

2016 Geopolitical Landscape

Optimism was in short supply at the “2016 Global Geopolitical Landscape” forum held on October 20, 2015, the opening day of the 16th World Knowledge Forum in Seoul, Korea. Panelists offered insight into the future geopolitical landscape and identified potential challenges the future may present. However, when presenting their ideas and views, they continued to see the future as bleak and troubled.

As author and Yale University Professor of History, Paul Kennedy, asked, “Do I think the world is more tense, more worrying than it was five years ago? Yes, I do.”

Carl Bildt, former Prime Minister and current Foreign Minister of Sweden, agreed and listed several causes for this unsettling state of international affairs: the return of tribalism, as seen in the rise of nationalism and extreme religious forms; antagonistic neighbors forming a “ring of fire” around Europe and making it more unstable; the collapse of important areas of the Middle East; and the “ongoing low-intensity conflict in cyberspace.” Mr. Bildt said all of these factors contribute to complicating the global landscape and create “a disorienting, more disconcerting, more dangerous world.”

Panelists also based much of their bleak forecast on weak geopolitical leadership. Leon Panetta, former CIA Director (2009–2011) and United States Secretary of Defense (2011–2013), said strong leadership is essential if we are to solve thorny issues the world currently faces.

“If leadership is going to succeed,” he said, “it has to take the risks that are associated with leadership.” Mr. Panetta identifies this as the biggest question that we must take on as we move into the future.

Growing distrust and suspicion between nations also colors the geopolitical landscape. For Mr. Panetta, the influence of Iran, the presence of North Korea, and the return of Russia to the international stage are all “flash points” of potential danger that serve as unstabilizing forces in the world.

But Alexander Panov, the Head of the Department of Diplomacy at Moscow State Institute of International Relations, sees the problem slightly differently. Mr. Panov complained about a lack of clear rules or any sense of teamwork amongst nations. He blamed this on what happened after the Cold War, when all of the rules establishing the terms of behavior fell and were replaced by nothing.

He agreed with Mr. Panetta that a lack of leadership has hindered progress in international affairs, but to solve this problem, he wants leaders to get together and establish clear “rules of behavior [defining] what countries can do, what countries cannot do, etcetera.” To him, international law is vague and it is hard to accurately judge what is going on in the geopolitical landscape without clear, established rules.

As a result of the Russian rejection of the current international set of rules, Mr. Panetta questioned whether the Cold War has, in fact, returned. Mr. Bildt seemed to agree, expressing worry that Russia is “throwing its weight around in a very unpredictable way.” Vladimir Putin, whom Mr. Bildt identifies as a revisionist who changes rules he dislikes or disagrees with, is the one who caused this “trust deficit” between Russia and the rest of the world.

John Mearshimer, Professor at University of Chicago, explains that the return of Russia to the geopolitical stage is actually a reversion to a more standard state of affairs.

“Geopolitics is all about competition between great powers,” he said.

Geopolitics was absent from 1989 to 2014 because during the Cold War, the world was completely dominated by the United States. No other nation had much chance to make a difference, so little geopolitical competition existed after 1989. But now, “Geopolitics is back,” he said, adding, “it’s not gonna be pretty.”

All speakers seemed to agree that true dialogue amongst nations is needed to resolve this tension in international affairs. Right now, Dr. Kennedy said, “There seems to be a fraying of tempers, an irritation with the other side, a sense of ‘I’m not gonna take much of this any more.’” He asked, “Where is the place where we are going to sit down and talk things over coolly and with some degree of understanding of how the others are playing?”

Mr. Panetta agrees with the need for enhanced dialogue. “The reality is we are living in a global world in which countries are developing their economies, they’re developing their own security,” he said. “The real key is whether or not those countries are going to work together to preserve peace and prosperity in their regions.”

Reporter: Joe Rogers