

The Colby conundrum: Washington's middle power blind spot

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How America's friends and allies interpret Washington's dismissal of middle power autonomy



Washington wants loyal allies, but its mixed signals are pushing them toward strategic autonomy. (File/AFP)

What does Trump's America really want? Does it want its friends and partners and allies to take increasing charge of their own security needs? Or does it want them to continue to be dependent on the US?

Frankly, the answer to that is not entirely clear – perhaps even to Washington.

In recent years, the geopolitical landscape has been defined by a growing anxiety among traditional US allies regarding the reliability of the American security umbrella. This tension was uncomfortably illuminated when US Under Secretary of Defence for War for Policy Elbridge Colby took to the social media platform X, a couple of days ago, to dismiss the emerging concept of a “middle powers” defence strategy. Labelling such efforts a “distraction” that squanders “valuable time, money, and political capital”, Colby asserted that middle powers lack a coherent basis for alignment and that no alternative coalition can rival the United States’ defence industrial base (DIB).

To Washington, these remarks may sound like a pragmatic restatement of flexible realism and unipolar dominance. However, to nations increasingly disappointed by America's shifting foreign policy – characterised by a confused now-a-pivot (and then seemingly not) to Asia, threats to abandon legacy commitments, and an overarching America First doctrine – Colby's comments are received quite differently. In capitals from Ottawa to Paris to New Delhi, these statements are viewed not as a reassuring projection of strength but as a symptom of hegemonic hubris that inadvertently validates their urgent quest for strategic autonomy.

For many international partners, navigating the current US foreign policy environment feels like dealing with a geopolitical bipolar disorder. Washington increasingly demands unwavering deference from its allies and insists on their exclusive reliance on American technology, yet simultaneously proves unreliable as it re-evaluates legacy defence arrangements in Europe and the Middle East to prioritise its domestic defence and the containment of China.

When Colby tells allies that seeking alternative security arrangements is a “waste” of resources, it rings distinctly hollow to nations facing immediate, proximal threats. Allies feel that the U.S. is unilaterally rewriting the social contract of its alliances. The expectation that allies should sit idle, waiting for a distracted superpower to dictate the terms of their security, is viewed as an unacceptable risk. Disappointed nations interpret Colby's dismissal not as a genuine strategic assessment of middle-power capabilities but as a defensive demand for subservience. They hear an ultimatum: rely entirely on the United States, even as the United States explicitly pivots away from them.

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of Colby's commentary for allied nations was his framing of the U.S. defence industrial base. By declaring that access to American military technology is “a privilege, not a right”, Washington has explicitly underscored the transactional nature of its modern alliances.

To middle powers (even though this term is very loosely used these days), this language transforms American arms from tools of mutual security into instruments of political coercion. If access to the U.S. DIB is merely a privilege that can be revoked at the whim of the current administration, then relying on American hardware is a profound strategic vulnerability. This realisation is already driving a wedge into the

traditional arms market. For example, Europe increased its military spending by 14 per cent in 2025 but concurrently scaled back its procurement from American defence manufacturers by nearly half. Similarly, Canada has debated scaling back orders of US-made F-35 fighters in favour of Swedish-made Saab Gripens to reduce dependency on Washington.

By scoffing at the ability of middle powers to compete with American manufacturing, Colby inadvertently accelerates the very decoupling he claims is impossible. Disappointed nations see his comments as proof that domestic defence industries and intra-middle-power arms deals – such as European joint ventures or defence integration in the Indo-Pacific – are not a waste of capital but an existential necessity for safeguarding their sovereignty.

Colby's assertion that middle powers lack a "coherent basis for alignment" reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what is driving these nations together. The alignment of middle powers – ranging from traditional Western allies like Canada, Australia, and Japan to rising Global South nations like Brazil and Indonesia – is not predicated on shared geography or identical economic models. Rather, it is born out of a mutual desire to avoid being collateral damage in great power competition.

As Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney noted, "The middle powers must act together, because if we're not at the table, we're on the menu." To disappointed allies, Washington's rigid, bipolar worldview fails to account for a rapidly multipolar reality. Middle powers do not harbour illusions of replacing the United States as a global hegemon; their goal is far more pragmatic. By forging interlocking defence agreements, pooling research and development, and diversifying their supply chains, they aim to create regional deterrence and strategic resilience. When Washington dismisses these efforts as a "faulty understanding of international relations", it only reinforces the perception that the US is out of touch with the modern needs of its partners.

Even nations that reject the traditional "middle power" label are part of this shifting dynamic. For instance, India has consistently emphasised its strategic autonomy, with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar defining the nation as a "power in the middle" due to its aspirations for a larger global role. This distinction underscores a broader

trend: nations across the geopolitical spectrum are actively diversifying their partnerships to carve out independent roles on the world stage.

Ultimately, Colby's X posts are read by these nations as the rearguard action of a superpower struggling to adapt to a world where its allies possess real agency. The insistence that there is "no credible free-world alternative to American tech" ignores the reality that allies are willing to accept indigenous or partnered technology if it comes with the guarantee of political independence. This dynamic is fostering a new form of multilateralism where minilateral defence pacts bypass Washington entirely, focusing on shared intelligence, technology transfers, and regional stability. Colby's perceived condescension serves as an unintentional unifying force, reminding these disparate nations that their only defence against the unpredictability of great powers is each other.

Elbridge Colby's dismissal of the middle powers' strategy was intended to project unshakeable American primacy and deter allies from straying from Washington's orbit. However, for countries already harbouring deep misgivings about the US security umbrella, his comments achieve the exact opposite.

The key lesson many countries around the world have absorbed from the war in Ukraine, Gaza, and now Iran is that the previous security architecture was highly unreliable, and at any time, strategic geostrategic or geoeconomic access could be cut off. This lesson is driving a lot of decision-making around the world.

By labelling their pursuit of strategic autonomy a distraction, characterising access to American defence as a conditional privilege, and fundamentally misunderstanding their motives for alignment, Washington validates their deepest anxieties.

Disappointed nations read these remarks not as a reason to fall back in line but as undeniable proof that the era of unquestioned reliance on the United States is over. While it is indeed true that America may still possess the world's most dominant military-industrial complex, the trust that historically glued its alliances together is eroding. In attempting to mock the middle powers back into submission, Washington may have just handed them the clearest mandate yet to build a resilient future without it. And the "hubub" Colby is hearing about middle-power cooperation is about to become much louder.

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