Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski
“American and China”
Critical Issues Seminar Series: Summary of Talk
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Dr. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Senior Research Professor of International Relations at John Hopkins’ School of Advanced International Studies and former U.S. National Security Advisor under President Carter, addressed the Critical Issues seminar series with reflections on his role during the normalization of U.S.-China relations in 1979 and the future of U.S.-China relations. While the likelihood of war between the U.S. and China is minimal, Russia’s recent invasion of Ukraine and possible further territorial moves in Eurasia as well as challenges presented by China’s relationship with Taiwan could alter the U.S.-China relationship and the international balance of power. Possible scenarios for these challenges underline the complexity of the U.S.-China relationship and its connections with global stability at large.

From normalization until recently, the U.S. and China enjoyed a positive and significant relationship. The two countries initially found a bond in their common enemy – the USSR – and established joint intelligence efforts which continued after the end of the Soviet Union. The US announcement of the “pivot,” however, carried the unintended connotation of US containment of China, challenging the relationship. This, combined with the “rise of China” and analytical frameworks suggesting the inevitability of conflict between rising and established powers, has led some observers to deem conflict between the US and China as pre-determined.

Despite this seemingly fatalistic framework, differences and similarities between the economic, political, and ideological systems of the two countries do not predict such an outcome. Unless the U.S. experiences significant economic decline and views China as a threat or China precipitously slides politically or economically, both of which are remote possibilities, there are no economic factors which could create a military conflict. While ideological differences persist between the two countries, they are not so great as they were during the Maoist era. Finally, a number of similarities between the two political systems exist, including the prevalence of corruption. Neither side, furthermore, seriously envisions war with the other, recognizing the untold destruction such moves would create in the world at large.

Nevertheless, there are two possibilities that could challenge this existing peaceful relationship: Russia’s activities in Eurasia and the Taiwan issue. At this moment the U.S.-China relationship could be characterized as “G2.” In recent speeches Xi has attempted to present a model for U.S.-China relations breaking with traditional great power dynamics, emphasizing instead the relationship’s place within the international system and the pursuit of common ground over zero-sum competition. Russia’s recent movement in Ukraine and plans to establish geo-political dominance over the territory of the former Soviet Union could place this vision on shaky ground. Depending on the degree of Russian dominance in Ukraine and other Eurasian countries and its consequent reflection on the diminished role of the United States in international peacekeeping, China could reconsider whether a close relationship with the U.S. is in its best interests.
The Taiwan question could present further challenges. That the current arrangement between China, Taiwan, and U.S. is unlikely to persist is evident. At some point the U.S. will have to desist from its commitments to supply Taiwan with arms sales – Taiwan will have to diversify its arms purchases. The U.S. will also need to take into account that its practice of running its ships in close proximity to the Chinese mainland is inappropriate and a source of irritation for the Chinese. In summary, these challenges indicate the embeddedness of the U.S.-Chinese relationship in the global order and the connections between global stability and the health of that relationship. As global stability decline, these issues between China and the U.S. will become more complicated.