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*The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, by Elbridge A. Colby, provides a comprehensive realist approach to modern US strategy. Through a well-planned deductive flow, Colby guides readers through key concepts that underpin his proposed strategy to deny regional hegemonic aspirations using the careful cultivation of alliances. China plays an outsized role in Colby's strategic approach, and while he covers other vital regions, Asia is the focus of his book. He effectively threads several theoretical components of international relations into a potential American approach to strategic competition with China. In the era of resurgent great power competition, Colby provides a bridge between many of the past realist arguments and current policy implications.

Colby begins by establishing physical security as the cornerstone to ensuring US freedom and prosperity within today's context. One of the book's greatest strengths is that his point is not simply a trite retelling of previous arguments that military strength eclipses all other requirements. Instead, he helps to reestablish some of the fundamental drivers of why states seek to gain power for security. Hard power underpins soft power in efforts to establish a favorable balance of power. Without physical security, applying the other levers of power becomes immensely more complicated. However, he does not leave out the economics, politics, and information aspects of competition. His strategy recommendation lightly touches on these other aspects as they connect to establishing security through balancing efforts. The necessity of physical security underpins foreign policy requirements and is continually at play within strategic competition.

Basing his discussion on the realist arguments of power and balance, Colby argues that the primary goal of American foreign policy should be to ensure that other states cannot gain regional hegemony. His arguments build on previous research into balancing versus bandwagoning. However, in Colby's work, balancing focuses on denying other states their hegemonic aspirations. Unlike some current arguments, Colby presents a
greater need to foster an anti-hegemonic alliance to counter aggressive revisionist intentions. What then proceeds in the subsequent chapters is an exploration of the collective action problem of alliances. While states typically desire to balance against a rising regional power through anti-hegemonic alliances, these connections are difficult to form as nations seek their personal security. An effective alliance brings together enough states to mutually contend against the rising power, but holding this group together is difficult. Especially in the early strategies of alliance formation, a cornerstone state is necessary to hold the others together.

Colby builds a point-counterpoint of how the United States can place itself as an external cornerstone balancer to insert confidence within the alliance. Member confidence forms the center of gravity for a successful anti-hegemonic alliance. Beyond building a critical mass of member states, the cornerstone balancer must instill confidence in the promise of mutual support. These states must have enough reliability and trust in one another’s ability to resist corrosion, or they will likely seek security through other means. The cornerstone state can provide this confidence by matching the power of the aspirant hegemon. Thus, being a peer, that state should be less sustainable to coerce efforts. The United States does not need to overextend itself, but as a cornerstone balancer, it must provide sufficient security guarantees that members have faith in the alliance.

Not surprisingly, Colby argues that China is the salient contender to American leadership, and Asia receives the bulk of the attention as he outlines his strategy of denial. The other regions of the globe are still important, but the combination of a revisionist China and Asia as an economic power makes the region strategically important. Furthermore, due to Asia’s geographic proximity, ensuring no regional hegemon is a strategic imperative to the United States. While past national security requirements have allowed China’s rise, there remains a window of opportunity for America to act. An anti-hegemonic alliance in Asia is capable of balancing China’s rise. This alliance would raise the cost and consequences of aggressive expansionist antics. The strategy of denial also fits with the current strategic thoughts on the first and second island chains. The alliance would help to tighten up defensive lines in a way that can deny China’s hegemonic aspirations.

Within the context of alliance formation, Colby presents one of the more controversial elements of his strategy of gaining differentiated credibility through only allying with capable partners. The selective approach ensures the United States gains more differentiated credibility by limiting demands on its support. This approach has the benefit of ensuring the US does not become overburdened in its efforts. He argues that the United States should only selectively form alliances with states capable of resisting China. The less capable states are left in a quasi-partner status but would receive no promises of support. The selective aspect of this strategy is one of the more problematic parts of the book. Not for lack of effort or thought, Colby sets up a decision-making requirement that needs a further understanding of relative and contingent conditions. Additionally, defensibility is not easily measured and is still vigorously debated. Many experts expected Ukraine to crumble against a Russian assault, but it is still holding out despite the previously perceived power disparity. Colby makes an essential argument on alliance formation, but the application will likely be more difficult without a clear understanding of policy implications.

Colby’s Strategy of Denial approaches a broad range of themes within the realist tradition and broader strategy discussions that should make it interesting to a diverse audience. The idea of cornerstone balancer highlights an exciting thread for further discussion on the current military-economic crossover needed to form alliances in today’s strategic competition. While there are sev-
eral argumentative points within Colby’s work, his points are important ones that students and practitioners of strategy should debate. *The Strategy of Denial* does exactly what a good book should by presenting an argument that sparks further discussion.

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