

# Since 1945, in Asia, have Alliances Formed and Functioned as Expected by Alliance Theory?

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Alliances formed during the Cold War were pivotal in shaping the security landscape in Asia and continue to affect dynamics in the region today. Alliance theorists have proposed several models to explain the formation and function of alliances post-1945, however, the validity of each is continuously debated. In this essay, I will consider whether alliances in Asia have formed and functioned under alliance theory. More specifically, I explore the applicability of the Balance of Threat theory to the alliances between the US, Japan, and the Republic of Korea (ROK). I argue that alliances between these three states developed as expected by the Balance of Threat theory in some cases. However, notable diversions from the theory suggest that alliances could be more accurately explained by theories that account for factors beyond only threat perception. I will first outline the Balance of Threat theory and its significance in alliance literature. I will then explore the applicability of the theory to the formation and function of US-Japan, US-ROK, and Japan-ROK relations during the Cold War. Next, I will consider whether these alliances developed as expected by the theory in the changing post-Cold War environment. Finally, I will highlight three other alliance theories that utilise abandonment fears and patron commitment to better explain the formation and function of alliances in Asia after World War II.

There is no universally agreed-upon theory of alliance formation and function; however, the Balance of Threat theory is one of the most widespread approaches and underlies more recent theories. The theory was first proposed by Stephen M. Walt, who argues that states form alliances to externally balance against perceived threats.<sup>71</sup> He defines external balancing as an alignment against a threatening state “to deter it from attacking or to defeat it if it does.”<sup>72</sup> Walt’s Balance of Threat theory expands upon Kenneth Waltz’s Balance of Power theory, proposing that states balance not only against military power but against other factors such as “geographic proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions.”<sup>73</sup> This theory predicts that alliances will form when there is a “congruence of strategic interests” between states, and will function to balance their shared threats.<sup>74</sup> Therefore, it also predicts that the alliance will end when the shared threat subsides.<sup>75</sup> In considering how the Balance of Threat theory can explain alliances in Asia, I have chosen to focus on the US’ primary security partners, Japan and the ROK. The alliances formed with these states during the Cold War continue to determine the Asian security landscape today. During the Cold War, Japan and the ROK provided the foundation for the US “forward-deployed presence” in the region, and remain crucial in maintaining US control in Asia.<sup>76</sup>

The US-Japan and US-ROK alliances during the Cold War formed in response to Soviet expansion in Asia and functioned to balance this

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71 Stephen M. Walt, “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,” *International Security* 9 (1985): 3-43; Joseph M. Parent and Sebastian Rosato, “Balancing in Neorealism,” *International Security* 40 (2015): 57.

72 Stephen M. Walt, “Testing Theories of Alliance Formation: The Case of Southwest Asia,” *International Organization* 42 (1988): 278.

73 *Ibid.*, 281.

74 Zeev Maoz et al., “What is the Enemy of My Enemy? Causes and Consequences of Imbalanced International Relations, 1816-2001,” *The Journal of Politics* 69 (2007): 102.

75 Skyler J. Crammer, Bruce A. Desmarais, and Justin H. Kirkland, “Toward a Network Theory of Alliance Formation,” *International Interactions* 38 (2012): 300.

76 Victor D. Cha, “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism in Asia: The United States, Japan, and Korea,” *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (2000): 263.

threat, as expected by the Balance of Threat theory. Within the Cold War bipolar system, the US formed alliances with non-communist states in order to balance the USSR and prevent a communist takeover of Asia. In particular, the US wanted to prevent Soviet control of Japan due to its geostrategic significance to the US.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, while the ROK was of less direct significance, the US believed that the loss of the state to the Soviets would result in the fall of the entire region to communism.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, the regional threat of communist expansion in Asia, most notably from North Korea and Communist China, was salient in both Japan and the ROK. Although the US was a stronger power militarily, its “relatively benign intentions” and geographical isolation led Japan and the ROK to perceive regional communist states as a greater threat to their security.<sup>79</sup> Thus they formed alliances to balance this perceived threat, resulting in a bilateral alliance between the US and Japan in 1951, and between the US and the ROK in 1953.<sup>80</sup> These alliances were a “manifestation” of states’ balancing behaviour.<sup>81</sup> As noted by Victor Cha, they functioned to provide a “bulwark against communism” in Asia.<sup>82</sup> Particularly, they served to maintain stability along the Korean Peninsula by providing a deterrent to North Korean aggression and the capacity for the US to respond quickly if such an event did occur.<sup>83</sup> Critics of the Balance of Threat theory argue that

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77 Yasuhiro Izumikawa, “Network Connections and the Emergence of the Hub-and-Spokes Alliance System in East Asia,” *International Security* 45 (2020): 13.

78 Victor D. Cha, “Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia,” *International Security* 34 (2009): 188.

79 Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?” *International Security* 35 (2010): 10-11; Walt, “Testing Theories of Alliance Formation,” 311.

80 Izumikawa, “Network Connections,” 7.

81 David C. Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks,” *International Security* 27 (2003): 71; Michael Mastanduno, “Incomplete Hegemon: The United States and Security Order in Asia,” in *Asian Security Order*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 143.

82 Cha, “Powerplay,” 185.

83 Yasuyo Sakata, “Korea and the Japan-U.S. Alliance: A Japanese Perspective,” in *The U.S.-Japan Security Alliance: Regional Multilateralism*, eds. John Ikenberry, Takashi Inoguchi, and Yoichiro Sato (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 92.

Japan's contribution to its alliance with the US was not consistent with external balancing behaviour. Japan did not seek to contribute militarily to the alliance nor directly support the US against communist states in Asia.<sup>84</sup> However, Walt's explanation of "buck-passing" as an alternative to balancing can explain Japan's behaviour as consistent with his Balance of Threat theory.<sup>85</sup> Japan's weakness following World War II meant it had to rely heavily on defence from allied partners.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, Japan's strategic significance to the US almost guaranteed US support.<sup>87</sup> These two factors led to Japan "buck-passing" its defence to the US as opposed to actively balancing the Soviet threat, as is consistent with Walt's theory.<sup>88</sup> The US-Japan and US-ROK alliances during the Cold War formed in response to the perceived threat of communism in Asia, and functioned to maintain stability in the region via balancing or buck-passing, as expected by the Balance of Threat theory.

However, the lack of alliance formation between Japan and the ROK during the Cold War is not consistent with the Balance of Threat theory. Japan and the ROK had shared allies, enemies, and perceived threats, and their respective alliances with the US served essentially the same function.<sup>89</sup> Additionally, neither state had any other significant alliance partners in the region.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, based on Walt's model, Japan and the ROK should have formed an alliance during the Cold War. Balance of Threat could explain the ROK's initial aversion to an alliance by highlighting their fears of Japanese military resurgence and neo-

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84 Jennifer M. Lind, "Pacifism or Passing the Buck: Testing Theories of Japanese Security Policy," *International Security* 29 (2004): 101-102; Kang, "Getting Asia Wrong," 73-74; Sakata, "Korea and the Japan-U.S. Alliance," 93.

85 Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 33.

86 Lind, "Pacifism or Passing the Buck," 103.

87 Walt, *The Origins of Alliance*, 33.

88 *Ibid.*

89 Cha, "Powerplay," 185

90 Cha, "Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism," 263.

colonialism.<sup>91</sup> However, Cha argues that, despite their initial antagonism, an alliance should have been established as the threat of Japanese dominance subsided.<sup>92</sup> The Balance of Threat theory suggests that the alliance structure in Asia should have adapted as conditions changed and the perceived threat of communism increased.<sup>93</sup> Cha proposes that the level of alignment between the two states at different levels of threat can be used to test the Balance of Threat theory.<sup>94</sup> Contrary to the theory, he finds that changes in perceived levels of threat were not correlated with periods of closer alignment.<sup>95</sup> Such diversions from the Balance of Threat theory demonstrate that “alignment choices are not a direct function of external threat” but the result of a number of domestic and external factors.<sup>96</sup> It is likely that Japan and the ROK also considered historical antagonisms, colonial fears, political constraints, and domestic military strength in forming alliances.<sup>97</sup> Overall, alliances in Asia during the Cold War formed and functioned as expected by the Balance of Threat theory to some extent, however, there are significant cases of deviation.

After the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union, alliances in Asia adapted according to changes in perceived threats, as expected by the Balance of Threat theory. From the theory’s realist perspective, alliances are rare and “collapse when the threats against which they

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<sup>91</sup> Arthur A. Stein, “Recalcitrance and Initiative: US Hegemony and Regional Powers in Asia and Europe After World War II,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 14 (2014): 167.

<sup>92</sup> Cha, “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism,” 263.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 262-263.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Alyson J. K. Bailes, Bradley A. Thayer, and Baldur Thorhallsson, “Alliance Theory and Alliance ‘Shelter’: The Complexities of Small State Alliance Behaviour,” *Third World Thematics: A TWQ Journal* 1 (2016): 13; James D. Morrow, “Arms Versus Allies: Trade-Offs in the Search for Security,” *International Organisation* 47 (1993): 208; Lind, “Pacifism or Passing the Buck,” 101.

were built disappear.”<sup>98</sup> When the Soviet Union disappeared as a significant threat, Balance of Threat theorists predicted that the US’ alliances in Northeast Asia would instead function to balance North Korea and rising China.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the Cold War alliances were not expected to disappear, but rather “adjust... to the changing global strategic environment.”<sup>100</sup> Firstly, this can be seen in the increasing alliance commitment from Japan in the 1990s in response to North Korea’s missile program.<sup>101</sup> In May 1993, North Korea conducted a missile test in the Sea of Japan.<sup>102</sup> Japan’s increasing fears of the North Korean threat were noted the following year in the Defence White Paper, where they stated that North Korean missiles would create an “extremely dangerous situation” for Japan.<sup>103</sup> This increase in threat perception resulted in a Joint Declaration on Security in 1996 to reaffirm the US-Japan alliance commitment and a revision of the 1978 Guidelines for Japan-US Defence Cooperation to include a Korea Contingency.<sup>104</sup> Yasuyo Sakata argues that the North Korean threat was the “catalyst for closer Japan-US defence cooperation,” and that the alliance had “adapted well” to the changing security environment of the 1990s.<sup>105</sup> Secondly, the US-ROK alliance was affected by changing levels of perceived threat. With the fall of the Soviet Union and increasing economic issues within North Korea, the threat of communism spreading to the South had significantly decreased. A conventional attack by North Korean forces was no longer a viable

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98 Ji-Young Lee, “Contested American Hegemony and Regional Order in Postwar Asia: The Case of Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation,” *International Relations of the Asia Pacific* 19 (2019): 243.

99 Fred Charles Iklé and Terumasa Nakanishi, “Japan’s Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs* 69 (1990): 84-85.

100 *Ibid.*, 81.

101 Sakata, “Korea and the Japan-U.S. Alliance,” 34.

102 David Fouse, “Japan’s Post-Cold War North Korea Policy: Hedging Toward Autonomy?” *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 31 (2004): 1.

103 Sakata, “Korea and the Japan-U.S. Alliance,” 94.

104 Fouse, “Hedging Toward Autonomy?” 108; Sakata, “Korea and the Japan-U.S. Alliance,” 93.

105 Sakata, “Korea and the Japan-U.S. Alliance,” 93.

option, and thus the threat they posed to the ROK decreased relative to the Cold War.<sup>106</sup> This lower level of perceived threat resulted in a stagnation of the US-ROK alliance, consistent with the Balance of Threat theory.<sup>107</sup> Thirdly, more recently, Japan has used the US-Japan alliance to balance China.<sup>108</sup> Nori Katagiri argues that Japan currently perceives China's military modernisation as the greatest threat to their security and that they have primarily relied on their alliance with the US to externally balance this threat.<sup>109</sup> Japan has pursued external balancing against China by increasing diplomatic relations with the US, as seen through Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's address to the US Congress in 2015.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, Japan has supported the US' pivot to Asia and cooperated with the US to improve Japan's cyber security.<sup>111</sup> Overall, US alliances in Northeast Asia did adapt to changes in perceived threats in the post-Cold War security environment, as expected by the Balance of Threat theory.

However, US alliances in Asia since the end of the Cold War and the conditions in which they have existed have been dynamic and inconsistent, thus there are many different perspectives on the role of perceived threat in these alliances. Firstly, some scholars suggest that North Korea and China did not constitute an immediate replacement for the Soviet threat and that the fall of the Soviet Union "objectively

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<sup>106</sup> Cha, "Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism," 282.

<sup>107</sup> Chae-Sung Chun, "Theoretical Approaches to Alliance: Implications on the R.O.K.-U.S. Alliance," *Journal of International and Area Studies* 7 (2000): 75.

<sup>108</sup> Nobuhiko Tamaki, "Japan's Quest for a Rules-Based International Order: The Japan-US Alliance and the Decline of US Liberal Hegemony," *Contemporary Politics* 26 (2020): 397.

<sup>109</sup> Nori Katagiri, "Between Structural Realism and Liberalism: Japan's Threat Perception and Response," *International Studies Perspectives* 19 (2018): 330-331.

<sup>110</sup> Tongfi Kim, *The Supply Side of Security: A Market Theory of Military Alliances* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 2.

<sup>111</sup> Katagiri, "Between Structural Realism and Liberalism," 328, 335, 338.

reduced” the need for US security alliances in Asia.<sup>112</sup> US interests no longer aligned with those of Japan and the ROK, which should have been accompanied by a decrease in alliance commitment between 1990 and 1993.<sup>113</sup> Despite this, Japan significantly increased their military commitment to the alliance during this period.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, the ROK government publicly affirmed their commitment to the US alliance amid a declining North Korean threat and stated that they would support the continuation of the alliance even after Korean reunification.<sup>115</sup> Secondly, despite a decrease in the level of shared threats between the ROK and Japan immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union, these two states increased their security cooperation.<sup>116</sup> In 1992, they released a joint statement of their intentions for closer relations, and since then they have formalised bilateral security dialogue channels and made agreements on aerial collision and maritime cooperation.<sup>117</sup> As was the case during the Cold War, Cha argues that this is inconsistent with the Balance of Threat alliance theory.<sup>118</sup> Finally, Kang and Tamaki question the extent to which the US-Japan and US-ROK alliances have functioned to balance China.<sup>119</sup> They argue that neither Japan nor the ROK has pursued aggressive external balancing strategies as the Balance of Threat theory would predict but have instead shown “considerable deference to China” and reluctance in supporting the US militarily.<sup>120</sup> While the alliances have adapted as expected by the

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112 Cha, “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism,” 273; Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Yoichiro Sato, “The US-Japan Alliance Dilemma in the Asia-Pacific: Changing Rationales and Scope,” *The International Spectator* 54 (2019): 78; Kim, *The Supply Side of Security*, 2.

113 Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, “The US-Japan Alliance Dilemma,” 78; Kim, *The Supply Side of Security*, 2.

114 Kim, *The Supply Side of Security*, 2.

115 Cha, “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism,” 273.

116 *Ibid.*, 282.

117 *Ibid.*

118 Cha, “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism,” 283-284.

119 Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong,” 79-80; Tamaki, “Japan’s Quest,” 397.

120 *Ibid.*



Balance of Threat theory in some cases, many inconsistencies suggest more complex factors are at play.

While alliances during the Cold War sometimes formed and functioned in accordance with the Balance of Threat theory, inconsistencies suggest that they could be better explained by alternate theories of alliance formation that consider a wider variety of factors. In particular, Balance of Threat overlooks the importance of abandonment fears and patron commitment in dictating alliance dynamics. Alliances in Asia after 1945 formed and functioned with closer adherence to alliance theories that consider the interplay of these factors. Three interrelated theories, the Quasi-Alliance model, the Social Exchange Network theory, and hedging, apply abandonment fears to the US' alliances in Asia.

Firstly, Cha's Quasi-Alliance theory uses abandonment fears and patron commitment to explain Japan-ROK relations during the Cold War.<sup>121</sup> He asserts that because Japan and the ROK were heavily dependent on the US, alliance patterns between the two states were determined not by external threats but by the level of US commitment.<sup>122</sup> The US' commitment to the region was relatively high throughout the Cold War, therefore Japan and the ROK had already attained sufficient security guarantees from their alliances with the US, and neither state needed the other as an additional ally.<sup>123</sup> Changes in Japan-ROK relations throughout the Cold War were also consistent with this model. For example, periods of weak US commitment to the two bilateral alliances resulted in high abandonment fears from Japan and the ROK.<sup>124</sup> These fears led the states to seek improved relations amongst themselves, regardless of the level of perceived threats.<sup>125</sup>

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121 Cha, "Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism," 269.

122 Ibid, 263.

123 Ibid, 273.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

Secondly, Yasuhiro Izumikawa uses the Social Exchange Network approach to explain alliance formation in Asia. This model highlights the wide variety of interactions and exchanges between all states in the alliance system, accounting for abandonment fears.<sup>126</sup> Specifically, he uses the inter-spoke negative connection hypothesis to explain US-Japan-ROK dynamics.<sup>127</sup> Similar to the Quasi-Alliance model, this hypothesis suggests that the willingness of Japan and the ROK to strengthen their bilateral security ties is negatively related to the strength of their alliance with the US.<sup>128</sup> In particular, Izumikawa uses the model to explain the bilateral nature of alliances in Asia. He argues that the ROK and Japan had no need to expand their alliances to be multilateral as their security was already “boosted” by the US’ network of bilateral alliances in Asia.<sup>129</sup>

Finally, Elena Atanassova-Cornelis and Yoichiro Sato use theories of abandonment and hedging to explain Japan’s diversion from a balancing strategy in the post-Cold War environment.<sup>130</sup> They explain that fears of US abandonment have led Japan to pursue a hedging strategy that includes reinforcement of their alliance with the US to prevent abandonment, and the simultaneous pursuit of “alignment with other US allies” in case the US does withdraw.<sup>131</sup> This strategy explains Japan’s lack of decisive balancing against China and their improvement of relations with the ROK after the fall of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the hedging strategy aligns with Cha’s hypothesis that when a state fears abandonment, it will increase its contribution to the alliance to encourage the ally to maintain their commitment.<sup>132</sup> This hypothesis, therefore, explains Japan and the ROK’s commitment to

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<sup>126</sup> Izumikawa, “Network Connections,” 14-15.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>130</sup> Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, “The US-Japan Alliance Dilemma,” 80.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Cha, “Abandonment, Entrapment, and Neoclassical Realism,” 266-267.

their respective alliances immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union, when they believed that the US would decrease its involvement in Asia.<sup>133</sup> By incorporating abandonment fears and patron commitment into alliance theory, these models more accurately explain alliance dynamics between the US, Japan, and the ROK after 1945.

Overall, alliances in Asia did not form and function as expected by any single alliance theory. The traditional Balance of Threat theory is able to somewhat explain US-Japan and US-ROK alliances during the Cold War, which formed in response to, and functioned to balance against, the threat of communism in Asia. Additionally, these alliances adapted to the changing security environment at the end of the Cold War in adherence to the theory. The US-Japan alliance adapted to balance the threat of North Korea in the 1990s, and more recently to balance a rising China. Conversely, commitment to the ROK alliance declined as the level of perceived threats to the ROK decreased. However, there did exist alliance dynamics different from those expected by the Balance of Threat theory, such as the lack of a Japan-ROK alliance and unexpected variations in alliance commitment after the Cold War. More recent alliance theories that consider abandonment fears and patron commitment can account for these shortfalls in traditional theory, including Cha's Quasi-Alliance theory, Izumikawa's Social Exchange Network approach, and Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato's application of the hedging strategy. As of yet, no alliance theory has been able to completely encompass the dynamic nature of alliances in Asia since 1945. Theories are often too restrictive to account for the wide variety of factors that contribute to alliance formation and function, or too broad to be of significant value to the field. Further exploration into the region is needed to completely understand the dynamics of alliances in Asia, and how the formation of these alliances after World War II continue to affect the global security environment today.

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133 Atanassova-Cornelis and Sato, "The US-Japan Alliance Dilemma," 83.

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