

THE STRATEGY OF DENIAL

AMERICAN DEFENSE IN AN AGE
OF GREAT POWER CONFLICT

ELBRIDGE A. COLBY

The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict

By Elbridge A. Colby
Yale University Press, 2021
384 pp. \$32.50
ISBN: 978-0300256437

Reviewed by Travis Zahnow

In *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, Elbridge Colby, a lead architect of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, wades into the ever-prescient debate about how the United States might compete with China in the Pacific. The Joseph Biden administration's recent release of the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy and the pending release of the 2022 National Defense Strategy add urgency to a question three Presidential administrations have sought to answer: "What is the best defense strategy for America?" Colby's work undertakes this vexing question, offering a novel strategy, as well as what many will consider to be polarizing and potentially unviable recommendations focused on a strategic realignment, in which the Biden administration would undertake not just to compete with

China but to deny China the ability to achieve regional hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.

The heart of the argument offered in *The Strategy of Denial* suggests that the United States should focus most of its effort on countering China in the Indo-Pacific, at the potential cost of reduced attention and resources elsewhere around the globe. Although Colby makes a logical case, some readers may find this argument, with its required tradeoffs, unpersuasive, noting that the United States has vital interests in other regions as well. Even in a resource-constrained environment in which the United States expects its allies to shoulder more of the burden, one needs only to watch the unfolding disaster that is Russia's invasion of Ukraine to recognize that a myopic focus on the Indo-Pacific will be problematic.

Some of the recommendations in *The Strategy of Denial* may remind readers of the Barack Obama-era pivot that was viewed by some as "decline management." There is a parallel, but Colby's strategic concept is more nuanced than previous ones. Focusing on the fact that U.S. ambiguity in the region is more harmful than helpful, Colby argues that specificity is important. The United States needs to communicate exactly how it plans to prevent China from becoming too powerful in the region, how it plans to guarantee partner security in the region, and whose security it is guaranteeing. U.S. partners deserve to know where they stand on the concept of island chain perimeter defense that many strategists call for.

Colby relies heavily on assumptions derived from Western literature that speculate about Chinese motivations toward becoming a regional hegemon in the near term and a global power in the long term. One would expect the inclusion of translated Chinese sources in a thoroughly researched volume. For that, readers should turn to Rush Doshi's *The Long Game*, which provides context for understanding China's aspirations. Also missing from Colby's work is a deep examination, or acknowledgment, of his assumptions about why China will ascend in the Pacific. This is problematic for two

reasons: it opens the book to criticism if the assumptions later prove incorrect, and it relies on the belief that the reader will agree with the author's assertions. Neither is guaranteed.

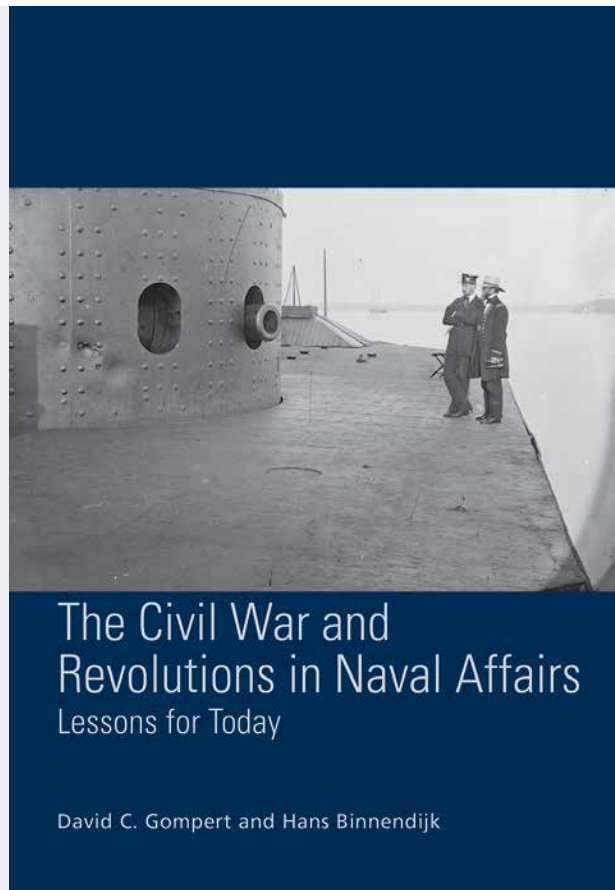
To Colby's credit, the last section of *The Strategy of Denial* might be worth the price of admission and will be most useful to strategists and policymakers alike. Chapter nine deals with ways to end the limited war Colby envisions between China and the United States. Here, Colby offers the reader plausible and believable policy recommendations about war termination should the United States and its allies not develop an effective policy to curb Chinese economic and military expansion within the region. Colby also tackles what escalation in such a scenario might look like, how a protracted war might take shape, and how the United States could compel an end to a conflict that readers may think Colby believes inevitable. In chapter 10, Colby also probes how his "denial defense" might not work out, exploring how and why such a strategy would fail when one takes into account that China has a vote in any potential U.S. strategic success.

Whereas Colby focuses mostly on the China challenge, readers would also benefit from Michael O'Hanlon's *The Art of War in an Age of Peace: U.S. Grand Strategy and Resolute Restraint*. O'Hanlon offers an alternate view—one that emphasizes that different regional challenges for the United States are globally intertwined. O'Hanlon's work ties together the familiar four-plus-one state-based threat construct (that is, Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and transnational violent extremism) and then doubles it to include nuclear, biological, and digital threats; climate change; and weakened domestic cohesion. It also acknowledges how globally intertwined many challenges are. The way the United States deals with Russian President Vladimir Putin will affect the way U.S.-China competition plays out. Without accounting for the integrated nature of distinct U.S. foreign policy challenges abroad, Colby's recommended strategic focus on China defines U.S. interests primarily in terms of perceptions

of the threat from China. The risk in this is that the power to define American interests abroad could transfer to Chinese President Xi Jinping. This is especially dangerous because Beijing's leadership might use this position to pressure the United States to spend time and resources on areas that are not fundamentally linked to U.S. national security interests. A well-balanced strategy, one that is regionally focused, but not too narrowly, lies between the insights from Colby's and O'Hanlon's work.

Is *The Strategy of Denial* worth reading? Yes. Even if defense and security professionals do not buy the strategy or the recommendations Colby offers, the book is still a useful and important exercise in thinking about an approach to dealing with China in the Indo-Pacific and what a future conflict with China could portend. The good parts of Colby's arguments are valid and will challenge the reader to think differently, though partially offset by those that are of diminishing value. Despite these drawbacks, most readers will appreciate the complexities of formulating a national defense strategy for the Indo-Pacific, as well as what a conflict with China could look like. JFQ

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The Civil War and Revolutions in Naval Affairs: Lessons for Today

By David C. Gompert and Hans Binnendijk

At certain times, the character of naval warfare undergoes revolution. The American Civil War was such a time, and its lessons still resound. Because the war began suddenly when secession followed Abraham Lincoln's election, the Union was unprepared to blockade the South. Its small navy had mainly wooden-hulled sailing ships with poor gunnery. Consequently, only 1 in 10 Confederate blockade runners was interdicted in the first year. What followed was a dramatic shift to ironclad steam-driven warships with accurate guns. Before long, Union ships were demolishing Confederate forts, closing Southern ports, and fighting jointly with Union ground forces. The paradigm born then—strategy and technology producing winning capabilities, multiplied by industrial mobilization—is later evident in the carrier, nuclear propulsion, and networking naval revolutions. Another revolution is needed now to thwart China's attempt to gain military advantage in the Pacific. We know from the Civil War and since that bold and inventive leadership is crucial.