

Critical Issues Confronting China Series featuring M. Taylor Fravel –
China's Military Strategy in the New Era, March 24, 2021

– Good afternoon or good evening, wherever you are. Welcome, everyone. Ezra Vogel who organized, initiated the forum used to remind us that international relations are built on three pillars. One of course is diplomacy. The second way is military strength and strategy. And third is the economy. We're privileged to have two eminent experts to help us to understand China's military strategy in the new era. We organized this forum deciding we need an expert on China's military strategy to moderate the session so we can gain a more in-depth, a nuanced understanding of the military strategy. I'm going to introduce the guest moderator, Andrew Erickson, and then he will introduce a speaker, Professor Fravel. Our guest moderator is Prof. Andrew Erickson a long time colleague and friend of Fairbank Center. He's associate in research at the Center, published several seminal papers on military strategy American studies, and won many prizes. Professor Erickson is the Professor of Strategy at the U.S. Naval War College. I want to tell you that's the preeminent place studying military strategy in United States. Andrew led the Naval War College to establish the China Maritime Studies Institute. That was done in 2006. Andrew is a top expert on China and Japan and their sea power and American history and strategy. It's my pleasure to welcome you and thank you for moderating this session, Andrew. Now it's yours.

– Professor Hsiao, thank you so much for that very kind introduction. Of course, everything that I'm saying today just represents my own personal views, not the policies or estimates of the US Navy or any other organization of the US Government. That said, I can't think of a better time to be discussing China's military strategy in this challenging new era. And I can't think of a better scholar and specialist to be sharing his insights with us than Professor Taylor Fravel of MIT. As most will know, Taylor is the Arthur and Ruth Sloan Professor of Political Science and the Director of the Security Studies Program at MIT. He holds a PhD from Stanford as well as other degrees from Middlebury, the London School of Economics and Oxford where he was a Rhodes Scholar. In addition to numerous peer reviewed publications, he has published two landmark, or perhaps I should say sea-mark books. Really invaluable references in the field that also stand the test of time, amid a deluge of data that is constantly changing at the detailed level. "Strong Borders, Secure Nation" outlines China's long time border challenges both at land and at sea. And most recently he's published "Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949." And I think the seminal research behind that book will probably be a large part of his discussion and insights with us today. I want to give Taylor maximum time to share those insights, but let me just offer the perspective that he embodies the ideal in my mind of the scholar who combines academic rigor with real-world relevance. And I think I certainly felt this in reading this wonderful book, "Active Defense." You can see all the Post-it Notes I felt

compelled to use to mark the key data points, but yet in good scholarly fashion, he was able to distill everything down to a hyper logical two by two matrix. So to me, that's the ideal of what should be produced here and I think that'll make his insights particularly relevant today. I'll just add one more personal note. Several nights ago as I was struggling to understand just what sort of a feature exactly is Whitsun Reef in the Spratlys, Taylor was the first person I reached out to and not surprisingly, he rapidly furnished the most logical and comprehensive documentation to explain that. So again, this what we call a walking on two legs as a scholar and a public intellectual. I'll now turn it over to Nick Drake who will explain today's logistics including the point that this talk will ultimately be posted on the Fairbank Center's YouTube channel, a link of which will be provided on the website accompanying the announcement of this talk. Nick, over to you.

- Thank you. Yes, so this is being recorded and will be posted if you want to watch it later. And if you would like to ask questions at the end, which we hope you will, there's a Q&A box at the bottom of your screen. In order to ask questions just click into that and type your question into that and we will try to get through as many as possible. Because this is being recorded, if you do want to ask a question anonymously you may do so and there should be an option as you are asking the question to submit it anonymously, so please do so. Otherwise, please identify yourself and your institution so we know who's asking that question. Thanks, and I'll turn it over to Professor Fravel.

- Great. Good afternoon, everyone. I'm really delighted to be here with you. and really wanna extend my thanks and gratitude to the Fairbank Center for hosting this event and for inviting me. And I also simply wanted to take a moment to acknowledge the memory of Ezra Vogel who has a fixture in the China field, not just in the seminar, but certainly over the entire scope of his career and who played a very important role on various stages of my own development as a scholar. And so I guess I offer this talk today in his memory and in gratitude for all that he has taught us. So I'm gonna talk about China's Military Strategy in the New Era. This is intended as an overview of China's approach to military strategy in the past and in the present with some speculations about the future. I want to try to answer the following questions for you. How does China define military strategy? How many military strategies has China had since 1949? What is the current military strategy, and why was it adopted? How does China approach nuclear weapons and then what is the future of China's military strategy? So that's the general outline of where I'd like to go today, but before doing that I thought we should have a strategic a palate cleanser of sorts and just simply reflect on China's strategic environment because a military strategy, of course, is defined as how a state plans and prepares to use armed force to achieve political goals. But those calculations and the development of strategy in a

very basic sense are also shaped by a state's strategic environment. And here, what I'd like to do is contrast China's circumstances with those of the United States which are perhaps more well-known to all of us. So first we can simply start with the number of neighbors. China has 14 neighbors on land whereas the United States only has two. This means that China has to maintain 14 different sets of diplomatic relations in order to maximize its security whereas this is much simpler for the United States. This also means, I think historically that China has been quite sensitive to the formation of counter balancing coalitions that might appear on its periphery. Now, if we extend this into the maritime space, the US has many more neighbors with all of the small states in the Caribbean and China has more as well. But I think the basic point here still stands. Five of China's neighbors have large armies which can project military power on land and perhaps up to or even across other borders. So this means that China has to not only worry about these 14 different bilateral relationships with the fact that some of these states really militarily are quite consequential and quite powerful. Further, on this point, four of China's neighbors have nuclear weapons, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Russia. This is also perhaps unprecedented. I think China has more nuclear neighbors than any other state. And again, the US has no neighbors with nuclear weapons and also no neighbors with large standing armies. Moreover, China has had a legacy of armed conflict with its neighbors And presently it still has active territorial disputes with six of them whereas the United States has stable borders and no disputes. Another element of China's security environment is that four of the states, perhaps on its periphery might be viewed as potential failed states or at risk states, states that might be at risk of failing. And this means that China has to worry about a different kind of instability on its frontiers. And I think with the United States, of course the situation is different as Mexico and Canada are quite stable. Finally China's many states that are majority Muslim in terms of the religious orientation or the religious orientation of their populations, which from China's perspective creates concerns about extremist terrorist activities that not might have to contend with or that might spill over into its borders. And again, this is not a problem that the United States considers. Then we can look at two other elements. The first would be adjacent oceans. And of course the United States is buffered by Atlantic to the East and the Pacific to the West. And this really greatly enhances US security, not just because it only has two neighbors but because it is very hard for other countries to reach the United States. By contrast, China has really no adjacent oceans. Instead it has the first Island chain, something Andrew's written extensively about which seems to hem China in as it were. And then finally, in terms with treaty allies, China only has one which is North Korea in terms of a formal treaty ally, whereas the United States has 35. This means that the United States can aggregate capabilities with the large number of states and North Korea, China's only allies in fact, a strategic liability and not a strategic asset from this perspective. And so it's really quite

a challenging environment. Not all of these features have been permanent but they are enduring and they don't necessarily change quickly. It's really short outlines what China has to consider when formulating a military strategy. And let me just make this point with a few maps as well, because I think all the challenges I just mentioned are really important for two reasons. One is this enduring focus on its immediate periphery because it is so complicated, and you can see here China and Asia and all of the neighbors it has on land as well as its maritime areas and the fact that in some ways it doesn't have open access to the Western Pacific, but in some ways hemmed in by this island chain concept. But it also means, I think there's historically been fear of encirclement and perhaps even more presently, perhaps concerns that counterbalancing coalitions might form around China's periphery from China standpoint the expense of its security. But there's another way that's also very useful to drive home this point about trying to immediately focus on its periphery which is to turn the map in this direction. And so I tried to orient us in Beijing more or less looking due East from Beijing. And here you can see the Island chain, before what is known as the first Island chain which is Japan, the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, the Philippines and how that blocks China from having ready access to the Western Pacific but also is a series of barriers that China has to overcome if it wants to extend into the Western Pacific and is a series of landmasses on which other countries and most notably the United States can deploy military forces especially with treaty allies such as Japan and perhaps in the future, again, with the Philippines. So it's a very complicated environment and that complication has not just evaporated with China's moving rapid economic growth and military modernization. Many of these challenges remain. So let me turn now to how China views and conceptualizes military strategy. The PLA has this concept known as the Military Strategic Guidelines, or it was previously just known as the strategic guidelines. This is the junshi zhanlue fangzhen, and this is how China captures military strategy in its lexicon. And if one looks at the PLA glossary of military terms, this is the entry in which they define as representing China's military strategy. These guidelines are issued by the Central Military Commission of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party which is the main body that part body within the part that oversees China's armed forces including the PLA, the People's Liberation Army as well as the People's Armed Police and the Militia. So this is high-level strategic guidance. There have been nine guidelines or strategies that the CMC has issued since 1949. The most recent of which was in 2014. And I'll talk a little bit more about that particular strategy in a few minutes, but I wanted to pause here simply to talk a little bit about the content. So these guidelines are meant to answer four questions. These were questions that the Gen. Zhang Wannian posed in late December, 1992, when he was tasked with standing up a group to help formulate what would become China's 1993 military strategy. So the strategic guideline has to answer four questions and I wanna put them here in plain English and then in sort of in quotes, the actual terms

that come from the PLS own lexicon. So the first question is who will China fight? Who is the strategic opponent? This is sometimes referred to as the strategic adversary, but in other words which is the country or the actors at that pose the greatest threat to China around which it needs to prepare a ticket to use armed force. The second question is where will China fight? And this refers to the idea of a strategic direction or zhanlue fangxiang. And a China's military strategy at least to date has always distinguished between the primary strategic direction or the main focus or the center of gravity for armed conflict in the future versus secondary strategic directions where conflict might erupt but are not as important as the primary strategic direction. And in most cases, the primary strategic direction or where China will fight is of course associated with who China will fight or who the strategic component is. The third question are these guidelines answers what kind of wars will China fight in the future. And this is described as what is the basis of preparations for military struggle. And I know this term military struggle sounds a little bit odd but basically it's asking what are their requirements of combat readiness for future wars. What kinds of operations are future wars gonna be characterized by and thus how this China need to prepare to fight them. And then the final question is how China will fight these wars which includes strategic guiding principles or thought, identifying the main form of operations or so given the general characteristics of warfare how the PLA should fight, and then the basic guiding thought for operations which includes how to conduct those kinds of operations that are pretty high level. So again, just to sum up here the guidelines or China's military strategy identify who China will fight in the future. Where China believes it needs to fight in the future, what kinds of wars China will fight in the future and then finally how China I will do so. So as I mentioned there have been nine military strategies since 1949. At the very end of the talk, I'm gonna dangle that there may have been a change in 2019 but I and myself, I'm not yet fully persuaded that this has happened to department because we don't have a lot of data with which to make this analysis. But I want to review the earlier strategies with you. They're listed here with the names that the PLA attached to them and I'm not gonna go into great detail, but happy to talk about specific strategies during the Q&A period. But the main point I wanna make here is to conceptualize the first five strategies with the last four. And so what distinguishes the first five from the last four of the strategies from 1956 to 1980 versus those from 1988 to the present is that these first five were focused on defending China in the context of a total war in which the adversary would seek to conquer other country. Now, this may seem quite because in a very important sense it's not clear if China is conquerable, but nevertheless this was the pacing threat for China during the Cold War period. And these first three strategies were actually premised on how to defeat a US invasion and effort to seize either Beijing or Shanghai. And the last two from in 1977 and 1980 were focused on how to defeat a Soviet armored invasion that would come through Mongolia and the steps there and then

try to seize Beijing as well. So these are total wars in which China would need on the one hand to prepare perhaps for a protracted fight but on the other hand would want to take decisive action early on. Now, these last four strategies are all around this idea of a local war. And a local war is distinguished from a total war and not being a war of invasion or an existential conflict in that sense, but rather a conflict over limited aims in a particular area of the country. And in particular, these local wars have come to focus on areas where sovereignty is contested between China and its neighbors, primarily the border with India, the various disputes in the South China Sea and this also of course includes Taiwan. Over time, in the last two to three decades roughly China has gone through four variants of these local a war strategies of the most recent of which is called Informatized Local Wars are preparing to fight and win informatized local wars. Now, in the book that Andrew kindly mentioned, I focus on explaining what I view to be the major changes in China's military strategy since 1949 or the moments when the PLA developed a new vision of warfare to wage war in a new way which required a deep organizational change or to develop new capabilities. And these changes were reflected in new operational doctrine in new fore-structure and in new training and in particular training new forces according to the operational doctrine to achieve the vision as laid out in the strategic guidelines. Now, the 1956 strategy was a major change because of marked the shift from mobile warfare which would characterize PLA operations during the civil war. And really even in the first half of the Korean war to what was then described as positional defense or fighting on a fixed front. And here this positional defense was seen as essential to defeating a US invasion or at least preventing deep penetration by US forces into the Chinese hot land. And the solution here was to focus on something called combined arms operations in which you would integrate with your ground forces infantry, armor and artillery in order to achieve much greater effects than just relying on infantry or armor or artillery independently. The next major change occurred in 1980. And this actually has a label of Active Defense which we'll talk about in just one minute but this was the strategy to defeat a Soviet invasion that Chinese strategists assessed would come through Mongolia, which had become a treaty ally of the Soviet Union in 1966 in an effort to seize the capital. And here the problem was not how to defeat an amphibious assault which was the problem in the 1956 strategy really how to defeat an armored assault and a rapid armored assault. And then the third strategy is this major change was from 1993, and this refers to fighting local wars under a high-technology conditions. And this strategy marked when the PLA shifted from really thinking about the military services such as the ground forces, Navy and Air Force as separate to trying to conduct or execute joint operations which will be military operations where you tried to seamlessly integrate elements from the different services in order to achieve the effects that you want to achieve on the battlefield. I'm very happy to talk more about the historical changes during the Q&A period and why I think they had when they did

but the only other point I wanna make here now for the purposes of this talk is to say that all of these strategies from China's stand point reflect this principle of active defense or jiji fangyu. And this was coined by Mao Zedong in 1936 as offensive defense or defense through decisive engagements. It reflects this idea that China can maximize the initiative when it doesn't strike first but strike second. So it's sort of a strategy of counterattacking, if you will. And it also refers to this idea the strategic level that China's military strategy is defensive focused around either defending the homeland or defending contestants sovereignty is not offensive but that once China is attack in any of these contexts that China will engage in offensive actions at the operational and tactical level in order to achieve victory. Here's just a quick map to show you what the toll of war problem was for the 1980 strategy. Here you can see that in the mid 1970s PLA strategists identified three different routes by which the Soviet Union could invade China. And the one that worried Chinese planners the most was the fact that Beijing was roughly 500 kilometers from the border with Mongolia. And much of the area was open grassy plains on which you could move armor very quickly and rapidly. And the main strategy here was to try to tie up Soviet armor in the mountains around Zhangjiakou and see if they could slow down the invasion or even prevent Soviet forces from reaching Beijing in order to buy time, to carry out a nationwide mobilization to then repel Soviet forces. And this map here simply shows the 1993 strategy but really focused on local conflicts and quite quickly around the time it was put in place focused on a potential conflict over Taiwan in the context of unification or a Taiwanese bid to pursue a formal independence. And this has become the main scenario animating Chinese military strategy, really since the early 1990s or for the entire post-Cold War period. Let me turn now to the present or the current strategy. I wanna talk about the goals that some of the details I wanna contrast it with the 1993 strategy then talk about some of the new elements. This is the strategy that was put in place in the summer of 2014. The name given to it by the Chinese is Winning Informatized Local Wars and I'll unpack what all that means in a minute. But first I wanna talk about the goals that were associated with this strategy. These goals come from the 2015 Defense White Paper which is a document that the Chinese armed forces typically release every two years although not entirely sometimes there are larger gaps when they are released. The 2015 one in particular is entirely devoted to China's military strategy. And in fact, contains many details about the 2014 strategy even though these strategies in principle or historically have been very difficult to study. So some of the main goals are as following: To safeguard the sovereignty and security of China's territorial, land, air, and sea. And this clearly identifies a contested sovereignty and territorial disputes is really one of the main focuses of the strategy. And China's outstanding disputes today, as I've mentioned are the border with India. There's actually a smaller dispute with Bhutan. Although the dispute with India is quite large about 125,000 square kilometers. And then disputes over the

Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea and the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. And all of those maritime disputes, by the way also include a conflicting claims to maritime jurisdiction or to maritime rights. The second goal is entirely about Taiwan to resolutely safeguard the unification of the motherland. And this, I want to submit is the most important goal or objective in China's military strategy. This is the pacing threat if you will, given the way in which unification is linked to the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. Then you have other goals that also reflect new ways perhaps in which military force might be used in the future to safeguard China security and interest in new domains to include the space and cyber domains and even what Chinese sources refer to the electromagnetic domain. To safeguard the security of China's overseas interests. Of course, one key element of Chinese foreign policy over the last two decades has been the way in which Chinese firms and Chinese citizens have moved overseas in search of economic opportunities such that China is now much more integrated into other regions of the world, but also then vulnerable to what happens in those regions. And this includes a variety of potential subsidiary tasks such as evacuating Chinese citizens from conflict zones or even securing sea lines of communication carrying important goods from different parts of the world to China. And we've seen Chinese efforts in this regard in the unprecedented non-combatant evacuation operation in Libya going back to 2011 and even earlier the start of the anti-piracy patrols on the Gulf of Aden. Final goal of the current strategies to maintain strategic deterrence and carry out a nuclear counterattack. From the Chinese standpoint, strategic deterrence has a somewhat different connotation than it does in the United States. And so when Chinese military sources talk about strategic deterrence, they refer to a combined a deterrent effective conventional and nuclear capabilities. So a strategic and a broader sense is simply focusing on what we might describe as strategic weapons or in particular nuclear weapons. And then of course it talks about carrying out a nuclear counterattack which is the key to China's deterrence ie having a secure second strike that deters another country from considering attacking China with nuclear weapons first. And at the end of the talk I'll touch briefly on China's approach to nuclear weapons. So let me go through now in somewhat way the way in which the current 2014 strategy meets all these different elements or identifies all the different elements that I mentioned at the start of the talk. So here at the main strategic component is Taiwan but also the United States to the degree it would aid Taiwan in its defense or come to Taiwan aid if it were attacked, and this means that the main strategic direction is the Southeast. Again, this is oriented from Beijing's perspective. So looking Southeast, of course, is where Taiwan is situated off the coast of Zhejiang and Fujian provinces. This is because of the United States. It means that it expanded to include certainly parts of the Western Pacific as well because United States would come to Taiwan on the water and in the air through the Western Pacific. The basis of preparations for military struggle are

the kinds of conflicts that China thinks is gonna fight in the future are what are described as informatized wars. And informatize here is a really clunky translation of a Chinese term, xinxihua which means through the application of information technology to war fighting and to combat power generation. And so the simplest way to think about it is the role of information technology and what is sometimes described as kill chain, by which you start out with a surveillance and reconnaissance to identify targets how you process that information in various ways and then you command forces to conduct operations against those targets. And of course, information technology and information is key to this entire endeavor because it allows you to be more precise perhaps be more nimble, to be more rapid. And this really is the way in which China believes wars will be fought in the future. And China has come to this belief by very closely watching other words in the international system. And in particular the way the United States has fought going all the way back to the Gulf War when this was described as high technology conflicts up until the present. And in the US context this is often described as net-centric warfare and the Chinese understanding is pretty similar to the US one, because they've studied it very closely. The main form of operations or how China is gonna fight is what's described as integrated joint operation. And this is emphasizing how joint operations in fact need to be such that you could take simply a unit from your Naval forces and unit from your forces and perhaps a unit from your ground forces combine them all together into one strike package to be able to conduct the greatest effect that you can on the battlefield versus kind of having your Army, Navy and Air Force operate more or less independently perhaps in a coordinated fashion, but certainly not like in a joint or in an integrated fashion. I'll try to highlight some of these points. The strategic guideline or the current military strategies, basic guiding thought for operations is information dominance, precision strikes on strategic points and joint operations to gain victory. So of course this highlights the way in which information is seen as pervasive and the key to victory in the future in terms of how one organizes one's armed forces and deploys them the role of precision strikes and of course, joint operations. But also importantly the post Cold War strategies also have something known as strategic guiding thoughts. This never characterize the total war strategies. And this is important because it really reflects the fact that China would like to prevent war from occurring if it can and wants to prevail in a crisis, should they erupt, and of course, military forces would still play a very important role in these conditions. And so the strategic guiding thought here is to shape favorable situations, comprehensively manage crises and then resolutely deter and win wars. Now, what I thought I'd do briefly is just kind of contrast the current strategy with the 1993 strategy which in my book I argue is the last major change of military strategy. And I wanna highlight the areas of continuity and then where there some really significant differences. And there's one really significant one that has to do with the maritime domain. So what this slide tries to do is on these same criteria does compare and contrast

and so you can see the strategic opponent is still Taiwan. And I think, from 1993 to 2014 but the US has played a greater role. This has led to sort of an adjustment of the strategic direction but nevertheless, overall these are still both examples of local war strategies. And so that's very much an area of continuity. The 1993 strategy identified high technology conditions as being central. And then this was reconceptualized by the PLA to be informatized conditions. So this way, the 2014 strategy is very much a natural outgrowth in many respects from the previous one. You can see both focused on joint operations although they're characterized a little bit differently because China's understanding of joint operations evolved in the two decades from 1993 to 2014. And one could see kind of this evolution in the basic guiding thought for military operations. The 1993 guiding thought was I think a bit more simplistic focusing really just on the integrated operations element and precision, not quite precision strikes but being very selective in one strikes versus just focusing on mass whereas the 2014 strategy really highlights dominance. But then in both strategies you see in the end the strategic guide thought is still very much focused on how to manage crises, to deter war, if it can and then to win war or to prevail a war if deterrence fails and war occurs on nevertheless. So in some senses there's pretty significant continuity. I would say the biggest continuity is probably the basis of preparations for military struggle and how that moves from high technology conditions in informatized conditions and also the broadening of the opponent and the strategic direction to focus on the United States as it relates to Taiwan. But there's other one really huge difference I wanna draw our attention to you which is the maritime domain. And so the 2014 strategy was the first strategy of all nine to identify a particular domain of conflict as being strategically relevant and strategically important. So historically all of the strategies never identify the domain because they were implicitly all their previous strategies never identified a domain because they were implicitly basically ground force or army dominant or land-based domains that were identified as most important. After all it's the People's Liberation Army cannot come to the People's Liberation Joint force as it were and so there's always been a very heavy influence in the ground forces in all aspects of the PLA. So the 2014 strategy called for highlighting maritime military struggle and preparations for a maritime military struggle, which is a direct outgrowth of the way in which not only I think Chinese views of the Taiwan conflict evolved but also the way in which maritime issues more generally have become much more prominent. And some of you may recall that in the, was it the 2007 in the 17th Party Congress, I believe Hu Jintao identified China's ambitions to be a maritime power which has then been further emphasized in the 18th and 19th. Party Congress is now to be China's ambition to be a maritime great power. So this is all reflected in the military strap, I believe. And the other key element in the 2014 strategy was that there is a change in what we would describe as a service strategy. So in addition to these national military strategies that I have been

talking about these strategic guidelines, each of the services in China has their own strategic guiding principle or strategic concept which we can call the service strategy. And in the 2014 strategic guidelines and indicated that there was a change in the PLA Navy's strategy from focusing just on near seas defense or being able to prevail in conflicts as they would occur in the bodies of water immediately adjacent to China, to combining near seas defense with far seas protection. Far seas protection has more of a reactive element and includes a lot of the protection of overseas interests that I've talked about before. But certainly also conceptually at least could develop to have a greater war fighting connotation in the future. And then lastly here I just wanted to flag what is typically viewed as the near seas. A subject near and dear to Andrew's own research. So why was the strategy adopted in 2014? I think there are two main reasons. The first is organizational. So some of you may know that at the end of 2015 and really the start of 2016 the PLA started to implement unprecedented reforms. So unprecedented in my estimation or my judgment like the most significant reforms of the PLA since 1956 or 1958, when the PLA set up this general staff department model that they have borrowed to some degree from the Soviet Union. And so in the 2016 reforms, the general staff model was abolished and all of the subordinate elements of the four general departments were placed directly under the Central Military Commission. You had a clear division between lines of reporting for commanding forces in combat versus upward developing forces for future use. You had the creation of theater command or the shift from military regions to theater commands and theater commands would be part of that command chain and many other changes as well that were fundamentally premised on improving the PLAs ability to conduct joint operations. And the basic reason I think why the strategy was put in place when it was, since it wasn't a major change when compared to some of the ones that proceeded it was to provide the high level strategic guidance or strategic rationale for pursuing a change in strategy. And I say this because the reforms that began in 2016 were foreshadowed at the third plenum of the 18th Party Congress. That like the proposal that came out of that or the communicate that came out of that plan and clearly segment that major reforms would occur and then they unfolded over a period of time. And around this time Xi Jinping was quoted saying "We have extensively explored the command system for joint operations but the problem has not been fundamentally solved." And it could only be funnel fundamentally solved in my view by forgive the pun literally breaking all the China and the general staff system, reorganizing all of the elements such that the ground forces were no longer dominate and on par with all the other services so that it would be easier for the PLA to be able to conduct joint operations in future. So that was a huge driver in the 2014 change, but then also the fact that there were new threats on the horizon and in particular are those associated with the maritime sphere. So the White Paper also draws our attention to this claim that safe guarding maritime rights and interests has been a long standing task and now is one that is of strategic

importance such that it will be included in the strategic guidelines. So there's this open question as to whether or not there has been a change in China's military strategy in 2019. It's one to which I did not have an answer and more work here as required but I wanna at least share with you why I think a change may have occurred which is starting in 2019, a PLA sources most notably the PLA Daily which is the newspaper of the PLA began to use a new term to describe China's military strategy. So in orange, you see what was used after 2014 and this is the military strategic guidelines in the new situation. After Xi Jinping came to power, many things were described as being part of the new situation, but in 2019 that term almost completely disappeared as an orange and is replaced by what is it, blue, namely China's Military Strategic Guidelines for the New Era. And so whenever there is a change in terminology lights go off in my head that this is reflecting a deeper change. So I think there are two possibilities here. I think the first is that there really wasn't a change but the 2014 strategy was relabeled or rebranded to be more consistent with the elevation of Xi Jinping thought and the way in which everything after the 19th Party Congress was really identified as being part of the new era. Therefore it really wouldn't work to continue to describe the military strategy as being under the new situation because that term was no longer being used and the new era was being used not just in the military domain but in many other policy domains. So there is reasons why this might be the case I think would include that the 2019 defense White Paper the most recent one really didn't talk about any way what strategy might have changed apart from having a new way of talking about the strategic guidelines. However, one great challenge in studying military strategy at China is it's much easier to get data on earlier strategies than is to get data on the most recent strategy. So it could certainly be the case that a change has occurred. We don't certainly know what the parameters or the content of that change has been. So this would be, in my view a partial change to the existing strategy because when still sees references, of course to informatize local wars and to integrated joint operations and even to the same strategic guiding thought but it is a partial change. It might have elevated the importance of the United States as US-China relations have deteriorated in the last four to six years, such that the PLA analysis the US to be an even greater threat than it was before and how this might play out will remain to be seen over time. So I don't have an answer here. I welcome thoughts and comments from others but I wanted to throw it out there. Last two slides. So at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 the work report delivered by Xi Jinping outline China's ambition to have "a world-class military and world-class courses" by 2049 or the middle of a 21st century. And this raised a question in many minds whether or not this was reflected a change in strategy. My judgment is that it did not. I ended up digging deep into how this concept had been used and came to the conclusion. It was never really defined by Xi Jinping or by others. And to the degree it was defined, it was described as a forced development concept or forced development goal representing China's aspirations to have one

of the great militaries in the world by 2049 or world-class. So world-class in Chinese, is yiliu, sort of top tier, if you will. And other world-class military today are described as being the United States, Russia, Britain, and France and sometimes even India. And so this is not necessarily an exclusive club from China stamp, but does reflect ambition to be as good as anybody else. That's kind of what world-class means. But what it does not mean, or what it does not reflect is any kind of global military strategy or any change away from local wars to some global power projection. And my view, for good reasons the PLA is very much still focused from a war fighting military operations perspective on East Asia and even though it has greater interests overseas and sometimes military forces can be used up for presence operations or civilian evacuation operations it doesn't yet have a global military deployment aspirations. We can talk more about that in the question and the answer. Finally, I've said nothing so far about China's nuclear strategy part because it's not nearly as dynamic as China's conventional strategy. China sense testing its first atomic bomb in 1964 has pursued a nuclear strategy key to developing what's known as an assured retaliatory capability or the ability of nuclear forces to survive a first strike and be in a position to retaliate. So if you can survive a first strike and be in a position to retaliate, then it's much easier to deter other countries from attacking you first. And so this is also sometimes described as the second strike posture. China does not view nuclear weapons as useful for war fighting, even in a conventional conflict or in this idea of a nuclear war fighting which did characterize some Soviet and US thinking during the Cold War and very much sees a nuclear weapons as only having one function or purpose which is deter a nuclear attacks or to deter on a nuclear coercion. China currently has about 225 warheads. The defense intelligent agency estimates this will double over the next decade. It's pursuing a pretty significant modernization and expansion of its force, but I would argue that expansion of modernization is focused on strengthening its ability to survive a first strike and to be able to retaliate. So at that I'll conclude, and I thank you all much for coming today and I look forward to the conversation.

- Taylor, thank you very much for a wonderful talk and it clearly draws on your important combination of closely examining demonstrably authoritative Chinese sources and continuing to have discussions with actual PLA officers and strategists. That really offers a powerful combination of insights and I think a durable foundation to build this research on. I'm clearly not the only one who thinks so because we already have nine questions in the queue. I'm mindful that we have a hard stop at 01:45. I will bundle the questions for Taylor as best I can. I will get through as many of these questions as we can. If we run into real time challenges, everybody please accept my apologies in advance and I would always commend Taylor's website taylorfravel.com where his research and insights can be found as well as his Twitter feed where he applies them to current events. So looking through the initial set of questions here, Neil Glazer from Brown University is

interested and asking about China's Island building in the South China Sea, how it differs in intent and purpose from a US military basis throughout the world. Likewise on this broader issue of US and China military comparison, Mark Selden states, you contrast US an allied strengths versus an isolated surrounded China, but he had like a discussion of the significance of US military bases in the Western Pacific and the changing technologies that lie behind the strategy. So finally, perhaps we could bundle with that. A third question, the extent to which asymmetric warfare capabilities have played into China's military strategy and in what areas does it currently hold asymmetric capabilities vis-a-vis the United States. So some initial questions to start with, Taylor if you could offer us your thoughts.

- Great, thanks. Let's see, starting with Island building and how to compare US basis. So, I'm guessing most people know but in case anyone doesn't write in 2014, '15 timeframe China reclaimed extensive land at the seven features that occupies Spratlys. Three of these features, it built a very large what I would describe as for a forward operating bases for Chinese air enabled forces. So each of them has a 10,000 foot runway hardened hangars for I don't know, 24 fighter jets, six bombers high Bay shelters for missile systems. And then given the nature of the reef semi enclosed harbors where Naval ships can anchor. And so far China has not deployed a significant forces onto these islands. So I don't believe, and Andrew correct if I'm wrong there's ever been a PLA Air Force or Navy jet or bomber but there have been some reconnaissance and transport planes. And there have been some missile systems that were revealed a few years ago but they've not been fully garrison. There perhaps some reasons for that given the harsh climate. But nevertheless, they have great potential because you could put 60, 72 aircraft fighter strike aircraft there associated bombers, a variety of missile systems. And so I think China is certainly put in place the infrastructure by which you could use military means to exert much greater influence over the South China Sea. I think today China has focused on are using its coast guard and actually most notably this week, it's maritime Militia a topic that Andrew has studied extensively by dispatching up to 200 or roughly 200 ships to an unoccupied reef in the Spratlys called Whitsun Reef and I believe it has a different name for the Philippines. But nevertheless, China has relied mostly on almost surging coast guard in times maritime militia forces into the South China Sea. But just in terms of... And apart from the China's Base in Djibouti and the Gulf of Aden, these three Spratly features are the only military installations not in continental China or Hainan Island. And so in that sense they're definitely Ford military bases. Now, in terms of overall size, I don't think that they necessarily compare with the size of US bases in Japan in terms of how many forces one could put on them. But nevertheless, they are significant given where they're located and there no US bases, although there are certainly access points there are no us bases anywhere adjacent to the South China Sea though the US sometimes operates out of Singapore and Malaysia. So I think they were

developed into very specific context the South China dispute was escalating the mid 2010s. China was I think, looking to make a decisive move in order to consolidate its position. It can reclaimed a land there for those reasons. Mark Selden asked about the significance of US bases in the Western Pacific and some of the technologies behind the strategy. I mean, I think from China standpoint of course, the bases are significant, especially because at least in this island chain framework you have a lot of US military for assets for deployed in different parts of Japan from Okinawa up to some of the other islands. The US and the Philippines have a visiting forces agreement. There hasn't been a lot of US military activity in the Philippines under President Duterte's leadership of the country. But I think the infrastructure is in place and there were some agreements from the Obama era that would allow the US to return especially to a variety of air bases if the Philippines were willing to welcome them. So this clearly is something that I think does shape China's sense of being kind of bobbled in East Asia that it has to deal with the United States. So I think it would certainly prefer not to. The question is, what price China is willing to try to move the US out of the region. But I think so far it's taking a very gradual approach and we'll probably focus more on trying to drive wedges between the United States and its allies then engaging in a major military confrontation. But nevertheless, in a Taiwan context these bases are what would help facilitate on US involvement so China views them negatively for that reason. On the technologies behind this strategy. I mean, at the core it's just the computing power is really what enables this but obviously it's the whole network and constellation of systems, satellite, reconnaissance and other reconnaissance tools that allow you to really gather tremendous amounts of information and have much greater of battlefield awareness than in the past and then being able to process that information through an information technology to share that information and then to synthesize that information at the command level, and then be able to disperse the relevant information to military units in the case of a conflict or a war. So it's really a whole suite of everything we would associate with internet 2.0 and now of course, China talking a lot about this idea of intelligitization or zhineng hua, which I think focuses the next level of new emerging technologies around machine learning and artificial intelligence and exploring how they can be used on the battlefield way to help aid all of these processes in terms of gathering and synthesizing information. But also, and this is not just an issue with China I think many of the military are looking at AI today but also trying to automate things which I think very, very dangerous from a military perspective. But nevertheless, that's the appeal I think of some of those technology. In terms of asymmetric capabilities. It's a great question. I mean, China in many ways has, I don't necessarily fully appreciate it, but in my book, "China's Military Strategies" it has developed either when it was clearly the inferior power or believed to be itself to be inferior in military capabilities. So in the total war era, it was the inferior power versus the Soviet Union or the United States from a

military perspective. And it was always developing asymmetric strategies in that sense. And even going back to the civil work period until the very end, it felt as if it was an inferior actor. And this is in many ways the origins of Mao's idea of active defense which was that when you are the inferior actor you have to work really hard to create local superiority to achieve victories on the battlefield. Then you have to really be able to turn the entire correlation of forces later on in the conflict. And so China always had this focus. I think today, some of the most notable asymmetric capabilities are the one that's most memorable. It would be this anti-ship ballistic missile system something Andrew also written a lot about. So please feel free to chime in Andrew, but this idea really from the late 1990s, that somehow you could launch a missile into the atmosphere, guide a war head to hit moving target at sea. So in other words, you're not gonna contest the US carrier dominance with your own fleet of 12 carriers but you're gonna try to negate that capability by using guide. So it's quite an impressive engineering feat. I think different views as to how capable it is. And there are, of course, some questions about the so-called kill chain in terms of every step needed in order to make sure it's effective and in particular kind of tracking targets at sea. But I think it's a problem that China is working very hard on solving. So that's probably the best example. Ballistic missiles which China has a huge arsenal of conventional ballistic missiles including short and medium range and even some intermediate range. Conventional ballistic missiles is another key element of what is often described as kind of an asymmetric capabilities. Thanks.

- Thank you, Taylor. A good range of topics. And now Professor Bill Overholt has the next question and I'll ask him to ask it directly. Thank you.

- Taylor, thanks for a marvelously illuminating talk. The big issue of the day seems to be Taiwan. A lot of Chinese leaders talk about now focusing on Taiwan. They've pretty much eliminated their non-military options. From what you've seen, do you think they're actively preparing a military option which they might use or reunification, and are we passing a tipping point where China has the capability to either takeover against Taiwanese and US resistance or to deter US to defend Taiwan?

- Great question. So maybe that's easier to take the second one first. So if the scenario is like the all out and management would require an amphibious assault, which of course is a very challenging kind of military campaign to execute 'cause you're so vulnerable and crossing the ocean and then it's pretty difficult to secure your landing. So I think for that scenario, no the tipping point has not yet been reached such that I think Chinese military leadership would feel confident that they would be successful. There are of course scenarios short of that to include a blockade scenario to include seizing Jinmen or Matsu Islands off the Chinese mainland coast, perhaps seizing Pratas or

Dongsha Island maybe even seizing the Penghu. Those are all probably militarily feasible today. So it is still a political calculation whether or not China wants to push forward on Taiwan in that respect. So this, I guess is a nice segue back to your other question, which is that I don't think that they have distinguished the nine military options. And the military option in Taiwan, these historic at least in the post-Cold War period. China has talked a lot about using the threat of military force in a deterrent way. And then trying to pursue political means of unification or at least starting talks however you wanna characterize that. And so I still think it is playing that deterrent function versus the brute force function which is to just try to solve the problem militarily because of the costs associated with, I think the kind of operation that would allow China to achieve unification. One problem with the blockade for example is it could go on for a very long time and PLA writings talk a lot about the problems of protracted conflicts also from their perspective. And blockade would allow for other countries to mobilize to come to support Taiwan. And then it would also in some ways perhaps plays China in an uncomfortable position, deciding if it wanted to escalate more against other countries and not just Taiwan. And so I think one thinks about the broader political calculations they are still very complicated and I think there's lots to consider. I have the view that China wants to bring about unification politically and not militarily, and that it wants a negotiated outcome and not simply at the surrender table. And wants to start negotiating without having to fight but it views the threat of fighting as making negotiations more appealing or more credible. And so that threat is growing and it's gonna continue to grow. And I think away point it might be seeing China more explicitly kind of branders that threat as it tries to bring about talks versus kind of jumping over that step and just trying to bring about a military solution

- Thank you.

- Taylor, this is great. The questions keep accumulating. Clearly there's tremendous interest in these timely topics. I'm mindful that we have fewer than 10 minutes left. So I'm attempting to bundle the remaining questions conceptually, to give you a chance to address them however best you see fit. I have four basic categories. The first category is this attendee is particularly hoping that you could speak more about Japan specifically and US allies more broadly. How is Japan discussed in these key doctrinal documents particularly in the post 1993 era and is there any discussion of possible Japanese involvement vis-a-vis a Taiwan contingency. Second and building on the concept of allies, how is China responding to the Quad and the US Indo-Pacific strategy? Third, there's interest in hearing any further insights you can offer on China's approaches toward India in Bhutan particularly I think the border disputes and I'll note that you've done some of the few specific studies on the Bhutan dispute, which is not widely known about. And finally, as a catchall question, you're clearly very

careful in looking specifically at what the documents say and what China's doing but what might be any potential prospects for further outward emphasis activity by China in the maritime dimension or even as one of the attendees asks in terms of further territorial expansion and consolidation on China's part. I know that's a lot of questions in a short time but we'll appreciate whatever you can leave us with in the five minutes remaining. Thank you.

- Thank you, Andrew. Maybe I'll go in reverse order. 'Cause it touches on some territorial disputes which is a subject I've watched that in the past. I think if one looks at China's territorial planes from 1949 to the present, the claims themselves have been pretty stable in terms of the territory that China has disputed with its neighbors and what it is, claim sovereignty over. In some cases like Bhutan that's bringing that question. It's has been a little unclear because that particular conflict is incredibly hard to study because neither China nor Bhutan really talked about where all the disputes lie. So there's been a sense perhaps that China's claim to have grown a little bit with respect to Bhutan so I'll just leave that ambiguity there but take India as another example. The claims and the three sectors have been quite stable. So I don't view China as claiming new territory beyond what it has claimed in the past. So I don't view it as expanding the scope of what it claimed in that sense, but clearly China is much more capable than it's ever been in the past. And so is able to assert itself in these disputes much more vigorously than in the past. And so that's what I think we will see in the coming decade is a continuation perhaps in the last decade, especially in the maritime domain we're trying to just asserted itself much more vigorously than ever before, in some ways relying on its armed forces and trying really ensure that those conflicts are resolved in China's favor. But I don't see greater Chinese claims. I think I did this calculation in my book. I can't quite remember the exact calculation but China's only claimed small fraction of the territory that was once part of the chain at its height. And you can think of the territory the chain at the site is kind of the algorithmic of a potentially or a dentist claims and China simply hasn't pursued them in that way. So I think it's more consolidation of the existing claims versus expanding into new areas, but in the maritime domain, that's gonna be pretty big. In terms of Japan and US allies. In at least these PLA sources oftentimes countries are never mentioned explicitly and so Taiwan is often described as a large Island. So I have this book on "Amphibious Assault of Large Island." How to attack Taiwan but I don't think Taiwan is ever mentioned. And so sometimes it can be a little hard to parse but I would say, Japan is not okay in my estimation, not featured strongly with the exception of US bases in Japan, which do feature in different discussions of head of operations talk China might conduct in a Taiwan conflict because there's a whole chapter in some of these books on fire when you have joined firepower strikes and attacking air bases, which includes not just presumably air bases in Taiwan, but also a US air bases in Japan and potentially even US air

bases in Korea. And so there are a lot of indirect references but Japan is never really been featured, has never really been a driver of China's military strategy. The Senkaku is in some ways are not a large enough military problem to warn a lot of separate attention. And so I think it doesn't... So the point that, Japan is not mentioned explicitly doesn't really mean there's no thinking about this in caecus at all, but I think it's not the kind of military problem that China is thinking about. But this could change of course as the situation in the stature evolves. And so I'm really just thinking of the sources I used in the book and many of them the last of them were published around 2011, 2012 timeframe. So it is possible that there's been more discussion in newer sources that simply we now no longer have access to. China's response to the Quad and to the Indo-Pacific. I mean, I think China whether or not we'll be successful but I think China is trying perhaps to play some divide and conquer with the Quad although China's put Australia on the doghouse and is not trying to divide or drive a wedge for US and Australia. You do see a pretty concerted engagement of Japan in the last two to three years. Before the pandemic occurred Xi Jinping was due to travel to Tokyo for a summit the first time since the nationalization of the islands. And even with India, I think China will never say this publicly but China's willingness to pursue the recent disengagement in the areas where there've been standoffs since last summer and the language around all of that suggests that China is trying to achieve a reset with India. I don't think there'll be successful, but I wouldn't attribute that to or as part of a Chinese response to the Quad and this idea that China wants to improve relations with different components such that the Quad doesn't from the Chinese standpoint, reach its full potential. Thank you.

- Taylor, on behalf of the entire audience of more than 125 people, I'd like to thank you for a wonderful talk. It's been my honor to support this event. In about a week we can look forward to the recording on the Fairbank Center website and the YouTube channel. In the meantime, I asked the forbearance of all whose questions we didn't have time to address in every particular and encourage everyone to consult taylorfravel.com and to follow Taylor on Twitter. It's very easy. His handle is at Fravel @Fravel F-R-A-V-E-L. Thank you very much.

- Thank you.