Critical Issues Confronting China:  
The Rise of the Chinese Navy:  
What It Means for East Asia and the United States  
Robert Ross, Boston College  
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U.S.-China relations have reached their lowest point since 1971, as remarked by Robert Ross, Professor of Political Science at Boston College. How did this happen? Ross explained the dynamics that led to this situation, and proposed some actions to prevent it from worsening.

As China amasses more economic resources and military capability, significantly narrowing the gap with the U.S. on multiple fronts, it naturally wants more security around its periphery. From China’s point of view, U.S. bases have encircled it from South Korea to the Strait of Malacca. As a rising power, China is necessarily a revisionist power, and it cannot be expected to accept this existing order. But China’s policy essentially challenges U.S. military supremacy in the Asia Pacific and the regional order, built and maintained by the U.S. since World War II. As the leading power in the status quo, the United States cannot readily make way for China.

Ross was concerned about this growing tension and the prospect for hostilities, but he believed that any prediction of an inevitable war between these two great powers is “too simplistic and dangerous.” Notwithstanding the extreme difficulty of power transitions from an established power to a rising power, he called for a greater exercise of patience and restraint by both sides at this critical juncture. During the question and answer session, he suggested that the U.S. change from continuing to stand against China’s rise to signaling to Beijing its readiness to make some accommodations.

Ross also looked into China’s economic role in East Asia and the security implications for the U.S. China has become the largest export market for many East Asian economies, including South Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and Taiwan. These economies depend on China’s vast and open market for their exports, employment and economic growth. China already has free trade agreements with the ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), South Korea, Singapore, and New Zealand; and it is negotiating more free trade agreements with other countries. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) will integrate other countries’ economies into China’s economic orbit. Ross lamented the Trump administration’s unwise decisions to put “America First,” wage trade wars, and withdraw from the Trans-Pacific
Partnership (TPP), just when China is making big strides to enhance its regional economic influence.

More importantly, Ross worried that America’s economic conditions would make U.S. competition with China unaffordable. Both President Obama and President Trump have wanted to increase the size of the US Navy, but servicing the enormous federal debt and funding America’s many social entitlement programs already take nearly 70 percent of the federal annual budget. Moreover, the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives will not approve significant increases in the defense budget. American financial constraints put China in a better position to win the race, despite its own economic problems.

During 2010–2012, China shifted its emphasis from investing in its army to its navy, as it deemed Russia, India, and Vietnam to no longer be threats on its borders. Under President Xi Jinping’s leadership since 2012, China’s challenge to the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea has grown. China has built artificial islands, enabling its increased surveillance throughout the area. China already possesses more submarines than the United States. Overall, approximately 80 to 90 percent of China’s 320 ships are modern ships, whereas the U.S. has 280 modern ships.

Ross noted that the South China Sea is becoming quite crowded, as both the U.S. and China have increased the frequency and scale of their surveillance operations, including the U.S. freedom of navigation exercises. In such circumstances, incidents can happen and quickly escalate. Ross anticipated that managing such an incident in the current power transition will be more difficult than the U.S.-China management of the 1999 American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade and of the 2001 EP-3 aircraft midair collision with a Chinese fighter jet near Hainan Island, because, at that time, the United States pursued engagement with China, and China’s policy was one of “peaceful rise.”

Ross noted that America’s Asian allies have begun to adjust to China’s rising power. After South Korea allowed the Americans to install the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, it suffered heavy economic losses due to China’s sanctions. When President Moon replaced President Park in 2017, he reversed the previous administration’s decision. Similarly, when Rodrigo Duterte replaced Benigno Aquino III as President of the Philippines in 2016, he put aside the Philippine’s victory in the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague, over its claim of part of the South China Sea. He has brought the Philippine’s China policy more in line with Malaysia’s policy toward the territorial dispute. Even Vietnam, under China’s pressure, has agreed not to “internationalize” its sovereignty dispute with China concerning islands in the South China Sea.

In Ross’s view, these countries recognize the changing balance of power between the
U.S. and China. To them, more U.S. posturing and signaling of resolve cannot conceal America’s declining capabilities that resulted from long-term financial burdens. Unfortunately, the more America is in denial of its decline, the more it cares about its reputation, and the more posturing it does. The Obama administration developed the “Pivot to Asia,” policy, thereby shifting 60 percent of the American fleet into the Asia Pacific. But East Asian countries understand that this is a percentage increase of a shrinking fleet. The Trump administration developed the Indo-Pacific Strategy, whereby the U.S. would solidify its security cooperation with India and Australia, both far from China’s coastal bases.

Ross remarked on U.S. resistance to any adjustment to the rise of China. The U.S. refused to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), a China’s initiative to build much needed infrastructure around the world, and it has waged a trade war against China. These policies enhance China’s perception that the U.S. seeks to contain China and prevent its further rise. Meanwhile, many Chinese actions, such as its sanctions against U.S. allies, coercive challenges to the sovereignty claims of U.S. allies, and its island-building campaign, strengthen the impression that China wants to oust the U.S. from East Asia.

Ross made it clear that American policies have failed to enhance American allies’ confidence in the U.S., or to constrain China’s increasing capability and its desire for more security. Expecting this bilateral relationship to be “very difficult” in the coming years, Ross urged the Chinese side to be more patient and restrained with its increased capabilities. He also urged the U.S. side to exercise restraint, and avoid the mentality of considering every China’s gain as a U.S. loss. He underlined that both countries must resist nationalistic pressures and tendencies.