Critical Issues Confronting China: The Military Dimension of Sino-American Strategic Competition
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After congratulating the Fairbank Center for the sixth consecutive year of the Critical Issues Confronting China seminar series, led by Professor Ezra Vogel, Karl Eikenberry, Director of the U.S.-Asia Security Initiative, Professor of Practice at Stanford University and former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, noted how quickly Sino-U.S. relations have deteriorated in recent years. Gone are the Clinton years of “strategic partnership” and U.S. Under-Secretary of the State Robert Zoellick’s call, in 2005, for China to become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system. Instead, the tenor of this bilateral relationship has evolved into identifying China, under President George W. Bush, as a “strategic competitor” which the U.S. should hedge against, and whose development, under President Obama, the U.S. should “monitor” in order to ensure that its regional and international interests remain intact. Now, President Trump’s 2017 national security strategy report labels China as a “revisionist power,” not only trying to change the international order in its favor, but also to “displace the U.S.” in the western Pacific and seek regional domination.

What led to this fundamental change in the characterization of China over the past decade or so? And why is it exceedingly difficult to manage this bilateral relationship? Eikenberry explained the dynamics underlying this precarious situation, exacerbated by strong feelings on both sides and lack of norms in an era permeated with new forms of advanced technologies.

First, major contingencies can drive and shape the U.S. security outlook and basic orientation. The surprise September 11th attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001 resulted in a U.S. national security strategy that concentrated on fighting terrorism in the Middle East and Central Asia for most of the ensuing decade. China was not the Pentagon’s focus during those years. It was against this backdrop that Eikenberry himself was deployed to Central Asia for much of the decade, culminating in his appointment as U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2009-2011.

The 2008 financial crisis was another exigency that impacted Sino-U.S. relations. Around 2007, some U.S. policy pundits began to question the premise that more U.S. engagement with China would not only facilitate China’s economic growth and prosperity, but also lead to a more
open and politically liberalized China. The juxtaposition of China maintaining a very high economic growth rate during the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, while the U.S. experienced negative growth rates in 2008 and 2009, led some people to conclude that “China [has been] cheating” or “taking advantage of us.” Estimates of U.S. economic losses due to China not playing by the rules—such as the theft of intellectual property rights—entered the public debate, and allegedly amounted to hundreds of billions of dollars. Even Charlene Barshefsky, U.S. Trade Representative during 1997-2001, who championed China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, changed her supportive stance. Dismayed by China’s stymied reform and opening-up process, she decried China’s mercantilism and unfair practices.

Second, the quantity of China’s military equipment has become formidable and can be worrisome for the U.S., especially in the South China Sea. Some U.S. analysts blame the war on terrorism for distracting U.S. security priorities from China’s rapid military buildup. Since the mid-2000s, the Chinese military has replaced old equipment with massive amounts of modern equipment. Although their equipment’s quality gap with the U.S.s varies from one area to another, China exceeds the U.S. in terms of quantity, such as in the number of fighter jets and destroyers. Furthermore, China still adds to its already large arsenal every year at a faster rate than the U.S.

Third, the Obama administration’s pronouncement of a “pivot to Asia” in 2011 re-enforced the Chinese perception of “American containment” of China. This further motivated China to strengthen its technological and military prowess. Making breakthroughs in 5G technologies and building artificial islands in the South China Sea are emblematic of this overall drive to become competitive. China views the U.S. forward military presence in the western Pacific after the collapse of the Soviet Union as being aimed against China and threatening China’s security. In response, since 2015, China has intensified military reform. On the U.S. side, Eikenberry cautioned that it is always easier to blame others for our own domestic problems than to take the responsibility to solve them ourselves. He did not envision this bilateral relationship, having evolved into “strategic competitors,” reverting to the prior “engagement” strategy any time soon.

Eikenberry then discussed the military management component of the relationship. First, China presents a serious security dilemma for the U.S. What is defensive for one party can be seen as offensive by the other party. Instead of hoping for the best, the military’s job is to prepare for the worst. Whereas intentions can change overnight, military capabilities take a long time to improve. From the time when the Pentagon decides what weaponry it needs to the time it actually possesses it can take over a decade. This long-term cycle requires early preparation for a potential worst-case scenario, but then adversaries have to counter this additional capability, even though it was meant as a defensive tactic in the first place. Thus a downward spiral ensues.
Second, the nature of the most advanced technologies today has changed dramatically from the past. In the last round of technological breakthroughs, which gave rise to GPS and the internet, about 70 percent of the technologies came from large American defense contractors. Today, in contrast, most of the leading technologies in areas such as artificial intelligence, biotechnologies, and nano technologies, come from commercial enterprises. Therefore, economic exchanges with China in the commercial area have a security dimension, as these advanced technologies have military and security implications.

Third, technologies have developed into arenas where there are no established rules or norms, unlike conventional land, naval, and air warfare. Eikenberry gave some examples. If an U.S. unmanned drone went within 12 nautical miles of a Chinese artificial island in the South China Sea, and the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) shot it down, would this be considered an act of war? If we replace the unmanned drone in this scenario with a manned aircraft, but with advanced warning to the Chinese, would the Chinese shooting the aircraft be an act of war? These examples are only the tip of the iceberg where the red line is blurred. Even rescue operations can trigger unpleasant and unexpected consequences.

Fourth, China has a fundamentally different conception of the South China Sea and the East China Sea than the U.S. China views them as its own historical waters, hence a national sovereignty issue, whereas the U.S. considers them as international waters, where freedom of navigation applies and should be enforced. Because of this U.S. approach, the U.S. has to prepare counter measures against any restrictions on navigation in the disputed waters. In addition, tensions between China and Japan and the Philippines, both of whom are U.S. allies, over these waters present the U.S. with an on-going dilemma as to what actions to take and what global precedents it wants to establish.

In conclusion, Eikenberry advised caution for both sides. Even as the U.S. military prepares for worst-case scenarios, it has to prepare and exercise control to prevent crises from happening or from escalating. For the Chinese side, at a time of rising nationalism—epitomized in slogans like “we beat you at your own game” and “our moment has come”—China should not forget that it still has a large proportion of its population, outside its affluent megacities, that has difficulty in meeting basic needs. Compared to the cost of building a modern destroyer, how many people’s livelihood could have been uplifted and how many empty apartments could have been filled instead. Eikenberry called for both China and the U.S. to have more empathy for and a better understanding of each other in order to assuage rising tensions.