

Summary of Robert Ross' Presentation "The Future of China-US Relations" on Tuesday, June 6th 2017 by Yany Siek

The U.S.-China relationship is one of the most significant bilateral relationships and has deep implications for international security, prosperity, and peace. Since the establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1979, Sino-U.S. relations have worsened to their lowest point. From tensions over disputed islands in the South China Sea to allegations of unfair trade practices, the list of issues is extensive. Speaking to an attentive audience, [Professor Robert Ross](#) provided an insightful assessment of the current state of U.S.-China relations, an analysis of U.S. and Chinese foreign policy, and finally, a consideration of the future under U.S. President Donald Trump.

According to Professor Ross, the dismal state of U.S.-China relations is not a surprise. Modern China is stronger, richer, and more secure than at any point since the Opium War. After implementing market reforms in 1978, China experienced an average [GDP growth rate](#) of almost 10% percent a year, contributing to its rapid ascent and a shift in the balance of power relative to the United States. This has produced a power transition scenario characterized by a revisionist China that is more willing to challenge American leadership. China's goal is to replace the current strategic order in East Asia with one that is more reflective of China's security interests.

As part of its efforts to increase its security, China has invested more resources into improving its naval capability. The dearth of land threats from neighbours, including from Russia, has allowed China to redirect money from the army to the navy. Professor Ross noted that in four years, the Chinese navy will be larger than the U.S. navy and the technological gap will have decreased. Although some may argue that the Chinese navy's lack of experience is problematic, the U.S. has not fought a naval war since World War II.

The American policy response to China's rise, the so-called "pivot," and greater assertiveness has failed. Under the Obama administration, there was more symbolism and boisterous diplomacy than tangible action. The highly-publicized U.S. pivot to Asia was intended to contain China's rise, but lacked effectiveness. Furthermore, as China's navy continues to develop, the U.S. naval fleet continues to decline. For example, the U.S. Congressional Budget Office estimates that if military spending remains constant, the American navy will decline from 273 to 230 ships. According to Professor Ross, there are three ways that the U.S. could address its declining navy, none of which are attractive. American policymakers could cut welfare programs and social spending, reform a highly dysfunctional defence budget by redirecting spending away from the army, or print money. Although these options are available, none are politically or economically feasible.

Professor Ross' presentation provides a unique perspective on China's ascent and its implications for bilateral relations with the United States. Firstly, although China's ascent will create difficulties, it is not certain that both sides will go to war. Other factors such as leadership, nationalism and domestic politics contribute to the great power war. Secondly, the presentation underscored the current lack of dialogue in the U.S. regarding the desire to sustain a dominant navy while maintaining current levels of domestic, social spending. It is not possible to have *guns* without sacrificing *butter*. Given the trends in Sino-U.S. naval capabilities and the level of spending required to sustain a naval arms race, ignoring this issue is worrisome. As Professor Ross asserts, it may be wise for the U.S. to accept that control over the Western Hemisphere is

sufficient for American security and that sacrificing social welfare for a strategic luxury is too high a price to pay.