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THE PUZZLE

We were huddled in the cramped quarters of the US Secretary of State's airplane, planning for our next stop in Sydney, Australia. The most coveted space on the Boeing C-32, the Secretary's suite, comes complete with a foldout couch and flat screen TV. But given the numbers in the room, we were all seated cross-legged on the floor like overgrown boy scouts around a campfire, in shirts and ties, rumpled from the seven-hour flight from Jakarta. We ran through the policy items for the meetings with Prime Minister John Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, with each staff person briefing on his or her area of expertise: China, UN reform, Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, North Korea. The last issue was the East Asia Summit (EAS). A new organization created largely through Malaysia's initiative, EAS had gained the interest of many countries in Asia as the first true indigenously created regional institution. The Singaporeans were hosting the next meeting and the Australians and Japanese sorely wanted the United States to join this new grouping, in no small part to prevent the Chinese from dominating the organization. There were benefits to being included in the grouping. Membership would constitute a good representation opportunity in the region for the United States. At the same time, a US commitment to EAS, which still had not evinced a clear agenda or mission as a regionwide institution, would detract from the work of the other regional body, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Council (APEC). Moreover, it would be hard to convince domestic staff within the White House to send the president halfway around the world to participate in a "talk shop" among leaders with no clear agenda. In the run-up to the Sydney visit, the Australians were pushing for the United States to begin informal participation in EAS as a non-member by sending the Secretary (rather than the president) to the next meeting.

The State Department was leaning in this direction, but APEC proponents within the US government were against transmitting any positive signals on the issue during this trip. In the midst of the discussion, the Secretary asked one of her staff for his opinion. He sighed, and then stated in a deadpan tone, “Madame Secretary, EAS is a bad idea whose time has come.”

The US official’s point was that the United States could no longer eschew the new emerging architecture in Asia. Our bilateral alliance system, with treaty allies and security partners in Australia, Japan, South Korea, Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and Singapore, was still the most significant security architecture in the region. But the United States needed to consider transacting business in Asia through these new multilateral groupings, even if they were somewhat duplicative of work done through our exclusive relationships with the governments in the region. The United States eventually did join the East Asia Summit in 2010, but not without some trepidation.¹ Validating the new organization through US membership despite its absence of a clear agenda or mission was troubling to some who insisted that our bilateral alliances were still the most important feature of the region’s architectural design.

These experiences in government led me to wonder why it has taken so long for Asia to develop inclusive political and security structures. Asia is home to the fastest growing economies in the world today. Over the next five years, 50 percent of global growth outside of the United States will emanate from this region.² Though many of its governments are democracies, many are not; yet this variety has not precluded high levels of regional economic, social, and political interaction. Nevertheless, multilateral structures in Asia, like EAS, emerged only in 2005, sixty years after the end of World War II. By contrast, multilateralism took hold much earlier in Europe with the creation of NATO in 1949. Rather than multilateralism, the most distinctive architecture in Asia through the end of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first has been the US bilateral alliance system—an exclusive rather than inclusive security architecture. Why did security in Asia over the last six decades evolve this way? Why has it taken so long for Asia to develop viable multilateral security institutions? And why did the United States, the preeminent power in the region after the defeat of Japan in 1945, choose to build bilateral security institutions in Asia rather than the multilateral ones it forged in Europe?

Some might respond to these questions by noting that Washington has been supportive of Asian regionalism, including organizations

like APEC, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). But when compared with NATO and the European Union, it is fairly evident that: (1) Europe is more organized as a “region” than Asia; and (2) while the United States transacts business all over the world both through exclusive one-to-one arrangements and through more inclusive regional groupings, on balance, Europe has seen more multilateralism while Asia has seen more bilateralism.

The reason for Asia’s unusual security evolution and the slow growth of multilateralism can be found in the origins of the American alliance system in Asia. In this book, I argue that a confluence of historical, political, and strategic circumstances led the United States to build a unique “hub and spokes” security network in Asia. “Hub and spokes” is defined as a set of tightly held and exclusive, one-to-one bilateral partnerships with countries in the region. Like a bicycle wheel, each of these allies and partners constituted “spokes” connected with a central hub (the United States), but with few connections between the spokes. This bilateral method of organizing Asia stood in stark contrast to Europe, where security was organized in a more elaborately designed multilateral framework (i.e., NATO). The rationale for this institutional design decision is what I term the “powerplay” in US grand strategy—the creation of these alliances to exert considerable political, military, and economic control over key countries in East Asia. In Taiwan and Korea, the bilateral alliances were created to bolster staunchly anti-communist regimes as a bulwark against Soviet influence. But an equally important, if unstated, rationale for Washington’s creation of deep bilateral alliances was to constrain anti-communist leaders, embroiled in civil wars and with questionable domestic political legitimacy, from going “rogue” and recklessly pulling the United States into unwanted conflicts in Asia when the primary strategic concern was Europe. In Japan, the powerplay rationale was to create a tight, exclusive hold over the defeated imperial power to ensure that the region’s one major power would evolve in a direction that suited US interests.

The powerplay strategy had a deep and enduring impact on the region’s security evolution. Once created, the Cold War hub and spokes bilateral alliance system afforded the United States an informal empire of sorts in Asia. Whether this was the American intention is not the subject of this book. Rather, I seek to trace how and why the United States chose this bilateral institutional design for Asia, and to demonstrate why it has endured. While democratic values may have something to do with the longevity of the US alliance system, the fact is that democracy did

not come to these East Asian players (with the exception of Japan) for decades after the creation of the hub and spokes system. Bilateral alliances, however, afforded the United States a powerplay advantage—it exercised near-total control over foreign and domestic affairs of its allies, and it created an asymmetry of power that rendered inconceivable counterbalancing by these smaller countries, on their own or in concert with others. Not only did the United States dominate the power matrix, it also dominated the network matrix. That is, as the central “hub” power among disparate “spokes” as allies, the United States made itself the indispensable power to all in Asia. Undeniably, things are changing today, but the legacies of this bilateral tradition are hard to shake. Indeed, the US-based alliance system remains the single most important security and political institution in Asia amid a plethora of recent and new regional groupings.



I argue that the powerplay rationale informed American intentions vis-à-vis the creation of the United States-Republic of Korea (ROK) (1953), the United States-Republic of China (ROC) (1954), and the United States-Japan (1951) alliances. The United States established mutual defense treaties with the ROK and ROC not only to contain communism, but also to stop the Syngman Rhee and Chiang Kai-shek governments from provoking conflicts with North Korea and mainland China (respectively) that might embroil the United States in a larger unwanted war on the Asian mainland when the primary theater of concern for US national security was Western Europe. The desire to use the alliance as a form of “constraint” obviated the need for a larger multilateral security alliance framework in Asia. Washington best exercised control bilaterally. To have tried to exercise similar control in a larger multilateral regional framework would have diluted US material and political influence. In Europe, by contrast, the United States had less concern about small aggressive states entrapping it in a larger war with the Soviet Union. This reduced the obstacles to designing a multilateral security organization.

The powerplay rationale for Japan was slightly different from that informing the US-Korea and US-Taiwan alliances. The concern was not that Japan would entrap the United States in another war; instead, it was the concern that Japan’s postwar recovery would occur absent American input. The United States understood that Japan was the only candidate for great power status in the region after World War II. Washington initially attempted to embed Japan in a regional framework of maritime

Asian countries for its postwar recovery, just as they were doing with Germany and its neighbors in Europe. But when this failed, the United States reverted to a tight bilateral alliance with Japan. The powerplay rationale for the alliance therefore 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 American interests in the region. This was accomplished through the creation of bilateral security dependence within the alliance. This powerplay rationale had the effect of isolating Japan from the rest of Asia, making historical reconciliation with its neighbors difficult. Japan’s lack of postwar integration with the region in turn made multilateralism difficult. The evolution of security in Asia was therefore different from that in Europe. Alliances were not just instruments of containment against the adversary; they were also instruments of control over the allies. The supplementary powerplay rationale both reduced the need for and made the prospects of organizing a NATO-like multilateral organization in Asia less likely.

The powerplay argument has implications for the recent work on multilateralism and the uses of power. It challenges the prevailing causal proposition in the literature put forward by liberal institutionalists and foreign policy internationalists that embedding a state in multilateral structures and rules is the best way to control power and dampen unilateralist inclinations.³ Many have argued, for example, that embedding China in multilateral rules and institutions offers the most prudent path for managing the country’s rise. Others have argued that America’s unilateralist temptations and tendencies in an age of unipolarity are best moderated through allowing itself to be bound by the multilateral institutions and rules that it helped to create as part of the postwar order. While I do not disagree with these propositions, I show that they are highly conditional ones. Under different circumstances, the same goals of controlling others and amplifying one’s own power might sometimes be more efficiently attained through bilateral rather than multilateral ties. I show that power asymmetries “select” for the type of institutional designs that work best for control. If small powers try to control a great power, then multilateralism works. But if great powers seek control over smaller ones, multilateralism is less efficient and far messier, requiring consultation and patience amid the vagaries of committee-based decision-making. Bilateral control is more effective and efficient.

The powerplay argument also has relevance for work in international relations on hierarchy. This body of scholarship acknowledges that world politics is composed of sovereign states operating under anarchy, but that

in practice there is an informal hierarchical order, and in some cases an informal empire, that has always coexisted with sovereignty and anarchy. This order is based on the power of the strong states over the weak, but it is also based on the “micropolitics” of those relationships—that is, notions of the legitimacy of that order in the subjective mind-sets of both ruling powers and the subject states.⁴ In this regard, the US hub and spokes system in Asia established at the beginning of the Cold War very much resembled an informal empire. Of course, all states were sovereign in this alliance framework, but the United States strode atop massive power gaps with its allies that basically muted any counterbalancing tendencies.⁵ Moreover, this US-imposed order was more or less considered legitimate by all participating governments. Alliance elements like host-nation support (i.e., Korean and Japanese government funding of the costs of US bases in their countries); status of forces agreements (i.e., negotiated agreements that protect the rights of US military operating in the host country); US-imposed restrictions on allied countries’ military arms acquisitions (i.e., Taiwan); the US military’s right to put down “domestic disturbances” in a country without that country’s consent (i.e., Japan until 1960); and even the exercise of US control over an allied government’s sovereign right to use force (i.e., in Korea) all reflected and reinforced the micropolitics of an informal empire. Indeed, for political leaders in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, closeness to the United States was an important metric of domestic political legitimacy. These are all tell-tale signs of an informal empire.

The powerplay argument also has relevance for the literature on network theory. One of the primary propositions of this body of literature is that an actor’s power and influence are relational rather than just material. The unit of analysis is not material power capabilities, but the position one occupies in a network. Well-situated or strategically placed actors in any organization or network can exert disproportionate influence derivative of their position.⁶ In this regard, the powerplay argument demonstrates how US hegemony and power was not simply material but also relational. That is, by positioning itself as the central economic and military hub among a group of disconnected states in Asia, the United States rendered itself indispensable to the region’s stability and welfare. The United States made itself the exclusive partner of countries that were distrustful of one another, which afforded it a great deal of leeway and advantage in these relationships.

Network power is also sometimes operationalized as bargaining strength. A central “node” (state) with interconnections within a cluster

of states and between clusters has bargaining strength granted to it solely by its position. This was where the United States sat in Asia, allowing it great leverage in negotiations with and between its Asian partners and allies. Moreover, the states in the network lacked “exit” options or the possibility to “delink.”⁷ The existence of outside options is an important factor in assessing the network power of any given state in a networked system. If there are no exit options for states, or few opportunities to delink from a network, the power of the strategically placed states increases. This was the position of the United States in Asia under Cold War bipolarity. With few alternative options for these non-communist states, the United States was granted a great deal of power and influence over their decisions and development, thus making the system durable. In the end, the strength and durability of the US position was overdetermined.⁸ It exercised both supreme material power and network power.

The powerplay argument also challenges traditional propositions held out by international relations theory about the “alliance security dilemma” of abandonment and entrapment.⁹ The prevailing causal proposition is that a country who fears that an ally might pull it into an unwanted dispute will adopt distancing strategies—such as weakening commitments, reducing aid, or even abrogating the alliance contract—to avoid entrapment. The powerplay argument shows that, on the contrary, states may *tighten* rather than loosen the alliance in order to exert more direct restraint and stop the ally from taking undesirable actions. In this regard, I highlight the active rather than passive strategies for dealing with entrapment fears.

Finally, the powerplay argument has predictive implications for the institutional design of Asia. It explains that the US alliance system, as an informal empire, has endured for so long because of material and social power. But my argument also suggests that the factors that led to the establishment of the bilateral alliance system are not as relevant today. Although the deterrence element is still important, relatively speaking, the control element of US alliances in Asia is not as compelling in modern strategic thinking. Concerns about overzealous smaller allies entrapping America in a bigger war that animated US Cold War thinking are not as operative today. Connections among the spokes in the form of bilateral and multilateral institutions have sprouted today in a way not present during the Cold War. Moreover, these interconnections are encouraged by the United States in a way that was also not the case during the Cold War. As the aide to the Secretary of State suggested, the security multilateralization of Asia is an idea whose time has come.

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What is striking about the puzzle of Asia's security bilateralism and Europe's multilateralism are the similarities in structural and substructural conditions.¹⁰ Both regions experienced the defeat of a rising hegemonic power and witnessed a potential power vacuum at the end of World War II. Both regions faced a proximate communist threat. Both regions saw the United States extend security guarantees to allies against this threat. Both regions focused on economic development and recovery as a top postwar priority. And two dominant strategic beliefs informed US policymakers about both regions: First, the importance of constructing a multilateral world order, infused with US desires for collective security and representative institutions; and second, the importance of the domino theory—i.e., preventing the loss of even one intrinsically insignificant country to communism because of the potential cascading effect this could have on other countries falling to communism.

Despite these similar conditions and congruent intentions by the United States to design security institutions in postwar Europe and Asia, Washington acts, as one author described, with “half-hearted commitment” and “indifference” to one region while it dives into a “forceful policy” seeking “enduring peace” in the other.¹¹ One region turns into a collective defense organization while the other does not. By the early 1950s, a twelve-member multilateral security organization is institutionalized in Europe with all the bells and whistles—a bureaucratic apparatus, integrated military planning, and central command structure. Security in Asia, however, is characterized by a series of bilateral alliances—known as the “San Francisco system” or hub and spokes—centered on the United States with no apparent connections between them. The United States independently inked bilateral security treaties with the Philippines (August 1951), Japan (September 1951), South Korea (October 1953), Formosa/Taiwan (December 1954), and a single trilateral arrangement with Australia and New Zealand (September 1951). The exception to this in form was the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), created in 1954 as an inclusive regional security apparatus. But in substance there was no collective security provision (such as NATO's Article V) regarding an attack on one member as constituting an attack on all members, and the power disparities between the United States and these small Southeast Asian nations rendered irrelevant the notion of a multilateral institution with all members sharing a seat at the table with America. Because each state preferred bilateral relations with the

United States, experts assessed that SEATO was “little more than a traditional alliance, embodying none of the multilateral features of NATO.”¹² These American-Asian bilateral alliances were not only discrete, but on the whole they each exhibited little institutional structure and enjoyed less joint military planning than their European counterparts.¹³

Two questions emerge from this puzzle: First, why does bilateralism take hold in Asia as opposed to a more sophisticated form of multilateralism as the dominant security structure? And second, if the answer to the first question is that the United States intended for there to be two disparate designs, this still raises the question of *why* the United States preferred bilateralism rather than multilateralism in Asia?

EXPLANATIONS

Power and Threats

Realist arguments trace the differences in the institutional designs of Asia and Europe to the explanatory variables of threats, geography, hegemonic power, and relative costs.¹⁴ With threats and geography in particular, the nature of the external threat faced in Europe determined the type of alliances that were needed. The United States and its allies faced 200 Soviet ground divisions, realists might argue, on a contiguous continental piece of territory, with a clear dividing line between the two sides on the German front. This combination of threat and geography required a collective, multilateral response—the United States had neither the resources nor the manpower to prepare for such a contingency on its own. The nature of the military-operational imperatives therefore determined the shape of the alliance. In Asia, by contrast, there was no similar military contingency in the Soviet Far East as that in Western Europe.¹⁵ There were land contingencies in Northeast Asia (Korea) and in Southeast Asia (Indochina), but there was also a maritime theater in Northeast Asia (the Taiwan Straits) as well as allied responsibilities as far as the South Pacific Ocean. Such a situation was not conducive to a single overarching collective umbrella alliance.

Realists may also point to regional hegemony as an explanatory variable.¹⁶ The United States had no feasible incentive for building multilateralism in Asia, having established itself as the supreme power in the region at the end of World War II. It had just forced an unconditional surrender by the rising challenger in the region, Japan; militarily occupied the country; and established itself as a key underwriter of security

for Asia. Subjecting this hegemonic position to a multilateral committee of powers was neither desirable (given all the costs borne by the United States) nor feasible (given the absence of any comparable power equivalents).

Realism could also point to relative cost concerns regarding nuclear weapons and military doctrine to explain bilateralism in Asia.¹⁷ In particular, the Eisenhower administration sought to bolster America's security guarantees embodied in the Truman Doctrine with a "New Look" strategy that featured the deterrent threat of massive retaliation. This doctrine, combined with a mandate for fiscal conservatism, inclined the United States away from the need for a costly and major integration of the regional security architecture in Asia. Bilateral alliances were cost-efficient in a way that multilateralism was not. They did enough to show the US commitment to defend and deter, reinforced by the doctrine of massive retaliation.¹⁸

These realist explanations are persuasive; however, they tend to reinforce the puzzle rather than solve it. First, if external threats are the primary determinant of the alliance's design (i.e., multilateral or bilateral), then this should have had a somewhat uniform rather than disparate effect across the two regions. Granted, the Soviet threat was much more in the face of Europeans on the ground than in Asia, where the threat was diversely continental and maritime.¹⁹ But as Adlai Stevenson noted, the United States clearly saw the alliance network in Asia as focused on the Soviet Union as well.²⁰ While there was no geographic dividing line in Asia as clear as that in Germany, the United States did draw—in Dean Acheson's famous 1950 "defense perimeter" speech—a clear line of defense across the continental and maritime areas, defining American strategic interests in Asia. Moreover, the United States faced another threat in China. Not only did the Chinese present a ground contingency that the United States had to prepare for, but the threat was an existential one for US allies, demonstrated by the Chinese intervention in the Korean War. The point here is that arguments about large operational ground contingencies determining the collective shape of alliance designs in Europe should have yielded similar predictions in Asia, where a ground war was *actually fought* rather than just planned for.

In this regard then, the Korean War poses an extremely perplexing puzzle. The Korean War was the one place where the budding Cold War turned hot. By the fifth month of the war in 1950, the United States found itself fighting a ground contingency on the Asian continent. This crystallized the existential communist threat for the United States and

prompted a wide-ranging security multilateralization in Europe, reintegration of Germany, and militarization of NATO. Yet it did *not* lead to a similar multilateral design in Asia. The realist irony therefore is that the one military contingency that deepened the coherence of NATO as a collective defense body took place in Asia, not Europe. Furthermore, if the predominant fear among US planners across *both* regions was the domino theory, then the attack against South Korea should have led to somewhat similar responses in the two regions. Yet the United States responded to the same core security event in disparate ways across the two regions. Realism is certainly helpful, but there appears to be more at play in understanding these differences than just threats.

Finally, if realists point to the cost-effectiveness of the massive retaliation strategy during the Eisenhower years or to US regional hegemony as the reasons that multilateralism did not take root in Asia, this begs the question as to why a similar outcome did not obtain in Europe where both variables were also present. If the United States thought that security bilateralism was the more affordable option, then why was this not the case for Europe as well, where the United States was underwriting huge costs associated with the Marshall Plan and European reconstruction? From the end of the Second World War, through the Marshall Plan, and up to 1953, the United States poured nearly \$25 billion into Europe. Given that in Asia the corresponding figure was just shy of \$6 billion, it is hard to argue that the United States was primarily concerned with relative costs.²¹ Realists might respond that it served US hegemonic interests to administer bilateralism in Asia and multilateralism in Europe. But this still begs the question as to *why* the United States perceived this balance to be optimal.

Economic Development and Institutions

A liberalist interpretation would likely trace the variation in security structures in Asia and Europe to several variables, such as economic development, regime type, and the absolute gains-motivated interests of states in the region.²² First, levels of economic development in Asia were very low. Despite the destruction of the war, Europe was still a global economic powerhouse. The combined GDP of the twelve largest Western European countries was equivalent to \$967 billion in 1946, and would reach \$2.1 trillion by 1960.²³ The comparative figure of the United States' East Asian allies and partners was just \$140 billion in 1946 (\$28 billion without Japan), rising to \$492 billion in 1960 (\$117 billion without

Japan).²⁴ These figures show that although there was a fair amount of growth in Asia, aside from Japan there was very little economic heft. This was not conducive to an intraregional trading order which would have been an important spur to greater multilateralism in the region. In Europe, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) was created in 1951 with the distinct purposes of revitalizing the member economies, of eventually creating a single market, and of peacefully uniting the continent more generally. In Asia, these sorts of multilateral economic groupings proved to be a much harder sell.

Low levels of economic development in Asia, liberals may also argue, reinforced bilateralism because most of the regional powers were able to secure their material needs from the United States alone. For example, between 1948 and 1960, US-Japan trade annually averaged nearly 28 percent of Japan's total.²⁵ Between 1953 and 1960, US trade comprised nearly 32 percent of Taiwan's total and approximately 45 percent of South Korea's.²⁶ There was neither an incentive nor any likelihood of success in venturing outside the bilateral relationship to others in the region for help. In Western Europe, for instance, the intraregional trade volume steadily increased from \$8.5 billion in 1948 up to more than \$29 billion by 1960. Intraregional Asian trade, by comparison, started out at a paltry \$167 million and capped out at just over \$1.2 billion over the same period.²⁷ The total volume of aggregate trade during these years was nearly twenty-five times greater in Europe than in Asia.²⁸ The priority of Asian countries at the end of World War II was economic reconstruction, and only one partner mattered.²⁹

Augmenting this disincentive was the wide variety of regime types in the region. Unlike the liberal democracies of Western Europe, the types of domestic political systems in Asia ranged widely from authoritarian to democratic. Japan, for starters, was a full-blown constitutional democracy by the end of the occupation in 1952. Korea and Taiwan, on the other hand, were fairly repressive authoritarian regimes right up until the 1980s and 1990s. Thailand's record was mixed in this period, but it tended to lean toward authoritarianism. And the Philippines was similarly mixed, but it leaned toward democracy.³⁰ Unlike the community of liberal democracies in Europe, the diversity of regime types in Asia made it that much more difficult to organize in a multilateral fashion.³¹

Liberal theorists would also note that any regional institution's success rests on the enthusiasm or shared interests of its membership. Arguably while this existed in Europe, no similar support was exhibited by Asian nation-states. The reasons for this ambivalence were many, but the

most prominent was postcolonialism. That is, governments that had just been liberated from Japanese colonial rule, and prior to that European colonial rule, were in no mood to surrender their newly won sovereignty to some larger regional body. Asian states also harbored a deep distrust of re-integrating Japan into the region, which naturally would have had to play a large role in any regional security organization.³²

Liberalism is useful in understanding the complexities of postwar security institution-building in Asia, but there is the issue of relative consistency—that is, many of the impediments to multilateral cooperation in Asia cited could be equally applicable to Europe, yet we see dissimilar outcomes. For example, Europe lay in total destruction after the war and sought a great deal more support from the United States than its Asian counterparts. As noted previously, from the end of the war up until 1953 the amount of US aid to Europe was more than four times greater than that to Asia. In addition, the distrust of postwar Germany by Europeans was no less vehement than that experienced in Asia vis-à-vis Japan. As French Foreign Minister Robert Schumann told his National Assembly in 1949, the question of German accession to NATO “cannot be raised. . . . Germany has no army and may not have one. She has no weapons and will not be allowed to acquire them.”³³ Some in Britain were equally wary, with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster arguing in 1948 that a rearmed West Germany would constitute “the greatest danger to world peace.”³⁴ But Germany saw far more successful reintegration in a regional security organization.³⁵ It eventually acceded to NATO in 1955 and would go on to become the conventional fulcrum of European defense, maintaining about 500,000 troops from the mid-1960s onward—among the greatest forces in Western Europe.³⁶

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the absence of multilateralism in Asia was not for lack of supporters of the idea. There were countries in the region that were interested in building some form of regional security. Regional players voiced proposals during the Vietnam War in the late 1960s and early 1970s, for example, to turn the Vietnam War allies’ conference as well as a regional cultural organization known as the Asian-Pacific Council (ASPAC) into a “PATO-like” organization.³⁷ The fact that such proposals never took root is puzzling. Finally, regime theory would predict that hegemonic concentrations of power should be conducive to multilateralism.³⁸ But this argument also lacks relative consistency. While it can explain the creation of NATO, the European Common Market, and GATT, a similar if not more concentrated distribution of power existed in Asia without similar outcomes.³⁹

But what is most puzzling is the question of American volition.⁴⁰ While many assert that the United States chose to pursue one form of security in Europe and not in Asia, they cannot explain why the choice was made. John Ruggie, for example, writing in 1997 on the origins of multilateralism, stated that the United States chose not to pursue multilateralism in Asia because “the situation on the ground there made that impossible,” but does not delve deeper to explain this American choice.⁴¹ Robert Gilpin (though not a liberal) wrote in 1989 that the United States always subordinated the Pacific to the Atlantic in every aspect of economic and political affairs.⁴² Liberalism argues that 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).⁴³ If this requires on the part of the United States more cost, more input, and more attention, then this begs the question: Why did the United States pursue this laborious effort in Europe and not Asia? John Ikenberry’s answer is that the United States made the effort in Europe because it wanted more out of the European experiment than it wanted out of Asia. The United States therefore was willing to construct multilateral institutions in Europe that would allow its power to be constrained by these institutions in return for more benefits from Europe. This was not the case in Asia: “Conditions did not favor Atlantic-style multilateralism. . . . the United States was dominant in East Asia yet wanted less out of the region, so the United States found it less necessary to give up policy autonomy in exchange for institutional cooperation there. . . . To get what it wanted, the United States had to bargain with the Europeans, and this meant agreeing to institutionally restrain and commit its power.”⁴⁴

Ikenberry is correct in explaining how postwar multilateralism in trans-Atlantic relations required more effort and compromise on the part of the United States. In this sense, the United States exercised a deliberate form of self-restraint as the wartime victor, which enabled it to create a stable, rule-abiding order. His depiction of the postwar strategy in Asia deserves closer examination, however. Did the United States really pursue bilateralism in Asia because it “wanted less” from Asian countries? The tradable “commodity” in building postwar order that Ikenberry describes is essentially control. He argues that the United States surrendered some of this political control in order to gain institutional cooperation from European allies. The obverse of this logic is that the United States chose bilateralism in Asia not because it “wanted less” from Asia but because it wanted and needed *more* political control than in Europe.

Why then was the United States willing to concede a degree of policy autonomy in Europe but not in Asia? It is this aspect of America's postwar order-building that requires further attention.

Distrust and Racism

Constructivism would attribute the absence of a NATO-like security organization in Asia not to issues of power, but to identity.⁴⁵ In particular, countries held a deep historical distrust of Japan as part of their postwar, postcolonial, nationalist identity that trumped all incentive-based arguments for re-integrating the former adversary as part of a regional order.⁴⁶ Even if there was American interest in cultivating regional security institutions in Asia, as John Foster Dulles observed in a *Foreign Affairs* article in January 1952, Asian states “have memories of Japanese aggression which are so vivid that they are reluctant to create a Mutual Security Pact which will include Japan.”⁴⁷

Undeniably, Asian nations were wary of working with Japan after World War II; however, again like both the realist and liberal arguments, there is the issue of relative consistency. Europeans faced a similar situation regarding Germany in 1945, as one author described, where a capitalist union of democracies was “unimaginable” and Franco-German cooperation as its pillar was “even more remote.”⁴⁸ But there, the postwar regional re-integration project was a priority of the United States. Germany had to be brought back into the fold in Western Europe for the sake of stability and order. Why not a similar priority for Japan in Asia? Second, as noted earlier, while not denying that Asian countries certainly distrusted Japan after the war, this did not stop some countries like Taiwan and South Korea from advocating an Asian form of NATO during the Cold War years. During the Korean War, for example, Taipei offered to join forces with the United States, the ROK, and Japan in a collective anti-communist alliance. But, as Miles Kahler and others have observed, rather than adopt the idea, the United States decidedly resisted it.⁴⁹

Constructivists and social historians offer race as a related explanation for the disparity in security structures. Although Europe and Asia lay in ruins after World War II, what distinguished the former theater was an expectation or belief that one was dealing with “grown-ups” in Europe rather than the “children” in Asia. European powers were assumed to re-emerge eventually as great powers with which the United States still shared a common civilization, and therefore these states would be able to manage a more complex organizational design that assumed

responsibilities and sophistication on the part of member states.⁵⁰ No such expectations, however, existed with regard to states in Asia.⁵¹ As Blum describes, Americans viewed postwar Asia as “foreign,” almost alien, and further down on the international relations food chain:

American politicians and diplomats, who were of European ancestry, who had occasionally traveled to Europe, and who were familiar with its languages and culture, felt much more comfortable dealing with the problems of Western Europe. Their images and understanding of Asia were much more vague . . . They watched Asia, and especially China worriedly, but held back from taking an activist role.⁵²

The small, postcolonial powers were not perceived to be capable of handling the responsibilities of multilateralism. A State Department memo from 1953 encapsulates these views:

[T]he plain fact is that any Western joint action in Asia must carry with it the clear implication that we do not take the Asians very seriously and in fact regard them as inferiors. We should not be able to avoid this implication because that is indeed our attitude.⁵³

For constructivists and social historians, racism could not be disentangled from distrust in these views. Europe was devastated, yet would rise from the ashes again. As Assistant Secretary of State Will Clayton stated unabashedly in a 1949 testimony on NATO, “my idea would be that in the beginning the [postwar] union would be composed of all countries that have our ideas and ideals of freedom and that are composed of the white race.”⁵⁴ Those with a common civilizational rooting could be trusted to work with the United States. Asia, by contrast, was devastated and in need of direction: “The image of Asia, racist and utterly uninformed, was of a region with vast resources and opportunities, populated by dutiful and cringing peoples who followed white leadership.”⁵⁵ The idea of small, yellow and brown, uneducated people sharing a multilateral table as equals with Ivy League–educated East Coast intellectuals was beyond comprehension (Acheson once testified that the United States was contending with “simple and mostly illiterate people” in Asia).⁵⁶ As Hemmer and Katzenstein note, “In the case of Asia, these various affinities [shared with Europeans] and trust were 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 US preference for multilateral or bilateral security arrangements followed from these different constellations.”⁵⁷

There is no denying racism in these early views of Asia and the idea that this racism may have fed deep-seeded feelings of Asians as distrustful partners.⁵⁸ The problem with this argument, however, is that the puzzle it explains is *not* the multilateralism puzzle. Arguments about racism help to explain why the “Europe-firsters” carried the day over “Asia-firsters” inside of the US government. But there is not necessarily a direct causal link between this relative prioritization of regions and the design of security institutions that follow. Social historians have utilized the race argument to explain, for example, why Dean Acheson as Secretary of State was unapologetic about his Atlanticist leanings and his conspicuous dearth of interest in Asia. To the extent that he cared about Asia, it was only to beat back Republican criticisms that his State Department had botched China policy. Acheson made eleven trips to Europe but none to Asia during his term, and those within the US government who pleaded for greater attention to Asia in postwar planning went unheard. Nevertheless this variable does not explain why multilateralism was preferred in Europe but not Asia. The fact that Western Europe was prioritized over Asia does not logically mean that a different type of security institution was to emerge in each part of the world. After establishing their argument about the collective identities of the two regions, Hemmer and Katzenstein even admit that “available evidence is relatively sketchy and permits only cautious inferences,”⁵⁹ and at best one could surmise that the institutional variation in security design may have flowed from these disparate identities.⁶⁰ Despite these best efforts by astute scholars, ignorance or prejudice as causal variables only gets as far as regional priorities of the United States between Europe and Asia.

Finally, while all of these explanations are helpful, none of them speak to the fundamental and human element of uncertainty that the United States faced in Asia after World War II. The future path seemed very unclear. The United States had just fought a bloody war in the Pacific with a brutal enemy in Japan to an unconditional surrender in August 1945, but lacked any clear direction or conviction about what was to follow in terms of the relationship between Asia’s only great power and the region. A plethora of new nation-states were emerging out of an era of European and Japanese imperialism without a clear organizing structure for the region. Unlike in Europe, the United States had to contend with two significant actors in East Asia—the Republic of China and Republic of

Korea—both of which were divided countries with authoritarian leaders embroiled in civil wars (against mainland China and North Korea respectively). Because leaders are much less likely to compromise in civil conflicts than in international ones,⁶¹ Washington could predict with less certainty whether these countries would follow the dictates of a multilateral grouping, especially when their interests were far from those of the coalition.⁶² The most proximate counterpart in Europe was a divided Germany, but there was less concern about adventurist leaders who might take unauthorized actions. The process of dealing with a postwar Germany was much more carefully considered by the European powers than was the case for China or Korea after 1945. Further clouding the picture in Asia was the problem of Japan. Washington knew that the loser in the Pacific War would eventually re-emerge as the region's only great power; yet, how to deal with this eventuality was unclear, especially when most of Japan's former colonies in the region harbored intense distrust, if not hatred, of the country's playing a larger role again.

The point of this exposition is not to argue that all prior explanations are incorrect. On the contrary, they all contribute pieces of an eclectic answer to the puzzle.⁶³ My effort is to use the powerplay variable to help complete the story of why disparate postwar institutional designs emerged in the Asian and European regions. The United States would deliberately choose a unique design for Asia based on a desire to control the environment and reduce uncertainty. This story will be told in the pages that follow, but understanding why states use alliance institutions to manage risk in their external security environment is important, and will be dealt with in the next chapter. Chapter 3 will provide an overview of US grand strategy in Asia after the Second World War. This chapter provides the context for the three case study chapters on Taiwan (chapter 4), Korea (chapter 5), and Japan (chapter 6). Chapter 7 is devoted to addressing counter-arguments and alternative explanations to my powerplay thesis. Chapter 8 first looks at the generalizability of the powerplay argument. It then takes the story of US alliances in Asia to the present day, assessing the resiliency of the American hub and spokes network in the context of new forms of regional architecture emerging in Asia.