
Book Review of *The Crafting of the Postwar Peace Treaty with Japan, 1945-1951*

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Reviewed Book

The Crafting of the Postwar Peace Treaty with Japan, 1945–1951.

By Seung Mo Kang. Routledge, 2025. 208 pages.

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Introduction

Recently historical and territorial disputes have intensified in East Asia. In August of this year, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement on the Taiwan issue in relation to the San Francisco Peace Treaty¹. The statement read: “The so-called ‘Treaty of San Francisco’ is an illegal and invalid document issued by the United States after World War II by assembling a number of countries to conclude a separate peace with Japan, while excluding the People’s Republic of China and the Soviet Union. The historical and legal fact that Taiwan belongs to China is indisputable.”

On November 7, Sanae Takaichi, the Prime Minister of Japan, remarked at the House of Representatives Budget Committee that Japan might exercise its right to collective self-defense in the event of a military clash between the United States and China over Taiwan (Jiji Press, November 7, 2025),² which has since exacerbated tensions between China and Japan.

Meanwhile, Korean academia have critically reviewed the San Francisco Treaty system focusing on colonial rule, wartime compensation, and territorial disputes, including Dokdo.³ Against this backdrop, it is timely to examine both the significance and the limitations of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which continues to shape the international order of East Asia today. Seung Mo Kang’s book undertakes this task. This

¹ *Renmin Ribao*. 2025. “Waijiaobu: suowei ‘Jiujinshan heyue’ feifa wuxiao, Taiwan shuyu Zhongguo de lishi he falv shishi burong zhiyi” [Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The so-called ‘San Francisco Peace Treaty’ is illegal and invalid; the historical and legal facts of Taiwan belonging to China are beyond doubt]. August 18. Accessed November 24, 2025. <https://world.people.com.cn/n1/2025/0818/c1002-40544961.html>.

² *Jiji Press*. 2025. “Taiwan yuji to sonritsu kiki jitai o meguru yaritori” [Exchange concerning a Taiwan contingency and survival-threatening situations]. November 7. Accessed November 24, 2025. <https://www.jiji.com/jc/v8?id=20251107yosan>.

³ 5th International Conference, Beyond the San Francisco System, December 15, 2023, The Asiatic Research Institute; Kim, Young-ho, ed. 2022. *Saenpeuransiseuko chejereul neomeoseo: Dongasia naengjeongwa singminji-jeonjaeng beomjui cheongsan* [Beyond the San Francisco System: The Cold War in East Asia and the liquidation of colonial and war crimes]. Medici Media.

book not only prompts a reconsideration of the historical value of the peace treaty but also offers useful insights for understanding the ongoing conflicts among East Asian countries.

1. Book Overview

According to the author, most of the significant research on the San Francisco Peace Treaty had been conducted before the 1980s. Since then, despite the treaty's importance, it has not received sufficient scholarly attention. Instead, researchers have continuously drawn to the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty and the period the US occupation of Japan. Responding to this academic trend, the author emphasizes that the peace treaty, the security treaty, and Japan's occupation policies overlap in certain respects and therefore need to be considered together. As a reason for such consideration, the author points out that "the whole point of the Japanese peace treaty was to end the occupation and declare the termination of a state of war with Japan. Furthermore, the Japanese peace treaty was premised on the assumption that a separate security treaty would be signed between Washington and Tokyo to allow the continued American troop presence in Japan" (p.3).

After stressing the need to reexamine the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, the author attempts to explain how one should approach this process. He notes that the peace treaty was fundamentally "a multilateral effort that involved more than 13 different countries" and "a product of delicate compromise that sought to balance differing interests." Most importantly, the author highlights that "the treaty was impacted by factors that did not even seem directly relevant to Japan." These observations are valid, given that previous research has primarily focused on dialogues between the United States and Japan during the treaty-making process (p.1).

From this critical standpoint, the author raises the following question: while countries such as Korea, which experienced Japanese colonial rule, China, which was a direct party to the Second Sino-Japanese War,

and the Soviet Union, one of the most important Allied powers in World War II, were excluded from participation in the treaty, “why were Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam invited to sign the treaty?” (p.4).

The author argues that “The very fact that postwar German and Italian settlements, as well as the question of Western European security wielded influence on the Japanese peace treaty negotiations indicates that the fate of the Pacific and Europe could not be divorced from one another.” His argument is supported by sufficient evidence throughout the book (p.4).

Building on this discussion, the author asserts that the most important feature of the book is its reexamination of the conclusion of San Francisco Treaty from an international perspective. In his opinion, “this allows one to look at the Japanese peace treaty from a fresh viewpoint. In turn, this [perspective] allows one to better appreciate the complexity of the postwar Pacific.” (p.4). As shown below, the book is so organized as to support this point.

The book is broadly divided into two parts, each consisting of several chapters. The first part is a chronological account of the treaty’s conclusion, spanning Chapters 1 through 3, and covering the period from the end of the Asia-Pacific War in 1945 to the signing of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1951. The second part explores the issues that arose during the drafting process of the treaty and is composed of six chapters in total. This structure allows the author examine the process of concluding the peace treaty in a chronological sequence while also addressing the treaty’s major issues in detail.

Most importantly, as the author makes clear in the introduction, the book scrutinizes various countries’ perspectives and political calculations in the treaty-making process. In the final analysis, the author seems to agree that in the conclusion of the peace treaty, the United States exerted considerable effort to enforce its own intentions, and that the treaty faithfully reflected American interests.

2. Main Issues

The first main issue of the peace treaty, discussed in Chapter 4, is about the signatory countries. As noted earlier, among the belligerent powers, the Soviet Union and China were excluded, while India, despite being part of the non-Communist bloc, did not sign. Korea, which had long suffered under Japanese colonial rule, was not included as a signatory either, due to its ambiguous international legal status as neither a victor nor a defeated nation, and its division into North and South and the ongoing civil war. The author explains that the selection and exclusion of signatories were not carried out according to uniform principles but dictated by the interests of major powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom. Therefore, the author argues that by examining the selection process, one can discern the American objective in the peace treaty: “to entice Japan to ‘align itself with the U.S’ away from the ‘forces inimical to the U.S.’” (p.53). This appears to be a valid interpretation.

To be specific, in the case of China, the United States and the United Kingdom considered the participation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the peace treaty. However, prioritizing their relationship with the Republic of China (ROC) government in Taiwan, they concluded that the international community should not recognize the PRC as the official government of China. At that time, there was little international support for the participation of the ROC government as a signatory. In response, the U.S. government proposed a separate bilateral treaty between China and Japan after the conclusion of the peace treaty, a solution that gained the support of the international community (“Exclusion of China”, pp.54–56).

In the case of Korea, when Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, the problem lay in its ambiguous legal status. The author explains that “despite the end of Japan’s colonial rule of Korea, there was no express renunciation of the 1910 annexation treaty, which meant that Korea’s legal status—whether or not it was independent in a juridical sense—remained unclear” (p.57). In addition, the division of the peninsula further intensified debates over which government legitimately represented Ko-

rea and what the legal status of that government was.

The author points out that as early as 1947, the United States had already excluded Korea from the list of signatory states, and even in December 1949—after the establishment of the South Korean government—the U.S. continued to regard Korea's legal status as uncertain. In the United States' understanding of international law, even after the founding of the South Korean government in 1948, the 1910 annexation treaty had not been formally abrogated nor replaced by another treaty. Furthermore, the South Korean government strongly wished to participate in the conclusion of the treaty and simultaneously sought to claim reparations from Japan amounting to more than two billion dollars. However, this conflicted with the U.S. position, which sought to avoid imposing any heavy burden on the Japanese economy, and thus appears to have influenced the American decision to exclude Korea from the list of signatories. Lastly, in the context of an intensifying Cold War, rejecting North Korea's participation while recognizing only South Korea's participation would have imposed considerable political burdens on the United States.

The United Kingdom also questioned Korea's international legal status. The author explains that from the perspective of the British government, Korea was not yet an independent state in the juridical sense, and it would only acquire the qualifications of an independent nation upon the conclusion of the peace treaty with Japan. Accordingly, Britain's position was that Korea had no right to sign the treaty. According to the author, what laid behind was Britain's concern that recognizing the South Korean government as a signatory might provoke the Communist bloc and, in turn, affect its numerous colonies in Asia, such as Malaya and Singapore.

The South Korean government also expressed to the United States its intention to normalize bilateral relations with Japan through separate negotiations. As a result of the positions taken by the various countries involved, Korea was not able to participate as a signatory to the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The author emphasizes that by reaffirming the fact that the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea had never been recognized by the international community, the U.S. Department of State concluded that Korea did not have the qualifications to sign the

peace treaty as a victorious nation (“Exclusion of South Korea,” pp.57–62).

The next noteworthy section is Chapter 8, which addresses the provisions of the San Francisco Peace Treaty concerning territorial issues. As is widely known, Japan has territorial disputes with neighboring countries: with Russia regarding the Northern Territories, with South Korea over Dokdo, and with China concerning the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Although not directly related to Japan’s territorial claims, there are also disputes between China and other nations over Taiwan, as well as conflicts in the South China Sea over the Spratly and Paracel Islands. The origins of many territorial disputes in the Western Pacific region can be traced back to the San Francisco Treaty.

It is the author’s position that these problems ultimately stemmed from the ambiguous attitude of the United States toward territorial issues in the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty. The U.S. deliberately adopted this stance with regard to territorial questions in the Far East, and it is Article 2 of the treaty that embodies the stance. The author further suggests that the United States chose this vague approach because taking a clear position on any specific territory could have created difficulties in relation to other territorial disputes.

The United States applied the following principle to many of the island territories that had once belonged to the Japanese Empire. First, the peace treaty explicitly declared Japan’s renunciation of sovereignty over these areas. However, the treaty provisions did not specify which country would hold sovereignty over them. For example, in the case of territories that clearly aligned with American national interests—such as the Mandate Islands in the southern Pacific, which Japan had acquired from Germany after World War I—the San Francisco Treaty explicitly stipulated Japan’s renunciation of ownership (Article 7), yet it contained no clear provision regarding which state would exercise sovereignty over those islands.

Taiwan underwent a similar process. Taiwan became a Japanese colony after the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, and the peace treaty stipulated the renunciation of Japanese claims to it. However, the United

States was ambiguous about Taiwan's ownership. Washington neither recognized Taiwan as belonging to the PRC nor to the ROC. The author explains that this was because the Nationalist government, having retreated to Taiwan after its defeat in the Chinese Civil War, sought to secure the island and maintain its regime, and the United States deemed that such a path for Taiwan aligned with its own interests. Consequently, as noted earlier, the Chinese government today, claims that the San Francisco Treaty was illegal and invalid. The reason can be traced back to the fact that the treaty's territorial provisions were deliberately drafted in an ambiguous manner.

The four islands at the southern end of the Kuril chain, which had historically belonged to Japan, were occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II. The United States did not demand their return from the Soviets. According to the author, this was because the Soviet Union might obstruct America's attempt to occupy Okinawa by invoking the issue of the Kuril Islands. Given the way Okinawa was handled, this explanation is highly plausible. In this chapter, the author notes that the United States "formally adopted the idea that the US should retain Okinawa and build bases there 'on a long-term basis'" and, in order to remain faithful to this plan, deliberately refrained from specifying sovereignty over the Okinawa Islands in the peace treaty. In practice, the United States did not return the territory to Japan until the mid-1970s.

In brief, the United States sought to handle the territorial issues of the former Japanese Empire in a manner that best served its own interests. In the Kuril Islands and Okinawa cases, where the interests of the Allied powers could potentially conflict, and in the Taiwanese case, where complex international political problems including territorial divisions were entangled, Washington deliberately chose not to clarify sovereignty and instead left matters in an ambiguous state. This ambiguity, the author argues, can be regarded as the fundamental cause of the complex territorial disputes that continue to trouble East Asia today.

In conclusion, the author evaluates the character of the San Francisco Peace Treaty in the following way. First, he emphasizes that it was a generous deal for Japan: "a lenient peace treaty emerged, which was in-

tended to avoid imposing any harsh economic or political terms on Japan and was geared toward containing the Soviet Union” (p.168).

The author repeats that the reason for such a lenient peace treaty was the United States’ intention to contain the communist bloc. Regarding John Foster Dulles, the then US Secretary of State who played a central role in the conception and negotiation of the treaty, the evaluation is as follows: “He shrewdly employed a mixture of appealing to anti-communist camaraderie, stressing the importance of rebuilding Tokyo’s economy so as to curb Soviet influence and lift the financial burden off the US of having to continue sustaining Japan, and promising security guarantees to those countries concerned about Japan’s potential re-emergence as a threat.” The author further notes that Dulles was able to employ such strategies precisely because “After all, the whole point of the Japanese peace treaty was to contain the communist bloc.” In order to counter the Soviet Union and restrain the communist bloc in the Far East, the United States needed to “firmly anchor Japan to the West” (p.169).

The author also explicates the American intention to prevent Asian countries from demanding reparations from Japan: “Furthermore, Article 14—which was premised on the tacit understanding that Japan would repay the initial American aid provided during the early phase of the occupation—was later used by the US to create a counterpart fund in Japan and steer the latter to assist with the economic development of Southeast Asia and Korea.” In other words, the United States prioritized Japan’s economic reconstruction over the reparation claims of various Asian countries, and sought to quell their dissatisfaction by rebuilding the Far Eastern economy with Japan at its center.

Thus, the author is right to say that under the framework of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, drafted in line with America’s vision for peace in the Far East, Japan emerged as the greatest beneficiary. The author details Japan’s “benefit” as follows: “the US led the effort to minimize Japan’s reparations payment for the sake of helping Japan keep its precious foreign exchange and to avoid the possibility of the US indirectly paying for reparations. Yoshida and his cabinet were also able to achieve two of Japan’s most important goals: independence and putting rearmament on

hold to concentrate on economic development” (p.170). In the end, it becomes clear that the United States prioritized the economic reconstruction of the entire region in order to prevent communist forces from dominating the Far East and to use the region as a means of containing the Soviet Union. To achieve this, Washington sought to assign Japan a central role.

Conclusion

As we have seen, this book provides a thorough examination of the international debates surrounding the formation of the San Francisco Peace Treaty and its main issues. It can be said that the author has achieved the stated goal in the preface—namely, to shed new light on the treaty’s conclusion from an international perspective. That said, one cannot help but feel some regret that the book did not supplement its analysis with a fuller account of the internal discussions within the United States and Japan during the treaty’s formation, although earlier studies may already have addressed this sufficiently. Such additions would have made the work more accessible to readers encountering this subject for the first time.

The author’s ultimate argument is that the San Francisco Peace Treaty was shaped in a way that served American national interests. Yet questions remain as to how much new insight this offers when compared with existing scholarship. Above all, given the author’s stated aim of examining the formation of the treaty from an international perspective, it is somewhat disappointing that the book does not clearly illuminate how the diverse opinions of the international community influenced the process by which U.S. interests were formed and secured through the treaty.