



Doubling Down on Asia

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IN REVIEW

Victor D. Cha, *Power Play: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton University Press, 2016).

Michael R. Auslin, *The End of the Asian Century: War, Stagnation and Risks to the World's Most Dynamic Region* (Yale University Press, 2017).

With the Chinese government aggressively militarizing the South China Sea and U.S. President Donald Trump scuttling the Trans-Pacific Partnership, there appears no clear answer to Beijing's "One Belt, One Road" initiative. In fact, U.S. foreign policy thinkers are casting about for a strategy in Asia. What is to be done? Victor Cha's *Power Play* and Michael Auslin's *End of the Asian Century* recommends that the United States "double-down," an expression Cha uses repeatedly, on its time-tested strategy of containing Chinese power in Asia.

Power Play explores why Washington chose the "hub and spokes" security system for post-1945 Asia, whereby America (the hub) forged "tightly held and exclusive, one-to-one bilateral partnerships" with its regional allies (the spokes). Cha, a political scientist, former member of George W. Bush's National Security Council, and (at the time of this writing) soon-to-be U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, argues that "bilateral control is more effective and efficient." The multilateralism that characterized the U.S.-Europe relationship would have "diluted" American influence in Asia, "putting decisions to committees rather than by fiat." Indeed, Cha contends, Washington's "distrust and suspicions of smaller allies entrapping" America in a "larger war" was of an entirely different "scale" in Asia than in Europe. Taiwan's Chiang Kai-shek obsessed about retaking mainland China; South Korea's Syngman Rhee wanted to unify forcefully the peninsula. Both men labored to escalate their respective conflicts as if propelling their American ally toward locking horns with the

USSR, China, or both. Additionally, Chiang and Rhee sought to combine their efforts and leverage their ties with the United States to accomplish their goals.

Cha argues that U.S. leaders found such behavior by their allies intolerable. But instead of distancing the United States from men like Chiang and Rhee, U.S. leaders chose the “power play” strategy. Washington substantially increased its bilateral commitments to Taiwan and South Korea to make them more reliant on the United States. By “doubling down,” Cha argues, America became the “central economic and military hub among a group of disconnected states in Asia,” controlling an alliance framework that “much resembled an informal empire.” Deploying a wide range of instruments (e.g., the United States retained operational control of South Korean forces), the informal American empire could easily coerce its “intransigent” allies to dial back their provocative tendencies, “chaining Chiang” to Taiwan and placing “Rhee-strait” upon South Korea, and dispelling any collaboration between Taipei and Seoul. Control, Cha intimates, was everything to Washington. America used the same strategy vis-à-vis Japan with the “subtlety of a billy club,” Cha writes, even though Japan’s postwar leaders did not entertain the kind of expansionist designs that fired Chiang’s and Rhee’s minds. U.S. leaders reasoned that to fend off communist influence in Japan and rebuild its former enemy into an engine for Asia’s economic growth, American administrators of occupied Japan must have “absolute control” over the nation’s “postwar disposition.” The argument, on its face, seems compelling.

But while *Power Play* seems to suggest that Washington chose the “hub and spokes” system for Asia, Cha insists that “whether this was the American intention is not the subject of this book.” In the preface, Cha states that the “issue of American volition”—“why did the United States *choose* a particular security design for Asia”—merits a journal article, “maybe even a book (*italics in original*.)” *Power Play* is not that book. And upon closer inspection, Cha’s study actually reveals that Chiang and Rhee exercised such nettlesome independence of thought and action that U.S. leaders had little choice but to “double down.” In Cha’s own words, Chiang was so wedded to his goals that America’s “only answer” was to use “deep bilateral ties to control all downside risk from unpredictable leaders” like Chiang. Rhee, too, frustrated Washington to the point that Cha concedes that “the only path was to “double-down.”

The more intensely American officials distrusted Chiang and Rhee, the fewer options Washington enjoyed in either relationship. Furthermore, Cha emphasizes frequently that U.S. strategy was seized by “domino-theory-thinking” and “could not afford to abandon these countries.” Perhaps unintentionally, *Power Play* proves that small- and medium-sized states enjoy significant latitude for pursuing agendas at odds with that of their superpower patron and that such willfulness brings the reward of their patron’s deepening commitment to them. Cha argues that these smaller U.S. allies discerned and welcomed how America’s “doubling down” broadly benefited them and their regimes. Through such mechanisms, small- and medium-sized states wield an under-appreciated influence upon regional and global affairs.

As the book closes, it strains to bring its study of America’s “power play” to bear on contemporary U.S.-Asian relations. This work might have benefited, however, by examining U.S.-Southeast Asian relations as well. Here, though, the

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