

CASUALTIES OF US GRAND STRATEGY

ROK Exclusion from the San Francisco Peace Treaty

Abstract: This paper investigates the American exclusion of the Republic of Korea from the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan. It asserts a new understanding of how Korea occupied American strategic and post-WWII thinking prior to and during the Korean War. Cultural attitudes, American disinterest in discussing postcolonial issues, as well as the crystallization of Cold Warrior mindsets resulted in a peace treaty that failed its purpose as a both a backwards and forwards-facing document. Despite American interests in turning a new leaf in West-East relations, State Department diplomats crucially viewed U.S. Cold War strategic concerns as being of greater importance than post-WWII idealism of reconciling East Asia with Japan's imperialist past.

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On September 8, 1951 delegations from forty-eight nations gathered in the opulent San Francisco opera house and signed the peace treaty that would formally end the Allied occupation of Japan. Although the Soviet Union walked out in the middle of the conference, the treaty nevertheless formalized the restoration of Japanese sovereignty. “The Japan of today is no longer the Japan of yesterday,” Yoshida Shigeru, the Japanese Prime Minister said before the assembled delegates. “We will not fail your expectations of us as a new nation, dedicated to peace, democracy and freedom.”¹ The peace treaty was a stunning success for the Truman administration, which had authorized John Foster Dulles (soon to be Secretary of State) to lead the U.S. negotiating team in June 1950. The treaty reduced Japan's territories to its home islands and authorized the seizure of overseas Japanese assets, but—unlike the discredited 1919 Treaty of Versailles—largely refrained from punitive reparations and sovereignty restrictions.

In a non-binding clause, Japan merely pledged to “refrain” from the “use of force” in international disputes. Another article encouraged affected nations seeking reparations to initiate their own negotiations with the Japanese government.² When a group of Japanese businessmen visited Nebraska in early 1952, they expressed amazement with their American host that San Francisco was not at all “the treaty of a conqueror.”³ The U.S. would be completing six years of an occasionally tumultuous, but mostly successful occupation of Japan, just in time to repeatedly petition its former wartime foe to rearm in the face of Soviet machinations in East Asia.

While initially praised for its sensibility and generosity, the San Francisco peace treaty is perforated by a controversial legacy. The enduring hostilities of the Cold War, embodied by the Soviet walkout, permeated the conference and its news coverage. The September 8, 1951 issue of *The New York Times* noted uneasily that San Francisco may have

“reconciled” Japan with the Western Allies, but it was “not quite a peace of reconciliation from the point of view of the great powers.”⁴ Additionally, with a war still raging on the Korean peninsula—separated from Japan by a strait measuring only 120 miles wide—the Department of Defense was particularly anxious to ensure that the prosecution of the war would not be interrupted by the resumption of Japanese sovereignty.⁵ Consequently, Japan and the United States signed a security treaty on the same day as the peace treaty, granting the U.S. exclusive rights to maintain bases and military forces in Japan.⁶ Japan received its sovereignty with a bright red asterisk, asserting its subordination to American security interests in Asia.

The San Francisco Peace Treaty initiated a new political-economic order for the Asia-Pacific region that not only defined relations between Japan and the United States, but also America's place in the region as a whole. International relations scholar Kent Calder popularized the term “San Francisco System” to describe this new Pacific order—an order marked by American dominance of geopolitical matters and a recurring inability among Asia-Pacific nations to reconcile with Japan over unaddressed issues stemming from Japanese wartime imperialism.⁷

One such aspect of San Francisco's troubled legacy was the Republic of Korea's (ROK) absence from the treaty conference, having been denied an invitation despite repeated attempts to seek participation. The San Francisco Peace Treaty was billed as both a backward- and forward-facing instrument that could restore Japanese sovereignty and bookend World War II in the Pacific. Korean exclusion raises questions over how effectively the treaty could satisfy lingering wartime animosities.

Officially, Korea's exclusion from the peace treaty stemmed from its historical context as a Japanese colony, and therefore



Withdrawal of Japanese Troops from Korea (1945)
Source: *Mainichi Newspapers Company, "Showa History of 100 million people: Occupation of Japan Vol. 1"*
(Wikimedia Commons)

not a sovereign state, before and during World War II. The Joseon dynasty, Korea's ruling dynastic kingdom since the fourteenth century, became one of the first victims of Japan's imperialistic success when it was annexed as a Japanese colony in 1910. In the first volume of his work *The Origins of the Korean War*, scholar of Korean history Bruce Cumings describes Japan's colonial policy in Korea as "a means of...providing the wherewithal to mobilize and extract resources on an unprecedented scale."⁸ Extraction is an apt term. Japanese authorities exploited Korean resources and actively marginalized Korean history, culture, and language. Japan's heavy-handed regime spawned resistance groups in Manchuria and Korea proper as well as overseas movements like the Shanghai-based Korean Provisional Government. Japanese control ended with the Empire's surrender on August 15, 1945, whereupon the Soviet Union and the United States divided occupation responsibilities in Korea along the 38th parallel. Two rival governments crystallized in the North and South after U.S.-Soviet plans to hold unified elections fell apart.

The ROK was the governing authority for the South and only achieved UN recognition (and observer status) in 1948—three years after the end of World War II. The Korean Provisional Government, Korea's government-in-exile during Japanese control, had never been recognized by the United States. In July 1951, Dulles, acting as a special representative of the State Department, informed a stunned Korean ambassador Yang You-Chan that the ROK would not be a treaty signatory. Dulles offered the reasoning that only those nations which

were participants of the 1942 UN Declaration would sign a treaty of peace with Japan.⁹ In other words, the ROK was not an "official" Allied Power and could not be a signatory, regardless of Korea's moral claim to victimhood at the hands of Japanese imperialism. However, social historian John Price notes that this reason was flimsy at best, not least because the newly-independent nations of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos would all attend and sign the treaty despite having been part of the French colony of Indochina in 1942.¹⁰ The peace treaty, which supposedly signaled Japan's rehabilitation in the eyes of the world, remarkably eschewed a key victim who would have benefited from "a peace of reconciliation" with Japan.

Yet, the San Francisco Peace Treaty did not completely exclude the ROK. Article 21 included treaty provisions whereby Japan officially renounced its claims to Korea and assented to Korean appropriation of Japanese properties left on the peninsula. Through the treaty, Japan promised to adopt favorable maritime, fishing, and trading relations with the ROK. Dulles summarized Korea's relationship with the treaty in a report for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations: "[T]he treaty, in many ways, treats Korea like an Allied Power."¹¹ Significantly, however, the ROK was not included in particular treaty provisions, including clauses that encouraged Japan to negotiate reparations with former enemies. Indochinese participation and the ROK's partial exclusion from the benefits of the treaty underlines the point that the ROK was not denied a place at the table because of its colonial status during World War II. This raises the question: in the minds of American policy-makers, could possibly have formed the evaluating criteria that determined inclusion or exclusion in the peace treaty?

This article argues that American grand strategic interests decisively eclipsed any concerns related to satisfying post-war moral claims of victimhood. The obstacle to Korea's inclusion as a treaty signatory was not its non-sovereign status during World War II. Korea was excluded because, from the time when American post-war planners began drafting a peace treaty to when the peace treaty was signed in September 1951, American interests in the Asia-Pacific had been reified along newfound Cold War lines. Informed by long-standing American disdain for Koreans and justified by the growing Communist threat, Korea's inclusion in the San Francisco Peace Treaty would have involved confronting the fundamental tension between American grand strategic priorities and divided opinions over what constituted justice for Japan's imperialist wartime behavior.

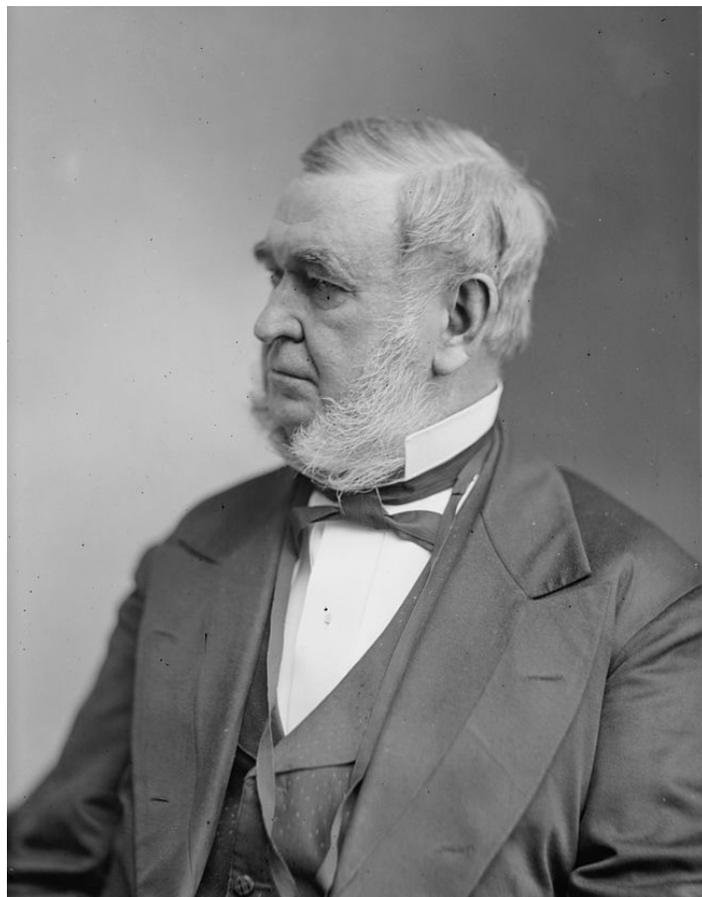
In this way, Korea's tragic history under Japanese control simultaneously gave it the greatest reason to seek access to the peace treaty negotiations and doomed its self-advocacy from the start. With the Korean War still raging and a unilateral grand strategy crystallizing, American diplomats and policy-makers would value expediency above all else.

“THE SITUATION IN THE WEST PACIFIC WILL BE GRAVE FOR A LONG TIME”:

ADDRESSING KOREAN ENTITLEMENT

The San Francisco Peace Treaty was an American-led enterprise. Early U.S. diplomatic efforts involved negotiating through the Far Eastern Commission—a body of former Allied Powers designed to collaborate on postwar issues. However, these efforts ultimately failed in 1947 as the Chinese Civil War produced two separate “Chinas,” poisoning U.S.-Soviet cooperation in the commission. Thereafter, the State Department drafted plans based on the assumption of American domination of treaty negotiations—an assumption to an extent justified by American perception of their own outsized role in the Pacific theater. To this end, John Foster Dulles, as head of the U.S. negotiating team, traveled to the nations that would sign the treaty and negotiated with each government individually, essentially crafting a multilateral document out of a series of bilateral conversations. John Allison, a career State official who served prominently on Dulles’ team, wrote after the fact that Dulles’ strategy was designed to avoid Soviet obstructionism.¹² It should be noted that deploying bilateral means for a multilateral end also would have enabled Dulles to maximize American leverage, as a dyadic interaction limited the chances for smaller powers to cooperate with one another against the United States.

It was this context that enabled the United States to act as the primary gatekeeper for potential signatories for the treaty, although State Department officials remained cognizant of the interests of other major powers such as Great Britain and the Soviet Union.¹³ Even before the *de facto* collapse of the Far Eastern Commission in late 1947, a State Department working group produced a treaty draft in 1947 that included Korea and Indonesia as signatories, despite neither being Allied powers. An accompanying commentary justified Indonesian inclusion on the basis of its significant “human and material losses” and its status as a colony of an Allied Power during the war. In contrast, the statement justified Korean inclusion by noting that “as a liberated territory with a decades old resistance movement...and with an important interest in the treaty, [the ROK government] would doubtless feel entitled to participate, and would be resentful if the U.S. did not favor its participation.”¹⁴ This language is compelling. Indonesia was included simply because of its “losses” during the war. But the motivation to include Korea stemmed from the belief that the ROK would be resentful if excluded. Although the commentary does include Korea, it significantly believed that appeasing the “entitled” attitude of the ROK government was equally, if not more important than any moral standpoint that Korean losses during the war had earned the ROK a place at the table. Although the commentary does include Korea, it was significantly motivated by the effort to appease the ROK government’s “entitled attitude,” rather than by an assessment of Korea’s World War II experience.



Allison, John Treasury Dept. (1865-1880)

Source: *Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Brady-Handy Photograph Collection (Wikimedia Commons)*

Depicting Korean interests as underserved entitlement harmonized with other existing American generalizations about Korea. American military occupation authorities in Korea cooperated with prevailing Japanese colonial bureaucrats in part because they viewed Koreans as

obstreperous, obnoxiously nationalistic, and politically immature.¹⁵ The Rhee government was also plagued by the image that its diplomats were headstrong and uncaring of sensitive norms of diplomacy. A report dated October 29, 1949 from a Japan-based State Department official advised against encouraging Korean-Japanese cooperation, citing the Korean ambassador’s “repeated and somewhat-aggressive attempts to deal directly with Japanese officials” as evidence that the ROK was only interested in extractive bargaining rather than rapprochement.¹⁶ Even before the start of the Korean War, the State Department viewed the ROK government as a potential bull in a china shop, prone to damaging careful American designs and motivated by inappropriate levels of undisciplined nationalism. Consequently in the American view, a Korean delegation would be involved in the treaty negotiating process, albeit solely on a consultative basis, as the ROK’s exclusion risked causing a troublesome outcry from Seoul and the Korean public.¹⁷

Casualties of US Grand Strategy

NEW STRATEGIES

By 1950-1951, geopolitical developments and the intensification of Cold War tensions changed the American calculus. In particular, American treaty planning for Japan evolved from a desire to prevent a vengeful resurgence of Japanese militarism (*a la* post-Versailles Germany) into a need to establish a friendly and strategically-additive nation to the American defense perimeter in the Pacific. American occupation authorities feared the possibility of anti-Americanism developing in Japan after either a prolonged occupation or a punitive peace treaty, and this ideological bent of avoiding historical mistakes slotted nicely into geopolitical concerns of checking the rise of Communism both in Asia and Japan.¹⁸

Unsurprisingly, Japan was a key element of the Truman Administration's policy of containment in Asia. "[T]he basic U.S. military objective in Japan," summarized a State Department assessment of the merits of a peace treaty, "[is] to ensure that in the event of a U.S.-USSR conflict, Japan is 'on our side' with its resources available to us and denied to the Soviets."¹⁹ To that end, the United States had to fend off internal Communist "subversion" in Japan, ensure that Japan re-emerged onto the world stage on the side of the West, prevent the growth of anti-American sentiment, and optimize American control over Japanese policy.

A proper and speedy peace treaty, supplemented by a security agreement, could accomplish those goals and be the foundation of a new, comprehensive American defense strategy in Asia. Waiting too long, American occupation and treaty planners feared, could be catastrophic if a Japanese Communist movement were augmented by general Japanese resentment of a prolonged occupation. This fear was only amplified with North Korea invading the South in June.²⁰ Rearming Japan, or otherwise building up Japan economically and politically to be a reliable strategic bulwark in Asia, was already an American priority in early 1950.

An atmosphere of *contingency* pervaded the air in Washington. The sense of urgency is perhaps best expressed by Dulles' words in a March 18, 1951 letter to General MacArthur. Writing before he entered another round of treaty negotiations, Dulles said, "The United States and Japan are the only significant sources of power in the Pacific, we actual, they potential... If the United States and Japan fall apart, the situation in the West Pacific will be grave for a long time."²¹ The U.S. was now evaluating treaty issues through the far more pressing lens of its own imminent security concerns, which would directly affect the question of Korean participation.

PANDORA'S BOX AND THE KOREAN CASE: AVOIDING "A COLONIAL CHARACTER OF UNFORTUNATE EFFECT IN ASIA"

In some respects, the heightening Cold War did not completely alter American consideration of satellite issues

tethered to the peace treaty. The nature of a peace treaty with Japan would not only determine Japan's future, but also shape the American—and by extension, the free world's—image in Asia. In a manner that resembled old Rooseveltian ideals of equality and cooperation among sovereign nations, State Department planners were anxious that a peace treaty avoided the image of a Western imperialist imposition.

As mentioned earlier, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos ultimately signed the peace treaty. State Department reasoning for Indochinese participation reflects American concerns about the makeup of the signatory states. On August 20, 1951, less than three weeks before the San Francisco Conference was slated to commence, Secretary of State Dean Acheson received a memorandum, issued under Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk's name, advocating for the inclusion of the three newly-independent Indochinese states. Previously, invitations had been delayed over concerns that India, Indonesia, and Burma—all non-aligned states that the U.S. had been desperately hoping to include in the peace—would themselves refuse to participate in protest if "French puppets" were allowed in. However, the memorandum referenced new reports that the three non-aligned states might not participate in the treaty-signing regardless. In view of the fact "that in the last analysis India, Indonesia and Burma may refuse to sign the Treaty and as it is believed important for as *many Asiatic States as possible to sign*," the memorandum concluded, "it is considered advisable to issue an invitation to the Associated States as soon as possible."²² The U.S. accordingly invited Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, which then attended as treaty signatories—India and Burma refused their invitations, although Indonesia still participated.

Rusk's August 20 memorandum reveals that it was considered vital to American interests that "as many Asiatic states as possible" participated in the treaty-signing. His language shows how the State Department deliberately crafted the peace treaty to appear as a joint document authored by Western and "Asiatic" states. It demonstrates that U.S. planners were doubtlessly conscious of the history of Western involvement in Asia. Earlier that year, the State Department's Far East Division argued that Asian historical memory of European colonialism demanded the exclusion of some European allies from any potential security pact in Asia. "For example, the participation of the United Kingdom might imply a commitment regarding Hong Kong that the United States is not prepared to assume," the memo stated, also suggesting American wariness about involvement on mainland Asia. "[UK involvement in an Asian security pact] might also lead to the desire of France or the Netherlands to participate which would give the arrangement a *'colonial' character of unfortunate effect in Asia*."²³ The State Department clearly wished to avoid the appearance of an imposition of Western interests onto Asia. U.S. involvement in Asia needed to be distinct from European imperialism and avoid negative colonialist implications.



U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson signing the Treaty of Peace with Japan (1951)
 Source: U.S. Dept. of State, published on Flickr in 2008 (Wikimedia Commons)

The same concerns applied to American interests related to the peace treaty. In July, a political advisor for SCAP in Japan sent a telegram to Secretary Acheson, urging that the Americans avoid any behavior during the conference that might be perceived as belittling or discriminatory against the Japanese: “We [should] also constantly bear in mind that Japan is an Asiatic nation and that eyes of Asia will be upon San Francisco and upon [the] manner in which each and every Asiatic nation, including Japan, is [received] and treated by [the] United States and other ‘white’ nations.”²⁴ There could be no characteristically “colonial” behavior during the conference proceedings. Having many “non-white Asian” nations signing a peace treaty with Japan could plausibly promote the image that this treaty was the product of a collective, global effort rather than just American power and interests. Additionally, reinstating Japan as a member of the Asian community would require the “approval” of other Asian nations.

“Asianizing” the treaty by increasing non-Western representation, however, raised additional questions about the eventual exclusion of the ROK. A Korean delegation might have been well-suited for the conference. For a Western audience, Korea was visibly an “Asiatic” and alien nation. In the broadest possible terms, Korea slotted nicely into the role of a token foreigner that could legitimize the American-led peace treaty by simply being present in the conference hall. Less cynically, Korean participation could fulfill the Rooseveltian vision of transforming the independence movements of oppressed peoples into sovereign nation-states, each equal to one another. The peace treaty could have contributed an ember to the wider hearth-fire of what Elizabeth Borgwardt described as “America’s multilateralist moment” during the waning days of the final Roosevelt administration, when the U.S. labored to ensure that the weak had at least a voice on the international stage.²⁵

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But while maximizing Asian representation at the peace conference was beneficial in public relations terms, such “Asianization” could not compromise security priorities. Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos were ideal signatories: they were visibly Asian and had comparatively little stake in the provisions of the peace treaty, thus posing no obstructions to American security designs that were linked to the treaty. Korea may have been an Asiatic state, but it was most certainly deeply interested in a treaty with Japan and vocal about its concerns.

A KOREAN PROBLEM

Reparations, for one, were a major sticking point in the peace treaty negotiations. The ROK government demanded repayment for what it depicted as forty years of lost development and prosperity. But reparations ran counter to both American ideological concerns about avoiding the mistakes of Versailles *and* its forward-looking interest in rebuilding Japan as an ally amenable to American grand strategy. Furthermore, the State Department never fully believed in the “legitimacy” of Korean demands for reparations. Their reservations were summarized in a December 12, 1949 report published by the department’s Division of Research for the Far East:

While the claim of the Republic of Korea for participation in the Japanese peace settlement is based on its alleged status as a belligerent during the war and many of the present officials of the Republic of Korea have considered themselves belligerents against Japan since the annexation of Korea in 1910, the interests of Korea in the peace settlement appear to arise *more from the consequences of annexation and forty years of exploitation than from the war itself*, which was merely the incident that separated Korea from Japan.²⁶

The report concluded: “[R]egardless of Korea’s legal status, Korean interests in the Japanese peace settlement are not derived primarily from belligerency against Japan in World War II...Instead, Korean interests are derived almost wholly from Japanese imperial rule over Korea during the period 1910-1945.”²⁷ Korea’s claims for war reparations and its signatory aspirations, the report declared, belonged to a separate conflict—the Japanese Occupation of Korea—whose sole relation to World War II was that it bore the same termination date.

Notably, the report does not immediately suggest that the United States dismiss the Korean position out of hand. Instead, Korea’s status vis-a-vis the peace settlement would depend on “an estimation of the *line of conduct* likely to be followed by the Republic of Korea...”²⁸ The report revealed the criteria by which the State Department evaluated ROK claims that could have garnered Korea signatory status, albeit six months before the start of the Korean War. In other words, the “line of conduct” of a Korean delegation would have to be compliant with American priorities.

The ROK was not the only party involved that saw reparations as an important issue. The Philippines, too, lobbied heavily for reparations from Japan, which proved to be a point which the United States had to repeatedly fend off, usually by asserting that Japan’s brittle economy had no ability to pay.²⁹ Concerns about burdening Japan with reparations, for both ideological and strategic reasons, meant that even those nations whose claims of wartime damage the U.S. deemed more “legitimate” were nevertheless hard-pressed to find sympathetic American ears.

It was in this same vein that State Department officials gave the ROK’s claims for damages short shrift. As the 1949 State Department research report described, “[The ROK’s] claims appear to be excessive, as currently stated, and also pose a peculiar problem because of the long time period covered.” The report goes on to conclude that if the U.S. allowed the ROK to participate in peace negotiations, Korean diplomats would likely demand a punitive treaty, due to both the Korean public’s anti-Japanese sentiment and the ROK government’s need to appear more anti-Japanese than the North. Ultimately, the report’s authors advocated that the ROK be given a consultative, but *ultimately meaningless*, role in the peace settlement—something that would allow the United States to shut down any demands for excessive reparations but nevertheless satisfy the Korean public’s “sensibilities on the question of participation.”³⁰ In other words, limit the ROK’s role in a peace treaty to the minimum necessary to prevent rampant anti-Americanism in Korea.

Changing American priorities prompted by an intensifying Cold War would have further lowered Korean chances of participation given the ROK’s rhetoric on the matter of reparations. But an argument can be made that the Korean War dramatically raised the prominence of the ROK government—Korea was no longer an Asian backwater; rather, it was part of the new front line against a monolithic Communist threat. Surely, on the basis of prosecuting the Korean War, the United States should have a greater incentive to curate positive feelings among the Korean public and the ROK government towards the West.

Indeed, the U.S. evaluated ROK advocacy for its participation in a peace treaty on slightly more expanded grounds. Cheong Sung-hwa argues that the U.S. was more receptive towards ROK participation in early 1951. Dulles had expressed an interest in “building up” the ROK’s international presence and legitimacy. Bringing Seoul onto a multilateral treaty that symbolized the end of World War II and global reconciliation would give the ROK a boosted status of working within the international system.³¹ The ROK’s international legitimacy in 1951, then, was of enough importance that Dulles was utilizing it as a criterion for determining signatory status. Subsequently, the U.S. team initiated discussions with Japan and its allies to obtain approval for the ROK’s participation in the peace treaty.

Japan resisted the matter, largely due to concerns about the status of ethnic Koreans residing in Japan. If the ROK was a treaty signatory, Japan feared that the 600,000 ethnic Koreans within Japan would then be considered nationals of an Allied power. The treaty had provided for nationals of Allied powers to be compensated for any property or wealth in Japan seized during the war. The Koreans living in Japan included both long-time residents and recent immigrants, but their legal status was now ambiguous, and the ROK government claimed all of them as “Korean nationals.”³²

The Japanese government, led by Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru, was determined to prevent Koreans in Japan from accessing the treaty compensation clauses for Allied nationals, which was motivated both by Japanese concerns about having to compensate wartime victims and a long history of Japanese racism and mistrust towards its Korean minority.³³ Still, on April 23, 1951, Japan informed the United States that it would acquiesce in Korean participation “if it is definitely assured that by the said treaty Korean residents in Japan will not acquire the status of Allied Powers nationals.”³⁴ The most obvious source of obstruction had been cleared. Why then, after American treaty negotiators met with British diplomats later that month, did the U.S. inform the ROK on July 3rd that Korea would not be allowed to sign the treaty after all?

concurrency indicates that the United States was already inclined to deem the Korean case “illegitimate” and only gave it a second glance when Dulles believed that inclusion might boost the ROK’s international status. For Dulles and other American negotiators, Korean participation might have had some merits, but by no means was it a hill worth dying on.

There were enough issues to make Korean participation in the treaty inconvenient and problematic. Korean demands for “excessive” reparations, the ambiguous status of the 600,000 Koreans living in Japan and whether they would be eligible for compensation for wartime mistreatment, and British opposition to Korea’s participation all meant that involving the ROK could delay the peace treaty, which was scheduled for September 1951. The peace treaty effort, a time-sensitive matter and a vital part of US strategy in Asia, could not be delayed by what Washington thought was Korea’s extortionate nationalistic interests. Korea might have been the land where American troops battled against the tide of Communism, but it was not the cornerstone of American grand strategy. Korea’s prominence in the American psyche was acutely circumscribed.

“For Dulles and other American negotiators, Korean participation might have had some merits, but by no means was it a hill worth dying on.”

Cheong speculated that British lobbying against the ROK likely played a significant role. On May 16, John Allison issued a notice to Dulles that the United States, after conferring with the British ambassador, was now prepared to drop the issue of ROK participation. Instead, a new clause would be drafted to grant the ROK certain benefits of the treaty.³⁵ No records, to this author’s knowledge, exist of the final meeting between the British and the Americans that tipped the scales against Korean participation. In the State Department’s published volumes of selected diplomatic documents, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, there is merely an editorial note that “Other reference of this talk has not been found in State Department files.”³⁶ Despite the absence of documentation, it is nevertheless significant that the U.S. team dropped the matter of ROK participation after only a handful of meetings with its British counterpart.

Rhee and other ROK leaders had been arguing for Korean signatory status for almost two years, so it was clear to Washington that this was an emotional issue that mattered deeply to both the Korean leadership and public. Regardless of British views, the rapidity of U.S.

The ROK Ambassador to the United States Yang You-chan would repeatedly seek reconsideration for Korea’s case between July and September 1951. His efforts were met with a mixture of responses, from sympathetic but firm refusals to outright scolding for making a fuss. At a July 19 meeting between Yang and Dulles, Dulles expressed frustration that Yang had made a press statement in which the disgruntled ambassador had asserted that Japan was not fully rehabilitated and had not satisfactorily made amends for its imperialist behavior in Korea. “Mr. Dulles pointed out the difficulty and delicacy of the position of the United States in its efforts to obtain a reasonable and satisfactory treaty with Japan...and stressed the importance, in this matter, of Korean understanding and cooperation.”³⁷ In August, Yang met with Assistant Secretary Rusk, making another pitch to the effect that Korean exclusion would be damaging at a psychological level to both the ROK government and the Korean people. Rusk brushed off Yang’s points, responding “that the absence of a Korean delegation should not be considered as a loss of prestige for [the] ROK, and that it might be wiser for [the] ROK not to make such an issue of the matter...”³⁸

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The chief attitude of the American responses was “annoyance,” as American officials had to devote energy to damage control after the decision to exclude the ROK. Dulles attempted to impress on Yang the importance of a cause larger than Korean issues. Rusk implied that repeated Korean lobbying was unnecessary squawking for the sake of national pride. Dismissiveness among American diplomats towards “excessive” Korean nationalism was clearly still as prevalent in 1951 as it had been in the late 1940s, and dovetailed with their overall unreceptiveness to emotional Korean appeals.

As the date of the San Francisco conference drew closer, one State Department official did submit a proposal to have the ROK attend the conference as an observer, seeking to smooth over ROK-Japan relations by diminishing any reason for the ROK to have a “chip in[*sic*] its shoulder.” The proposal author went on to say, “From a strictly moral point of view, it would seem only fair that the Koreans, who have suffered from Japanese oppression for more than 40 years, should be represented in some capacity in San Francisco.” Dulles personally responded to the proposal with a handwritten note, merely stating, “While from a strictly Korean point of view I agree with the above, I believe such actions would get us into many difficulties and open a Pandora’s Box which we would regret.”³⁹ The State Department instead offered the ROK a downgraded invitation of being informal guests to the conference who could receive some assistance in booking their hotels—an offer which the ROK did not deign with a response.⁴⁰

Dulles did not elaborate on what he believed was within that proverbial “Pandora’s Box.” But in an environment imbued by the need to implement American grand strategic plans as quickly as possible, we may speculate with some confidence that he had already decided that Korean exclusion was the path of least resistance. In his mind, Korean issues and moral claim to wartime victimhood were wholly insignificant compared to the needs of the free world as interpreted by the U.S.

CONCLUSION

The narrative of ROK exclusion from the San Francisco Peace Treaty reveals the tension between varying roles that the peace treaty could have performed. It was a grand strategic device that ushered in a political-security perimeter in the Pacific, but it also symbolized at least a modicum of rehabilitation, reconciliation, and redress for the past. It could deliver due attention to those nations affected by WWII yet marginalized by outdated “Allied power” designations. Additionally, the treaty presented an opportunity for American diplomats to try to cast away the historical memory of Western colonialism. Unsurprisingly, the treaty failed to operate in all of its ideal ways. For the ROK, its moral claims to have a seat at the table with Japan suited neither American post-war intentions or Cold War strategy.

Korea arguably always had at least a small chance of achieving signatory status on the peace treaty. State Department planners

struggled to fit Korea’s historical experience within the confines of the American understanding of World War II. American negotiators later latched onto the conclusion that Korea did not belong among the ranks of Allied powers when Korea’s claims of victimhood conflicted with the desired course of Japanese rehabilitation. Similarly, the process of “Asianizing” the peace conference was impersonal and not tailored to the specifics of individual Asian nations. It was ultimately guided by public relations concerns rather than a motivation to resolve the root causes of anti-Western and anti-colonialist attitudes in Asia. Consequently, Korea’s absence did little to delegitimize the U.S.-led venture, given the presence and tokenization of other “Asiatic” delegations in the conference hall.

Presented side-by-side, Korean moral claims also paled in comparison to U.S. and other Western security concerns, at least from the perspective in Washington. Korea had always had a moral claim to being involved with the treaty, yet the United States only came close to inviting the ROK after the Korean War had begun and concerns arose about the ROK government’s international prestige. The American interest in corraling potential sources for anti-American sentiment argued in favor of Korean inclusion, but was also subordinate to security concerns. Longer-held assumptions that the ROK might be unruly and muddle the treaty process came to the fore as Korea proved to be a less-than-ideal participant. Even though Korean participation in the San Francisco Peace Treaty might have built up the ROK’s international legitimacy and the occasional American diplomat believed that the ROK had a moral right to be represented, most American negotiators essentially believed that the strategic advantage of the peace treaty was far greater than any matter of Korean national pride.

The result was a smoothly-run peace conference that concluded within two days but left the ROK government and public frustrated and resentful. Japan had formally recognized Korean independence and assented to the seizure of Japanese assets left in Korea. But Korea had been denied a chance to address Japan directly about its forty years of colonial status—a status that traumatized Korea long before any other nation came into full contact with Japan’s imperial ambitions. Basic diplomatic relations between Japan and South Korea would not exist until 1965, fourteen years after the peace treaty and six years after Dulles had already died.

When there was a historic moment for the United States to engineer ROK-Japanese reconciliation, American officials balked. As the image of Communism rolling across Asia burned itself in their minds, resolving the bitter legacy of Japanese control of Korea was a low priority. The requirements of the Cold War, mixed with inadequate American appreciation for what constituted a valid World War II experience in the Asia-Pacific, culminated in the decision to exclude the Republic of Korea from the San Francisco Peace Treaty. When the lingering echoes of wartime victimhood reached Washington, Foggy Bottom had no response. 🏛️

Endnotes

- [1] James Reston. "Yoshida Avers Country Will Not 'Fail' Allies in Promoting Points." *New York Times*, 8 Sept 1951. pp.1
- [2] Article 5(a) and 14(a)1 of "Treaty of Peace with Japan," signing date September 8, 1951, *United Nations Treaty Series*, registration no. 1832.
- [3] Letter from E.N. Thompson to John M. Allison, 24 Jan 1952, Box 4, Folder "Correspondence 1952," John Allison Papers, Harry S. Truman Library Archives, Independence, Missouri.
- [4] Reston. "Yoshida Avers."
- [5] "Memorandum from the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State to the President." 4 Sept 1951, Box 1, Folder "Defense Dept-Correspondence With", Records Relating to the Treaty of Peace with Japan, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, Maryland (hereafter shortened to RG 59).
- [6] "Security Treaty Between the United States and Japan," signing date September 8, 1951.
- [7] Historiography on the San Francisco Peace Treaty has largely focused on the subsequent security system or enduring territorial disputes. Seokwoo Lee. "Territorial Disputes in East Asia, The San Francisco Peace Treaty Of 1951, and The Legacy Of U.S. Security Interests In East Asia." In: S. Lee and H. Lee, ed., *Dokdo: Historical Appraisal and International Justice*. (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers) pp.41-70. Kimie Hara. "50 Years from San Francisco: Re-Examining the Peace Treaty and Japan's Territorial Problems." *Pacific Affairs* 74, no. 3 (2001): 361-82; Leszek Buszynski disputes that the San Francisco Treaty was intended to initiate a comprehensive security structure in Asia due to its Japan-centric focus. Although Buszynski questions U.S. intentions, the U.S. engineered the ANZUS, U.S.-Philippines, and U.S.-Japan alliances directly because of the treaty process. Japan was the center of a developing U.S. strategy, and subsequently spawned U.S. commitments elsewhere across the Pacific. Leszek Buszynski. "The San Francisco System: Contemporary Meaning and Challenges." *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 35, no. 3 (September 2011): 315-35. Kent Calder, "Securing Security Through Prosperity: the San Francisco System in Perspective," *Pacific Review*, Vol. 17, no. 1, (March 2004): 135-157; John Dower, "The San Francisco System: Past, Present, and Future in U.S.-Japan-China Relations," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 8, no. 2, (Feb 2014).
- [8] Bruce Cumings. *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 1*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 10-12.
- [9] The 1942 UN Declaration formalized the Allies in WWII. 47 nations ultimately signed the declaration between 1942 and 1945. "1942: Declaration of The United Nations". 2018. *UN.Org*. Accessed November 12.; *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1951, Volume VI, Part 1, Asia and the Pacific, 1951, Document 633.
- [10] Similar observations could be made about other "Asiatic" states that participated, e.g. the US lobbied hard for Indonesian participation despite Indonesia only becoming an independent state after the end of WWII. John Price, "Cold War Relic: the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty and the Politics of Memory," *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 25, no. 3 (2001): 31-60, esp. pgs 43-44.
- [11] "Japanese Peace Treaty and Other Treaties Relating to Security in the Pacific," 19 Jan 1952, Box 7, Folder "Japan Subj. File [1 of 2], Allison Papers, Truman Library.
- [12] "The Negotiation of the Japanese Peace Treaty and Possible Lessons it has for Today," (n.d.), Box 7, Folder "Japan Subj File [2 of 2], Allison Papers, Truman Library; Allison, John M. (1905-1978); 1969; John Foster Dulles Oral History Collection, Public Policy Papers, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, esp. pgs. 24-26.
- [13] U.S. diplomats produced a June 14, 1951 joint draft of the treaty with a UK diplomatic team, who themselves were worried about USSR obstructionism. Sung-hwa Cheong. *The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea: Japanese-South Korean Relations under American Occupation, 1945-1952*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), pgs. 88-93.
- [14] "Commentary on 1947 Treaty," Box 1, Folder "Commentary on the 1947 Treaty", Records Relating to the Treaty of Peace with Japan, RG 59.
- [15] Bruce Cumings. *The Origins of the Korean War, Vol. 1*, 137-151.
- [16] Report from W.J. Sebald to the Secretary of State, 29 Oct 1949, Box 4037, Central Decimal Files 1945-1949, RG 59.
- [17] "Commentary on 1947 Treaty." Box 1, Folder "Commentary on the 1947 Treaty", Records Relating to the Treaty of Peace with Japan, RG 59.
- [18] John W Dower. *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), esp. pgs. 438-439; Michael Schaller. *The American Occupation of Japan: The Origins of the Cold War in Asia*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. pgs. 163-168.
- [19] "Advantages and Disadvantages of Indefinitely Continued Occupation or Conclusion of a Peace Settlement", n.d., surmised to be May 1949, Box 5, Folder "Treaty Draft", Records Relating to the Treaty of Peace with Japan 1945-1951, RG 59.
- [20] For more information about the growth of Japan's leftist movement during the occupation see Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 268-273.; W. Butterworth notes that the State Department obtained the Pentagon's support for a peace treaty by arguing that the sooner a peace treaty was concluded, the sooner it would be politically feasible for Japan to be rearmed. *FRUS 1950*, Volume VI, East Asia and the Pacific, 1950, Document 689.; *FRUS 1950*, Volume VI, East Asia and the Pacific, 1950, Document 728.
- [21] *FRUS 1951*, Volume VI, Part 1, Asia and the Pacific, 1951, Document 532.
- [22] Emphasis added. *FRUS 1951*, Volume VI, Part 1, Asia and the Pacific, 1951, Document 699.
- [23] Emphasis added. "Memorandum for the President," 6 Jan 1951, Box 3, Folder "Peace Treaty", Records Relating to the Treaty of Peace with Japan 1945-1951, RG 59.
- [24] SCAP refers to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers—the U.S. occupation authority in Japan; *FRUS 1951*, Volume VI, Part 1, Asia and the Pacific, 1951, Document 663.

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- [25] Elizabeth Borgwardt. *A New Deal for the New World*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pgs. 286-291.
- [26] Emphasis added. "Participation of the ROK in the Japanese Peace Settlement," 12 Dec 1949, Box 4, Folder "DRF 163", Reports Relating to the Far East 1946-1952, RG 59.
- [27] *Ibid.*
- [28] *Ibid.*
- [29] "Memorandum of Conversation between President Quirino and Ambassador Dulles." 12 Feb 1951, Box 7, Folder "Trip Philippine Papers", Records Relating to Treaty of Peace with Japan, RG 59.
- [30] "Participation of the ROK in the Japanese Peace Settlement," 12 Dec 1949, Box 4, Folder "DRF 163", Reports Relating to the Far East, 1946-1952, RG 59.
- [31] Cheong, *The Politics of Anti-Japanese Sentiment in Korea*, 80.
- [32] *Ibid.*, 74.
- [33] Price, "Cold War Relic," 45.
- [34] "Supplementary Statement to the Conversation of Friday Morning, April 23, 1951." 23 April 1951, Box 5, Folder "Second Tokyo Trip (April 1951)", Records Relating to Treaty of Peace with Japan, RG 59.
- [35] Such "certain benefits" are discussed in §1 of this chapter; Allison to Dulles, "Talk with Sir Oliver Franks Regarding Japanese Peace Treaty," 16 May 1951, Box 1, Folder "Canberra Conference", Records Relating to Treaty of Peace with Japan, RG 59.
- [36] In addition, I personally traveled to the National Archives at College Park and searched in vain through the relevant State Department records, but also encountered the same absence of documentation as to what was said that indicated British reasoning for Korean exclusion; *FRUS 1951*, Vol. VI, Part 1, Asia and the Pacific, 1951, Document 576.
- [37] *FRUS 1951*, Vol. VI, Part 1, Asia and the Pacific, 1951, Document 647.
- [38] "Memorandum of Conversation between Korean Ambassador Yu-Chan Yang and Dean Rusk." 16 Aug 1951, Reel 9, Microform C43, US State Dept Special Files Japan 1947-1956, Files of John Foster Dulles, RG 59.
- [39] Johnson to Dulles, "Attendance of Korean Observers at Japanese Peace Conference," 20 Aug 1951, Reel 10, Microform C43, Files of John Foster Dulles, RG 59.
- [40] "Note of a Telephone Conversation between Dulles and Rusk," 22 Aug 1951. Reel 10, Microform C43, Files of John Foster Dulles, RG 59.