Post event note: Stephen M. Walt

Obama's Foreign Policy and the End of the American Era.

Professor Walt delivered a wide-ranging and insightful address on "Obama's Foreign Policy and the End of the American Era." His address was divided into two parts; firstly an assessment of both the successes and failures of Obama's foreign policy, and secondly an analysis of the American era, the challenges it has faced and the future of American influence in the world.

Assessing Obama's foreign policy over the last four years, Professor Walt concluded that there were no major foreign policy accomplishments in the first term, attributing this in part to the scale of the challenges inherited from the previous administration and the declining popularity of the US abroad. Professor Walt questioned the ability of US foreign policy to shape the future of Afghanistan and questioned the success of US policy towards Iran, noting that while Obama was more willing to engage with the Iranian government in an open manner, America's obsession with Iran's nuclear ambitions has prevented further progress.

Professor Walt then addressed one of the most entrenched foreign policy challenges facing the US, the Israel-Palestine conflict. He noted the retreat of the US government, from its initial expression of strong support for a two-state solution and the immediate halt of settlement building, to the February 2011 veto by the US of a Security Council resolution on Israeli settlements, the first veto at the UN by the Obama administration. Professor Walt predicted that the problem would only get worse during the remainder of this presidency, and that it would in turn have an impact on the ability of the US government to maintain good relations with the Arab world.

Professor Walt identified some examples of progress, however; in re-setting relations with Russia, improving the image of the US in most parts of the world, with the exception of the Middle East, the elevation of nuclear security as a major foreign policy issue, and the successful targeting of Osama Bin Laden. In spite of this progress,

according to Walt foreign policy will not be a source of political capital for Obama to draw on in his re-election campaign.

In the second part of the address, Professor Walt focused on the end of the American Era. He traced the evolution of American power from the post-war era to today. From a position of great economic strength at the end of the Second World War, when the US economy equalled half of the global economy, and the country held a large store of good will and prestige, the US proceeded to establish and lead a global political, economic and security order. While the order was challenged during the Cold War, it was never broken. He also spoke of the emergence of the BRICs and of regional forces such as Turkey and Russia, which are more assertive and influential than before.

Professor Walt stressed throughout his address that the US is still a strong global power, whose role will never be irrelevant; nonetheless it can no longer create and lead security orders in every part of the world. Walt foresees major long-term fiscal problems for the US, cuts to defence spending and an increasing role for emerging global powers, but in spite of these problems there is still the unshakeable belief among US policy makers that they are an "indispensible nation." After fifty years of US leadership, Walt believes that the establishment remains committed to military power and intervention on the global stage, although the new distribution of power globally, will impact on the US position in the world.