

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

The Asia Chessboard Podcast

“Plan Your Move: The NDS and the Chessboard”

RECORDING DATE

Thursday May 7, 2020

SPEAKERS:

Elbridge Colby

*Former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy Enforced
Development, Department of Defense*

Patrick Buchan

Director, the U.S. Alliances Project and Fellow, Indo-Pacific Security, CSIS

HOST:

Mike Green

Senior Vice President for Asia and Japan Chair, CSIS

- Andrew Schwartz: Welcome to the Asia Chessboard, a podcast that examines geopolitical dynamics in Asia and takes an inside look at the making of grand strategy. I'm Andrew Schwartz at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Benjamin Rimland: Mike is joined in this episode by former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy Enforced Development, Elbridge Colby, with a special guest appearance by CSIS US Alliances Project Director, Patrick Buchan. Mike, Bridge and Pat discuss the planning process for the National Defense Strategy and its impact on force posture in the Indo-Pacific. The three discuss how alliance concerns, budget issues and adversary planning factor to major planning documents like the NDS.
- Mike Green: Welcome back to the Asia Chessboard. I'm joined by Elbridge Colby and Pat Buchan. Bridge is a scholar of international security and East Asia and the Indo-Pacific and the Principal Drafter of the National Defense Strategy. And Pat of course, is at CSIS, leading our Alliance project on leave from the Australian Department of Defense. And before he came to CSIS was seconded with Bridge working on the National Defense Strategy.
- Mike Green: So we're going to talk today about the goals of the National Defense Strategy, the framing concepts, how execution is going, what it was like making the sausage, how that looks to an ally, particularly one who is embedded in the process and what are some of the resource challenges or maybe changed assumptions in the age of COVID-19. But first Bridge, we always like to start because our listeners are always very interested in how you got here, and let's start with that.
- Mike Green: And I have to begin by saying that you and I have known each other since 1958, since in the small world of the blob or the swamp, Bridge's grandfather was of course, a very, very famous intelligence officer, director of the CIA. When he was the station chief in Rome, Italy in the late 1950s under ambassador Clare Boothe Luce. My mom was a brown graduate who spoke Italian and was in the CIA station, and the CIA station chief could not have some average person coming to babysit so he picked one of the only young single women in the embassy, in the CIA station to babysit.
- Mike Green: So my mom, we figured out babysat Bridge's dad. And just to state, I was not born yet and Bridge certainly was not born yet. So we go way back in one sense, so we only just took this about five years ago. So tell us, you don't have to go back to the '50s, but tell us about your family, about your interest in service and in strategy and Asia.
- Elbridge Colby: Well, first of all, thanks Mike, delighted to beyond honored. I know you've had a really great group and of course you're the leading expert on Asia around. So it's a delight and an honor to be on the show. You've kind of tipped my hand a little bit, I would say that I think like you, it was sort of in the air. One of the few

things that I sort of took maybe a little bit on faith in my family background was just an interest in national security and serving in some capacity in the foreign and national security realm.

Elbridge Colby: Actually, my grandfather's father was also as a career army officer, sort of an early military intellectual. And my father even though he's a businessman, I actually grew up in Asia and that's kind of one of the roots of my interests in Asia, but he'd always inculcated and encouraged an interest in national security. And so as I've worked on my bio over the years, I've made it look more and more linear in a way that's probably not accurate. I think I always had an interest in national security, but it's taken me some time to figure out.

Elbridge Colby: So initially, I worked on some of the intelligence reform issues, why the Iraq intelligence was wrong. And then I got really introduction in all places in law school, in the questions of deterrence, which brought me to nuclear weapons. That's kind of the entry point in which I came into high grand strategy.

Mike Green: As far as I know, Georgetown Law School doesn't teach nuclear deterrence theory. So how did this happen in law school?

Elbridge Colby: Yeah, well, probably not. Well, maybe it is a good add for Yale Law School, but Yale where I went, it's always had a little bit of a slip stream for people who are interested in the kind of national security and broader questions. I sort of have taken it to the extreme. I mean, obviously there's a very distinguished group of people like Steve Hadley and Richard Danzig and so forth who actually are excellent lawyers in addition to being national security professionals.

Elbridge Colby: I dropped the excellent lawyer, as I've actually only half-jokingly say I'm the third generation of failed lawyer. My grandfather practiced for a while before he joined the agency like your mom. My dad practiced for a while and then got out of it. So I just decided to skip that entirely. But in a way, the legal training has more applicability than I think is immediate lobbyists.

Elbridge Colby: A lot of actually deterrence theory is essentially the law, right? Actually particularly in ports, which is about how do you incentivize people to do or not do something. And so that I wouldn't take it too far, but I actually found the legal training to be really useful, and Yale was very permissive of kind of a little bit of a free radical. And I actually, my first job out of law school was working on the new start negotiations and that was actually under fellowship from Yale Law School. So I give that institution a lot of credit for somebody who does not add to Yale's reputation and legal expertise it's often made better.

Elbridge Colby: But I would say that, that kind of got me in more and more into the defense strategy. I started in the kind of nuclear realm, but actually one of the things I would say kind of bring it into the NDS for a second is that one of the things that I brought, I would say from my personal experience, the NDS was a background in the sort of I use high, I don't mean to kind of be a tendentious about it, but

more wholistic about it, but kind of a high strategy of nuclear strategy of the Cold War.

- Elbridge Colby: It's really fallen out of the grand strategy discussion a lot since the end of the Cold War. And particularly in force planning and defense planning in the Pentagon where that kind of nuclear strategy kind of high alliance cohesion became separated from the specifics of conventional war fighting and these kinds of things. Largely I'd say it's a product of unipolarity, but one of the things I was trying to do in my own way was re-inject a little bit or kind of reintegrate that a little bit.
- Mike Green: So I had Steve Hadley on this podcast early on and when I asked him about his interest in strategy, he did not mention Yale Law School actually. He mentioned history, and one of my pet themes is that history is a great guide to strategic thinking. And Steve, maybe he was throwing me a bone, but he picked up on that and said studying diplomatic history under Walter Everett at Cornell is what really got him interested in strategy.
- Mike Green: But it makes sense that law school would prepare you because it's an extremely disciplined way of arguing and thinking. And you were working nuclear weapons, and as you point out, there's a logic to that. Before you joined the Pentagon as the Deputy Assistant Secretary in charge of strategic issues, what other policy jobs did you have along the way?
- Elbridge Colby: Sure. And actually, maybe I'll go back for a second because I would say my real interest in strategy per se, I would say General Secretary Mattis. Somebody said that he always has a sort of a crucible experience for trying to understand an individual's formation. I would say my product of my age, my kind of crucible experience was the debates over the Iraq War. I didn't serve in the military or anything, but a lot of it, I go back to actually my good friend who is, you may know Mike, Roman Martinez, who was on the NSC working in Iraq and was out in Baghdad.
- Elbridge Colby: And he and I would have titanic debates about the Iraq War. And he was at the time, he's a big supporter and I think, and I was a critic and we would have these real sharp back and forth and he would push me to sort of justify why ... I had this intuition about deterrence and that deterrence could work better, but he would push me and push me and push me. And frankly, I have to say I've lost a lot of arguments to him, but I don't feel so bad as he's now a Supreme court litigator.
- Elbridge Colby: But I think that kind of set me on the path of saying, okay, I need to figure this out. I got involved in some of the intelligence reform issues as I mentioned, the President's Commission on the Iraq Intelligence in '04, '05, then working for Ambassador Negroponte when he was setting up the Office of the DNI, but trying to think through it then, when I went to law school I used a lot of time trying to get deeper and that led me to the deterrence kind of literature, then that new star job. And then I left, being a Republican, I left the Pentagon in 2010

and I was first at CNA, which is one of the defense federally funded research and development centers.

Mike Green: I spent a couple months there too after I finished school, yeah.

Elbridge Colby: So working primarily on strategic issues and then at CNAS, which I joined in 2014, when Bob Work was the CEO and then when Michele Flournoy, and working with people like Sean Brimley and Eli Ratner and those people. And what I would say on that is its interesting, I kind of evolved out of the nuclear issues a little bit. Even before I went into the Pentagon, I remember I was presenting on some ... I really got interested in this issues of escalation and limited war because it seems to me, this is kind of where my thinking led, which bears to the NDS.

Elbridge Colby: But I think I presented to a group that Jan Nolan had a few years ago and Charlie Glazer said, "That's interesting presentation on nuclear strategy. It's not really what you're talking about is not nuclear strategy, you're talking about a conventional issue." And I kind of, sort of obvious when he said it, I mean, he's a brilliant guy, but it was kind of like, I kind of thought myself into a different space kind of grounded and proceeding from that nuclear strategy background and thinking about prominent led me to a different place, which is how I got into the kind of the fait-accompli and the escalation management along so many things that there in the NDS kind of logic.

Mike Green: So, how'd you get the pin on the National Defense Strategy?

Elbridge Colby: Honestly, usually say through no fault of my own or through no fault is not the right word. Jokingly. I mean, it was an enormous honor, right? Serendipity, honestly. I think, I don't know how the selection process went, but I became the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Strategy and Force Development in May of 2017. By that point, Secretary Mattis already had been the secretary for a couple of months and he and his staff had already structured a system in which it was going to be a small team and Pat knows this very well and played a really important role in all of these issues, a small team reporting directly to him.

Elbridge Colby: And I always, I'm a structuralist, I'm a realist. I think the most important thing that happened at the NDS was Secretary Mattis' decision not to have a typical QDR, Quadrennial Defense Review, not to have 50 people on each team led by a two star, which essentially leads to attrition bureaucratic warfare. And you end up not so far where you started. Instead he said, "I'm going to have this DASD and a guy from the joint staff reporting directly to me and eventually the deputy secretary as well," composed of 15 to 20 people, half of them civilians, individuals from each of the services.

Elbridge Colby: He specifically said, "I don't want flag officers," as I understand it because he wanted people who would have more freedom, would not be kind of only staff, but really participate themselves and iterate with him. So I think that's sort of, I

mean, I'd never met him before. Obviously I knew him by his incredible reputation, but I kind of felt with that in some ways it would have been more natural given my background to go to the nuclear job, but I'm really, I mean well, it's an incredibly important job and Rob Soofer has done a tremendous job there. I'm really happy that I landed there, ended up in the strategy job because I think it was just such an amazing group and team and window.

Mike Green: So normally the National Defense Strategy where the reports I worked on in the Pentagon in the '90s, the East Asia strategic reports, the first thing we would do is study the National Security Strategy from the White House and at a minimum, not piss off the president and ideally craft a defense strategy that fits into the National Grand Strategy. Doesn't always happen that way. I remember the Bush Administration, Secretary Rumsfeld didn't really care what the White House thought, especially the NSC staff. So it was a little more of to and fro.

Mike Green: And the continental defense reviews had a life of their own that sort of lived independently of whatever was coming out of the White House. But the NSS for the Trump Administration, the NSS came up before the NDS, at least chronologically, did it shape it? Was that your ... You're out of the government now, you can tell the truth. Was that touchstone for you guys?

Elbridge Colby: Yeah. I would, and I think you obviously know this better than I. I mean, I think that sometimes platonic model of a National Security Strategy that is sort of shaped and then goes down into a National Defense Strategy and so forth is rarely how things go for a number of reasons, including the fact that you've got, four years sounds like a lot of time, but it can get eaten up pretty quickly. What I would say is in a way, almost probably like an intellectual, a scholarly work where you're being influenced by other people, even if the timestamp on your publication date might be later.

Elbridge Colby: The NSS only came out a month I think before the NDS, the National Security Strategy I think came out in December of '17 and the National Defense Strategy in January. What I will say is that Nadia Schadow, who was the primary lead on the National Security Strategy and I would talk all the time, very close cooperation. And I was participating in all of her meetings or somebody from the team did and more, there was a kind of a less formal interaction that went through. And of course, Nadia I think already knew Mattis a little bit from her background. So there was a cross pollination or whatever you want to call it.

Elbridge Colby: I will say, I mean, I think one of the things that the president and obviously people have strong views on him, but just kind of looking at it from a kind of an analytical kind of empirical point of view. One of the things that the president has done, I think, history would put it, rather well, is that he's the disruptor who kind of cracked the task on a lot of things that have become calcified. Now, some people think that's bad, some people think that's good. But I think one of the things that we were able to do as the president was saying, "Well, I want you to put America first, as they put in the National Security Strategy. I want ..."

- Elbridge Colby: Essentially, a kind of something that's more tightly connected to our national interests. And I think that allowed a space for people working in subordinate echelons to be able to pursue something. So I think in the National Defense Strategy, I would certainly say we're very faithful and aligned with the National Security Strategy focused on great power competition and stuff. But I would almost even say, I think the National Defense Strategy even went even more farther, which is maybe more natural for a defense strategy where these kinds of hard choices are sometimes more necessary and practical.
- Patrick Buchan: Done with my current boss and my former boss, so it's a unique opportunity. If we cast our minds back to that time, people were still reeling quite frankly from the election of the Trump Administration. Uniquely I'd found myself in the Office of the Secretary Defense and the Strategy team which Bridge headed up as one of the longest serving people because I'd come in about 18 months before with the churn and burn. So I'd seen the Obama staff move out.
- Patrick Buchan: One of the things that I was saying was, I guess I was very cognizant that in the little way or influence that I could have in the strategy that we would factor in some of that concrete, if you will, on the importance of alliances particularly. We'd seen a lot of the rhetoric from the campaign on alliances, the questioning of alliances, I guess, what I wanted to do was to take some of the emotion out of alliances, the classic lines you've always been with us, because I think that gets a little tired, right?
- Patrick Buchan: If an alliance is based on history, then that's an historical fact, but if it's based on grounded in modern reality, then you can sell that particularly to this administration. So I kind of took that tact gently behind the scenes, how could I ensure that alliances and particularly the alliances in the Indo-Pacific were not taken for granted, and that they were of modern utility to this administration. Particularly some of the folks we did see over at the White House in those first few months, I guess obviously took a very questioning line to alliances. A lot of those folks didn't hang around. So that was the sort of small role I'd like to play when I was in support to Bridge who obviously had the pin.
- Mike Green: Bridge, if you can tell me were there embeds from NATO?
- Elbridge Colby: There was a UK participant. Yeah.
- Mike Green: And I ask in part because one thing is while there are four strategic competitors, China, Russia, North Korea and Iran, it's clear that the Indo-Pacific is flag and the primary theater, and that was with British embeds in the room. The pivot to Asia, the Obama Administrations has given, that was also supposed to prioritize the Indo-Pacific group as we called it at the time, the Asia Pacific, but resources didn't change. Was that going through your mind as you did this?
- Elbridge Colby: Oh, absolutely. I mean, the reason that this strategy matters was because the Secretary of Defense and the Administration were behind it. I mean, people like

me and the team could say things, but it wouldn't carry weight and move money because people, even if it's a formal statement, I think one of the problems with the shift, the pivot, rebalance, or what have you is I think people could first see that it wasn't really where the movement was.

Elbridge Colby: And I think one of the things that my sense of what a strategy could do, why a strategy can make a difference and I've actually been confirmed or even persuaded my view that strategies can matter by that experience for reasons that are well beyond my role, essentially almost nothing to do with me, but if an empowered leader or leadership cadre makes a clear statement, assumes the hard choices and political risks under themselves and provides a degree of clarity and builds upon the existing recognition.

Elbridge Colby: I mean, there's a great Kissinger line, there's so many great Kissinger lines even if he's not always right by any stretch, but which is like great acts of state craft or not, products of virtuoso performance, they have to reflect underlying realities. So Bob Work is somebody I've known for a long time, I've had tremendous admiration for a long time. He was the Deputy Secretary for some of the critical early months of that period. A lot of stuff that he was doing from the period of 2014 and his individual case before that. But from the time he was Deputy Secretary Defense were absolutely critical.

Elbridge Colby: Some of the things that Dave Ochmanek was talking about in 2014, 2015, these are absolutely right. These were in a way that I actually analogize to a lot of things that the Reagan Administration, I think rightly did and rightly gets credit for were building on things that the Carter Administration, even the Nixon Ford administrations had started to see. I mean, if you look at the Army's big programs of the '80s, those that are all started. The B1 to B2 program, B1 is complicated, but you get the point.

Elbridge Colby: Similarly, I think here, and one of the critiques of the Obama Administration I would have on this point is that they were not able, and I think Bob would admit that, was that they were not able to translate that vision and that was for a number of different reasons. But I think what Secretary Mattis was trying to do, and what Secretary Esper is really continuing to try to do is to say, I, as the Secretary, I as the President's empowered individual confirmed by the Senate, et cetera, I am committed to this. I'm committed to making these hard choices. I'm not going to mince words about it.

Elbridge Colby: I mean, I think there was a little bit with the pivot to Asia. And again, I agree with the substance, but which was kind of A, yes, we're pivoting. The one I always kind of go to is like 60% of US Naval assets are deployed in the Pacific. And anybody who kind of peeled back any of that saw that was kind of like an accounting trick a little bit explaining something that was already there. It wasn't actually moving the hard decisions.

Mike Green: At the time, I felt like the Pentagon had a pretty clear, the Obama Administration period had a pretty clear idea of ends, ways and means. They

saw unambiguously particularly after 2010, 11, that China was a strategic competitor. They just weren't allowed to say it. And Bob Work as the deputy was a workhorse who made sure that ways and means fit the ends of preventing that rival, that strategic competitor from undercutting our alliances and so forth.

Mike Green: I think the problem with the pivot was that the premise itself was not something people agreed on. So I really liked this, but I heard both Secretary Hillary Clinton and Secretary John Kerry talk about China and it was very clear to me and you don't have to look at too many of the public statements to understand this, that John Kerry did not think at the time that China was a strategic competitor, Hillary Clinton did. So they had trouble defining or agreeing on the ends.

Elbridge Colby: Absolutely. I think that's right.

Mike Green: At least the assumption. And I think one of the great strengths of the NSS and the NDS was clearly defining strategic competition and not losing that competition, maintaining our privacy, which is open to a lot of different interpretation. Then we have Against Us. I wrote my book, Britain, Germany and Japan Soviets. Where I was a little less certain about the NDS I'll have to say and the NSS is, what were the assumptions? So a lot of us looked at it and thought good on you to use an "Australianism."

Mike Green: You've called a spade a spade, we're in strategic competition, but what are the assumptions? Do we think China's shape-able? Do we think China is now on a trajectory where we are basically going to have to defend ourselves? It wasn't so clear. Maybe it wasn't something you could state. What can you tell us now about some of the assumptions about the nature of that competition?

Elbridge Colby: Candidly, one of the frustrations I had is that, the National Defense Strategy unlike the National Security Strategy, the actual documents across my document. My personal view, also the view of the NDS Commissioner was that the vast majority of that could have readily been declassified. I think that would have been the right course for multiple reasons. I think Secretary Esper has begun to speak a little bit more candidly about some of the key principles in it.

Elbridge Colby: I think the unclassified summary of the National Defense Strategy gives you very, very thin sense of what the National Defense Strategy is actually talking about. And that of course sounds like I'm just hiding behind a wall of classification which I actually hate doing, so ...

Mike Green: I resort to that all the time. Don't worry about it.

Elbridge Colby: Exactly. Right. A brilliant paper that will never be declassified. The one thing I will say and since it's been cleared and so forth is I gave some testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee at the beginning of last year, beginning of 2019, which I think goes in a little bit more detail, less on the assumptions that

you're talking about which I'll get to in a second because I don't think there are any issues I bet, particularly on how you walk down that ends, ways, means line that you're talking about. And then actually you can see some of it reflected in the report of the National Defense Strategy Commission and some of its critiques.

Elbridge Colby: For instance, the National Defense Strategy Commission critiqued it, the National Defense Strategy for taking too much risk and for emphasizing capability over capacity, which by inference of course tells me where it was by too much prioritization of the Asia Pacific for instance. What I will say is on the assumptions, Secretary Mattis is very rigorous on this kind of point problem definitions of work. We actually did a very in fact ... and this was on my own maybe excessively pseudo academic aspiration, but we spent about the first month on framing and kind of intellectual structure. And we had competing groups within it. Evan Montgomery was involved in this and some other people from the team.

Elbridge Colby: What I would say is that one of the critical, absolute critical assumptions of the National Defense Strategy is this abiding centrality of the state. In the state, as an actor in national politics, which I think the COVID crisis only reinforces. I think, there's obviously different school of thought, but to me there ... if you look at the global trends document, the National Intelligence Council, that's a very different assessment. Our assessment, which is shared by other parts of the US government was that the state is the central accurate and kind of hard power is what really drives that, and that leaves you very, very quickly both to China as the primary challenge and the Asia Pacific, given its wealth and economic development and potential, translate that into military power, as the central fear.

Elbridge Colby: And so the National Defense Strategy is much clearer than any document I think in recent memory in saying that this is the core problem. The solution is a restoration of American military power in addressing the erosion of American conventional military superiority. But it has a particular theory of victory if you will, which is largely defeating the red theory of victory I would ... And this is kind of what my book, which I'm leaning very heavily on your superb book, Mike. In it is about matching that political objective, which is essentially coalition defense.

Elbridge Colby: I'm a fan of like Bob Comer's view or Dave Ochmanek in this view very, I think lucidly as well, which is designed to gather and cohere a coalition together and provide the military backing to be able to substantiate that. Now, I don't want to pretend that the National Defense Strategy says exactly what I'm saying here. I'd say we got about 85% there. We're now at the kind of the toughest part, but I think the National Defense Strategy sets in the right direction.

Elbridge Colby: The other point of the assumption that I would say possibly the single most important thing of a National Defense Strategy, and I can't get into too much specificity here is an assumption that the era of American sort of unipolarity or

hyper power is over, not out of some kind of a desire for us to be weaker, but just as a recognition of the structural development and accordingly that we have to adapt and one of those is that we have to make hard choice prioritization, which I think is very rare.

Elbridge Colby: And I think one of the things I really think that Secretary Mattis and Shanahan and others deserve a lot of credit for is saying specifically in the document, I can't get in super specificity but these are the things I want you to do less of. I mean, I remember because one of the good things about my job was that I was the strategy guy, but also as the policy representative in the budget deliberations. So I would see the decisions and be part of decisions about the future budgets. You'd have to see kind of where the rubber really meets the road.

Elbridge Colby: And one of the things that one of the army representative really thoughtful guy would say is, "Bridge, don't tell us to do all these other things and then leave it to us to make the hard choices, that's not fair." And I said, "That's exactly right." And I think Secretary Mattis is ultimately willing to say, and you see that. Now you see the struggle, of course, even today on the withdrawal of the Patriot batteries from Saudi Arabia, for instance, and CENTCOM, the continuing maw of CENTCOM. It's hard, but I think it's pretty clear where the DOD leadership has been.

Elbridge Colby: And I think to your point about John Kerry and Hillary Clinton is exactly right. I think Bob Work was there that whole time, but I'm not sure that the rest of that ... a strategy is a sort of an evangelization document at some level, right? I mean, it's kind of like clearer than truth, right? I mean, not to compare NDS with NSC 68, but I mean, NSC 68 when you go back and you read it, it's a little bit modeling and kind of overwrought, but the purpose of it was to activate the mass mind of government, right? And to make it clear how serious the situation was, reorder resources and so forth, help that war in Korea and so forth.

Elbridge Colby: But I think that's the contribution the NDS is not saying, "Oh, it's this brilliant thing that people haven't thought of." No, it's actually building on a lot of stuff, but it's actually taking these hard steps that are very politically difficult and personally difficult for a lot of these senior leaders, and that to me is the key aspect of every one of them.

Mike Green: In fact, sitting in the room for all this in the Pentagon as an embed from Australia. And I have to say it is just so remarkable that we let our closest allies into these most fundamental and sensitive strategic discussions, but where it came out, how'd you think it was going to play in Australia and the region? How do you think it did play in the NDS itself? We'll talk about the actual execution in just a sec.

Patrick Buchan: Yeah, Mike, I think there was some aspects that I could not have been involved in due to national classifications, and that's completely understandable, right? Some of those, there's some family divides that you have that you don't let your

cousins involved in, and I can completely understand that. My point was this, I became very concerned that white papers, Q-DAS, had become formulaic. That being that every four years, you sort of get a team together, you crank out some dot points and it ends up becoming a sort of policy document that sits on the shelves of officials throughout Washington or Canberra or Tokyo or wherever it may be.

Patrick Buchan: What was interesting about this and Bridge alludes to that. I take a slightly contrarian view where Bridge sort of noted that he would have preferred a more open version of the NDS. I'm not sure I fully concur with that, but what this did do and Bridge did allude to this where he's reference is to NSC 68, which obviously set forth the containment strategy for the United States. I think this set a marker down, a historical marker down to say to the American people, to say to the world and to America's friends and adversaries alike that the United States is now back in the great power game.

Patrick Buchan: The last 20 to 25 years of the sort of low intensity conflict and particularly focused on the Middle East, the CENTCOM theater, those days are now taking a second tier prioritization of the United States. So that was for me, the most interesting thing was to witness a historical shift and the official policy guidance to recognize that, that policy shift has now occurred, that as Bridge noted that the state is now back central to as the security actor on the global stage.

Mike Green: So I don't see a Biden Campaign or a Biden Administration going after the fundamental basis of the NDS, which is strategic competition with China. I think that boat has sailed so to speak and for political reasons, but also reasons of just sort of logic and national interest. I don't see a Biden Campaign or Administration trying to roll that back. Their criticism is going to be about execution, and of course they'll attack the president for his worldview.

Mike Green: And they'll say to win this blue-red competition, the US must have allies and we've treated them terribly, and you can read Secretary Mattis' resignation letter and come away thinking it was primarily about how we treated our allies. Part of that is demand for host nation support that are astronomical. Part of it is I think, withdrawal from Middle East. But part of it is that our allies also want us to play even in a state centric world. I'm a realist too. I basically agree, but our allies want us to play in the multilateralism, and wants us to play in the diplomatic game.

Mike Green: So all of those are not really problems with the NDS itself, it's kind of about execution. And after our own unilateral military capabilities, the most important force multiplier tool we have is our alliances and our network of alliances. So Bridge, you've been out for a little while, how do you look at that piece of it? Obviously, Secretary Mattis wasn't too happy about the execution on alliances. And I assume that was fundamental to the NDS is getting alliances up and ready for this.

Elbridge Colby: Yeah. I mean, I have a different view and I mean, I think on a number of axis, I mean, I think fundamentally we're preaching from the same Bible, but a couple of points. I think that there is going to be a segment of the democratic national security elite that's going to say yeah, NDS is great, but we're going to do it smarter. But the reality is that first of all, it's going to demand a lot of resources, which are going to be harder to generate, especially in a more constrained environment.

Elbridge Colby: It's going to involve a lot of controversial and tough stuff where, I mean, for instance, you see people saying, we need to work with the Chinese to deal with COVID, to deal with pandemic, to deal with ... That's going to be much, much of a ... a much stronger impetus on the left side of the aisle. And I think if the "Defense Democrats" many of whom are great friends of mine and who I have tremendous admiration for, if they ran the world, things might be fine and dandy, but they're not. They're going to run into the White House and the Air force, have a bake sale kind of problem.

Elbridge Colby: And there's going to be this constant ... The Republicans, in Trump Administration are going to have challenges of our own, but the Democrats are going to have this challenge of, do we really need to deploy those intermediate range conventional tip missiles? They're so controversial and it's going to cause friction in our alliances. And do we really need to push the Germans to step up and do 2% and have not embarrassingly pathetic conventional forces to allocate for the defensive of Eastern NATO, for instance. It's going to be tough.

Elbridge Colby: And I think what Trump has done, in a macro sense is basically open up a much more realistic appraisal. And I think what Pat is ... actually, it's kind of building on what Pat is saying is, look, we need to have a serious conversation. For example, Japan. I mean, nobody knows Japan better than you, but I mean, it's ridiculous that they are spending 1% of their GDP on defense and they need to hear it from us.

Elbridge Colby: They need to hear it from us because if it doesn't happen now, or in five years, then in five years or 10 years, when Americans are going to say, "Wow, this is really hard and risky because it's literally the first time we face an economy larger than our own in 150 years. And secondly, we have massive pressure on our entitlements and you're asking us to spend 3% and you guys spend one, maybe 1.5%, depending on how you measure it. Because of World War II, that was 75, almost 100 years ago." So better to have this pain and friction now.

Elbridge Colby: Now, I wish that we were doing better on getting to a place where we actually could have a coalition defense that was really predicated on a realistic assessment of our various schools. I mean, to me, Ash Townsend's work at the US Study Center is exactly right. Kind of really doing more with the allies. I mean, my view ... Secretary Mattis, I think was deeply, deeply committed to sustaining our alliances and I certainly agree with that. But to me, the NDS logic is a different model of alliance. In a sense it's a little bit more like a cold war model. And the cold war model in which, you could have the Plaza Accord fight,

or you could have Lyndon Johnson literally insisting that the Germans pay gold in order to have the good fortune of having the American occupying an army there.

Elbridge Colby: But really basically the point being, look, this is a collective effort. You cannot ask too much of the American people, you know de Gaulle's line. We're not going to just ... because we're no longer so dominant anymore, we have to think about the reality of a war over Taiwan, which Taiwan being critical for the defense of Japan. But the PLA is the most sophisticated military we've dealt with in over a generation and you can't just assume the American people will pay any price or support any friend.

Elbridge Colby: And so I actually think honestly, if the Democrats come in, they're going to have a really tough situation on the alliance front in a way that they don't quite probably expect, which is that there's this sense, that thing, particularly in Europe, but probably I don't detect as much in Asia, but you would have a better sense than I, but that things are going to go back to the way they were. Everybody's going to be polite, the Americans are going to say that we expect 2%, but nobody's really going to believe us. And that's not going to fly politically here as well.

Mike Green: Yeah. I think some of our friends in the national security establishment around former Vice President Biden know exactly what you're saying and probably weigh themselves about a ... part of the new administration if Biden wins coming in and saying, "Well, Trump's gone, now everyone will love us and do what we want," and it ain't going to happen.

Elbridge Colby: Right.

Mike Green: I gave a talk in Canberra last year and a lot of DFAT, defense people, and one of the questions said, "We never win. We get a Republican administration that spends the money, that has the risk tolerance, that stands up to the bad guys, but scares the hell out of everybody, doesn't listen well, yada yada. When we get a Democratic administration that listens really well, does the multilateral diplomacy we want and then does stuff like sequence ration, doesn't pay for it."

Mike Green: And I said to them, "We are still the best restaurant in town, it's just that we have prefix menus and you can't do all the cooking. This part of the Republicans, this part of the Democrats." So I'll tell you on the pressure on allies, I don't worry that much about Japan. I think that the Abe government is going to take the [inaudible] through the pressure from Donald Trump and say internally, yeah, we got to spend a little more. It's not going to be a four or 500% increase and host nation support or a doubling of the budget, but it's going to be more, COVID may knock that off, but it will be more.

Mike Green: And what they're going to do is say, "You're right. We're going to do more standoff weapons. We're going to do more in space. We're going to take more

risks. It's not all about dollars and cents." And I think within the administration, people in the Pentagon, the White House and State who say, "That's what we want to do." I worry about Korea because to be honest I don't think the Moon government is that deaf, doesn't have that level of trust and exchange and intimacy with this administration.

Mike Green: I lived through this conservative Republican government, progressive green government, but I also worry to be honest that within the president's mind, and maybe in some of the services, there's a view that maybe we shouldn't be in Korea. And so the risks I think of this hard line strategy with Korea are high. And I want to ask about Korea because the NDS and the NSS are very Mahanian, it's a maritime strategy. It's coalition to like-minded maritime... coalition building. It's all, I'm a Mahan guy. I love it.

Mike Green: But it's also Mahanian in the sense that Mahan and George Kennan and others who followed him, didn't think we should be on the continent of Asia, which leaves Korea in an awfully awkward spot. And I, reading the NDA thinking about US-Korea Alliance, didn't quite get where Korea fits. There's obviously the North Korea problem. Where's the North Korean alliance fit? Because in my view, that's the alliance in Northeast Asia that the Chinese are targeting.

Elbridge Colby: Well, Mike, I mean, this is why I should be asking you because I want to spend this hour hearing what you think. But, I feel like I need to savor my supper. I mean, honestly, I think you've put your finger on a real pressure point just on the Japan issue. I agree with you. In fact, the national defense planning guidelines are probably about as close to the NDS as you can get for a foreign defense strategy. I think Australia is coming along really well.

Elbridge Colby: But things kind of make a lot of sense to me in the sense that, okay, Japan, we've got to increase capacity, but you're obviously right. To me, the real, when people talk about the second line of effort for the National Defense Strategy on alliances, what it really is, is a new approach to alliances. And I think this was in Mattis' mind. He used to talk about, he'd never served in a US only formation and the model here to me, and I wrote something about this about a year ago in the European context is back in the day in NATO there was an American core, whatever, I think, then a German, then American, then a German, then a Dutch, then a British army, [inaudible] and so forth, and you had a coalition defense, now it was hard to make that work.

Elbridge Colby: But the idea was that the Americans had to give up a lot more of that unipolar discretion. It's not the Donald Rumsfeld attitude, of we don't need allies because they just fly flags. No, you actually need them, which means you actually have to work with them. You have to really collaborate in the planning process. You might have to do joint force development, which I think is something we should really be thinking about particularly with the closer ones. You have to expand the tent. It's not just the five eyes, it's Japan. I mean, Japan is the single most important alliance United States.

- Elbridge Colby: And I'm not just saying this because I grew up there or that you're Mr. Japan, I'm saying this because it's the second largest advanced economy in Asia. It's directly in the path of China's pursuit of regional hegemony. Yes, we have shared values, but we even better, we have a shared structural, deep structural alignment in preventing China's hegemony and Japan is also forward in the way the West Germany was. So it's kind of an alignment. So Japan should become more like the FRG of the 1970s and 1980s, which is a robustly well-developed military design for territorial defense. But that might include space, cyber, some strike capability along the lines you're talking about, but ideally integrated.
- Elbridge Colby: So anyway, that makes sense. And then Taiwan, which I talk about all the time, because I think it's the pain point in the Alliance structure. I mean, one of the things I'd love to talk to you more about is in writing my book, I've really come to appreciate the sort of archaic or the punitively archaic problem of a defense for her. I mean, it really is ... it's kind of old fashioned, but it's really important.
- Mike Green: It's remarkable how, when I was doing my book and I used declassified documents from the NSC from the 50s, it was all about the planning chain and back, it's just more complicated because we have outer-space, bio-space, cyberspace.
- Elbridge Colby: Except you still have to project military power in time and space. But anyway, I didn't mean to ignore it. I was going to get to your Korea problem, but yeah,
- Mike Green: Korea is to me, the intellectual and the US-Korea alliance is the intellectual Gordian Knot or the gold prize. And if people could figure that out, we win because what the US-Korea alliance represents—a joint and combined alliance. I mean, we do things with the Koreans I wish we could do with the Japanese in terms of planning and jointness and interoperability.
- Elbridge Colby: Yeah.
- Mike Green: And combined command and all of that. That's an amazing asset. And then of course the Korean peninsula is the linchpin, the fulcrum, the cockpit of Asia. And yet it's incredibly hard for Korea, even conservative Koreans to play the same game in China competition as Australia or Japan or India. So we really got to figure that one out I think.
- Elbridge Colby: I agree with you. Well, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to duck the question.
- Mike Green: I hope you don't mind me saying, the NDS, which I think is going to stand as a document that historians look at and see the trajectory continuing over several administrations. But the one thing that's still got to be figured out in some ways is what do you do about a country like Korea. Hey, let me end by asking you about your book project and what you're doing.

- Elbridge Colby: Well, my book project is basically really trying to develop the NDS logic. I mean the NDS, I think it went a long way in the right direction, but it's a government document and it's a point in time. To me what we want to do is we want to bring people back to the level of sophistication and kind of an election that you had in NATO instead of 60s, 70s and 80s on military planning, on alliance cohesion. I think during the period of unipolarity, these issues became a lot different. You could say easier, but probably harder in a different way.
- Elbridge Colby: But what I'm trying to do is basically, and I don't think somebody ... it's been a long time since somebody has written a kind of a true defense strategy book along the lines of defense strategy in government. So you have a lot of very good grand strategy books and you have Barry Posen and some have written defense strategy books from this kind of offshore restraint perspective.
- Elbridge Colby: But what I'm trying to do is okay, if you want to maintain a line scope and kind of the cohesion of the anti-hegemonial coalition in Asia, what does that mean? What does it issue and differentiated credibility? And then what is the military strategy that succeeds in that in a way that correlates the costs and risks that we run by doing so with the benefits that we gain. And it's a tough question. In fact, I don't think it was ever really solved in the Cold War, but we got to a good enough point to keep a lid on things until the Soviets fell apart, if we can get to that point.
- Elbridge Colby: And I'm very concerned about Taiwan, because I think Taiwan is our differentiated credibility, is on alliance. I think it's militarily valuable in the defense of Japan, which is the true cornerstone of the coalition and Asia along with India. But China has the capability, increasingly the capability to threaten Taiwan. So that's the book project I'm hoping to stew the first kind of main draft is due in a couple months, and then it's supposed to come out hopefully next year in time to at least be part of the conversation on whatever defense strategy, whether it's another Republican administration or Democrat.
- Elbridge Colby: And then my main advocacy is what we call the marathon initiative. So Wess Mitchell who was the Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, who's a very close old friend of mine. We're very like-minded, kind of conservative realist types. I've been thinking about this for a while, and this is an initiative that's really designed to just really think, laser-in, on the great power competition, like a think tank, like really to allow us to do the deep thinking, this kind of book longer projects while obviously doing a kind of public facing stuff as well, but really to give us that opportunity over the long haul.
- Mike Green: So Bridge, that is going to be a big contribution. So thanks for taking it on. Thanks for your service.
- Elbridge Colby: Well, thanks. I appreciate it.

- Mike Green: And congratulations on your success. I would like to take some credit since my mom obviously did a critically important job babysitting your dad back in the 1950s.
- Elbridge Colby: Among other, she was working all hours in Rome.
- Mike Green: I assume actually she wasn't babysitting him in the Rome station itself, probably in the residence.
- Elbridge Colby: Knowing my uncles that was quite a task, so dad was the well behaved one.
- Mike Green: So if your dad wasn't the problem, so even better was your uncles. Pat, thank you. You obviously had a great boss in the Pentagon.
- Patrick Buchan: Yeah, I did and very happy. Well done there Mike, thanks for allowing me to listen in. It was a nice little trip down memory lane of those first 12 months in the Trump Administration at the Pentagon, which was a pretty wild ride.
- Mike Green: Bridge, we'll get you back on when the book's done. Good luck with it. Thanks again.
- Andrew Schwartz: Thanks for listening. For more on strategy and the Asia programs work, visit the CSIS website at [csis.org](https://www.csis.org) and click on the Asia program page.