REVIEW

China's Strategy Needs Study, Not Assumptions

Elbridge Colby's influential take on combating Beijing doesn't add up.

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The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict, Elbridge Colby, Yale University Press, 384 pp., $32.50, September 2021

Elbridge Colby's *The Strategy of Denial* offers a blueprint for containing and combating China's rise in order to preserve American freedom, prosperity, and security—emphasis on security. The argument turns on a very specific vision of China's plans, which Colby does not attempt to link to actual Chinese policy or strategy for achieving hegemony in East Asia. The resulting prescriptions, although they've been lauded by some, are fatally flawed.

Colby, deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development from 2017 to 2018, believes that China could pursue a "focused and sequential strategy" of threatened or executed "wars against isolated coalition members," starting with Taiwan. He fears Beijing would do this in such a way that does not trigger a regional war but culminates in Chinese hegemony in Asia.

To prevent this, Colby believes the United States must pursue a "strategy of denial" to preserve U.S. dominance in Asia. Cut through the hundred-plus pages of theoretical exposition, and this seems to mean that America should focus its military power on Asia, keep its alliance perimeter in East Asia, and guarantee Taiwan's security. Given Colby's background and the largely positive reception to the book, his approach would likely be influential in any future Republican presidential administration.

Yet, there are important flaws in his approach. Colby's bridge from theory to practice is built on three faulty assumptions. He believes he does not need to muster evidence about Chinese strategy and intentions. He builds on incompatible assumptions about violence and the possibility that rules can limit war. And his assumptions about force in international politics leave him blind to how an effective U.S. strategy must be sensitive to the specific preferences and values of governments and populations in his anti-hegemonic coalition.

The most glaring flaw is that Colby works off what he thinks China's strategy should be, not the evidence about what it actually is. This is a particularly bad approach to analysis, because it makes mirroring or speculation easier to smuggle into predictions of adversary behavior.

A good defense strategy requires an understanding of how the expected adversary plans to fight. Yet he does not engage with Chinese military doctrine, Chinese strategic thought, or the robust debate in the United States about Chinese strategy and ambitions. Instead, he argues that because of uncertainty about China's strategy, the United States should simply focus on China's "best strategy" for winning Asia. In Colby's words, "a state's best strategy does not ultimately depend on what the state's leaders think it is" because it relates to "objective reality."

Colby believes China's best strategy begins with a *fait accompli* against Taiwan, as this would add Taiwan's heft to China's power ledger, while undermining U.S. credibility and piercing the first island chain. Yet Colby makes this argument based on the theory of Western international relations scholars and his own inductive logic, without any real engagement with what we can know about Chinese strategy, politics, or ideology.

The vast majority of footnotes used to substantiate Beijing's best strategy feature the works of various Western theoreticians and military historians, not Chinese sources or even China analysts. Of 72 footnotes in the chapter "Beijing's Best Strategy," one cites Chinese President Xi Jinping, one cites a few sources on Chinese military thinking about Taiwan dating mostly from the early 2000s, and perhaps 10 deal with China directly. Major scholars of Chinese strategy, such as Avery Goldstein and Andrew Nathan, do not appear in his citations, or, like Michael Swaine, appear only rarely. Compare this approach with Rush Doshi's *The Long Game*, for instance, which engages deeply with Chinese material. This contrast approach reinforces Michael Kofman's reasoning that arguments about a Chinese fait accompli rest on unstated and unproven assumptions about Chinese leadership perceptions.

Colby's sourcing is a dire problem for his argument, because his approach of inferring the adversary's "objective" "best strategy" rather than engaging with the evidence available opens the door to poor analysis and dangerous planning. Discerning Beijing's intentions and planning is a difficult and uncertain task. It demands not only linguistic skills but also an ability to discern the wheat of actual intention from the chaff of politicized rhetoric. But Beijing's rhetoric and ideology matter, too, because one thing we can be certain of is that the world seen from Beijing looks very different than the one seen from Washington. When not grounded in the adversary's actual thought, analysts can at best fall prey to mirroring, and at worst simply spin self-serving scenarios. Either outcome leads further from reality and deterrence.

Building a response according to an adversary's "best strategy" also makes you much more likely to miss what that adversary is actually doing. Colby defends his approach of strategizing based on China's "best" strategy by claiming that "Defeating a bad strategy is easier and less costly than defeating a good one." Therefore, if the United States prepares for China's best strategy, any real Chinese strategy should be even easier to handle.

In reality, the defense posture and investments needed to defeat an adversary's "best" strategy might be significantly different from those needed to defeat an adversary's second-best strategy. Making Taiwan a porcupine sheathed in defensive layers means little if China aims to peel off other members of Colby's anti-hegemonic coalition first. Pouring U.S. resources into military counters to China will do nothing to achieve Colby's goal of preventing Chinese hegemony if China manages to break an anti-hegemonic coalition primarily through economic and political coercion. Colby believes that building a U.S. strategy that counters China's "best" strategy makes the most of limited resources, but a better, safer, and more efficient approach would be to develop a U.S. strategy based at least on a sustained engagement with what China experts expect Beijing to do, not what IR theory predicts that all states should do.

Colby also relies on fundamental assumptions about the utility of violence that are hard to square with his lawyerly insistence that the United States can use rules to ensure a war with China is limited and resolves in America's favor.

Colby sees violence as the ultimate tool. He writes that "Physical force, especially the ability to kill, is the ultimate form of coercive leverage." He appears to believe that escalation is always a path to victory for the side with a greater capacity to kill. He claims, counterfactually, that the United States or the Soviet Union could have escalated their way to victory in South Vietnam or

Afghanistan but saw benefits as out of proportion to costs—not that violence itself could not achieve national goals at all. In Colby's framing, in the case of nuclear-armed states such as China and the United States, the side willing to employ the greater violence will emerge victorious. It's an odd, almost religious set of beliefs that requires stretching and rewriting of history to justify.

But Colby also believes that a limited war is possible and that rules limiting violence are the core feature of such conflicts. He notes that a limited war "may be thought of as a war in which the combatants establish, recognize, and agree to rules within and regarding the ends of the conflict." Victory in a limited war depends on being able to "employ a military strategy to achieve a decisive advantage relevant to the attainment of its political objectives within a given rule set" on the acceptable limits of escalation.

Thus, Colby's assumption that violence is a skeleton key to success is impossible to square with his belief that the United States can set rules to constrain China's use of force in a limited war. This is particularly true if hegemony and reunification with Taiwan are core Beijing goals, as Colby believes. If he were right that enough violence can achieve a state's ends, China would not remain within the "rules" for limited war set by and favorable to the United States in a war where China's resolve is greater than America's. This would almost certainly be the case for a war over Taiwan that China starts. China would escalate to win, assuming that the United States would not risk everything for Taiwan.

Colby's fixation on military solutions and state-level analysis also means his strategy for the United States is a military strategy binding states, not a whole-of-government strategy addressing what coalition partners may care about beyond mere security. Specific governments have specific values and preferences that must be taken seriously in any U.S. strategy to counter China's hegemony that relies on these partners.

Further compounding this issue is Colby's inconsistency on the relationship between interests and values. The realist scholar Patrick Porter has favorably compared Colby to Machiavelli for Colby's willingness to focus on power and interests and eschew morality-inflected policy. Indeed, in Colby's analysis, China and the United States have interests—hegemony in China's case and anti-hegemony abroad in the name of security, freedom, and property at home in America's—but the values of specific leaders, ruling parties, or constituencies are irrelevant. This is despite the long recognition in IR theory that values make interests.

Yet for the lesser states, Colby smuggles in value-based interests, at least in the case of security. He notes that states such as Japan, South Korea, India, and Vietnam have "strong traditions of independence" and, therefore, a high level of interest in preserving their autonomy. Other states are presumably less committed to their autonomy, which raises the awkward question of what might cause some states to value this fundamental interest, per Colby, in different ways and to different extents.

Gilding over preferences and values creates another risk of acting on Colby's arguments. His prescription of an anti-hegemonic coalition depends on a succession of specific governments in each state to prefer and value autonomy in a U.S.-led order to different autonomy in a China-led one. Colby thinks this is a sure thing if the United States provides enough military security, given his assumption that autonomy and independence is every state's fundamental interest. But again, Colby's rationalist assertions about what states ought to prefer and his fixation on violence and military strategy miss the real challenge. Getting continued support from governments and, in democracies, the people they represent requires a strategy that acknowledges and encompasses issues of relevance to those constituencies, such as economic growth, corruption, climate change, or morality, and not just military security.

A strategy of denial might well be what America needs to contain a rising China. If Colby had marshaled actual Chinese strategy to demonstrate that they would use military force in the way Colby imagines, his proposed Chinese and U.S. strategies might be credible. If he had grappled with the tension between his assumptions about violence and limited war, his vision of how the United States could win a war over Taiwan might be logical. And if he had grappled with the thorny challenge of government values and preferences and the necessity for strategy that goes beyond military security, his strategy might be realistic. But in this book, Colby does none of these things. *The Strategy of Denial* is not a reliable blueprint for countering China's strategy in East Asia, and those responsible for crafting future U.S. policy or generating future U.S. leaders should not pretend that it is.

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