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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **M. Taylor Fravel**

Episode 5: China's Maritime Security

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*You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast, a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, international role, and China’s relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center located in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host.*

**Haenle:** Today, we’re thrilled to be joined by my friend and one of the leading scholars on China and international security, Dr. Taylor Fravel. Taylor is an associate professor of Political Science and a member of the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Taylor is the author of “Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China’s Territorial Disputes”, while his edited volumes include “Rethinking China’s Rise, A Reader” and “China and East Asian Order, A Reader”. He is currently completing a book-length study of major change in China’s military doctrine since 1949 entitled “Active Defense: Explaining the Evolution of China’s Military Strategy”. Taylor, thank you very much for joining us today.

Taylor, I want to begin with the Eighteenth Party Congress, which took place, as you know, in November of last year. At the meeting, Chinese leaders called for China to become a major maritime power by developing its maritime resources, protecting the ocean environment. Could you start by describing what you see as China’s regional maritime strategy in recent years, who have been the main actors, and how effective has it been?

**Fravel:** Great, thanks Paul. I’m not sure there is a maritime strategy. There have been documents put out by agencies, such as the State Oceanic Administration on maritime development, but I think they’re actually, probably, in the process of working out the strategy. What they’ve done to date, I think, has been to enhance their overall maritime capabilities, and when I refer to maritime capabilities I’m not speaking about just naval forces but in particular civilian maritime law enforcement agencies. So one big development in this regard was the decision, which had been debated for years, to merge four of the so-called “Five Dragons” into one group now known as the Chinese Coast Guard and place it under the State Oceanic Administration, but interestingly enough also giving the Ministry of Public Security a role.

My understanding is that relationship has not yet been fully worked out. China’s been developing its ability to sort of govern the seas adjacent to China by developing these maritime actors, but it’s not clear to me that there’s necessarily a full-fledged strategy for how to do this because what we’ve seen in recent years is conflicts and incidents involving these maritime actors, particularly before the establishment of the coast guard, incidents involving the vessels from the Bureau of Fisheries Administration and incidents involving vessels from China Marine Surveillance. This, to me, suggests that the development of capabilities has outpaced the development of a strategy for the use of those capabilities, and I think perhaps now we are seeing the decision to centralize those actors under one body as a greater effort to produce a strategy. But we will have to see how it evolves over the coming years.

**Haenle:** Great. Taylor, you were one of the first to note a change in China’s neighbor, periphery strategy: diplomacy under President Xi. President Xi seems to recognize that some of China’s most assertive actions in the East and South China Seas have caused some diplomatic problems for China with Japan and with many Southeast Asian countries and have in many ways hurt China’s own interests. At the first-ever “Work Forum on Periphery Diplomacy” on October 24 and 25, President Xi outlined a new strategic approach: upgrade, acceleration, and add power to

relations with neighbors; enhance political goodwill; deepen regional economic integration; increase China's cultural influence; and improve regional security cooperation to China's neighbors as part of its overall strategy to realize the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation; and maintain a peaceful and stable external environment conducive to domestic economic reform. There's been a lot of discussion here in Beijing about the importance of this speech. Can you help us understand your view on this new strategic approach to China's periphery diplomacy, and what other signs has President Xi given that China's policy is evolving?

**Fravel:** I think that the regional diplomatic work forum was unprecedented. It's the first time, at least publicly acknowledged for the first time, that the forum has been held. So in the past, China has held general work conferences on foreign affairs that would include great powers, the periphery, the developing world, but this was the first time that the periphery was sort of highlighted for attention. The entire Politburo Standing Committee attended, right? So this means that it had the full support of China's top leaders and not simply a conference conducted within the foreign affairs system alone but rather reflected an effort to coordinate across systems. So, although it was unprecedented in that sense, I actually don't think it's a new strategy. I think they are trying to revitalize an old strategy that had not received enough attention or that had been overtaken by events due to the growth of Chinese capabilities in the last few years. From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, China talked a lot about pursuing a good neighbor policy, and I think that's how I would read the totality of the peripheral work forum because the main headline when it was announced in the *People's Daily* was to maintain a peaceful, stable external environment, which seems to suggest that China's environment was becoming un-peaceful or less stable and thus, China needed to take actions to rectify that situation.

There are many factors at play here, but one clearly important set of factors would be China's assertiveness in these maritime disputes, which collectively have worsened ties with many states in the region and created an opportunity for the United States and other major powers like India and Japan to assert themselves at China's expense. So, my read of this work forum was in part an effort to redress problems that Chinese foreign policy had created for itself. It had backfired, and that's really important because an acknowledgement that your policy is not working is the first step toward better policy. Over the past few years, those of us observing China from afar have wondered (if there) is there a feedback loop here? Does China understand that its efforts to assert itself—even if it views these assertions as defensive and justified—is nevertheless backfiring and creating a worse environment for China to pursue its own economic development? I think this peripheral work conference was a recognition that overall the policies have been suboptimal. Greater attention needs to be placed on the periphery.

Importantly, I would note, that maritime issues were not referenced once in the summary that Xinhua released of Xi's remarks at the conference. What that indicates to me is that less of an emphasis is going to be placed on so-called "rights defense" (维权) in the maritime domain. It doesn't mean that it's going to disappear entirely, but that going to have to be balanced against maintaining stability. I think that's an important development, and it can actually be traced back to the maritime power work conference that you referenced in your question, which occurred over the summer and in which for the first time Xi Jinping contrasted the need to maintain China's maritime rights or defend its rights (维权- Weiquan) with maintaining stability (维稳- Weiwen). That was characterized as two overall situations that China needed to handle properly, and that reflects the fact that these two impulses in Chinese foreign policy are working at cross-purposes

with each other and need to be readjusted accordingly. So, it's too soon to say where the regional strategy is going to go, and of course one immediate reaction was that it's cheap talk and it's easy to say that China wants to improve its regional security environment and so we have to see what will happen. But I don't think we can judge just by what happens in the next week, two weeks, or three weeks but what happens in the next two or three years because that's how strategy unfolds in China, over years and not days or weeks.

**Haenle:** One quick follow up to that. One of the things you hear Chinese scholars talking about with regards to the October 24 speech is this what appears to be a new effort by China to categorize to a certain degree their relationships with certain countries in the region, countries that are what they say pro-China or leaning towards China will be treated in one way, and the implication of course is that those who are causing trouble for China might be treated in a different way. I have heard over the last few weeks of scholars talking about this as one potential change that was expressed during President Xi's speech, and I wonder if you could comment on that?

**Fravel:** That's an interesting observation. That wasn't the message that I took away from the speech, but I was only able to read the summary, and I haven't been to China since the speech was delivered and haven't had the chance to talk to people in greater detail. I think up until now one does see that kind of distinction in Chinese foreign policy. So, if we look at China-Japan relations, China's basically refusing to hold unconditional talks at the foreign minister level or at the presidential-premier level with Japan until Japan makes some kind of expression regarding the fact that the Senkaku-Diaoyu islands are in fact disputed territory, which Japan until now has been unwilling to do because of its perspective on its claims in the region. Likewise, we see China at least the diplomatic level placing a freeze on ties with the Philippines. So Foreign Minister Wang Yi has met at least once with every foreign minister from ASEAN except for the Philippines. So it's clear that the Philippines is being isolated to some degree.

I guess what we have to see, what we have to do is to see how this will unfold going forward. After this big work conference, are we going to see this continued division in how China treats neighbors? Or are we going to see an effort by China to sort of quarantine these territorial disputes and prevent them from harming the overall development of bilateral ties? So that's what I call the India model. So China and India have this long-standing border dispute—they fought a war over it in 1962. Yet in the last 10 to 15 years we've seen this flowering and pretty robust development of bilateral ties, despite the presence of this dispute. So, the dispute can kind of be put in a box, it can still be talked about, but levels of tension in the dispute are not going to hinder overall development of relations. That would be one way forward at least with Japan and with the Philippines. Put these disputes in a box, and then develop relations in other areas, especially the economic area.

**Haenle:** So, let me dig deeper a little bit into what you were just talking about. There's been debate here among Chinese academics in recent years about the effectiveness of Deng Xiaoping's strategy of shelving sovereignty disputes and pursuing joint development, which you were just alluding to. I want you to talk, if you could, specifically to that. Does Deng's strategy and approach to these issues still have credibility today and among the current leadership in your view?

**Fravel:** The short answer is yes because there isn't an alternative. So if we look at Xi Jinping's speech at this maritime work conference back in the summer of 2013, he very clearly at the end of that speech endorsed Deng Xiaoping's approach to maritime disputes. The reason why I think he did so was because there isn't a better alternative unless you want to try to act very aggressively and coercively to compel the opposing states in these disputes to accede to China's demands. So recognizing that these disputes are fundamentally very difficult to solve, if you're going to have these disputes, then the best approach probably is to, as much as you can, set them aside and pursue joint development.

Now, it turns out that setting aside the dispute is much easier than pursuing joint development. So I think where Deng Xiaoping's policy has been criticized by many Chinese scholars and analysts is the fact that there hasn't been much joint development, despite the setting aside. In fact, the setting aside of these disputes allows the opposing states to pursue unilateral development and also creates incentives for China to pursue unilateral development. So, actually achieving something in joint development turns out to be much harder than Deng probably expected, although I think the primary focus of Deng's sort of guidance here was to simply not let the disputes become the center of bilateral relations with states with which China has disputes and rather to deepen political and economic ties despite the presence of these disputes, and you can only do this if you set them aside. So what we see with Japan and the Philippines right now is that the disputes really have become the center of relations and that's harming China's ability to move forward.

**Haenle:** Let me move to the one area where we've seen some progress as of late [and that] is this issue of completing a code of conduct for the South China Sea, and I wanted to ask you what you think the prospects there are. Then, talk about where America's interests lie here, because I know there is some debate in the United States whether or not it would be in America's interest for there to be a code of conduct completed, and I wonder if you could comment on that?

**Fravel:** Sure, let me take the second part of your question first. My own view, my own judgement would be that it is in America's interest because the effect of a code if it was reached would be to cap the potential for escalation, and that serves the American interest in maintaining peace and stability in the region, and it also basically removes one potential opportunity for the United States to become more closely involved in disputes in which China is a major claimant, which in turn might increase the role of China's disputes in U.S.-China relations which I don't think would be positive for that relationship. So, I do think it's in America's interest. That would be my judgement. Regarding the status of those talks and the ability for a code to be reached, I'm still pretty skeptical. China has agreed to hold consultations, which was sort of a precursor to formal talks or negotiations. So China has not yet said that it will negotiate a code of conduct, partly because it wants, I think, to see some movement by the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal and that's unlikely to happen because of the arbitration that's ongoing.

Nevertheless, I think China, because it has recognized how its policies in the South China Sea have backfired in recent years, does see value in at least talking about a code, and that in turn I think can be used to restrain Chinese behavior to some degree because if you are serious about talking about a code, then you're not going to necessarily be as willing to take actions that might clearly be seen as violating such a code. But successful achievement of a code also requires that ASEAN have a united position, and that cannot be taken for granted, especially at the moment the Philippines seems more willing to pursue a code that may be more detailed or more binding than

some of the other states. So, if there's not an ASEAN agreement on the content of a code, no unified ASEAN position with which to present to China, then that's going to be another obstacle. So China may not be willing to rush the net, so to speak, on achieving a code of conduct, although it's willing to talk about it. ASEAN might not be able to come up with a joint position so what we may see in the coming years is an increased frequency of consultations without necessarily anything produced, but I still think that's better than having no consultations at all.

**Haenle:** Taylor, my last question is related to the third plenum. President Xi presented a broad outline for his economic reform blueprint for the next decade. Within that, he announced two new bodies: one, which will deal with implementing the reforms, and the second was the creation of a national security coordinating mechanism, which many say could be modelled on the U.S.-type National Security Council where, as you know, I worked. So, (I have) great interest in this, but I'd like to ask you—specifically related to the issues that we've been discussing this morning—how do you think that the national security coordinating mechanism will affect China's strategy in the Asia-Pacific, the territorial issues, (and) the maritime issues that we've been discussing here?

**Fravel:** Thanks, Paul. It's too early to tell, right? Because we don't have any details about what the national security commission or the state security commission, depending on your preferred translation of 国家 (guojia) will do. My reading—when it was announced at least—was that it was going to focus more on internal threats to China's national security, and by that I mean the security of the Communist Party, and the external dimensions of those internal threats as opposed to focusing primarily on the external threats and questions of crisis management. So while the latter is really important and China needs a crisis management mechanism, I'm not sure that the national security commission or the state security commission is going to be the body that will conduct such crisis management.

In the plenum decision or the plenum resolution, it was discussed in the section on improving social governance, not in the section on foreign affairs and not in the section on defense. It was also not labelled as a central national security commission, it wasn't a 中央国家安全委员会 (zhongyang guojia anquan weiyuanhui), which suggests that it might be a government body under the state council or coordinating agencies within the state council, but if it has government rank, it's going to be hard within the Chinese system to coordinate actions that involve the PLA, which are at the level of the center, right? To engage in effective crisis management, you would need to have some effort to coordinate with the PLA and to coordinate with the PLA this body would have to have sufficiently high rank in the party that it would be able to do so. We've received no indications yet that it's going to have high rank in the party. In fact, it appears as if it's going to be a government or a state body, and that means that coordination with the PLA will continue to be very difficult. So I'm not optimistic, and I don't think that describing it as a national security council, which has been very common in the Western media since it was announced, is actually very helpful because it suggests that this body is going to have primarily an external focus or an external orientation, whereas I think the primary focus is going to be internal.

**Haenle:** Well, thank you for that. I agree with you that it's too early to tell. I also agree that the description of it as a U.S.-type national security council is premature. I don't think people know. The one thing I would note, which is interesting, is that—in my discussions here with Chinese scholars—those that have been advocating for a long time a national security coordinating

mechanism for foreign policy issues will tell you that this has been created for foreign policy reasons, and those who have not been advocating that will tell you, at least in my experience, that it's more for internal security. So I think it depends, you know, where you are on this issue and what your own views are, but I think we will hopefully see as things move forward how this develops. There's been some confusion or perhaps some controversy in the system, as we've seen—the English translation, as you noted, has changed over several days. The Chinese has remained the same, but the English has changed, which indicates some confusion and we'll see how things develop. Thank you very much for being with us today. That's it for this edition of Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast. If you'd like to listen to previous episodes of the Carnegie–Tsinghua “China in the World” podcast, you can find those along with a summary of each interview on the Carnegie–Tsinghua website at [www.carnegietsinghua.org](http://www.carnegietsinghua.org). I encourage you to explore our site, and see the work of all our scholars at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time!