

THE STRATEGY OF DENIAL

Elbridge A. Colby — Strategic Synthesis of the Book

LUCIANA BAUER AND GISELE AGNELLI
Agnelli & Bauer Strategies

“How can a decent peace be preserved when American superiority can no longer be taken for granted?”



**AGNELLI
& BAUER**
Ethical lobby / Strategies/ Advocacy

Who Is Elbridge A. Colby

American Defense Strategist and Author

Background

Defense strategist educated at Harvard College and Yale Law School. He has served in the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, and security research institutions.



Experience

He has held positions involving nuclear strategy, arms control, intelligence, defense planning, and national security policy. Co-author of the 2018 National Defense Strategy; the material presents him as a central figure in the shift toward great-power competition, with a focus on China and the Indo-Pacific.

*ELBRIDGE COLBY:
DO "STRATEGY OF
DENIAL" À
ESTRATÉGIA DE
DEFESA DOS EUA*

2018: participa da formulação da National Defense Strategy do primeiro governo Trump → China passa a ser o principal foco estratégico do Pentágono.

2021: publica *The Strategy of Denial* → desenvolve intelectualmente a tese de que os EUA devem impedir uma hegemonia chinesa na Ásia por meio de equilíbrio de poder, alianças e defesa por negação.

2026: apresenta ao Congresso a lógica da nova estratégia, definida como "flexible realism", priorizando defesa do território americano e dissuasão da China, com maior burden-sharing dos aliados.

2025: Trump o coloca como Under Secretary of Defense for Policy → Colby recebe a missão de liderar a elaboração da nova National Defense Strategy.

The Break: The End of the “Unipolar Moment”

03

From the Post-Cold War Era to Great-Power Competition

- After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. possessed sufficient preponderance to absorb strategic mistakes and act in multiple theaters.
- Chinese growth has reduced this margin and made a war between great powers plausible again.
- World power is more diffuse; China has become the main rival capable of altering the regional balance.
- Colby's conclusion: power alone is not enough. A strategic framework is needed to align interests, priorities and resources.
- The strategy must spell out limits: the U.S. cannot do everything at the same time.

The Fundamental Objective of American Grand Strategy

04

Physical Security + Freedom + Prosperity

SECURITY

Territorial integrity and protection from external attack. This is the foundation that makes it possible to safeguard all other interests.

FREEDOM

The ability of a free and republican society to determine its own destiny without external coercion.

PROSPERITY

Sustainable economic growth and the capacity to maintain living standards and national autonomy.

“The three ends are distinct but interdependent: security, freedom, and prosperity must be pursued together.”

AB

A Favorable Regional Balance of Power

The Conceptual Framework of Chapters 1–4

- The international system does not have a global sovereign capable of guaranteeing security and enforcing rules.
- Therefore, states need to preserve sufficient capacity to prevent coercion: the balance of power functions as a condition of autonomy.
- Colby ultimately defines power as military capability underpinned by wealth, technology, cohesion, and administrative capability.
- The goal is not to dominate all regions, but to prevent another state from establishing hegemony over a key region.
- The balance needs to be sustainable: preventing a hegemony in formation is more feasible than reversing it after it has been consolidated.

The Decisive Regions of the International System

06

The Geography of Power According to the Material

1. ASIA

The strongest economic dynamism and the principal theater of competition; it has the greatest potential for converting wealth into power.

2. EUROPE

A major economic and strategic center, although without a regional hegemon as evident as China is in Asia.

3. NORTH AMERICA

An essential region because it is dominated by the United States itself, which already enjoys regional predominance.

4. PERSIAN GULF

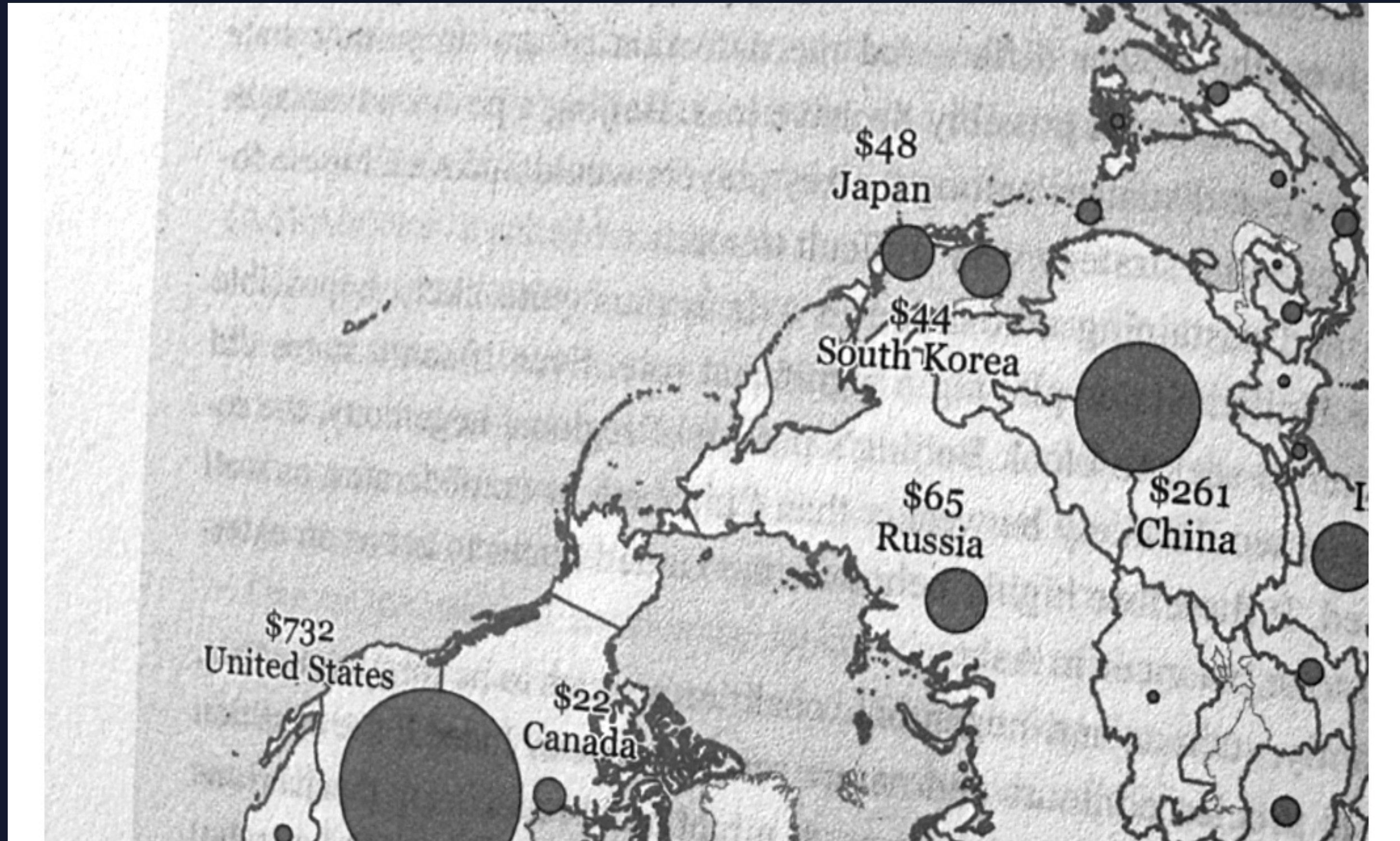
Smaller in GDP, but strategically important because it concentrates oil and gas reserves with significant strategic and coercive value.

“Strategic priority follows the concentration of military-economic power.”

AB

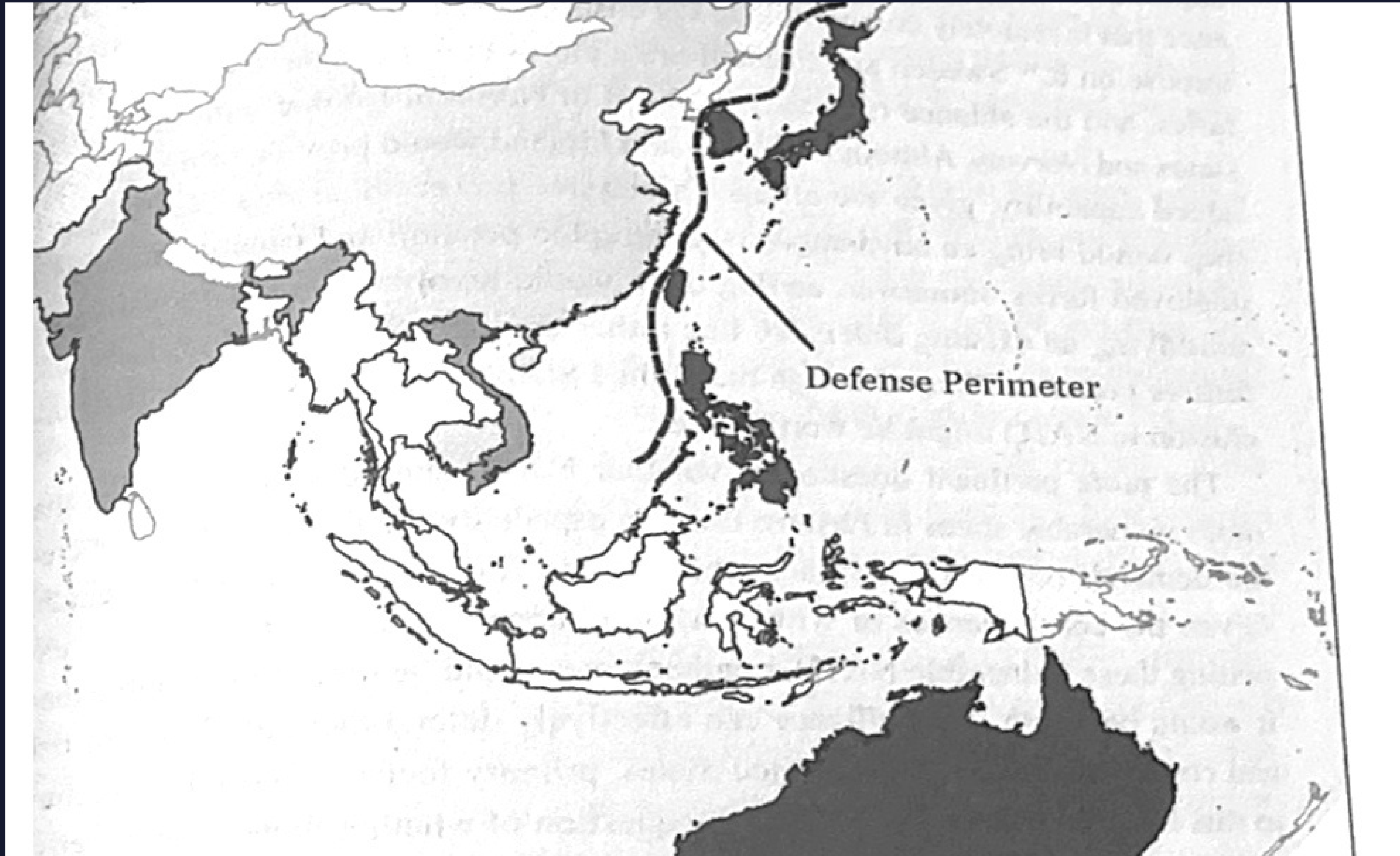
Global Defense Spending

Values in US\$ billions — SIPRI data



The Anti-Hegemonic Coalition in the Indo-Pacific

Defense Perimeter — Andrew Rhodes | Strategy of Denial



Why China Is the Focus

The Threat Is Structural: Regional Hegemony, Not Regime Change

- China is presented as the only state with sufficient economic, technological and military scale to plausibly aspire to Asian hegemony.
- The central problem is not Chinese ideology, but the possibility of concentration of regional power in a single state.
- A Chinese hegemony could allow Beijing to exclude or disadvantage the US in trade, investment, technology and production chains.
- A regional economic bloc dominated by China could expand its power and reduce the margin of American autonomy.
- The more consolidated the hegemony, the greater the cost of reversing it; therefore, Colby recommends early prevention.

Chapter 2: Anti-Hegemonic Coalitions

08

Balance Is Built Through a Combination of States

The Problem

An aspiring hegemon can pursue a focused, sequential strategy: pressuring or subordinating coalition members one by one before the coalition as a whole can respond.

The Solution

Build a coalition whose aggregate power exceeds that of the aspiring hegemon and its supporters.

The Role of the United States

Act as an “external balancer”: providing sufficient capabilities, coordination, and assurances to prevent regional accommodation to China.

Chapter 3: Alliances and Differentiated Credibility

09

Promises Deter Only When They Can Be Fulfilled

- Alliances offer guarantees and prevent smaller states from opportunistically accommodating themselves to the hegemon.
- But they also create a risk of dragging: the guarantor can be led into wars that he would not choose in isolation.
- Credibility does not mean indiscriminately delivering on every promise; it means aligning commitments, capabilities, and interests.
- American credibility must be differentiated: greater where Asian balance is decisive.
- Allies must also contribute to their own defense; the distribution of costs increases the sustainability of the coalition.

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Chapter 4: The Defense Perimeter

10

How Much to Promise, Where to Promise It, and What Not to Promise

AVOID OVEREXTENSION

An overly broad perimeter disperses resources, creates competing commitments, and can undermine the very credibility it is intended to produce.

PRIORITIZE

Stronger commitments should be concentrated in regions where the balance of power is genuinely decisive, above all in Asia.

CALIBRATE

Outside key regions, diplomacy, trade, and institutions can be employed without unlimited military guarantees.

Chapters 5–7: How China Could Wage the War

11

Nuclear Arsenals + Limited War + Salami-Slicing / Fait Accompli

- With surviving nuclear arsenals, an all-out U.S.–China war would be irrational for both; competition tends to occur under strong escalation constraints.

- Victory, in this context, is not about destroying the adversary, but about achieving political goals without leaving the other an easy path to climb to victory.

- Colby orients American planning to the best Chinese military strategy, not to every possible eventuality.

- The most dangerous Chinese strategy would be a "fait accompli": quickly conquering essential territory from an ally or quasi-ally.

- Taiwan appears as a central case; The Philippines and other partners also enter the logic of regional defense.

- In parallel, Beijing would seek to dissuade Washington and other allies from effectively intervening.

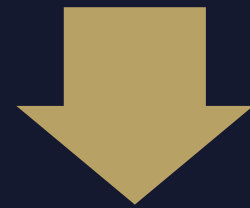
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Chapters 8–9: The Response — Defense by Denial

12

Prevent the Adversary from Turning Military Force into a Political Fact

What Colby rejects



Trying to restore absolute military supremacy over China would be unfeasible and excessively costly. The goal is not to dominate China.

DEFENSE BY DENIAL

Prevent the capture and consolidation of the critical territory necessary to subordinate the target state.

STRATEGIC EFFECT

If the fait accompli fails, Beijing faces a far greater escalation burden; the coalition can then combine denial with cost imposition.

AB

Chapter 10: What If Initial Denial Fails?

From Military Reversal to Cost Imposition

- An effective defense of Taiwan is possible in Colby's argument, but it is not easy: Chinese capability, geography and allies' preparedness may favor Beijing.
- If the invasion cannot be stopped, the defenders may face a wider war and accept a high burden of escalation.
- Another option is to impose sufficient costs to make the consolidation of the Chinese victory progressively worse.
- The logic is to convince Beijing that its initial gain will not produce its ultimate goals and that insisting on war will deteriorate its position.
- The strategy seeks to turn an initial Chinese territorial victory into an untenable political and military situation.

Chapter 11: The Architecture of U.S. Defense Strategy

14

Absolute Priority: Prevent the Subordination of Allies in Asia

MILITARY PRIORITY

Concentrate resources on defending Asia against China; avoid preparing simultaneously for every other possible war scenario.

POSTURE

Maintain a strong nuclear deterrent, capable conventional forces, and credible missile defenses where the cost is justified.

EUROPE

Reduce the American burden and encourage greater responsibility from European states within NATO; Russia's eastern flank is the principal residual contingency.

LAST RESORT

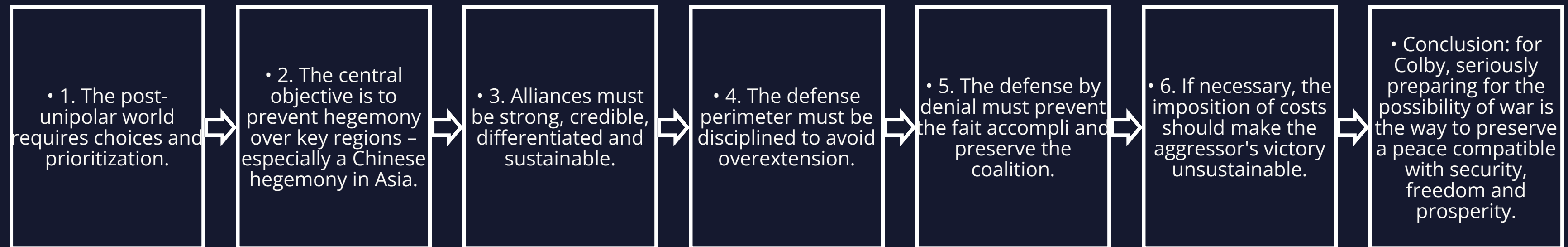
If denial and cost imposition fail, the material identifies selective nuclear proliferation among allies as a last-resort option — dangerous and undesirable.

Chapter 12: The Ultimate Purpose — A “Decent Peace”

15

Final Synthesis of the Logic of The Strategy of Denial

“Peace is not guaranteed by permanent superiority; it must be built through a strategy capable of deterring war.”





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Specialist in political strategy, communication, and brand equity, with extensive experience in USA-Brazil relations and democratic soft power



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