

Session on 'The Elections and American Foreign Policy' by Ambassador Richard Holbrooke

New Delhi, 28 March 2008

"The US elections this year will in large part be a referendum on Iraq," said Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke, President, The Asia Society and Vice Chairman of Perseus LLC, and one of America's best known foreign policy analysts. The US policy on Iraq is where the fundamental difference lies between the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates in this year's US elections, according to him. He described Republican Presidential Candidate John McCain as 'Bush plus' on Iraq, while subtly different from other policies of the Bush administration. Holbrooke's other big prediction was that the war in Afghanistan will be the longest war in American history, longer than the 14-year Vietnam conflict, and this will affect India.

Holbrooke was speaking at a session on 'The Elections and American Foreign Policy' organised by the Aspen Institute India in New Delhi on 28 March 2008. Also present at the session were L Brooks Entwistle, Managing Director and CEO, Goldman Sachs (India) Securities Pvt. Ltd and Tarun Das, President, Aspen Institute India. Holbrooke addressed a range of issues from Iraq to climate change.

"Afghanistan," Holbrooke declared, "is the big cauldron which will bubble and determine US relations with South Asia." A Vietnam veteran, he predicted that this war, already in its 7th year, will continue for the next decade. His reason was that on one hand, the Taliban does not have the strength, capability or ideology to win as 'one cannot build a revolution through fear, there needs to be a positive element.' On the other hand, in his opinion, the Afghan 'government can't win because they are too weak and filled with corruption.' He added that the drug culture- more than 90% of the world's drugs come from Afghanistan according to him - and the unsolved issues with Pakistan further undermine any chance of success in this war. India, he said, will have to play a crucial role. All three presidential candidates have declared their support for the war in Afghanistan, he pointed out.

In Pakistan, Holbrooke saw the end of the military era and the beginning of a democratic era. He also believed that the India-US nuclear deal would eventually be approved by both sides. He also felt that India and China should be a part of the G8 group of countries, and that India, Japan, and Germany should be members of the UN Security Council.

Holbrooke, by his admission a Democrat and close friend of the Clintons, severely criticised the Iraq invasion, calling it the biggest mistake of the George W. Bush administration. "The important thing to remember is that not a single reason for going to Iraq proved to be correct," he said. The eight years of inaction on the issue of climate change was the second biggest mistake of the George W Bush administration, according to him. He added that he hoped that the next US President would work with China on climate change on a bilateral basis, as the world's two worst polluters.

Holbrooke, a former UN Ambassador to the United Nations and former member of President Bill Clinton's cabinet, has had a ring-side view of US foreign policy for many decades. Among his many achievements was scripting the 1995 Dayton

peace agreement that ended the war in Bosnia. While introducing him to the audience, L Brooks Entwistle of Goldman Sachs (India) said that Holbrooke read out a line from his book, written more than a decade ago, " History is unpredictable there will be other Bosnias in our lives." In this session, Holbrooke emphasized that sentiment, saying " The US, whether we like it or not, will always be called on to deal with great crises in the world because that's our responsibility." As Tarun Das, Chief Mentor of CII said in his opening remarks, few can rival Holbrooke's knowledge of US foreign policy.