

Session on 'The Geopolitics of Emerging Global Powers' with Philip Gordon and Gideon Rachman

New Delhi, 16 September 2008

Emerging powers like India and China are the central feature of our times and the United States no longer can act on global issues on its own. Saying this, Mr Philip Gordon, Senior Fellow, US Foreign Policy, The Brookings Institution, added that the United States needs to engage with rising powers since increasingly, New Delhi and Beijing's global views have become important.

He was speaking at the session on 'The Geopolitics of Emerging Global Powers' organized by the Aspen Institute India and Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).

Mr Gordon said that while the world had been bipolar during the Cold War era, and subsequently unipolar, with the US as the undisputed global leader, today there are multiple points of power in the world. "Historically, economic power precedes military and geopolitical power after a certain time lag, and the same is often true when a power falls," he said. "The rise of India and China along with Brazil and South Africa and the relative decline of the US indicates that global cooperation is necessary to deal with the many challenges faced by the world," he said. He listed climate change, nuclear proliferation, water resources and terrorism as major global challenges today.

Striking a word of caution, Mr Gordon said that throughout history, change in the global power system has rarely been peaceful. "Although a clash among rising powers seems unlikely today as major wars are a thing of the past, but history tells us that the possibility cannot be completely discounted."

The new geopolitical reality of emerging global powers implies that we have to "reform the international architecture which is really out of date today," he said adding, US needs to take the lead in this process, for example by pushing for reform in the United Nations Security Council structure. "The new global structure need not just be an alliance of democracies as it would exclude other non-democratic powers like China and Russia," Mr Gordon said. He concluded by saying that the emerging powers also need to take global responsibilities today to tackle challenges.

Mr Gideon Rachman, Chief Foreign Affairs Commentator, The Financial Times, gave an European perspective on the change in the geopolitical scene. He said that while the European Union (EU) has significant economic might, he was "sceptical about EU working a major global power."

"The EU has to work as a bloc on foreign policy issues to become a power," he said adding, "but I do not see it happening." He cited popular ambivalence in Europe, European parochialism, its reluctance to use military power, internal rivalries between European nations and lack of any major external threat as reasons why the European Union has not emerged as a major geopolitical power as a whole.

However, Mr Rachman added that the resurgence of Russia as a power following the war in Georgia, and Russia's energy power muscle does pose a threat to Europe. "There is a lot of concern over this," he said pointing out that "35 per cent of gas imported by Europe comes from Russia."

Mr S K Lambah, Special Envoy to the Prime Minister, who introduced the two speakers, stressed on the need for global cooperation to face the varied challenges facing the world today. But, he said, "North-South differences have come in the way of any united action."