



The American Security Dilemma: the Middle East, Russia, or China?

Speaker: Dr. Amit Gupta

Chair: Prof. Alka Acharya, Director, Institute of Chinese Studies

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Dr. Amit Gupta's presentation focused on the three major security issues due to be faced by the United States (US) in the coming decades: the rise of China, insecurity in the Middle East, and the reassertion of Russia's role in the world. He began by asking how would the US manage and rank order these three challenges, particularly the rise of China. While the role of the US as the sole security guarantor in a unipolar world in the aftermath of the Cold War era was unchallenged, things however started to change from 2006-07 with the apparent changes in democratic trends in the US. The speaker pointed out that over the last two years there has been a growing belief in the US that the post-Cold War unilateral foundations of American foreign policy are under assault. This, in his view, reflects American security dilemma in the contemporary international system.

To begin with, the speaker drew attention to the fundamental assumption in the US about the democratic process that had started with the collapse of the Cold War and had taken over most of the world but had not gained routes in the Middle East. Later, the disruptive nature of the September 11 terrorist attacks led a group of intellectuals in the US to underline the need to retain a presence in the Middle East, in order to continue to transform this region. This was followed by the US and NATO's unsuccessful campaigns in Libya. The region is witnessing a series of grass-roots insurgencies that are difficult to control. It has made it difficult for the NATO and the US to put troops on the ground. Terrorism has become the focal concern of the general public in the US and Western Europe. In its aftermath, the US domestic politics has witnessed a fundamental change that has been fixated on threats emanating from the Middle East. A range of options are being proposed to deal with it, such as, keeping Muslims out of America, carpet bombing of Syria, and so on.

As far as the US security dilemma with regard to Russia is concerned, according to the speaker, the US mindset pertaining to Russia has changed in recent times. In his opinion, two very different trends are seen in Washington. On one side are those who do not see Russia as a global power, rather only a regional power. On the other side are those who perceive it differently. In addition, Russia being a major player in Syria makes it a curious case for the US government.

Dr. Gupta next discussed some of the problems that the US has with Russia and in the Middle East region. The traditional way of looking at these problems have been based on western alliance structure built around the world during the Cold War. In his opinion, the problem with the western alliance structure is that it is getting old and weary. Such an alliance (for example the NATO) faces challenges on numerous fronts, including on the issue of how to source troops and money and from where? The real problem today is that as the alliance structure grapples with its challenges, the US cannot be expected to sustain the kind of world campaign that is being talked about by some politicians. The speaker argued that such challenges cannot be looked at militarily.

Moving his focus on to China, Dr. Gupta stated that for the United States, China remains a strategic competitor for the next century. He mentioned that China's rise is being considered in all seriousness and in an unprecedented fashion by the US administration. As far as American security dilemma with respect to China is concerned, the speaker referred to two main issues. The first pertains to American anxiety about China's military plans. Secondly, in spite of US' strong naval presence in the Indo-Pacific region, Chinese assertiveness in the Taiwan issue has added to US security concerns in the region. The speaker opined that China is not looking for warfare purely in terms of force to force. Instead, it is planning a high technology war in local conditions. In terms of globalization, China has not made inroads to places where it was traditionally absent. He also observed that China's effective endeavor to run a parallel international economic system is a remarkable phenomenon. This in turn creates major challenges for US foreign policy. Therefore, for the next 10 years or so, American security dilemma is going to be Asia centered. If the US opts for a policy of containment then it would require allies. In this context, the speaker underscored the absence of such an alliance structure aimed at containing China.

Dr. Gupta further discussed in detail how he sees rising China as a stakeholder in the international system. For him, this aspect had a promising prospect in the coming years. The categorization of China as a stakeholder indicates that it will abide by the United Nations principles such as territorial sovereignty, peaceful settlement of disputes, and freedom of navigation. Dr. Gupta also referred to the idea of the 'Concert of Asia', which propagates power sharing among China, the United States, Japan and India. In his final argument, the speaker referred to the Indian perspective in a changing global economy. He mentioned that China is set to take over as the largest economy of the world by 2030 with India assuming the position of the third largest economy. In this backdrop, the speaker raised the potential for synergy between India and China on reshaping the global economic order. He argued that China and India

together are able to make the existing international economic system more representative. He pitched for the restructuring of international economic institutions through greater involvement of India and China.

In his concluding remarks, Dr. Gupta rejected a military solution for the Middle East. In his opinion, the Middle East has to be managed through diplomacy and the issue of migration too needs to be paid attention to. Further, given Russian involvement in Syria, issues with regards the modalities of working with the country is also likely to come up. As far as China is concerned, it must understand that spending money on developing weapons and long-range military strategies are not going to work in the future.

Discussion

A lively discussion followed and helped clarify various issues raised by the speaker. A question was asked about how much the US would be willing to concede in an international economic system significantly represented by China and India. Dr. Gupta referred to the gradual breakup of American and European partnership and the changing American demography as factors affecting its foreign policy. When asked about whether Russia would be included in the 'Concert of Asia', the answer was affirmative.

Another question was asked if the speaker saw the possibility of China fulfilling one of its major objectives with regards the military takeover of Taiwan. According to the speaker, the Chinese are not interested in engaging in conflict with Taiwan. Any possibility of deterring China militarily is out of place. On being asked about the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the speaker said that TPP changes nothing. First of all, it did not originate in Washington DC. It needs the involvement of big economies in order for it to assume European Union like proportion. Dr. Gupta also opined that there is a great potential for India and China to come together.

To a question whether China has the experience to operate in a multipolar world, the speaker replied in the affirmative. There was another question with respect to US-China-Russia relationship dynamics unfolding in the Central Asian Republics (CAR), particularly the US-Saudi Arabia relationship and its effects on the Middle East region. The speaker argued that while Saudi Arabia has done good things for the US, such as funding the Afghan Mujahideens, however, it has maintained a conservative set of governments in the Middle East.

The concluding comment and question was raised by the chair on the concept of 'Concert of Asia'. She pointed out that given the fact that India has been reluctant in pursuing such a concert, what would the big deal between the US and China be, given that China wants to be number one or is it only about the IMF and the World Bank? According to Dr. Gupta, it is not just about the IMF or the World Bank; China aspires to become a developed country with the help of the US. Therefore, a different economic engagement with the US would be required. At the same time, the US looks at the market in China. China too wants to create its own brand name and seek to move in to higher value end goods. Consequently, in Dr. Gupta's opinion, sharing technology,

building partnership and military confidence building are the areas where there are strong possibilities of connection between the US and China.

Report prepared by Kush Kumar Gayasen, Research Assistant, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Dr. Amit Gupta is an Associate Professor in the Department of International Security Studies at the USAF Air War College Montgomery Alabama. His research has focused on weapons proliferation, demography and politics, and more recently, the China-US rivalry in Asia.

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