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Doubling Down on Asia

November 12, 2017

By Wen-Qing Ngoei

Wen-Qing Ngoei is an Assistant Professor of History at the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. His first book, *The Arc of Containment: Britain, Malaya, Singapore and the Rise of American Hegemony in Southeast Asia, 1941-1976* (Cornell University Press), is forthcoming in Fall 2019.

IN REVIEW

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

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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

problem is that Cha notes how ASEAN has contributed in recent decades to the “complex patchwork” of multilateral intra-Asian initiatives (forums and regional organizations) and U.S.-Asian “mini-lateral” relationships that crisscross the region. U.S.-dominated dyads have ceased to be the prevalent alliance system in Asia. China-based bilateral initiatives with Asian states, too, have proliferated to complicate the picture.

Even Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan are part of this messy web. How did they slip free of America’s “power play,” thwarting U.S. obstacles to their collusion? The book sidesteps this question, stating that the “spokes, as advanced industrial democracies, are [now] much more independent in their behavior both inside and outside of [their] alliance” with America. In Cha’s view, U.S.-led economic modernization cured these allies of their “intransigence” and “irrationality.” He argues that bilateralism and multilateralism are now “mutually reinforcing,” that the “beauty” of such “messiness” now enables regional “Lilliputians” to “manage relations between the great powers,” that China and the United States, too, can operate in multiple groupings and avoid a zero-sum game. Though U.S. leaders “doubled-down” to forestall such region-wide groupings in the Cold War, the book recommends we not take their emergence as proof that the American strategy has failed. For, if the complicated Asian brand of multilateralism promises more cooperation, transparency and peace, then credit is due to the American bilateralism which made this condition possible. Yet this final rush to defend the “power play” remains unconvincing.

The End of the Asian Century paints a less sanguine picture of contemporary Asia. Michael Auslin, a former historian at Yale University and now a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, presents readers with a “risk map” of Asia. He contends that the region is not barreling toward “an era of unparalleled Asian power, prosperity, and peace,” but instead “on the cusp” of crisis. His book offers “bearish” correctives to popular and “misleadingly rosy” expert opinions, chief among these: that many Asian economies will keep growing, thus inexorably shifting global power eastward; that Sino-Japanese economic ties will prevent them from fighting over disputed territory; and that North Korea is not “suicidal” enough to use nukes against Seoul and Tokyo. Not so, Auslin writes, having interviewed politicians, military officials, academics, business leaders, and media figures in Asia. His book, predicting many more ominous developments in Asia, is likely the first “comprehensive” look at the region’s worrisome future. The book’s “risk map” is designed to encompass the “broader Indo-Pacific,” which rightly pays as much attention to the Indian subcontinent as the rest of Asia.

To be clear, the portents of Auslin’s “risk map” are obvious. The author is broadly correct to state that Asia’s developed economies—Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore—currently, or will soon, confront “unprecedented demographic drops” and intractable labor problems. China’s disastrous gender imbalance, the legacy of its one-child policy, may send the country spiraling toward a similar fate. What Auslin calls China’s “house-of-cards” style capitalism met in 2016 with a stock exchange collapse, a troubling turn given that Chinese authorities have

staked their political legitimacy on the economic success of their people. Across Asia, unsustainable development produces pollution on an epic scale, creating health problems, not to mention rising medical costs. One finds no great reason to quarrel with Auslin's gloomy forecasts.

However, Auslin claims his book illuminates "the Asia nobody sees." His interview subjects, of course, all see this Asia. His main audience is in the Western world, where he argues that pessimistic assessments such as his "should play a larger role . . . in business planning, government policymaking, and academic scholarship." The book often reads like a dim emulation of George Kennan's "Long Telegram" of February 1946, that pivotal plan for containing Soviet power. Thus, Auslin, too, seems to lean toward "doubling down," recommending a reprise of U.S. containment policy in Asia.

On that note, Auslin proposes a "concentric triangles" strategy wherein the United States draws its current allies closer while "encourag[ing] other Asian powers to forge deeper relations with the United States and Asia's leading liberal nations." The author's outer triangle features Japan, South Korea, India, and Australia; his inner triangle includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore. By linking Asia's "largest and oldest democracies . . . its leading economies, and most strategically located nations," Auslin suggests that America will be able stave off a potential Chinese economic meltdown while integrating Beijing into a U.S.-led liberal order. To borrow from Richard Nixon's 1967 formulation, Auslin seeks "containment [of China] without isolation." Indeed, even its "concentric triangles" prescription replicates Nixon's desire to make use of the triangle connecting the United States, USSR, and China. Here, too, Auslin's recommendations reiterate long-standing U.S. goals of liberalizing Asia and modernizing backward societies.

The author promises a novel approach for contemporary U.S.-Asian relations, but the continuities are more notable. The focus remains on Americanizing the region. This mindset appears hard to shake. And Auslin makes it harder when he references Western movies to ease his readers into the book's case studies (if even to challenge their expectations). For China, he mentions *The Last Emperor*; for India, he uses *Slumdog Millionaire* and *City of Joy*; for Japan and various Chinese cities, he keeps bringing up *Blade Runner*. Surely, if Americans want to retain power in Asia, they can be held to a higher standard of knowledge about the region.

U.S. leaders will no doubt continue seeking methods new and old to preserve American power in Asia amid rising Chinese power. Yet, though Cha and Auslin have both written historically-informed books, neither fully grapples with the historic costs of U.S. containment policy in Asia. Think of the many Asian wars of the Cold War era, for which not only Americans, but even more so Vietnamese, Indonesians, Koreans, and others paid a terrible price. What gives us confidence that containment will go better this time?

