Freshly returned from an extended stay in China, Ezra Vogel reconvened the Critical Issues seminar series with his impressions on recent developments on the mainland regarding US-China relations, domestic affairs, and Sino-Japanese relations. While Professor Vogel’s sense was one of general optimism concerning US-China relations and domestic issues, tensions in the Sino-Japanese arena are serious and dangerous. The relations between these two countries have steadily declined since the mid-1990s and are currently at their lowest point. Rectifying healthy relations will require wise and strong leadership on both sides of the East China Sea and efforts to raise awareness and reflection among the populaces of the two countries. The United States may be able to play a helpful role in this endeavor.

Xi Jinping’s recent successful visit with Barack Obama and Secretary Kerry’s role at the helm of the State Department have contributed to the sense of optimism in China with regards to US-China relations. Xi and Obama’s visit included many informal discussions, working towards building a trusting relationship between the two leaders. Kerry has also made efforts to cultivating more trust in the diplomatic community. Many Chinese view Kerry as being more positive toward China than his predecessor Hilary Clinton. The efforts on the part of these leaders have enabled a broader base of relations between the two countries. Despite a prior lack of trust between the Chinese and American militaries, there are signs of serious discussions between them. They will even engage in a joint military in Thailand. This general sense of optimism in bilateral relations continues despite recent tensions over the declaration of the PRC’s Air Defense Information Zone (ADIZ) and concerns over Chinese cyber attacks. Concerns raised during both of these issues have been tempered. In the case of the ADIZ, Chinese have provided more information regarding the limits of what they will do in the ADIZ. In the case of cyber security, revelations with the Edward Snowden case that the U.S. was engaging in much of the same tactics as China have reduced US pressure on China and the two sides have begun serious discussions on cyber security.

Recent attacks on corruption have created some hope amongst Chinese people about the ability of officials to lead China in a promising direction. There is now trepidation among officials about being seen in public with ostentatious shows of wealth and, with the hints of a possible purge of the head of the Public Security Bureau Zhou Yongkang, a sense that the corruption campaign is targeting even those at the very top. The sense that the new leadership team inherited a state of crisis has given Xi a basis for establishing a strong leadership. Xi has already become the strongest leader since Deng: He has distanced himself from his peers and quickly became head of the Central Military Commission and formed the National Security Council and another commission to coordinate long-term economic reforms. However, many intellectuals are distraught that he clamped down tightly on open discussion and announced the “qi bujiang [Seven Things cannot be discussed, including constitution and increased freedoms].” Many intellectuals fear that Xi will continue to camp down on dissent.

This optimism about US-China relations and progress on attacking corruption does not extend to Sino-Japanese relations, however. The relations between the countries have reached a new low point, with very negative public opinions of the other country in both China and Japan and a recent reduction in the number of official Chinese visits to Japan. Things have not always been so between the two countries. Following the beginning of reform in 1978 through the 1980s, half of international aid to China came from Japan and both countries had fairly positive public opinions of
the other. Relations remained stable through the 1990s even following the Tiananmen Square Massacre, but began to decline in the mid-1990s.

Several factors underpinned the change. As Taiwanese pressures for independence grew under Lee Teng-hui, China was concerned about Japanese support for Taiwan and for Japanese administered territory near Taiwan. The special relationship with Japan from 1989-1992 to break through sanctions against China after Tiananmen had ended by 1992 when other countries began relaxing their sanctions. The Cold War in which China and Japan, as well as the United States, had cooperated against the Soviet Union had dissipated after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, ending the strategic need for Sino-Japanese cooperation. After the Japan economic bubble burst in 1989 and China’s growth took off after Deng’s southern tour in 1992, some Chinese felt less need for Japanese economic aid and became more optimistic that their economy might soon surpass Japan’s. After the Chinese nuclear tests in 1995, Japan reduced its aid to China, exacerbating tensions. While the tensions have stemmed from increased Chinese assertiveness, China has been very successful in gaining international support by framing the conflict as stemming from Japan’s failure to apologize for their atrocities during the Second World War.

Bridging the ever-increasing gap between the two countries will require careful diplomacy. Japan must avoid provocative behavior such as Prime Minister Abe’s recent visit to the controversial Yasukuni war shrine. China should show a greater willingness to organize meetings with Japan. Both sides should reduce patrols in contested waters to avoid further incidents. Japan should have broader education at home and abroad acknowledging its activities in World War II, and China should give more public recognition at home and abroad of Japan’s contribution to Chinese modernization in the 1980s and to Japan’s turn to peace after 1945 and should reduce the anti-Japanese publicity through the media, especially the widespread portrayal of vicious Japanese in World War II movies.

#