

Great Britain's Postwar Insecurity and the Question of South Korean Participation in the Japanese Peace Treaty

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Between 1945 and 1951, Japan and her former belligerents worked assiduously to develop a peace treaty in an effort to formally terminate the Pacific War. At the time, the provisional South Korean government (and later the Republic of Korea government) sought to become a signatory to this treaty. Unfortunately, South Korea was never able to sign the resulting Treaty of San Francisco in 1951. One reason for this was Great Britain's steadfast opposition to the idea of South Korean involvement. Why was Britain opposed to South Korea signing a Japanese peace treaty? This paper argues that Britain's attitude was largely motivated by its postwar insecurity. Britain at the time was financially devastated from fighting World War II even as it was confronting communist menace throughout the world that threatened Britain's interests. Wishing to protect its commercial and security interests in China, Hong Kong, and Malaya, Britain was careful not to antagonize the newly established communist state in China. This extreme sensitivity towards the People's Republic of China ultimately dissuaded Britain from supporting South Korea when the question arose over whether or not to include that state as a signatory to the Japanese peace treaty. Britain's objection did not simply end at South Korean exclusion from the treaty, for it had far-reaching consequences that put South Korea in a disadvantageous position in its future relations with Japan, a situation that has been creating bitter controversies to this day.

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