



The Age of Uncertainty

Speaker: Michael Krepon

Chair: Amb. Shyam Saran

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Michael Krepon began his talk by outlining the contours of his thesis: The Age of Uncertainty. He noted that the international political scenario seemed to be in flux, especially in theatres of major power engagement; be that US-China relations, US-Russia relations or Sino-Indian relations. In the Sino-Indian case the speaker predicted, in the context of the current standoff at Doklam, ‘more intense incidents in the peripheral areas and eventually at sea.’ With regard to the immediately pressing, and potentially disastrous, US-North Korea nuclear face-off, Krepon asserted that the future stability in the Korean Peninsula is contingent on whether the Trump administration would be willing to cohabit with a nuclear North Korea. The speaker also noted an ‘odd juxtaposition’ between the US’ ‘domestic political incoherence and its [still powerful] military strength’; the implications of which ‘have yet to play out.’

Krepon delved deeper to flesh out the US’ domestic political incoherence. He painted a picture that portrayed American democracy in a crisis situation, remarking that it is in ‘ill health’. And this pathological state of the American democracy was symbolized by President Donald Trump, a ‘wrecking ball’ according to Krepon. Alleging Russian intervention in the American presidential elections, the speaker quipped that Trump was Kremlin’s ‘most cost-effective investment’. The speaker also disapproved of the conduct of the American media, saying that it practiced the art of ‘disinformation and the incitement of grievances.’ In such a

gloomy domestic, as well as international, political environment the need of the hour, according to Krepon, was to ‘reclaim our [America’s] democracy.’

Having wrestled with the issue of nuclear non-proliferation for many years Krepon also shared his views about the contemporary nuclear order. Like the broad trends in other aspects of international relations, for Krepon the nuclear order was also in flux, referring to it as a ‘wobbly nuclear order’. And this wobbliness was not because there are new seekers of the nuclear bomb; rather it is a consequence of intense military competition among top and middle tier nuclear weapons possessors. Of course, states like Iran and North Korea also threaten the nuclear order but the implications of their respective nuclear activities would depend a great deal on how the US engages with these two states. The gravest threat, the speaker noted, to the post Cold War nuclear order is the withering away of the norm of preventing a ‘mushroom cloud in a battlefield’.

Finally, the speaker sketched out the US-India relations in the context of the age of uncertainty. The US-India dyad unlike many other dyads, say the US-NATO dyad for instance, according to the speaker is one of the few constants in the Obama and the Trump administrations; after all India is only one of three countries (Israel and Saudi Arabia being the other two) that the current White House administration has reached out to. In fact the foundations of US-India relations since the Civil Nuclear Deal has been so strong that it has been ‘unaffected by the first 6 months’ of the Trump administration. This positive trend needed to be strengthened, noted Krepon; not to balance China, a concept that he called as ‘unwise parochial’, but so as to help protect the respective interests of India and the US from an assertive China.

In the Q&A session the speaker engaged with a wide range of enquiries. On the question of why the Pentagon and the US government have failed to reduce the American nuclear weapons stockpile, Krepon blamed their lack of vision. He said that the Pentagon and the Republic party in particular have not been able to see the wisdom of reducing the salience of nuclear weapons. Another question enquired whether the fallout of the Iran nuclear deal would lead to Iran renewing its bomb-making activities. To this Krepon replied that indeed if the Trump administration fails to abide by the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, then Iran would resume enrichment of uranium and stockpiling of fissile material. On the question on whether the US had ‘abdicated’ its leadership in the Asian region, Krepon neither declined nor accepted the proposition. According to him, the US had not abdicated its leadership; rather

there was a ‘fretting away of US leadership’ because of poor decision-making. Moreover, he also observed that under such circumstances India should do more in the region as far taking a leadership role is concerned, given its rising power and stature.

Report prepared by Rajesh Ghosh, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

About the Speaker

Michael Krepon co-founded the Stimson Center in 1989, a nonpartisan policy research centre working to solve the world’s greatest threats to security and prosperity. He served as Stimson’s President and CEO until 2000, and continues to direct Stimson’s programming on nuclear and space issues. He was appointed the University of Virginia’s Diplomat Scholar, where he taught from 2001-2010. He is the author and editor of twenty-one books, most recently *The Lure and Pitfalls of MIRVs: From the First to the Second Nuclear Age*. He worked previously at the Carnegie Endowment, the State Department’s Arms Control and Disarmament Agency during the Carter Administration, and on Capitol Hill. He received the Carnegie Endowment’s Thérèse Delpech Memorial Award in 2015 for lifetime achievement in non-governmental work to reduce nuclear dangers.

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