The Specter of Yalta: Asia Firsters and the Development of Conservative Internationalism

Joyce Mao
Middlebury College
Email: jmao@middlebury.edu

Abstract
During the 1940s, conservative leaders in the United States turned to the emerging Cold War in Asia both to condemn the moral bankruptcy of liberal globalism and to establish their own brand of anti-Communist internationalism. "Asia Firsters" such as Senators William F. Knowland, John W. Bricker, and Robert A. Taft evoked the specter of Yalta and Roosevelt’s betrayal of Nationalist China as a signature issue which extended far beyond the question of who “lost” China. Yalta served as a touchstone for the right’s ideological and political development during the Cold War. Focusing on U.S.-People’s Republic-Taiwan relations during the early and mid-1950s, this article traces how initial criticism of the 1945 agreements quickly evolved into practical legislative proposals that addressed executive overreach, legislative oversight, collective international peacekeeping, opposition to Beijing’s admission to the United Nations, and constitutional principles vis-à-vis active global interventionism. Although Asia Firsters failed to substantively change China policy, their approach was an inspiration for the most enduring American political movement of the postwar period.

Keywords
Containment Policy, Cold War, Yalta Papers, Yalta Accords, Bricker Amendment, Conservatism, William F. Knowland, Robert A. Taft, John W. Bricker

In May 1946, as American wartime optimism began to turn into postwar anxiety, an unusual petition appeared in major newspapers and periodicals. The Manchurian Manifesto claimed the United States owed a “special debt” to China because China was “the victim both of our long appeasement of Japan and of our unpreparedness.” The agreements reached at the Yalta conference the previous year – made “behind China’s back” – granted Soviet troops access to the province of Manchuria during the final weeks of the war. The Manifesto contended that the Russian Army was now giving Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung’s Communists a vital advantage in the civil war against Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists and that the United States
should “insist on the strict observance of promises made to China.” Defenders would say that Yalta negotiations took place before the certainty of the atomic bomb, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt had sought to bring the Soviet Union into the war against Japan in the spirit of realpolitik diplomacy. However, these critics charged that the Yalta agreement seriously compromised the moral leadership of the United States and imperiled the Open Door tradition of special friendship between America and China.

The Manifesto, drawn up by the American China Policy Association, blamed Americans, not Stalin, for China’s “betrayal” at Yalta. Sixty-two public figures from various backgrounds endorsed its claims. They ranged from Time-Life magnate Henry Luce and Congressman Walter Judd (R-Neb.) to the socialist Norman Thomas and American Federal of Labor President William Green to publisher Alfred A. Knopf and Mrs. Wendell Willkie. The names of well-known Chiang supporters such as Judd (a former medical missionary in China) and Luce (a son of China missionaries) were unsurprising, but the manifesto was not intended only for the eyes of the converted. It beseeched all Americans to rectify the wrong against a wartime ally: “Will the American people, at the strongest moment in their history, accept a Russian policy in Asia which we rejected in the case of Germany and Japan even when we were weak?”

Condemning the diplomacy which ended the war represented a dramatic turnaround from just a few months earlier. Initial public reception of the 1945 agreement had bordered on rapturous. Thanks to the efforts of James F. Byrnes, then director of the Office of War Mobilization, the Declaration on Liberated Europe and further solidification of the United

---

1 For a recent discussion, see Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, Racing the Enemy, Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

2 Alfred Kohlberg founded the American China Policy Association (ACPA) in 1946 as an alternative to the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR), which he believed had been infiltrated by Communists. The organization had a number of different presidents, the first of which was longtime Shanghai newspaper publisher John B. Powell, who was designated as the manifesto’s author. Nevertheless, Kohlberg was the real driving force behind ACPA, and he alone had the authority to name its presidents. See Kohlberg to Clare Boothe Luce, 4 June 1947, box 114, Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, CA; Joseph Keeley, The China Lobby Man: The Story of Alfred Kohlberg (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1969), 233.

Nations seemed a promising beginning to postwar order. Healthy praise came from Democrats as well as key Republicans. But as the full geopolitical scope of the agreement, especially the confidential provisions regarding Eastern Europe and the “Far East,” became public knowledge, the positive assessment of Roosevelt’s efforts rapidly soured. The now-dead president was accused of appeasement in yielding to Soviet demands.

As the Manchurian Manifesto showed, disapproval of Yalta could be heard across the political spectrum. However, by 1950, the most vocal and organized critics of Yalta came from the GOP right. Republican conservatives had seized upon Mao’s impending victory as exposing the futility of mere “containment” of communism rather than actively opposing or rolling it back. For years they had sought weaknesses in a foreign policy dominated by Democrats. The presumption of bipartisan consensus in diplomatic affairs was maddening to conservatives who felt they had little more than token input in Cold War strategy. The internationalist vision that underscored containment policy made them uneasy; it exponentially increased the number and variety of the nation’s commitments overseas and created what conservatives deemed a gross expansion of federal bureaucracy. At bottom, “liberal containment” granted the president unprecedented powers at home and abroad while infringing upon the powers of the other branches – notably the Senate, where conservatives had a stronghold. When Mao’s victory confirmed their geopolitical fears, conservatives capitalized on criticism of U.S. China policy that had steadily intensified since Yalta, the Marshall Mission, and the release of the Wedemeyer Report.

Grassroots activists joined institutional elites in the should-haves, could-haves, and ifs. They latched onto the GOP’s right wing as the best hope for Free China and linked it to their search for the best safeguard against an overbearing and wasteful government bureaucracy infected by communism. Robert Welch, Jr., for instance, used wartime China throughout the 1950s to showcase the moral bankruptcy of the U.S. state. He presented John Birch, a U.S. Army soldier and Baptist missionary who had been killed by a Chinese Communist patrol in 1945, as the first American casualty of the Cold War. The Communists, he said, recognized that Birch stood “for America, for Christianity… the very embodiment of those qualities and forces that stood in their way.”

Because of a bumbling yet subversive

---

federal bureaucracy, “Mao and the Chinese Communists were crushing their opposition in more and more of China.” Welch was so moved by Birch’s story he made the missionary-soldier the namesake of a new conservative organization. His line of assessment became standard conservative rhetoric: Either U.S. officials had been slow to discern Soviet intentions or, more likely, liberal traitors had knowingly handed China over to the enemy. Alger Hiss’s presence at Yalta was evidence that Democrats were blind to internal subversion, while John Birch’s martyrdom proved China could have been saved if only the State Department had not suppressed news of how he had been killed.

This cautionary tale of high intrigue and betrayal at Yalta achieved an aura of received truth in rightwing mythology. Indeed, much of conservatism’s discussion of Far Eastern policy used incendiary rhetoric that clouded analysis – both the analysis of people in the moment and historical analysis by later scholars – of what China actually meant for the right’s political and ideological development during the early Cold War. The “Who lost China?” melee obscured a larger underlying function. American conservatism needed to internationalize in order to remain politically viable. The urgency of global anti-communism required conservative officials and grassroots leaders alike to dispel the right’s isolationist reputation by making world affairs an integral part of their agendas. Because it tapped into American idealism and exceptionalism, a Free China receptive to Christianity and capitalism held wide appeal, and its “loss” proved an effective entrée into foreign policy debates. Invoking the specter of Yalta and extolling Free China showed that conservatives were not isolationist and simultaneously characterized their opponents’ China policy as an immoral betrayal of traditional American ideals and interests.

---

The “Asia First” approach was deceptively simple. Its conservative proponents – “Asia Firsters” – demanded that U.S. foreign policy give the Pacific equal or more consideration than the European Atlantic. Although their strategy appeared one-dimensional, its implications were far-reaching. On the diplomatic front, the spread of communism in Asia offered the Republican right a geopolitical issue to mark as its own, in contrast to liberal initiatives in European affairs such as the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine. At home, conservative politicians’ focus on the Pacific could better their fortunes among an electorate that was shifting due to the growth of Western Sunbelt states and the advent of the Cold War. Moreover, Asia First was not a short-lived or restrictive strategy. A series of conflicts in the Far East, including the Korean War and crises in the Taiwan Strait, fueled debates over fundamental issues such as executive power and the efficacy of collective security. They provided American conservatism the opportunity to use Congress as a base for a legislative approach to anti-Communist internationalism well after the ideal of a democratic Chinese mainland vanished.

American conservatives’ adoption of China as a foreign policy issue was never just about that one country, or even about Asia as a whole. On the contrary, the Soviet Union was the target. Some policymakers had a better understanding than they could show to a public that saw only the “loss” of China to the Soviets, but much Washington rhetoric inaccurately described Mao as the Kremlin’s puppet rather than its ally. Conservatives therefore interpreted active revision of U.S. China policy as a way to fight the larger Cold War and liberal containment simultaneously.

---

9 I use “Asia Firsters” to designate conservative Republicans who supported Free China. The more commonly employed term “China Lobby” encompasses a wider body of figures, many of whom were more moderate in their overall political inclinations. Key Asia Firsters (such as William Knowland and Styles Bridges) have previously been identified as members of the China Lobby, while others (such as Robert Taft) have had their associations with China virtually unrecognized. Their personal opinions about Chiang Kai-shek varied, but they all looked to China as a way to diversify the conservative platform – a motivation that was not universal within the China Lobby.


Questions of Morality: The Yalta “Betrayal”

The specter of Yalta played a remarkably consistent role in the evolution from reactionary denunciation and nostalgia for a special Sino-American relationship into legislative proposals. As a narrative touchstone, it was instantly recognizable, and Yalta remained in the right's rhetorical arsenal for decades. But even more important, Roosevelt's perceived errors prompted conservative leaders to propose their own policy solutions for Taiwan and the People's Republic of China; the concept “conservative internationalism” ceased to be an oxymoron. Backlash against the conference raised broader questions about who controlled U.S. foreign policy and how a concentration of power damaged national interests both at home and abroad. The blame rested, conservatives argued, with an executive branch that wielded too much unilateral influence over a large state apparatus.

At the beginning of the Cold War, Republicans had difficulty giving shape to the liberal state's alleged sins in foreign policy. The public generally gave Roosevelt credit for defeating the fascist enemy in World War II, and Roosevelt had worked assiduously to make that effort bipartisan. After 1945, Republican conservatives chafed as the wartime coalition of moderates, now headed by Harry S. Truman, continued to dominate the framing of international affairs. Truman's deliberate inclusion of Senator Arthur Vandenberg (R-Mich.) in major diplomatic events preempted the GOP right. Vandenberg was a well-known conservative and a former isolationist; his early involvement in the United Nations and seat on the Foreign Relations Committee gave the impression that politics stopped at the water's edge. The successes of the Marshall Plan and the Berlin airlift made it daunting, even hazardous, to criticize European reconstruction. Truman had also been savvy with Japan. His appointment of General Douglas MacArthur, one of conservatism's darlings, as head of the Supreme Command of Allied Powers (SCAP) in Japan, quashed grumblings about the direction and cost of the U.S.-led occupation, or at least postponed them until later in the Cold War.

Yalta provided Republican conservatives with an opening wedge even in those years. One major flashpoint was the fate of Poland, which drew sharp criticism from Midwestern members of Congress whose districts included sizeable immigrant populations from Eastern Europe. Yalta became campaign fodder. In the lead-up to the 1950 elections in Ohio, volunteers for Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio, a conservative Republican stalwart, labored to relate his diplomatic positions to a growing ethnic
electorate that included Poles, Italians, Rumanians, Hungarians, Greeks, Jews, and Czechs – groups that usually voted Democrat. Taft supporters reminded voters that the senator had opposed Tehran, Yalta, and Potsdam. One pamphlet, titled “Don’t Sell Yourself to Become a Slave of Government,” urged naturalized citizens to vote for the candidate who had not betrayed their homelands.\textsuperscript{12}

However, the fate of China transcended electoral regionalism and raised the outcry against Yalta to full volume. Chiang’s defeat, once inconceivable to the broader public, became grim fact by the close of the 1940s. Faced with the reality of a China under communism and the demise of what they believed was a special Sino-American friendship that dated back half a century, American supporters of the Nationalists – some of whom had the resources to make sure that their opinions were heard – mobilized to lay blame for the “loss.”\textsuperscript{13} Denunciation of East Asia policy grew more frenetic with each passing week. In 1950 alone, Senator William F. Knowland (R-Calif.) delivered 115 hard-charging speeches on the Far East, a feat that earned him the nickname “the senator from Formosa.” Former isolationists like Majority Leader Taft began to advocate intervention to combat communism in the Pacific.\textsuperscript{14} Agreements like Yalta had also exacted costs closer to home. In practical terms, Taft charged that American taxpayers would have to pay for federal agencies expanded to administer foreign aid. The moral price was even higher: “I am not happy about the country’s foreign policy. Through the agreements made at Tehran and Yalta by President Roosevelt, and at Potsdam by President Truman, we practically abandoned all of the ideals for which the war was fought.”\textsuperscript{15} Taft’s allegation was clear: Through secret wartime negotiations, American presidents had abandoned the nation’s public promises to uphold freedom around the world.


\textsuperscript{13} Koen, \textit{China Lobby}, 27-85; Keeley, \textit{China Lobby Man}.


Questions of Legality: Who Conducts Foreign Relations?

Decrying the erosion of traditional morals and values was easy; translating critique into policy was another task altogether. Former president Herbert Hoover was among the first to offer a reconsideration of Taiwan’s status *vis-à-vis* Yalta and other wartime agreements. Immediately after Chiang’s flight from the mainland, he wrote to remind Knowland that the Cairo Declaration of 1943, which stipulated Japanese imperial territories would be returned to the Republic of China (ROC) in the event of Allied victory, and the 1945 Potsdam proclamation, which specified the terms for Japanese surrender, were “executive agreements.” That status meant they were never ratified as treaties by the Senate and were therefore legally questionable. Hoover suggested, “You might think over an argument that could be made; namely, that Formosa and the Pescadores are still in [General Douglas] MacArthur’s jurisdiction.”

If Cairo and Potsdam were null and void, and if Taiwan and other offshore islands were still technically Japanese, not Chinese, possessions, then they would fall under the general’s authority as head of SCAP in Japan. Exactly what that meant for the security of Taiwan was left undefined – perhaps the occupation government in Japan would be expected to intervene if Mao moved across the strait. Whatever the possibilities, MacArthur’s status as a popular conservative figure offered reassurance that the ROC would be defended. Hoover’s plan demonstrated a remarkable willingness to intervene to protect Taiwan from Communist aggression, even if it meant nullifying its status as an independent, sovereign government.

Although the details of his suggestion were startling and remained hypothetical, Hoover raised a larger issue about growth of executive power at the hands of an expanded U.S. foreign policy, particularly when it came to postwar settlement in East Asia. Other Republican conservatives had been making that claim for some time: For example, in response to the State Department’s 1949 white paper on China, Senator Styles Bridges (R-N.H.) described Yalta as “a trade of territory which did not belong to either the United States or Great Britain.”

When direct war with Communist armies broke out in Korea, President Truman ordered American forces into combat without a formal declaration.

---

of war, and indeed, without formal consultation with Congress. The argument about executive overreach was repeated again and again as the Korean “police action” continued. GOP conservatives argued the president had circumvented Congress via the United Nations, and once the war was approved as a UN mission, Truman not only refused to take necessary steps to achieve total victory, he fired MacArthur for wanting to do so. During the 1951 Senate inquiry into MacArthur’s dismissal, Knowland presented the secrecy surrounding Yalta as part of an ongoing pattern: “When actions are taken that lead to hundreds of millions of Chinese going into the Soviet orbit with the destruction of their lives and their liberty, is this private business? Is it comparable to the relationship of a doctor and his patient, attorney and his client, priest and the parishioner? I think not.” Believing the Korean conflict could be traced to confidential settlement, the senator and his fellow Asia Firsters were determined to raise such rhetorical questions. The fact that vital decisions could be made without legislative oversight meant the White House wielded too much power over U.S. diplomacy and the new national security state.

**Containing Executive Power: The Bricker Amendment**

The debate over the Bricker Amendment highlighted conservative frustrations with an increasing dominance of the executive over the legislative branch. Introduced by Senator John W. Bricker (R-Ohio) in January 1953 as a series of amendments to the Constitution, the resolution’s first clause stated, “A provision of a treaty which denies or abridges any right enumerated in this Constitution shall not be of any force or effect.” The amendment immediately targeted executive agreements as dangerous to individual and states’ rights. By requiring Congress to strictly regulate
presidential agreements with foreign parties, it proposed a transfer of power away from the executive branch to the legislative.

Against the backdrop of the Yalta agreements and the Korean War, the amendment translated long expressed sentiments into concrete policy proposals. In a post-1949 world, pacts and treaties conservatives disapproved of were deemed aspects of totalitarianism. The Cold War had given dictatorship, in the form of an all-powerful executive, ample opportunity to emerge. “In our time the power of government has grown at a rampant rate. Whenever the power of government is enhanced, to the same degree human liberty is suppressed,” Bricker proclaimed. In other words, any president, Republican or Democrat, could singlehandedly implicate the nation in international debacle.

Bricker decried Yalta as a major example of executive agreements that should be contested. By falling back on the narrative of Roosevelt’s unchecked concessions and how they led to Chinese Communist aggression, which in turn provoked conflict in Korea, he and other amendment supporters appeared to fulfill stereotypes of stale, inflexible conservatism that did not square with the realities of American global responsibility. That impression has stuck. As late as 1992, historian Cathal J. Nolan dubbed Bricker “the last hurrah” of isolationism.

The Bricker episode warrants interpretation in a different light. The bill and the support it garnered are better understood as evidence that conservatives had significantly altered their views of the nation’s diplomatic responsibilities. Their brand of Asia First internationalism demonstrated an ability to exploit the crossover between domestic and foreign concerns. By again raising the specter of Yalta, the amendment framed constitutional constructivism as the safeguard against mistakes made by errant presidents (even if the executive had the best of intentions when striking international bargains).

From a partisan standpoint, the timing was a disaster. Republicans on the right raised the issue of executive power shortly after the GOP regained control of the presidency and a Senate majority. Such a display of disunity and insubordination so early in the new Eisenhower administration put a

---

severe damper on the party’s comeback, which was two decades in the making. But the GOP Senate, its leadership dominated by conservatives, had a ready answer for that critique: “I am certain that this President, Eisenhower, does not believe that Congress should be a rubber-stamp body,” declared Knowland, who was by then Senate majority leader. By defying even a Republican executive, conservative legislators presented themselves as dedicated to national ideals, not just partisan ones. A total of sixty senators voted for the Bricker Amendment. Although their efforts fell one vote shy of a two-thirds majority, the message they managed to send was quite clear.

The depth of the right’s protest against consensus foreign policy extended Yalta’s influence beyond the crisis of the Korean War. Dealing with Communist China catalyzed and legitimized demands for equilibrium of power in foreign affairs, which remained an ever-present theme. But from that central issue stemmed a host of arguments about how American superpower should be executed. A trio of events in 1955 – the Taiwan Strait crisis and Formosa Resolution, consequent debate over the UN, and the release of the Yalta papers – demonstrated how conservative internationalism was starting to address diplomatic issues more specifically and in more depth.

The Straits Crisis and a Resolution

The armistice in Korea in 1953 hardly dissipated fears that the Cold War could again turn hot in Asia. Certainly, mainstream media heightened public perception of a regional powder keg. U.S. News & World Report’s Christmas 1954 cover, for example, blared, “Chances of War in ’55: Explosion, If It Comes, Will Probably Be in the Pacific.” Inside, the article intimated that China and the Soviet Union were marched in monolithic lockstep: “One false step by the Communists toward Formosa can explode into war. Chinese Communists are talking and acting tough – with Moscow’s full backing.”

24 Phillip A. Grant, “The Bricker Amendment Controversy,” ibid. 15 (Summer 1985), 574; Tanenbaum, Bricker Amendment Controversy, 80-94, 141-44.
The Eisenhower administration’s protection of Taiwan aggravated concerns of another military conflict. In 1953, it announced that U.S. naval forces would defend the island from attack; the ships would also refrain from interfering in any moves made against the Chinese mainland. In what appeared to be a wholehearted renewal of support for Chiang, who continued to represent all of China in the UN, the American president signed a mutual defense treaty with the Republic of China on 2 December 1954. The United States was tightly bound to Taiwan, meaning any attack on the island could be potentially catastrophic.\(^{27}\)

Yet the vigorous anti-Communist rhetoric used by both Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles did not reflect the whole of their position. In private, they took care to avoid confrontations from happening in the first place. The White House warned Chiang it would refuse to green light any plan that could drag the United States into war.\(^{28}\) In public, the tough talk was a way to tell Beijing and Moscow that Washington would act if stability was threatened. It also staved off criticism from conservatives who questioned whether the “moderate” Eisenhower was taking a hard enough line against communism.

It was true that the president was no Asia Firster. His career and inclinations led him to put Europe first. Likewise, the National Security Council found the idea of going to war over Taiwan highly objectionable. After all, Dulles had just extricated the United States from the multilateral confines of the Geneva Accords on Vietnam, and with the founding of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954, U.S. policymakers could sustain flexible response in an increasingly unstable region.

Renewed shelling of Quemoy and Matsu in January 1955 tested the White House’s public/private compartmentalization regarding Taiwan. Motivated in part by the formation of SEATO and fears of America forging new agreements with Taiwan, Mao ordered a shelling campaign that first began the previous September.\(^{29}\) The situation quickly escalated as the Nationalists returned fire. In response, Congress overwhelmingly passed the Formosa Resolution on 29 January, granting the president unilateral discretion


to utilize all necessary force in the Taiwan Strait, including nuclear intervention.

Rather than immediately exercise that power, the administration made no public move, and Dulles was put in an unusual position of having to quell rumors of war. At a press conference in April he declared, “We have made it perfectly clear our desire that there shall be no war; our desire that there shall be a cease-fire. So if there is any war, it will be entirely due to the provocation and initiative of those who unfortunately may not be subject to the pacific purpose which they proclaim.” Dulles insisted American intervention would be strictly along the lines of the mutual defense treaty. There was “no commitment of any kind, sort, or description” that obligated the United States to protect Quemoy or Matsu. His words of calm belied the decision Eisenhower had come to. As Gordon Chang has argued, the president was determined to use nuclear weapons if escalation occurred. Although the White House did what it could to prevent such a scenario from happening in the first place – urging Chiang to withdraw from the islands or agree to a naval blockade with U.S. military support – the planned course of action was to exercise the full power of the Formosa Resolution.

Because they were not privy to the maneuvering and decision-making behind the scenes, Asia Firsters remained unaware of Eisenhower’s level of commitment. Impatient for a strong show of support for Taiwan, they had criticized the limitations of the mutual defense treaty when it was first signed. When shelling started again in January, they demanded immediate intervention. Rather than an affirmation of Eisenhower’s leadership, their votes in favor of the Formosa Resolution represented a potential expansion of mutual defense parameters. After giving the president a mandate to guarantee the security of Taiwan and surrounding areas, conservative internationalists expected him to exercise that power, and they voiced their intentions in no uncertain terms.


32 “We Must Be Willing to Fight Now,” Collier’s, 1 Oct. 1954, 24; Montgomery and Johnson, One Step from the White House, 173, 185-87.
In response to Dulles’s affirmation of non-intervention eleven days earlier, Knowland again pointed out the East Asia’s importance in relation to Western Europe: “The fact of the matter is that Quemoy and Matsu are as important to free China as Western Berlin is to free Germany.” If Soviet forces had stormed West Berlin, he argued, American policy would undoubtedly be more decisive than it was being in the Taiwan Strait. Was it not “time for the Iron Curtain to move backward rather than forward?”

When Senator Wayne Morse, a former Republican from Oregon who had recently become an independent, moved for reversal of the Formosa Resolution two months after its passage, Knowland rejected the proposition on the grounds that any such action would endanger the islands and begin a chain reaction that could lead to Communist control over most of Asia within two years. Chinese communism was Soviet communism, and because of a shrinking of the globe, “We are up against Soviet forces just across a river line.” Defensible American interests in the Cold War included Quemoy and Matsu, whatever the mutual defense treaty outlined. Eisenhower had to act. “The argument has been made that this is not the place to draw the line. It will never be easy to draw a line,” Knowland argued. “A great danger to the peace of the world today is that the Communists may interpret the mere introduction of a resolution which would reverse our policy and which, on its face, would tie the hands of the Commander in Chief.”

On the surface, such an endorsement of executive power clashed with the spirit of the recent Bricker Amendment. How could conservatives argue for entrusting a president with such a degree of military power despite recently attempting to limit the White House’s ability to unilaterally strike agreements with foreign nations? The answer rested with legislative process. Bricker’s chief complaint was that presidential treaties lacked congressional oversight. On the other hand, the Formosa Resolution was put to a vote, thus adhering to rules that allowed lawmakers to air their opinions. Rather than being antithetical to one another, support for both proposals were examples of how conservatives retained their commitment to a strict interpretation of the Constitution while simultaneously engaging with new Cold War issues. China and Taiwan provided both context and forum for what seemed to be a proactive conservative internationalism, distinct yet

also malleable to a mainstream Republican agenda if circumstances demanded.\textsuperscript{35}

\textbf{All or Nothing: Conservatives Take on the UN}

Crisis in the Taiwan Strait also yielded further opportunities for conservatives to criticize the United Nations, an organization with which they had longstanding grievances. Collective peacekeeping through an organization that seated Communist nations and restricted national autonomy had never sat well with the American right. Birchers proudly displayed “Get U.S. Out of the UN” bumper stickers, while Senator Bricker once described the UN Charter as a “a blueprint for slavery.”\textsuperscript{36} Truman’s appeal to the UN rather than Congress for the Korean War cemented this assessment.

In an immediate sense, conservatives worried that China somehow gaining control of Quemoy and Matsu – perhaps through UN channels – would be a “downpayment” toward further Communist expansion in the Pacific. Similar to the arguments about Yalta and Manchuria during 1945, there was fear that the People’s Republic of China (PRC) would claim more and more territory. A shoring up of China’s legitimacy might pave the way for its seizure of the Pescadores, or even Taiwan, “through the United Nations or by armed conflict.”\textsuperscript{37} Admittedly, the odds of such changes actually occurring were extremely slim, especially given the composition of the UN’s membership. “Red China” had been denied admission to the UN, but if admittance was even a possibility, the issue was too hot for conservatives to drop.

Their solution was to reform the UN to protect Taiwan. The key was to deemphasize the possibility of a Nationalist return to the mainland (by then almost universally accepted as an impossibility) and instead frame China’s exclusion as, first and foremost, a matter of national self-interest. The UN was a potential conduit for growth of Chinese power and corresponding threat to Taiwan; therefore it impeded what was good for the United States. While somewhat circuitous, this direction went so far as a


\textsuperscript{36} Tanenbaum, \textit{Bricker Amendment Controversy}, 25.

joint resolution that called for American withdrawal from the United Nations if Communist China was admitted or its delegation recognized. Hoping to thwart any PRC attempt to “shoot their way into the United Nations organization,” Senate Resolution 112 and Senate Concurrent Resolution 29 urged the president to “take such steps as may be necessary to effect the withdrawal of the United States from membership in the United Nations and all organs and agencies thereof.”

While clearly hostile, the resolutions were no mere reactions. On a symbolic level they proposed a type of diplomatic isolationism in the age of collective security. Rather than a return to literal, geographic isolationism, this version meant the execution of U.S. foreign policy unfettered by an international body. Conservatives had embraced the view that being an active superpower meant being able to intervene anywhere in the world. However, a perception that an organization dominated by foreign delegates (including representatives of Communist states) could jeopardize American sovereignty and potentially usurp the Constitution underscored their criticism of the UN. Extending the discussion that began with reaction to executive power at Yalta, conservative internationalism demanded that neither the president nor an external organization should be able to dictate America’s overseas commitment without strict oversight.

In the spring of 1955, talk of admitting the PRC reached one of its periodic crescendos, due in part to Chou En-lai’s leadership during the Bandung Conference in Indonesia. China’s heightened influence in the Third World via the “Bandung Spirit” sparked renewed debate within U.S. policy circles.

The PRC had shown diplomatic initiative, distinct from that of the Soviet Union. Even if it was an unexpected rival, Beijing had nonetheless made serious overtures toward newly independent states in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, regions U.S. officials had long considered frontiers of the Cold War. By the time the Bandung Conference ended, *Foreign Affairs* had published an article by Arthur H. Dean that argued for

---

formal U.S. recognition of the Communist state – and UN seating – provided Taiwan's interests were still rigorously protected.\footnote{Arthur Dean, “United States Foreign Policy and Formosa,” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, April 1955.}

To American conservatives, concession of this kind was anathema. Republican floor leader Knowland responded by venting complaints focused specifically on how the UN eroded two vital characteristics of American life: national sovereignty and national morality, both of which comprised major elements of national interest. According to his logic, the very inclusion of nations with totalitarian governments was increasingly detrimental to American sovereignty if the United States had to comply with UN measures. Knowland cited the Security Council seat of the Soviet Union (“the most tyrannical government since western civilization entered the modern era”) as the organization’s fatal flaw: “I am opposed to any form of world government wherein American freedom guaranteed by our Constitution and Bill of Rights is compromised or diluted in the slightest by co-membership with Communist tyranny.”\footnote{“Speech of Senator William F. Knowland, 64th Continental Congress of the Daughters of the American Revolution, Constitution Hall, Washington, D.C., 21 April 1955,” carton 299, Knowland Papers.}

Timing was another issue. The organization was potentially constructive, but its rules and bylaws allowed Communist nations to hamper prompt, streamlined action: “If you exhaust the United Nations before you act, all of these countries could be down the drain.”\footnote{William F. Knowland, Statement before Subcommittee on UN Charter Revision (SF), 9 Apr. 1955, ibid.}

As the PRC gained a diplomatic status independent from the Soviet Union, and the possibility of its entry into the UN loomed large, Asia Firsters demanded the United States withdraw if Chinese admission became a reality. They argued that seating China countered everything the UN should stand for. If the organization was to promote peace worldwide, nations with constitutional governments needed to be the dominant forces within it. Moreover, the UN’s potential admission of China despite PRC aggressions raised the possibility of an outside organization legitimizing a foreign government the U.S. refused to recognize. An international body with such an agenda could hardly promote what was good for American democracy, let alone Taiwan.

Conservatives pushed back, unsurprisingly, by raising familiar arguments about the execution of the Korean War. But they did not rely on well-used tropes alone. One example specific to the 1955 UN debate on China’s admission was the continued imprisonment of fifteen American airmen.
Prisoners of War (POWs) from the Korean War, they were being held somewhere in China. Knowland used the unresolved situation to highlight what he framed as a fundamental hypocrisy: The UN was considering admission of a nation that respected neither the organization itself nor the ideals it was supposed to uphold. He presented the POW situation as damning evidence. Because Allied participation in Korea was a UN peacekeeping mission, the organization had “an obligation to get the men out of Red China,” but “apparently the Communists have not been impressed by the resolution adopted by the United Nations.... The men remain there, and they are still in the Communist prisons.” Going further, in April 1955 the senator accused UN officials of treating the Korean War armistice as “a scrap of paper,” adding, “Either these arrangements mean something, or they mean nothing.” He claimed the POW debacle revealed the UN’s ineffectualness in the face of a defiant non-member state that would likely retain that attitude even after it was allowed to join.

Asia Firsters predicted that PRC membership would have disastrous results on hearts and minds around the world. Admission to the UN would bestow prestige on Communist China, transforming a rogue state into a symbol of triumph. Conversely, if the United States failed to vigorously oppose Chinese admission, the Taiwan government could very well lose all hope and collapse. At bottom, weaknesses in prevention might deflate Asian anti-communism to the point where Red revolution would engulf the entire region. If the United States were to let that happen, the Cold War in the Pacific was as good as lost.

In sum, conservative internationalists believed the UN was a conduit through which mainland China could encroach upon independent Taiwan; this ostensibly neutral and benign international body undermined America’s sovereignty and moral position. Even if the government in Beijing was a reluctantly accepted fact, any avenue through which it could gain recognition and legitimacy had to be closed off. As Knowland avowed, “On the day when Communist China is voted into membership into the United Nations, I shall resign my majority leadership in the Senate, so that without embarrassment to any of my colleagues or to the administration I can devote my full efforts ... to terminating United States membership in that organization and our financial support to it.”

---

warrant United States withdrawal from the United Nations,” he told *American Mercury* several years later. Knowland’s florid promise illustrated the tenuous and grudging nature of conservatism’s relationship with the UN. It also signaled how initial reservations about centralization of power had evolved to formulate sharp criticism of multilateral peacekeeping. Practitioners of conservative internationalism did not oppose all interventions or multilateral institutions, just those demanding American participation yet not subject to sufficient American control, or those that unduly increased presidential prerogative without oversight. From their perspective, the UN did both.

**Release of the Yalta Papers**

The specter of the Yalta agreements constantly reappeared, and yet it was hard for Asia Firsters to discuss a conference whose records remained classified. Even most federal officials were not privy to the contours of what had been agreed to, and as a result, accusations of mismanagement and double-dealing often lacked substantive detail.

Release of the Yalta proceedings in 1955 dramatically changed knowledge of what happened. As expected, familiar arguments about the betrayal of Chiang Kai-shek, Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe, and expansion in Manchuria again colored discussion of the Cold War. However, this time they were presented with renewed vigor, thanks to the Bricker Amendment and UN controversies. With shelling in the Taiwan Strait still reverberating, the redress of diplomatic missteps regarding China – however dated – took on an urgency that dovetailed with conservatism’s ongoing attempts to impose strictures on executive power.

The timing of the papers’ publication again illuminated the political faultlines within U.S. diplomacy. In a move that reemphasized how the GOP had parlayed diplomatic discontent into electoral victory, the Eisenhower administration set the release process in motion shortly after entering the White House. In May 1954, the State Department informed the Senate that papers of wartime conferences would be ready for publication by the end of the following month. The June deadline came and went, and State officials who were holdovers from the Truman years were pointedly

---

blamed for the delay. McCarthyism’s active targeting of the “China Hands” may have been over, but its effects still lingered.

In anticipation of the release, the rightwing journal *Human Events* offered its own assessment. “Yalta has been a main target of the whitewash brigade of the Roosevelt Administration court historians and apologists,” wrote William Henry Chamberlin, who deemed Yalta the “Pandora’s box from which most of international troubles in the postwar era have emerged.” In light of recent events in and around China, he warned that the United States was being asked to repeat its wartime mistakes: “Let us not imagine we shall appease Mao Tse-tung and buy peace, in our time or for any long time, if we offer up Free China as a sacrifice in a Formosan Yalta.”

Conference proceedings were eventually circulated to Congress on 19 March 1955. They immediately elicited a heated response. Arthur Schlesinger declared the publication would “persuade the rest of the world that John Foster Dulles is an idiot, if they need any persuasion.” *Foreign Affairs* lamented the obviously partisan motivation behind the release: “The Yalta papers could not have appeared under worse auspices.” Conservatives, too, orchestrated a politicized response, as the declassified records seemed to confirm the narrative publicized by the *Manchurian Manifesto* nearly a decade earlier. Senator Styles Bridges called for the papers to be made available to the general public. For his part, given the backlash, Douglas MacArthur could not distance himself far enough from what had happened at Yalta. In response to the claim that he had influenced decisions made there, the general issued an angry denial: “My views upon the need for Soviet Russia’s entry into the war against Japan were never requested and it was only months later that I heard of the territorial and other concessions which had been used as an inducement.... Such a statement is utterly unfounded and without the slightest basis in fact.”

---

47 “The Behind the Scenes Struggle Over the Yalta Papers,” *Newsweek*, 1 Nov. 1954, 42-43.
With elections coming up in 1956, the Yalta papers were an opportunity to show Republican unity in the face of Democratic diplomacy in general and the legacies of FDR in particular. John Foster Dulles pointedly stated Roosevelt had made the Yalta agreements in secret and never allowed the Senate a chance to vote on ratification. The not-so-subtle implication was that FDR had overstepped his executive authority and circumvented the Constitution. From a partisan perspective, the proceedings revealed that the Democrats had allowed themselves to be bullied by an aggressive, expansionist Stalin; the president had defied the Constitution to make concessions which were unnecessary and unwise.

Although the publication of the Yalta proceedings did not drastically alter what Asia Firsters had already said about wartime diplomacy and executive privilege, it did manage to temporarily mend relations between the Eisenhower administration and conservative Republicans. Partisanship trumped differences over the principle of executive agreements – at least temporarily. The secretary of state and his hard-line position against communism in Asia did much to bridge the rift. As Nancy Tucker has recently argued, Dulles diligently cultivated the pro-Nationalist bloc in Congress because he was eager to avoid what had happened to former Secretary of State Dean Acheson during McCarthyism’s peak. He had proven his anti-Communist mettle with his refusal to commit to the Geneva Accords. Moreover, his language on Communist China in the UN assured that, at the very least, he would not push for official recognition of the Beijing government or allow it any quarter. But even as Dulles affirmed that the United States could veto a new member, he also stated there was no occasion for American withdrawal from the UN. While his stance met only the halfway mark for Asia First conservatives who would have liked public, armed commitment to Taiwan, the secretary’s words suggested he could be a key ally. Publication of what happened at Yalta brought the administration and conservative internationalists marginally closer.

In particular, the friendly working relationship between Dulles and Knowland mitigated any underlying rancor. Indeed, it was Knowland who had personally urged Dulles to liberate the Yalta papers to expose

---

52 Staff of the Senate Republican Policy Committee, “Highlights of the Yalta Papers and Related Data” (March 1955), State Department Files, carton 285, “Yalta – State Department (I),” Knowland Papers.


any cover-up by "Roosevelt-Acheson supporters" lingering in the State Department.\textsuperscript{55} Dulles thanked the senator for his "fine leadership" and "attention and assistance" in State Department matters. In 1957, three days before he was to make an appearance in San Francisco, he gave Knowland an advance copy of his speech regarding U.S. policy on China. It detailed opposition to normalizing relations with Beijing, pointed out the ideological ties between the CCP and the Soviet Union (even if the two had "basic rivalries" over Asia), and forcefully rejected the prospect of PRC entry into the UN ("The United Nations is not a reformatory for bad governments"). Knowland described the speech as "outstanding" and of "great help in interest of a peaceful and free world."\textsuperscript{56}

\textbf{Postscript: Goldwater v. Carter}

With the rise of the "Moral Majority" and issues like the Equal Rights Amendment, by the end of the 1970s domestic preoccupations dominated conservatism's agenda. With a few exceptions, foreign policy took a backseat to social morality and school busing. However, the impulse to preserve a close Taiwan-America relationship still lingered. When President Jimmy Carter announced in 1979 his plans not to renew the mutual defense pact with the ROC, conservatism's devotion to Taiwan security was reinvigorated. Senator Bob Dole (R-Kans.) predicted that allowing the treaty to expire would damage "the reputation of our nation within the world community and global stability would be undermined."\textsuperscript{57}

The president's statement that to normalize relations with Communist China was to face simple reality elicited vehement responses from prominent conservative officials. However, none were so aggressive as Barry Goldwater, the five-time U.S. senator from Arizona, presidential nominee,


\textsuperscript{57} Senator Bob Dole to members of Congress (15 Jan. 1979), Personal and Political Series III, box 14, folder 3, Barry M. Goldwater Papers, MS FM MSS 1, Arizona Historical Foundation, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.
and rightwing icon. He retorted, “I submit there is nothing either simple or realistic in what the President has done in the name of peace.” From his perspective, this was not a simple reshuffling of diplomatic priorities but the obliteration of an entire nation: “He is saying that Taiwan has no right to exist.” Conservatives had long accepted a two-China policy, but there had to indeed be two Chinas. Goldwater’s reaction was clearly emotional. His experience training Nationalist pilots and flying missions over the hump to China during World War II underscored his own ardent support for Taiwan. He translated his fury into a lawsuit against the president, Goldwater v. Carter, contending that the president’s refusal to renew the mutual defense agreement constituted illegal abrogation of a treaty. Unlike Yalta or the Bricker Amendment, the case focused on whether or not a president had the unilateral power to end a foreign treaty that had been ratified by two-thirds of the U.S. Senate. The power to control foreign policy remained the fundamental issue at stake.

Goldwater v. Carter eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which declined jurisdiction over the matter explaining it was “not ripe for judicial review.” The majority opinion argued that questions of presidential power could, and should, be addressed through congressional avenues, not through the court system. It would be embarrassing for the three branches of government to contradict one another by reaching conflicting resolutions. As the case made its way through the legal system, Congress passed the Taiwan Relations Act (April 1979) in an effort to preserve flexible U.S.-Taiwan relations despite the end of official diplomatic ties. The preamble vigorously reasserted American commercial, cultural, and security interests in Taiwan; more practically, its measures provided an option for future arms sales to the island in the event that security was threatened. Although a diplomatic sea change was well underway, and despite Goldwater’s ultimate loss in court, the Act was a measure of continued support for the island. At the very least, it represented the type of legislative mitigation in Sino-American-Taiwan relations that conservatives had long agitated for.

---

Conclusion

For thirty years, the Yalta conference served as an inspiration or goad for American conservatives who sought to make their imprint on U.S. foreign relations. Although their personal motivations ranged from the opportunistic to the sincerely committed, they adopted China as a signature issue and framed their dedication in terms of righting a betrayal of the Open Door tradition. Despite a great deal of persistent, critical rhetoric – and the destruction of State Department and academic careers – practitioners of Asia First could not alter Far Eastern policy in any significant way. Such was the nature of the Yalta paradox: Even as the agreement’s alleged legacies served as stepping-stones for a legitimate conservative internationalism, conservatives in reality did not come closer to challenging the fundamental existence of Communist China.

In the long run, however, restoration of Nationalist or other friendly rule on mainland China became beside the point. Instead, the specter of Yalta helped to crystallize rightwing opposition to consensus diplomacy. The shift from reactionary critique to attempted policymaking marked a significant development. It demonstrated concerted efforts to curb executive power and allowed Asia First conservatives to urge strict constitutional balance of power as they sought a larger role in shaping American Cold War policy. Efforts to forge a diplomatic ethos distinct from that of bipartisan foreign policy granted conservative internationalism a degree of depth and complexity. By the 1960s, Asia Firsters helped to spark a political movement that represented a genuine alternative to moderate liberalism’s policies at home and abroad.

When President George W. Bush described Yalta as “one of the greatest wrongs of history” during a 2005 visit to Latvia, he reignited conservative vs. liberal discussion of the agreement’s geopolitical significance. Using no uncertain terms, historians Arthur Schlesinger and Robert Dallek downplayed the idea that Yalta had caused any real damage in Eastern Europe. Meanwhile the conservative blogosphere cheered Bush’s words. In a widely circulated column, Phyllis Schlafly noted Yalta’s impact on East Asia and claimed it had paved the way for a “Communist empire in China and North Korea.” She thanked the president for “correcting history and making a long overdue apology.” A reposting of her piece on FreeRepublic.com featured the

---

Clearly, the Asia First version of Yalta has continued to resonate in the twenty-first century, its longevity buoying the right’s vision of the past, present, and future of American foreign policy.