The United States and East Asia in the Postwar Era

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World War II was a watershed in American involvement in East Asia. Before Pearl Harbor, businessmen, missionaries, and independent diplomats favored passive and reactive US policies. But after 1945, the United States asserted its military power and political influence in East Asia in pursuit of regional hegemony. No longer satisfied with offering a model for emulation, postwar US policymakers believed that they had a special talent for restructuring the lives of liberated colonial people. To be sure, the reality of the Cold War in Europe was a powerful force behind the conviction of US leaders that an assertive policy was essential to prevent the Soviet Union from persuading people in Asia to embrace communism. But the United States already had made plain its intention to impose an American vision of social, economic, and political affairs on East Asia during the war at the Cairo Conference in 1943 and the Yalta Conference in 1945. The American quest to remake East Asia in its own image would become the unifying theme of postwar affairs across the Pacific, creating a predictable pattern of US frustration and failure.

Historian Paul Schroeder (1958) has argued that China was at the heart of the Japanese–American dispute that led to war in 1941, and it was also at the center of US foreign policy calculations toward postwar Asia. President Franklin D. Roosevelt had expected that China would be one of the four major powers acting to preserve peace and stability in the postwar world. But the contest between the Guomindang or Nationalist Party of Jiang Jieshi and the Communist Party under Mao Zedong resumed after Japan surrendered. Mao prevailed, establishing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949. Anti-communist conservatives in the United States, especially Republicans, charged that President Harry S. Truman had “lost China” because he had allowed communist sympathizers in the State Department to subvert Jiang’s government. Historians initially focused their research on this question, quickly concluding that the United States, short of military intervention, could not have prevented the triumph of communism in China. In August 1949, the State Department issued the “China White Paper” to disarm its critics, blaming Jiang for his own demise. Although Herbert Feis (1953) and Foster Rhea Dulles (1972) supported this view, Tang Tsou (1963) and Ernest R. May (1975) blamed the US failure in China on misguided idealism.

Early writings about US China policy mostly recounted the interactions between governments and their leaders. “Traditionalist” historians in the decade after World
Wartime – notably Thomas A. Bailey, Armin Rappaport, and Richard W. Leopold – wrote top-down history that focused on elites and consistently portrayed the United States as a nation seeking idealistic and altruistic objectives in world affairs. The Cold War reinforced their conviction in the fundamental goodness of US foreign policy. During the 1950s, however, a new school of writers known as the “realists” challenged traditionalist assumptions. Hans Morgenthau, Robert E. Osgood, and Norman A. Graebner argued that US pursuit of idealistic goals abroad had ignored the vital necessity of advancing and protecting fundamental national interests. While viewing American motives as admirable, realists described US policies as invariably unwise and often disastrous. The debate between idealism and realism would dominate the field of US diplomatic history until the Vietnam War shattered this framework.

Trade had been a central motive behind initial American expansion into the Pacific, yet surprisingly historians did not stress the economic motives behind postwar US policy in Asia until the 1960s. Fred Harvey Harrington (1944) set the stage for moving analysis in this direction with his study of US relations with Korea at the end of the nineteenth century. And William Appleman Williams, who followed Harrington at the University of Wisconsin, created a new interpretive school with his *Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959) that relied on economic determinism to explain a US foreign policy obsessed with opening new commercial and financial markets overseas. His students, especially Walter LaFeber, Thomas McCormick, and Lloyd C. Gardner, published prolific studies that portrayed the United States as an aggressive power seeking to impose its will on a reluctant world for economic gain. US intervention in Vietnam during the 1960s seemed to support this interpretation, causing many young historians to join the “Wisconsin School.” These New Left revisionists wrote passionately about malevolent US policies in East Asia, but at times without the benefit of access to still-classified government documents.

Traditionalists, realists, and revisionists would fight their most heated historiographical battle over the origins of the Cold War, with their attention focused primarily on Europe. But Joyce and Gabriel Kolko (1972), Richard J. Barnet (1968), and Walter LaFeber (1967) advanced a revisionist critique of postwar US policy in East Asia. During the 1970s, the availability of an increasing number of US government documents resulted in studies that seemed to belong to a new so-called post-revisionist synthesis school. John Lewis Gaddis (1982) led this school, but applied its perspective mainly to US policy in Europe rather than Asia. Many scholars – including Akira Iriye (1974), Nagai Yonosuke and Iriye (1977), John Chay (1977), and Dorothy Borg and Waldo Heinrichs (1980) – rejected the Cold War framework for understanding postwar US–East Asian relations. Among the issues that post-revisionist writers addressed was not whether the United States “lost” China, but if it could have found the new China. Warren I. Cohen (1980), William Stueck (1981), and Nancy B. Tucker (1983) argued that the United States missed an opportunity to reach an accord with the PRC after 1949. Chinese oral and written accounts later led Chen Jian (1994), Shu Guang Zhang (1995), and Michael Sheng (1997) to conclude that Mao’s revolutionary ideology ruled out accepting US offers of reconciliation, if in fact extended.

Vietnam moved China from center stage in writings on US–East Asian relations. As the war ended in 1975, younger scholars predictably began to investigate
the assertive postwar involvement of the United States elsewhere in Asia as a way to explain the disastrous American experience in Vietnam. For most of these writers, anti-communism, containment, and the Cold War were the motivating forces behind US policy in Asia. Truman initiated the pattern for global American intervention when he relied on alarmist rhetoric in his Truman Doctrine speech of March 1947 to build public support for a policy to contain the perceived Soviet threat to Western Europe. Russell H. Fifield (1973), Gary R. Hess (1987), and Marc S. Gallicchio (1988) portrayed US containment in Asia as an incremental policy to defend its interests. But by 1949, Truman had deserted Roosevelt’s policy of accelerating the liberation of colonial peoples and was actively opposing Asia’s revolutionary nationalist movements. Andrew J. Rotter (1987) and Lloyd C. Gardner (1988) point to this shift as evidence of a purposeful neocolonialist policy aimed at achieving regional economic hegemony. Washington, for example, strongly supported Britain’s efforts beginning in 1946 to reassert colonial rule over Malaya where it faced military opposition from the Malay Communist Party.

Containment dictated Truman’s policy in the Dutch East Indies as well. The popular nationalist leader Sukarno had proclaimed an independent Republic of Indonesia in August 1945, but the Dutch were determined to reassert colonial sovereignty over the sprawling archipelago that they had ruled with an iron fist before World War II. At first, the Truman administration was neutral, but Robert J. McMahon (1981) has shown how a need for European partners in the Cold War caused US leaders not to contest the legal right of the Netherlands to resume its position as “territorial sovereign.” Thereafter, US Marshall Plan aid facilitated indirectly two unsuccessful “police actions” to suppress the Indonesian independence movement. Washington’s policy shifted only after Sukarno suppressed a communist rebellion within its ranks in 1948. In the end, the Truman administration’s threat to withhold economic and military aid to the Netherlands unless it clearly and irrevocably committed itself to terminating colonial rule brought independence for Indonesia in December 1949. Similar pressure persuaded Britain to grant independence to Burma in 1948, although US officials were unsure about the new leader, U Nu, and concerned about his anti-communist credentials.

Cold War concerns also dominated US policy in the Philippines. In 1946, the United States fulfilled its 1934 promise to grant independence to the island nation. In return for economic assistance, the new Philippine Republic’s foreign policy followed the American anti-communist line. The US government maintained its strategic interests in the Philippines through a series of military agreements that allowed continued use of the Philippines as a military base for projecting its power in post-colonial Asia. Stephen R. Shalom (1981) sees US dominance extending to economic relations and neocolonial exploitation, but Nick Cullather (1994) and H. W. Brands (1992) maintain that Philippine leaders manipulated the United States to achieve their own agenda. Still, US efforts led to the election of Ramon Magsaysay as president, who worked with Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative Edward G. Lansdale to crush the communist Hukbalahap insurgency.

Postwar American fears of communist expansion in Asia also shaped US policy toward Japan. Richard B. Finn (1992) supports Edwin O. Reischauer’s (1950) and Justin Williams’s (1979) view that the United States was a benevolent occupier with the admiration, support, and trust of the Japanese people. William Borden (1984),
however, maintains that Washington restructured Japan to serve its economic interests, while John W. Dower (1999) presents US policy as ambiguous, arrogant, bungling, and culturally insensitive. Retaining Emperor Hirohito and working through existing parliamentary institutions and the bureaucracy, occupation officials, in the initial phase, tried to demilitarize and democratize Japan to prevent a revival of the militaristic imperialism that had led to war. In 1947, the new Japanese Constitution renounced war as an instrument of national policy and accepted parliamentary democracy. Steps to democratize Japan’s economy made landholders out of tenant farmers, broke up large economic combines (zaibatsu), and encouraged trade unionism.

Howard B. Schonberger (1989) and Michael Schaller (1985) also see the Cold War, rather than altruism, as dictating US occupation policy in Japan. The “reverse course” in 1947 and 1948 ended reform and enacted measures to build Japan into a bulwark against communist expansion in Asia. Japanese conservatives exploited this reverse course to justify purging leftists from government and revoking those reforms they disliked. During the Korean War, the United States and Japan created their security partnership with the Japanese Peace Treaty and the US–Japan Security Treaty of 1951. US occupation formally ended in 1952, leaving a divided legacy, Aaron Forsberg (2000) has observed, of democratic reform and an alliance with Japan’s conservative establishment that would be an enduring source of inspiration and friction for future Japanese–American relations.

Simultaneous US military occupation of Korea from 1945 to 1948 led to a far less favorable outcome, mainly because in August 1945, with the defeat of Japan at hand, Truman hastily persuaded the Soviets to accept division of the Korean peninsula into two zones of military occupation. As the Cold War deepened, the temporary division at the 38th parallel became permanent in 1948, separating two hostile regimes. While Carl Berger (1957), Soon-sung Cho (1967), and Charles M. Dobbs (1981) praise the United States for saving half the nation from communism, they criticize it for not building a stronger South Korea and inviting an attack from the North. But James I. Matray (1985), John Merrill (1989), and Ronald L. McIlwraith (1993) show how, in fact, Washington implemented a policy of qualified containment in Korea. US leaders knew that South Korea’s survival was in jeopardy when Moscow and Beijing signed the Sino-Soviet Pact in February 1950, establishing a bilateral defense commitment and initiating a modest Soviet aid program to China. Equating Korea with Vietnam, however, Bruce Cumings (1981) and Peter Lowe (1986) assert that Washington had blocked revolutionary change in Korea, resulting in the imposition of a repressive dictatorship on the South.

On June 25, 1950, when North Korea’s attack on South Korea ignited the Korean War, Truman sent ground forces a week later after self-defense failed because he saw communist control over Korea as a threat to Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Robert Leckie (1962), T. R. Fehrenbach (1963), Glenn D. Paige (1968), and Joseph Goulden (1982) agree with the Truman administration that the Soviet Union ordered North Korea to attack. During the 1980s, however, a consensus emerged that, as Burton I. Kaufman (1986), Callum A. McDonald (1986), and Bruce Cumings (1990) contend, Washington had intervened in a civil war. War, in fact, had been underway in Korea for two years, as violent border clashes occurred at the 38th parallel, with the South Koreans usually acting as the instigators. Soviet documents
released during the 1990s reveal that Joseph Stalin consistently refused before April 1950 to approve North Korean leader Kim Il Sung’s plans for invasion. But following Mao’s victory in China, pressure grew on Stalin to support the same outcome in Korea, which Kim said would be swift because of guerrilla operations and a popular uprising in the South. Most historians agree that US action in Korea was necessary to preserve US credibility, but Truman, acting on what Ernest R. May (1973) has called the “Lessons of the Past” and rejecting appeasement, erroneously portrayed intervention as a collective security operation under the United Nations.

Sergei Goncharov, John W. Lewis, and Xue Litai (1993), James I. Matray and Kim Chull Baum (1993), and William Stueck (1995) argue convincingly that Korea can best be seen as an “international civil war” fought in a restricted geographic space. Robert E. Osgood (1958), Trumbull Higgins (1960), and David Rees (1964) applaud this limited conflict, but Rosemary Foot (1985) shows how unrestrained was the US application of its military power, including near use of atomic weapons. UN troops retreated to the Pusan Perimeter, but then General Douglas MacArthur’s Inchon landing led to liberation of South Korea. Cold War and domestic political considerations motivated Truman’s decision to order an offensive across the 38th parallel, which ensured China’s intervention. Chinese forces were unable to evict UN troops from Korea and, by the fall of 1951, trench warfare characterized the ground fighting mostly just north of the 38th parallel, while US warplanes pummeled North Korea. Truce negotiations began in July 1951 and peace was near in April 1952, when a stalemate over repatriating prisoners of war prolonged the war for another fifteen months. In the spring of 1953, the Eisenhower administration considered attacking China with atomic bombs in coordination with an offensive in Korea. Robert A. Divine (1981) argues that Beijing agreed to a truce because of US nuclear threats, but Rosemary Foot (1995) sees communist domestic political and economic problems as producing the armistice agreement in July 1953.

The Korean War had great global repercussions, including, for example, the remilitarization of the United States, the emergence of a unified North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the rearmament of West Germany, and the destruction of hopes of reconciliation between the PRC and the United States. Two days after the war began, Truman deployed the Seventh Fleet in the Taiwan Strait to protect Jiang’s regime that had fled to Taiwan in 1949. After China intervened in Korea, Truman fully implemented his containment strategy, signing with Taiwan a Mutual Security Treaty in 1951. When the PRC began bombing offshore islands under Nationalist control during 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower persuaded Congress to pass the “Formosa Resolution” granting him emergency power to take independent action to protect Taiwan. His commitment to Taiwan almost ignited nuclear war. For Stephen E. Ambrose (1984), Eisenhower’s handling of the two Taiwan Strait crises demonstrated skillful diplomacy, which kept the final decision in his hands. Robert D. Accinelli (1996), however, judges it unduly risky, given the negligible strategic value of the offshore islands.

continued Truman’s policy of support for France against Ho Chi Minh’s Vietminh, but during the spring 1954 crisis at Dien Bien Phu, he withheld direct military assistance to stop communist forces from seizing that French stronghold. He could not prevent the division of Vietnam at the Geneva Conference that July, but then acted to block reunification through internationally supervised elections in 1956. By then, the United States had replaced France in Vietnam, moving to build an anti-communist state in the South. To deter further communist advances in the region, the United States was responsible for the creation in 1954 of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which placed Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam under its defense umbrella. SEATO included as members Australia, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Thailand, along with France, Britain, and the United States. But Indonesia, India, and Burma refused to join, preferring neutrality in the Cold War.

Eisenhower believed that SEATO would deter communist aggression in East Asia. Indeed, the insurgency in Malaya diminished greatly after 1954 and in 1960 the “Malay Emergency” ended. Meanwhile, the United States was sponsoring economic and military assistance programs to attract and strengthen former colonies in Asia as regional allies. Bernard B. Fall (1969), Timothy N. Castle (1993), and Roger Warner (1995) see the Laotian crisis of the late 1950s as showing how the containment policy prevented US leaders either from understanding or effectively handling revolutionary nationalism in Southeast Asia. As part of French Indochina, Laos, along with Cambodia and Vietnam, had been economically exploited and politically oppressed. After gaining independence in 1954 under the Geneva Accords, American influence quickly eclipsed that of France. US threats to withhold aid initially prevented the communist Pathet Lao from joining a coalition government, while the CIA promoted schemes to boost rightist political groups. Just prior to leaving office, Eisenhower told President-Elect John F. Kennedy that Laos was the nation’s most critical problem. As president, Kennedy, in a show of strength that Norman B. Hannah (1987) later would insist should have been sustained, ordered preliminary military moves, but then sought compromise. The 1962 accord neutralized Laos, but only increased the determination of Kennedy to keep other Asian nations out of communist hands.

Richard J. Walton (1972), Gabriel Kolko (1985), Marilyn B. Young (1991), and Lloyd C. Gardner (1995) point to US involvement in Vietnam as evidence of an American imperialism seeking dominance in Asia. More dispassionate are George C. Herring (1986), Robert D. Schulzinger (1997), and David E. Kaiser (1999), who have attributed intervention to an illusion of American omnipotence that combined with the containment policy to draw the United States into an unwinnable war against Vietnamese nationalism – the subject of another essay in this volume. But Harry Summers (1982), Timothy J. Lomperis (1984), and Philip B. Davidson (1988), part of a right revisionist school, all claim that a US military victory was possible if the war had been waged directly against North Vietnam rather than on guerrillas in the South.

Richard M. Nixon became president in 1969 and significantly altered the thrust of US policy across East Asia. Most important, his “Vietnamization” policy withdrew US forces and strengthened the South Vietnamese army to assume combat responsibilities. Nixon explained the regional significance of this new policy on Guam after visiting troops in Vietnam, stating that Asians directly facing communist aggression had to defend themselves, but that the United States would provide necessary
military and financial support. The “Nixon Doctrine” was a major revision in the containment policy in Asia, as by 1972, although war raged in most of Indochina, US participation was generally limited to aerial bombing and provision of weapons and assorted supplies to indigenous forces. This was enough, according to Bruce Palmer (1985), to persuade North Vietnam to accept the Paris Peace Accords after the intensive “Christmas Bombing” of Hanoi late in 1972. Gareth Porter (1975) and Anthony Short (1989) argue that the United States could have negotiated a better agreement years earlier, while Frank Snepp (1977) asserts that Nixon merely wanted to gain a “decent interval” after US departure before the certain fall of his client in South Vietnam. Once there were no more Americans on the ground, Congress reduced military aid to pro-US regimes in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

Nixon’s Vietnam policy devastated Cambodia and Laos. During the 1960s, Cambodia’s Norodom Sihanouk tried to avoid involvement in the war without angering either the Americans or the North Vietnamese, who were using Cambodian border territory to launch attacks. When Nixon became president in January 1969, he ordered the secret bombing of Cambodia, eventually dropping more tons of bombs there than in Japan during all of World War II. The bombing radicalized the peasants and fostered support for the communist Khmer Rouge. Dissatisfaction with Sihanouk led to the March 1970 coup that brought Lon Nol to power, who received immediate US backing and acquiesced to Nixon’s decision late in April to invade Cambodia from South Vietnam. Although US troops quickly withdrew, the war intensified. Thereafter, the Cambodian government teetered on the edge of extinction until the communists triumphed in April 1975 and the Khmer Rouge embarked on a fanatical ideological crusade that led to the extermination of more than 3 million Cambodians. William Shawcross (1979) and Arnold Isaacs (1983) blame Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger for this genocide, while Wilfred P. Deac (1997) attributes it to internal forces.

Laos experienced a similar, though not as horrific, fate. US bombing of the Ho Chi Minh Trail within Laos intensified after President Lyndon B. Johnson halted bombing of North Vietnam in 1968. Thereafter, the struggle for political power saw the communist Pathet Lao getting the upper hand during the dry season and the government with US support regaining territory in the rainy season. A secret US air war in Laos ended early in 1973, allowing the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese to continue their hostilities at will. The 1975 collapse of South Vietnam and Cambodia hastened the fall of the Royal Lao government, as there was no serious effort at resistance when the communists took power in December. The new communist regime was politically repressive and diplomatically isolated. In 1995, US relations with Laos started to improve, as Washington ended its ban on assisting this exceedingly poor country.

The United States justified its actions in postwar Indochina as necessary for the defense of Japan. Robert Blum (1982) contends that the ultimate aim was to create a “Great Crescent” of economic development in Asia, with Japan as its industrial engine. But many Japanese opposed US containment policies, aiming harsh criticism against the US–Japan Security Treaty that not only gave US base rights in Japan, but denied a voice to the Japanese in the deployment of US troops from them to other countries in Asia. Despite extensive protests, the treaty became the bedrock of US–Japanese relations for decades thereafter. After 1960, the central element in the
American–Japanese relationship increasingly became bilateral trade that brought benefits to both countries, but also provoked bitter rivalry. The initial postwar expansion of US–Japan trade was inseparable from the Cold War, as US spending on the Korean War in particular created a market for Japanese manufactures, while the US-imposed embargo of the PRC ended Japan’s traditional reliance on trade with China. Japanese manufacturers exported an increasing volume of consumer goods to the United States, as Japan’s economy surged forward during the “miracle” years. Expanding Japanese exports to the United States prompted pressure for protection on textiles in the 1950s, steel in the 1960s, and automobiles in the 1980s. The two countries frequently resorted to “voluntary exports restraints” or “voluntary import expansion” to resolve trade conflicts.

American relations with Japan began to experience a painful transition during the Nixon years. In 1969, the president agreed to return Okinawa, where US occupation had become a contentious issue in Japanese politics. Then, in the summer of 1971, the United States made three moves known as the “Nixon shocks” in Japan. The first was the announcement that the president would visit China. Since US occupation, Japan had supported the US policy of isolating the PRC, recognizing instead the government on Taiwan. Prime Minister Sato Eisaku learned about the dramatic change in policy just three minutes before Nixon went public with the news. For Walter LaFeber (1997), this illustrates basic flaws in a contradictory partnership, while Matray (2000) counters that Japan should not have been surprised, since Washington and Beijing had been exchanging signals for two years. The substantive result of the Nixon visit was the Shanghai Communiqué, in which both nations declared that they would not seek to dominate Asia, and would oppose efforts of a third nation to gain regional superiority, an obvious reference to the Soviet Union. As for Taiwan, the United States recognized that it was part of China, while the PRC implied a commitment to peaceful unification alone. Nixon’s visits symbolized the new military and economic balance of power in Asia emerging with US withdrawal from Vietnam.

A second “Nixon shock” was the American abandonment of the gold standard in August 1971, which made American goods cheaper and Japanese products more expensive. The third shock came in September when the American trade representative warned his Japanese counterpart that the United States intended to impose import quotas on textile goods, unless Japan adopted voluntary restraints. Nixon’s actions showed how economic competition with Japan, along with Vietnam, had ended American confidence about its dominance in Asia. Japan’s trade surplus continued to grow into the 1980s, making trade a divisive political issue. Bilateral agreement to revaluate the yen in 1985 had little effect. Not surprisingly, the Japanese resented criticism for selling quality goods that Americans wanted to buy. Ishihara Shintaro (1989) complains that Japan was being blamed unfairly for US economic shortcomings. Clyde Prestowitz (1988) charges that Japan traded according to a different set of rules and called for retaliation. Trade friction peaked just as the Cold War ended. But the American–Japanese partnership endured, despite profound changes in world affairs. Roger Buckley (1992), Timothy P. Maga (1997), and Michael Schaller (1997) have described how the two nations despite their struggles have managed to maintain cooperation, especially on security issues.

Meanwhile, the United States struggled to redefine its political role in Southeast Asia. Gerald R. Ford, who replaced Nixon as president in August 1974, was unable
to persuade Congress to provide the military assistance he requested for South Vietnam. According to Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold Schechter (1986) and P. Edward Haley (1982), he did so in a cynical and deceitful effort to shift blame to Congress for the communist victory in Vietnam. In fact, Nixon himself (1985), Norman Podhoretz (1982), and Jeffrey P. Kimball (1998) believe that Congress was responsible for losing the peace and forcing Ford to watch helplessly in April 1975 while North Vietnam seized the South. Ford privately feared a resurgence of isolationist sentiment domestically and the development of international contempt for the United States. In May, he therefore reacted strongly, and critics argue needlessly, to Cambodia’s seizure of the Mayaguez, even though the Khmer Rouge already had released the US freighter. R. B. Smith (1986) later implied that the US exercise of power in East Asia had thrown communist parties in the region on the defensive as early as 1965, pointing to events in Indonesia as proof. There, Sukarno’s determined pursuit of a nonaligned foreign policy clashed with Washington’s desire to convert Indonesia to the anti-communist cause. His rabid support for incorporation of the disputed territory of West Irian into the Indonesian state also generated tensions, as the United States endorsed its Dutch ally’s desire to retain the territory.

Jakarta’s warm relations with both Moscow and Beijing, as well as the growing power and influence of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), led the United States in late 1957 to make a bold attempt to undermine if not actually topple Sukarno. The CIA supported regional rebellions against the central government that Sukarno’s military crushed decisively. Thereafter, the Eisenhower administration tried to cultivate the Indonesian military as a counterweight to the PKI. Kennedy went further, mounting a major effort to win over Sukarno that culminated in his successful role in mediation of the West Irian dispute. Nevertheless, the PKI by 1963 was the largest nonruling communist party in the world, and Sukarno increasingly relied upon it for support. Relations deteriorated further under Johnson, as Sukarno told the United States to “Go to hell with your aid!” Washington feared that another Southeast Asian country soon might join the communist camp. But a failed coup in 1965 then gave the United States an unexpected diplomatic windfall. General Suharto moved quickly to restore order and repress the left. After establishing himself as the country’s new strongman, he replaced Sukarno in 1966 as president. Southeast Asia’s largest and richest nation had almost overnight transformed itself into a reliable US regional partner. George McT. and Audrey R. Kahin (1995) and Paul F. Gardner (1997) have argued that neither Vietnam nor the CIA had anything to do with Suharto’s victory.

Robert J. McMahon (1999) has discussed how Suharto’s victory signaled less about the future of US relations in East Asia than did the formation in August 1967 of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), its five original members being Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. The organization sought to achieve mutual economic development through regional cooperation that would promote both social progress and political democracy. ASEAN also adopted, however, a cardinal principle of noninterference in the domestic affairs of its members, which made it difficult for the organization to deal with human rights issues. Thailand and the Philippines would propose after the Vietnam War that ASEAN broaden its ability to involve itself in cases in which internal policies affected other nations in the region, such as the genocide in Cambodia and the stream of refugees into Thailand. This coincided with President Jimmy Carter’s human rights
campaign in 1977, but also exposed its fundamental policy weaknesses in a region that contained some notoriously repressive, authoritarian regimes. The Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand were major violators of human rights. In each case, Carter, more concerned about economic and security issues, refused to apply sanctions or significantly reduce aid to those governments. Eventually, he even reembraced containment, joining with ASEAN to condemn Vietnam’s occupation of Cambodia in 1978.

Carter’s efforts to move US policy in East Asia away from containment and toward human rights by then had focused attention on South Korea, which during the 1950s had been faithfully supportive of US priorities in defense and economic relations. In 1961, a military junta had seized power under Pak Chong-hui. Carter spoke about the need to reconsider the US security commitment to Pak’s regime because of its “repugnant” repression of internal critics, as well as stating his desire to remove US troops from South Korea. Typically, he backed away from both threats, but US policy then faced a new crisis with Pak’s assassination in October 1979. President Ronald Reagan had little difficulty in dealing with South Korea, inviting Chun Du-hwan, Pak’s authoritarian successor, as his first foreign visitor in 1981. For Reagan, it was far more important that under Pak and Chun, South Korea had achieved dramatic industrial growth and had become a world economic power. The gap between economic prosperity and political backwardness spurred rising public discontent, leading to the end of the military rule in 1987. By 1992, South Korea’s embrace of democracy led to the election of its first civilian leader since 1960 and the world’s eleventh largest economy.

As in Korea, Reagan viewed other East Asian issues and problems largely through the prism of a reenergized containment strategy that was central to his foreign policy. He successfully pressed the Japanese to assume greater responsibility for their own defense, strengthening security ties with Japan and persuading Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro to inaugurate a modest defense buildup. But Reagan showed little concern as Japan’s multinational companies invested heavily in US bonds, property, and businesses. Reagan pursued a strategic partnership with Beijing, seeing a cooperative China as an indispensable strategic asset. Revival of the Soviet–American Cold War under Carter already had resulted in the formal recognition of the PRC in January 1979 and absence of criticism when China initiated a brief border conflict with Vietnam. But Deng Xiaoping’s common commitment to check Soviet expansion delighted Reagan, contributing to the signing of several agreements governing trade, nuclear cooperation, and technical, scientific, and cultural exchanges. Two-way trade between the United States and the PRC rose. Reagan liberalized US technology transfer policy to the PRC and the United States became a major arms supplier to its former adversary.

Reagan’s support for ASEAN increasingly became the pivot around which US policy toward Southeast Asia revolved, as trade between these countries and the United States grew during the 1980s. He also sought close political and security bonds with ASEAN members, operating on the premise that human rights pressures just served as irritants to East Asia’s more friendly, stable, and anti-communist regimes. Vice-President George Bush went so far as to toast Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos during his 1981 visit for his “adherence to democratic processes.” Marcos was his own worst enemy, taking actions so repressive and destabilizing that
even the forgiving Reagan ultimately had to renounce him. After the blatant fraud in the presidential election of February 1986, Reagan recognized the opposition government on the same day Marcos fled to exile in Hawaii. But Reagan offered unqualified support to the equally repressive, venal, and authoritarian Suharto regime in Indonesia. He also courted Thailand. After providing a base for US military operations in Vietnam, Bangkok had repositioned itself as a leading player in Southeast Asian political and economic life. Thailand’s engagement with the world economy made it one of the “tiger” economies of the early 1990s.

Containment no longer was the driving force behind US East Asia policy after the Cold War ended during 1989. Thereafter, Presidents Bush and Bill Clinton sought expanded economic relations and greater political stability in the region, with promoting human rights an ancillary concern. Reflecting this pattern was Washington’s movement toward normalization of relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Carter had abandoned his efforts in this direction because of disagreements over the issues of US reparations to Vietnam and Vietnamese cooperation in finding US servicemen missing in action (MIA). Reagan sought to isolate and punish Vietnam, although he did make deals on searching for MIAs and orderly emigration of Vietnamese. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Vietnam withdrew its forces from Cambodia in 1989, persuading Bush to permit sale of humanitarian supplies to Vietnam and allow US companies to negotiate contracts for business ventures there. The Clinton administration ended all economic sanctions and announced plans to open mutual liaison offices in 1994. Full diplomatic relations came in 1995, paving the way for Vietnam to join ASEAN that July. Communist Laos gained admission in July 1997, along with Myanmar (the new official name for Burma), despite its brutal repression of political dissenters.

Pursuit of economic interests dominated US policy toward East Asia in the first half of the 1990s, as economies along the Pacific Rim boomed. But in 1997 a financial crisis dramatically altered relationships in the region. Asian nations had borrowed large amounts of then cheap capital to finance risky business ventures that went sour when export growth began to stall in the middle of the decade. Various Asian nations had no choice but to devalue their currencies, creating a financial catastrophe. After its currency collapsed, Thailand sought a $17 billion loan package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Indonesia also turned to the IMF, but the economic downturn ignited a mass uprising that forced Suharto from power in 1998. Financial distress spread to Japan, where the banking industry teetered on the brink of collapse. Washington used the crisis to press Tokyo to boost domestic demand and lower tariffs, thereby reducing the US trade deficit. South Korea was hard hit because the government had encouraged banks to make cheap loans to big businesses, resulting in an inefficient allocation of resources. Massive layoffs and a $57 billion IMF loan request contributed to the election of former dissident Kim Dae-jung as president.

Declining per capita income, growing unemployment, and rising prices seemingly put a damper on the previously lauded Asian economic miracle. This only encouraged a preference for cooperation rather than confrontation in relations between the United States and East Asia in the 1990s. There were meetings of the new Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. In 1993, the United Nations sponsored elections in Cambodia that saw over 90 percent of the eligible population vote in defiance of Khmer Rouge threats of violence. Reviving Cold War fears that
year, however, was the evidence that North Korea was near completion of a program to develop nuclear weapons. Negotiation of an Agreed Framework in 1994 temporarily defused the crisis, as South Korea, Japan, and the United States pledged funding to construct power plants in North Korea that did not produce weapons-grade nuclear waste. When the financial crisis caused Tokyo and Seoul to delay action on the deal, an impatient Pyongyang launched a missile over Japanese territory in 1998. Tensions relaxed thereafter because South Korean President Kim Dae-jung implemented a “Sunshine Policy” of engagement, with the strong support of the Clinton administration, that led to his personal meeting in Pyongyang in June 2000 with North Korean leader Kim Jong Il.

Harry Harding (1992), Rosemary Foot (1995), and Robert S. Ross (1995) applaud US China policy after 1972 because it successfully integrated the PRC into the world system, while advancing the interests of the United States in East Asia. But the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 removed a key element in maintaining this fragile relationship, causing the United States to have trouble in the 1990s developing mature and stable relations with China. While still sensitive about threats to Taiwan, Washington was mainly at odds with Beijing over its suppression of political freedom in China. In June 1989, the human rights issue exploded when the Chinese army killed hundreds of pro-democracy demonstrators gathered in Tiananmen Square. Bush condemned the massacre, but opposed a boycott or ending the PRC’s most-favored-nation trading status, insisting that engagement with Beijing kept the way open for capitalist development and greater personal freedom. Despite criticizing Bush for not punishing China as a presidential candidate, Clinton followed a “constructive engagement” policy that differed little from that of his predecessor.

Taiwan remained the main source of friction in relations between the United States and China. During the 1980s, US–Taiwan relations achieved greater equality because of the transformation of Taiwan from a one-party, authoritarian dictatorship to a fledgling democracy and from a developing country to a modern, highly industrialized nation. Congressional pressure to end its isolation caused the Clinton administration to allow US officials to attend high-level bilateral meetings on Taiwan, but it refused to support its bid for representation at the United Nations. Relations between the United States and the PRC were strained severely in June 1995 when President Li Denghui of Taiwan visited the United States. In March 1996, Clinton sent naval forces to the Taiwan Strait after the PRC staged military exercises in the area. Another source of friction was Hong Kong, which Britain returned to China’s rule in July 1997, where critics charged Beijing with violating its pledge not to interfere internally with the former colony.

Since the mid-1970s, the United States has tried to reverse the steady decline of its power and influence in East Asia and reassert itself, without appearing to seek hegemony. Writings on events during these years either have been tentative scholarly studies or journalistic commentaries without foundation in primary sources. But US diplomatic historians will address these events as the documents become available, and their conclusions are certain to be enlightening because, as Warren I. Cohen noted in 1985, writing on East Asia is on the “cutting edge of the historical profession.” In this view, he challenges Charles S. Maier’s (1980) claim that diplomatic historians had stopped dealing with important issues and were writing books that were a mere compilation of what “one clerk wrote to another.” Yet the 1980s and 1990s
saw an outburst of analytical innovation in the field of US foreign relations that resulted in imaginative new interpretive frameworks ranging from world systems theory to corporatism. Regarding East Asia, there was renewed interest in probing the role of culture, a factor that Frances FitzGerald (1972) had addressed earlier in Vietnam. Recently, writers have revived this analytical approach, in particular William O. Walker (1991) on the opium trade, Inoue Kyoko (1991) on Japan’s Constitution, T. Christopher Jespersen (1996) on the American vision of China, and Mark P. Bradley (2000) on American images of Vietnam. US policymakers would be wise to read recent and forthcoming studies on US–East Asia relations as a reminder of the limits on American power to reorder the world.

REFERENCES


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FURTHER READING