answer these questions and others, please join me in giving a very warm welcome to a very special guest, Victor Cha. Thank you.

Remarks

VICTOR CHA: Thank you, Joanne, for that very kind introduction. It's a pleasure to be here again at the Carnegie Council.

It really is a pleasure to be here and it's a pleasure to talk to you about this book this morning, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia*. There are probably a number of you in this audience who have written books as well. You know that every book is a story but there is a story behind every book. In this case, for me, the story behind this book was that I was teaching a course at Georgetown in East Asian security. I was at the lecture where we were talking about the differences between Asia and Europe and, in particular, why it was that Asia didn't have a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) like Europe.

This was a class of about 70 students. I was going through all of the reasons, as I had done every year when I taught this course, about why Asia didn't have a NATO. I mentioned geography. In the European theater essentially you had a contiguous land theater with a clear dividing line down the middle, much more conducive to a NATO-type organization, a collective defense organization. In Asia you had a different geography: you had continental but you also had maritime. It was a real mix. It's harder to develop a single umbrella organization.

Then I moved on and I talked about polarity, great power polarity. In Europe you had a contiguous land theater and you had two poles, the United States and the Soviet Union. In Asia you also had a conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, but this was complicated by a third pole, and that was China. That made it harder to form two completely separate organizations.

Then I talked about economic interdependence, the idea being that even in Europe after *World War II* the level of economic interaction of trade and investment among the countries in Europe was still fairly high, Europe was still fairly integrated, and that is conducive to creating a community. In Asia after *World War II* there was almost no trade within the region. If anything, the trade was going outside the region.

The last thing I mentioned in the class as I was finishing this part of the lecture was I said, "And then the other thing we also have to consider is race." In Europe it was very easy for planners to sit down and think about planning the postwar reconstruction of Europe and the security of Europe with other Europeans—the French, the British—you know, we could have these conversations around a nice table, with coffee and wine and all this other stuff. In Asia it was more difficult to imagine that because they were at a lower level of development, a lower level of education; it was hard to imagine forming this grouping where we would all sit around a table and talk to each other as equals.

So I was going through all of these reasons. As I'm going through these reasons a student walks into class late. This student is late for class every week. He looks like he just rolled out of bed. The class met at 11:30 in the morning, but still, he looked like he had just rolled out of bed. He shuffles into the back of the classroom and sits there. For this particular lecture I think he noticed that I noticed that he was late. So at the end of class as the students were filing out, he kind of shuffles down to the front of the classroom and he says, "Professor Cha, I want to ask you a question."

I said, "Sure. What is it?"

He said, "I don't understand why the United States chose this bilateral alliance system in Asia and they chose this collective defense system in Europe."

I looked at him and I said, "I just spent half the lecture talking about that—geography, polarity, economic interdependence, these sorts of things."

I think he was just trying to show that he had an interest in the class. He was like, "Okay, all right, I got

it. Thanks a lot, Professor." Then he scurried out of the classroom, probably to go back to sleep.

But then, as I was walking back to my office, I was thinking about his questions, because whenever students ask questions you answer them, but I always think about the questions that they ask. I thought it was an interesting question because he was asking about choice. I had given a bunch of explanations about structure that had to do with geography, had to do with balance of power, had to do with economic interest; and he was asking a very human question about choice: Why did the United States choose to organize security in Europe one way and to organize security in Asia another way?

When I thought about it, I thought, "This is actually a great question. None of the literature has really addressed it. They have talked about all the things that I lectured about, but no one has really asked the question of choice, volition: Why did [Harry Truman](#), [Dwight Eisenhower](#), [George Kennan](#), [Dean Acheson](#)—why did they choose a bilateral alliance system for Asia?"

The dedication for the book is actually to my mentors, three of them at Columbia—[Bob Jervis](#), [Jerry Curtis](#), and [James Morley](#)—and to a professor in Korea, [Han Sung-joo](#). But I couldn't dedicate it to the student because I didn't remember the student's name. I actually have no idea what grade he got in the class—hopefully he did okay. But that's the story behind how this book came about.

This is my [fifth book](#). It has taken me the longest time to write this book. This book took over 12 years to write. I'm actually a very fast writer, but in this case I started this book in about 2003, got about 150 pages written and then panicked. It was contracted with Princeton University Press.

Then, as some of you know, in 2004 I was asked to work in the government, so I went to work at the National Security Council for three years as director for Asian affairs, so that was three years when I couldn't write, obviously. Then, when I came back, I ended up writing two other books before finally coming back to this one. So it is actually a real pleasure to have finished this book and to be able to talk to you about it this morning.

What I'll do is I'll tell you a little bit about the basic argument in the book, so that you don't have to read it, and I will try to bring it to the present to talk about the current situation in Asia with regard to all the new institutions that are developing in Asia, in particular in the last decade the institutions that China has developed in Asia, and what that means for the U.S. alliance system.

Every book starts out with a question, usually a big question. For me the question is, as you can imagine from my inability to answer the question that the student had asked, is: Why is it that great powers choose different ways of organizing security in different parts of the world? We may think they just grow organically, but they are often centered around what the big power in that particular region wants to do or chooses to do.

Why was the U.S. security architecture in Asia different from Europe? Why was there NATO in Europe? Why was there the bilateral so-called hub-and-spokes system in Asia?

It's called "hub and spokes" because—think of a bicycle wheel: you have a hub, that's the great power; and then you have spokes, which are each of the bilateral alliance relationships that the United States created in the region, with not much interaction among the spokes. That's what we mean when we say "hub and spokes."

Why did the United States choose a multilateral design for Europe and a bilateral design for Asia? Why did we choose an inclusive design for Europe—this big large umbrella collective defense system—but why did we choose an exclusive security design for Asia? Why did we choose to apportion security exclusively in Asia while we saw it as inclusive in Europe? These are essentially the questions that I tried to answer in the book.

In the end, my answer is—and it is the title of the book—what I call the "powerplay," which is that the United States had to develop a different strategy for Asia because it saw a very unique situation in Asia at the end of the Second World War and at the beginning of the [Cold War](#). The best way to encapsulate this is what the United States had to contend with was a combination of dangerous partners and new or different strategic beliefs.

Let me start with the dangerous part. This was the beginning of the Cold War and the United States wanted to have strongly anti-communist leaders in these countries in Asia. It had found two in Formosa (or Taiwan) and in Korea, [Chiang Kai-Shek](#) in Taiwan and [Syngman Rhee](#) in Korea—great anti-communists, fantastic anti-communists.

But these were also two leaders who had some problems: (1) For both of them their domestic political legitimacy was questionable because they ruled in both countries with a pretty strong hand; (2) both of these leaders, Chiang Kai-Shek and Syngman Rhee, while they were fighting the Cold War they were both embroiled in their own civil wars; Chiang Kai-Shek wanted to [take back Mainland China](#) and Syngman Rhee wanted to [take back the Korean Peninsula](#). So with both of them, essentially, you had two anti-communist allies who were embroiled in their own civil wars and had revisionist intentions, a revisionist agenda: they wanted to change the status quo.

Chiang Kai-Shek was very provocative in terms of his announced plans to take back the mainland. He funded guerrilla troops in Burma that would [constantly do raids into China](#). He stationed troops on the offshore islands as a way to again try to take action against Mainland China. In South Korea, Syngman Rhee had a very open policy of so-called "marching north," that he was going to march north and retake the Korean Peninsula.

What this created for the United States was a bit of a dilemma. You had these great anti-communist allies, the kind that you would want in what was emerging as a real Cold War; but at the same time ones that looked like they were willing and ready to try to draw the United States into a war on the Asian mainland. Eisenhower—I did a lot of archival research for this book—in meetings at the White House and in the State Department talked openly about his concern that Chiang Kai-Shek wanted to pull the United States into a nuclear war with Mainland China. That was one thing they had to deal with.

The other was what I was saying, the strategic beliefs. The main change there was the growth or the embedding of the [domino theory](#) in the way that we thought about security around the world. Some of you may remember the domino theory. For those of you who don't, it's essentially this idea that during the Cold War there was concern that if one of these small countries fell to communism they would all start tipping like dominos. It was what led the United States to connect the periphery with the core. It was part of the reason that we fought in Korea and part of the reason that we fought in [Vietnam](#).

The domino theory, this notion that the core and the periphery were now connected, really didn't emerge in U.S. thinking after the [revolution in China in 1949](#)—I mean it was there but it wasn't really in U.S. strategic thinking in 1949. But after the Korean War, after the North Koreans invaded in June of 1950, then the domino theory really started to emerge in terms of U.S. Cold War thinking.

The domino theory created another dilemma for the United States. If you have a partner that you think is going to drag you into something that you don't necessarily want to be involved in, your natural reaction is to pull back and not support. They had that concern about countries like Taiwan and Korea.

The problem was, because of the domino theory, you could not pull back. Because of the domino theory, if these partners got themselves into trouble, you were obligated to go help them because you were worried if one of them tipped they would all start tipping. This was the dilemma that the United States faced in Asia. Arguably, it was not the dilemma that they faced in Europe.

What I argue in the book is that in thinking about this, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennan, and Acheson made the decision eventually not to distance from these dangerous or potentially rogue partners but to double down—that is, to make a commitment to defend them in the Cold War, but also to place a premium on not just defending them but controlling them, and control was best exercised through establishing deep bilateral ties with these countries rather than creating some sort of multilateral mechanism. If you want to exercise control, the best way to do it is individually. Rather than putting it to a committee vote, you want to establish a deep tie with political, economic, and military assistance, create dependency, and then be able to titrate that assistance every time it looked like these allies might go rogue, like they might do something different.

In the book I talk about the front end and the back end of the powerplay. The front end of the powerplay is basic alliances. This is what the alliances were for, to defend these countries against communist aggression—the application of the Truman Doctrine to Asia. That's what it was.

But what I really focus on in the book is the back end of the powerplay, which is the creation of these ties and then the use of these alliances to control these partners.

Again, there is a lot of archival research in the book, very explicit examples of Eisenhower saying, "We're not going to approve this shipment of planes to Chiang Kai-Shek until he promises to stop funding the guerrillas in Burma." There are very clear examples of trying to exercise—sometimes successfully; sometimes not so successfully—these sorts of things.

There was a clear U.S. preference for bilateralism in Asia, and there were proposals at various times in history by Syngman Rhee in Korea, by Chiang Kai-Shek in Taiwan, and by [Quirino](#) in the Philippines for some sort of Asian NATO. There had been proposals made. The United States' expressed preference for bilateralism was manifested in the way we were very unenthusiastic about those proposals, about trying to create some sort of multilateral mechanism, because that would not serve the purpose of what we were interested in. That is Taiwan and Korea.

What about Japan? The powerplay for Japan was very different because there was not a concern that there was a leader in Japan who was embroiled in a civil war or who was seeking to retake something; there was not the same sort of concern. But there still was a great deal of American preoccupation with control. As George Kennan said when he started looking at Asia for the first time after World War II, "Japan was the only great power in Asia." And for the foreseeable future it would be the only great power in Asia.

The United States' orientation toward Asia prior to the Korean War was largely maritime. We were a maritime power in Asia. We did not see ourselves as a continental power in Asia. If we were going to be a maritime power in Asia, the most important country was Japan. Australia was important, New Zealand was important, the Philippines were important, perhaps even Indonesia; but the key country was Japan. So United States strategy with regard to Japan, as Kennan wrote in a policy-planning memo, was we had to win Japan. We had to turn Japan into the "Britain of Asia." The only way to do that was to exercise control.

Now, there was a brief period of time in which the United States thought about a similar model for Japan as had been done in Germany, which was to create a deep bilateral tie and then try to embed that in some sort of broader-grouping state. [John Foster Dulles](#)—at this point he was secretary of state—made a trip in February 1952 in which he went to countries in the region. He talked to the Australians and said, "What about this idea of putting Japan in a grouping of maritime states in Asia?" And the Australians said, "No, thank you. We do not trust Japan. We still fear Japan. We would much prefer that the United States have a deep bilateral tie and have its thumb on Japan during this reconstruction/reverse course of the occupation period."

He went to New Zealand—actually the Kiwis came to Australia—same thing; they felt the same way.

He went to Japan; Japan felt the same way. Japan did not to be part of a multilateral grouping because they said, "Nobody trusts us and everybody fears us. We want a bilateral alliance with Japan."

In the end, after Dulles took that trip and came back and was giving talks here—I do not know if he gave one here, but he gave one at I think the Council on Foreign Relations. If you read the transcript of the speech, his thinking very much is focused on creating this bilateral mechanism in Asia. For this reason, this emphasis on the unique situation that they saw in Asia and the dilemmas that they faced forced them to choose this particular framework for Asia. To this day, the most deeply imprinted part of the political architecture in Asia today is the United States' bilateral hub-and-spokes system. And it has legacies that continue until this day.

Many academics have argued—and I think it is fair to argue—that part of the reason up until fairly recently that Asia—and so now I am moving to the present here—is under-institutionalized relative to Europe is because of the deep imprint of the U.S. bilateral system in Asia. That is why Asia, relatively speaking, has been under-institutionalized. Because the United States created this arrangement, all the countries in the region after decolonization and the end of the Cold War really had no incentive to engage with each other because they all got what they wanted from the United States.

Similarly Japan: As many of you know, there is a longstanding issue of unresolved history between Japan and the region. Part of that is a legacy of the bilateral hub-and-spoke system because Japan, again, had no real incentives to reconcile with the region; it got everything it wanted from the United States. So it is a very deep imprint.

What does this all mean for today? In terms of the architecture for the region today, we have seen a couple of things happen. When I say architecture, I am not talking about the buildings; I am talking about the regional architecture, what we eggheads call the "regional architectural of Asia"—the institutions in Asia. We have seen a couple of things happen.

After the end of the Cold War, what we see is a sort of "plurilateralization" of the bilateral alliance structure. What that means is if before we had line segments—the U.S.–Japan alliance, the U.S.–Korea alliance, the U.S.–Philippines alliance—after the Cold War we start seeing different geometric shapes. We started seeing triangles, quadrilaterals, these sorts of things, not just U.S.–Japan but U.S.–Japan–Australia, U.S.–Japan–Korea, quadrilateral arrangements that started to emerge based on the bilateral alliance system largely to deal with functional issues—disaster response to the [2004 tsunami](#); the [six-party talks](#) to deal with North Korean nuclear weapons. We started seeing this plurilateralization of the bilateral alliance structure.

The second set of institutions we see growing out of Asia is after the [Asian financial crisis in 1997-1998](#). We start seeing newer institutions in Asia more indigenous to the region, largely based around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in response to the Asian financial crisis. In addition to ASEAN we see things like ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum, Chiang Mai Initiative (CMI), all these different sorts of things largely centered around Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the innovation that has created the most discussion and debate has happened in the last decade, which has been the growth of new institutions in Asia largely centered around China. These are things like the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA), and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)—these are largely China-based institutions.

So the question is: With the growth of all these new institutions, are they all competing with each other now? There are people who talk about institutional balancing between these institutions China is

developing and the existing alliance system. As China has created these institutions it has also been fairly clear about how it does not like the U.S. hub-and-spoke architecture. China has tried to delegitimize the alliance system, calling for a new form of security in Asia, calling the U.S. alliance system selfish because it is an exclusive security arrangement—it is a partnership; it is not inclusive—and even referring to them as "Cold War dinosaurs," things that are from the Cold War era. The whole question is whether we have a zero-sum view of all this architecture developing in Asia and where it is all headed.

I will just give you my opinion on this, which is I do not think that this is zero-sum. I think that what is emerging in Asia is not a choice whether you need to be a part of U.S. institutions or Chinese institutions; it is not a matter of choice but it is what I call a "complex patchwork of partially overlapping parallel, sometimes interlinked structures in which there is no hierarchy among them." This is very messy. This is not the European Union. This is much messier than what we see in Europe.

But in Asia the messiness may be a good thing. This is a region of changing power, of different regime types—you have everything from advanced industrialized democracies, like Japan and Korea; to countries that are rolling back from democracy, like Russia; to countries right on the cusp, like Vietnam; to countries like North Korea, total dictatorships. So we have all these different regime types, changing power differentials, unresolved history.

In these sorts of situations, some regime theorists will tell you complexity may actually be a good thing, messiness may be a good thing, because it may help to mute the security dilemmas or insecurity spirals that might exist if we were to simply create one single hierarchical organization. If it is messy, it mitigates the membership problems, the exclusivity problems; it allows countries to forum-shop, which is like: "I have this issue. I want to see if I can work with this group. They say 'no.' So then let me try this group, let me try this group." If you are not a member of this organization, like if you are not a member of this table, you can be a member of this table because some people from this table will be part of this table. So there is a lot of overlapping and messiness about what is happening in Asia that is not necessarily a bad thing.

Is it efficient? It is not efficient. But to create a single hierarchical arrangement will incite more problems, more competition than it would to allow this thing to grow as it is now.

At the end of the book I say, "In the end what we all want is peace," and I think peace is not necessarily something that can be manufactured based on the way it worked in another region, and so we have to accept what is growing in Asia as being organic. And while there may be some competition that takes place, in the end the complexity of Asian architecture is the architecture of Asia, and we should not try to make it something that it is not because thus far it has helped to promote peace and prosperity in the region.

With that, thank you for listening. I would be happy to take any questions that you may have.

Questions

QUESTION: Don Simmons.

In the 1950s the United Kingdom had a successful [military experience in Malaysia](#), but that did not lead to a security partnership with the United States; the United Kingdom recognized Red China against our wishes; they refused to contribute any troops to our Vietnam War effort and so on. Why didn't the United Kingdom become more of a security partner to the United States in Asia?

VICTOR CHA: I think it is a very good question, and I do not have a full answer for you, but I can certainly give you my thoughts on that.

I think part of the reason was the end of World War II did not just coincide with the beginning of the Cold War; it coincided also with massive decolonization in the region. It also coincided with a period when the United States, for the first time really, had decided that Asia as a region was strategically important. Prior to the Cold War, the United States' traditional interest in Asia was economic in terms of open access to trade and missionary activity. That was really it. There really was not a strategic interest. That changed with the Cold War.

Once the United States reached that point, I think it had a preference for minimizing the role of European powers in their former colonies. I think that was a part of it, and that was exemplified in the way the United States—particularly after the reverse course in Japan started to operate within the Far Eastern Commission (FEC), which was the multilateral organization that was designed to deal with Japan's defeat.

Then also, I think also part of it was on the British side too. On the British side there was not as much interest in being deeply engaged in Asia.

I do remember reading documents that stated that once the United States had made the commitment to these bilateral alliances, because they came in succession—with the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Taiwan—the British were actually quite worried that the United States was overextended in Asia—particularly after the Korean, but even before the Korean War—too focused on Asia because this was all a distraction from the conflict in Europe, and that our resources were already overextended and what resources we had should be devoted to Europe and not to Asia.

The British I think also themselves were not oriented toward a big commitment to Asia after the Second World War.

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson. Thank you for being so clear in your analysis of a very complicated subject.

Please analyze what is going on now with Korea, where in both the North and the South both the United States and China are very much involved.

And the other question is: When you talk about spokes, what about the Philippines? Because right now there is a complete change, and the [new ruler](#) in the Philippines is pulling away from the United States. What does this mean?

VICTOR CHA: I have been studying alliances for a long time, and when we think about alliance relationships, leadership change does matter—whether it is in the Philippines, leadership change in Korea, or leadership change here—these things do matter.

But we do not know how much they matter until later. In other words, we have had periods of time—for example, you mentioned Korea and the U.S.-Korea relationship—where we have had leaders who were very different and had very different domestic agendas and very different foreign policy agendas—[George W. Bush](#) on one hand and [Roh Moo-hyun](#), a progressive South Korean president, on the other. So when you see situations like that, you think, "Oh, my goodness, this relationship is going to crumble, it is going to fall apart." But when we look back at that period, it was very scratchy. The news headlines, the daily take on the relationship, was very scratchy. But when you look at it in terms of results—it was during that period that we got a free trade agreement, visa waiver, NATO+3 status for Korea. Korea was the third largest ground contingent in [Iraq](#) and in the peacekeeping operations in [Afghanistan](#).

When we look at the results, we see leadership matters, but in the end it is, "Does the alliance still produce?" So that is the metric I would use, for example, for the Philippines. We are in a very scratchy

period right now. Things are being said that we have never heard before.

So the real question is: Will this actually affect what the alliance produces? All alliances produce security benefits and they also produce non-security benefits, whether it is political support, cultural ties, all these sorts of things. So that is the real question: When leadership changes do these alliances still continue to produce or do they really start to erode? So that is what I would be watching for in the case of the Philippines, and I would be watching for it in the case of leadership change here and in other countries with which we have alliances.

QUESTION: David Malone with the United Nations. I'm a resident of Tokyo.

I wanted to press you a bit on the Philippines. You partly answered the question I was going to ask. Say you were invited to advise the next president of the United States a few weeks from now on what to do about the Philippines, if anything. What would the answer be?

VICTOR CHA: The first thing I would say is, "Don't take the bait." There are a lot of things that *have been said* that it would be easy to react to, almost emotionally react to, because some of it has been pretty offensive. So do not take that bait.

And really focus on the equities in the relationship. So, is the new leader really going to erode some of the equities in the relationship? In the case of the Philippines, it would be to what extent—the leader has said things about the alliance, but to what extent he is actually going to revise the new *legal framework agreement for military access to the United States*. If those things start to change, then I think we have a serious situation. But, until then, all of the things that get picked up in the headlines are not things that I think a U.S. president should react to.

QUESTION: Eric Magnuson, the Fletcher School.

I just wanted to go back to something you touched on very briefly in terms of the organization of the alliance and the structure. Maybe I misheard you, but it seemed like you had said China was looking to goad the United States into war at some point. I also thought you may have mentioned a nuclear war, at that. Maybe I heard incorrectly, but that always to me feels like *the* zero-sum game, if not even worse than a zero-sum game. So I was just wondering about the thought process behind that.

VICTOR CHA: What I said was that Chiang Kai-Shek, so Taiwan, in terms of their machinations, really wanted the United States to start a war with Mainland China. This was in the 1950s; I am not talking about now. In fact, there is a great Christmas card that Chiang Kai-Shek sent to Eisenhower in which he said essentially, "We want to help you prosecute the war in Korea. We are ready to fight against the communist reds in all of Asia. We need to take this to a nuclear war. Merry Christmas." [Laughter]

What I was referring to was that period, in which there were legitimate concerns that these allies were trying to pull the United States into another conflict—maybe not necessarily a nuclear conflict, but there were things that both Chiang Kai-Shek and Syngman Rhee were doing that were clearly designed to continue to exacerbate hostilities between the United States and China.

Like I said, Chiang Kai-Shek was secretly funding guerrillas in Burma to attack the Chinese. Syngman Rhee did not want the Korean War to end. When the United States was in armistice/peace treaty negotiations in 1953 to end the hostilities, the one issue that was holding back everything was the issues of prisoners of war (POWs)—do you send them all back or do you interview them to decide who wants to go back and who wants to stay and send the ones who want to go back? Syngman Rhee sabotaged the negotiations and released all of the POWs—27,000 of them—in the middle of the night to basically undercut the armistice negotiations. Both of these leaders were doing things that were deliberately destructive to try to exacerbate tensions.

That was then. Now it is very different. I do not think in either case we have those sorts of potentially rogue allies.

QUESTION: Youssef Bahammi, The Halsten Enterprise.

Does the book speak about the fact that the American alliance system in Asia has been growing after World War II naturally due to several factors—post-colonialism with the case of the Philippines; the fact that there was the Cold War; the nationalists in Chinese Taipei versus [Mao Zedong](#); North Korea versus South Korea; the fact that this area is still the beacon of communism if we add Vietnam and Laos; and also for the fact that there was an economic need of help from the United States rebuilding Asia with the case of Japan? So is it a natural domino effect that has built up in the area, and does the book speak about it?

VICTOR CHA: Yes. I think that there was a concern. Like I said, the communist revolution in China in 1949 actually did not resonate strategically for the United States. We did not think about the domino theory then. It resonated politically here in the United States – very much so—because the Republicans accused Truman and the [Democratic administration](#) of "losing" China. It also led to the [McCarthy hearings](#). So it resonated domestically. But it really did not resonate strategically.

The domino theory really started to enter U.S. strategic thinking in 1950, after the North Koreans invaded. The North Korean invasion pissed off Truman. Emotionally he got very angry about it, because the nature of the invasion—an armored invasion across the demilitarized zone (DMZ)—was so obviously an act of aggression, a *fait accompli*, that he got really upset at that. He was also upset because this was the first main project of the newly formed United Nations. One of its first main projects was administering [elections](#) in Korea. Truman was very angry about that. There is a story about him in the Blair House jumping up and down, saying, "We can't let the UN down, we can't let the UN down." He had a very emotional reaction to it.

But it was also strategic, in the sense that there now looked like there were actually dominoes falling in Asia, so we could not let Korea fall. This all happened before we started thinking about alliances in Asia. So that domino theory actually placed a huge constraint on us in terms of how we could think about security in Asia. We were locked in, tied to these countries, whether we liked it or not and in spite of what their leaders might do.

So the United States had to figure out how we were going to do this without giving them a blank check so they could feel like they could do whatever they wanted in the region. That is why I think we ended up with this bilateral system.

QUESTION: Tarik Fatallah.

As you mentioned, a lot of the structure of the hub and spokes in Asia was put in place during and post-Cold War, so we cannot take Russia out of the equation. With that being said, what type of anticipated moves do you see the Kremlin—in addition to the shift in tactics, that Russia is now making an alliance with countries in Asia—what type of anticipated moves do you see the Kremlin making in the near future? And counter, what should the next U.S. administration consider as direct action and what types of contingencies should they have in place in case the Kremlin decides to go a little further to the extreme?

VICTOR CHA: I think probably the most interesting and potentially disorienting thing that Russia could do in Asia going forward is what looks like an effort to reconcile with Japan. There are still these [outstanding northern territories](#). World War II has never ended between Japan and Russia. It still has not ended. There is no peace treaty between these two countries. The outstanding issue is these northern territories. With [Putin](#) and with [Abe](#), there is the possibility that there could be some sort of

agreement reached. That would be disorienting, because when you plan strategy you look for certain things to remain constant, and that would be something that would change dramatically. In Northeast Asia I think that would be one of the big things.

The second big thing, of course, is North Korea. North Korea is trying to demonstrate a survivable nuclear deterrent, an ability to reach the U.S. mainland with a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile. At the pace that they are going, it looks like they will accomplish that in a matter of a few years.

And then, down in Southeast Asia the big issue is the [South China Sea](#) and China's continued land reclamation and building structures on islands in the South China Sea.

These I think are the three big strategic challenges.

The fourth big challenge is the [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#) (TPP). This 12-member free trade agreement is extremely important. It will be the most important new institution in Asia, I think, since the bilateral alliance system. But it is encountering many difficulties in terms of passage here in the United States.

JOANNE MYERS: Well, Victor, as always your insights are so instructive. Thank you once again.

VICTOR CHA: Thank you.

Audio

Why is there no NATO for Asia? After World War II, why did the United States opt for bilateral relationships with countries like Japan and South Korea? As Georgetown's Victor Cha explains, this was a "powerplay" by the Americans to contend with a "dangerous" and complex East Asia. Does this arrangement still make sense today?

Video Clips

Why is there no NATO for Asia? After World War II, why did the United States opt for bilateral relationships with countries like Japan and South Korea? As Georgetown's Victor Cha explains, this was a "powerplay" by the Americans to contend with a "dangerous" and complex East Asia. Does this arrangement still make sense today?

TV Show

Why is there no NATO for Asia? After World War II, why did the United States opt for bilateral relationships with countries like Japan and South Korea? As Georgetown's Victor Cha explains, this was a "powerplay" by the Americans to contend with a "dangerous" and complex East Asia. Does this arrangement still make sense today?

Read More: [Aid](#), [Security](#), [Warfare](#), [Armed Conflict](#), [Collective Security](#), [Foreign Aid](#), [Global Governance](#), [International Relations](#), [Nuclear Proliferation](#), [United Nations](#), [U.S. Foreign Policy](#), [East Asia](#), [Southeast Asia](#), [Europe](#), [China](#), [Japan](#), [North Korea](#), [Russia](#), [South Korea](#), [Taiwan](#), [United States](#), [Vietnam](#)