

# The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Major Melvin L. Williams\*

*Our aim for the past four years has been to engage less, do less, and have a smaller footprint. But then we should be prepared to also matter less and influence less . . . . [W]e have gone from leading everywhere to leading nowhere.<sup>2</sup>*

## I. Introduction

As events have unfolded in the greater Middle East over the past several years, from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the crises in Egypt, Libya, and Syria, American foreign policy under President Barack Obama has increasingly weakened, failing to provide the necessary global leadership expected of the world's "one indispensable nation."<sup>3</sup> At least that is what Vali Nasr contends in his latest book, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*, a shrewd and revealing account of his two years working in the Obama administration.

In *Dispensable Nation*, Nasr<sup>4</sup> presents a thought-provoking appraisal of the current state of America's foreign policy and its results by simultaneously articulating three stories. First, he details the contentious working relationship between the White House and the State Department, in particular with the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP)—the late Richard C. Holbrooke. Second, Nasr provides an insightful review of broad U.S. foreign policy as well as the administration's diplomatic shortfalls. Lastly, he concludes with an assessment of the "coming geopolitical competition with China."<sup>5</sup>

Part memoir, part history lesson, and all critique, *Dispensable Nation* proves to be valuable, timely, and

relevant. While Nasr attempts to offer solutions for the perceived failures of President Obama's administration, a preponderance of Nasr's prescribed courses come across as equivocal and possibly unrealistic. However, the foreign policy contextual framework he provides, coupled with the rational arguments for American engagement instead of withdrawal, make this book a worthwhile read.

An expert in Middle Eastern affairs, Nasr has previously written two books: *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of the New Muslim Middle Class and What It Will Mean for Our World* (2009) on the new business-minded Islamic middle class that ultimately led to the 2011 uprisings known as the Arab Spring,<sup>6</sup> and *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future* (2006) on the Sunni-Shia feud that drove the postwar insurgency in Iraq. Against this backdrop, Nasr is well-equipped to distill the information and observations he gleaned from his personal involvement in State Department inner dealings and better able than his contemporaries to dissect the "implications of [the] Obama administration's foreign policy on American strategic interests."<sup>7</sup>

## II. Holbrooke's Swan Song

Nasr opens *Dispensable Nation* by shedding light on the dynamics of the White House and State Department relationship, chronicling bureaucratic infighting, clashing of personalities, and differences in policy making and philosophy.<sup>8</sup> As envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, or "AfPak" as it was styled, Richard Holbrooke undertook the charge for AfPak diplomatic initiatives.<sup>9</sup> In Nasr's telling,

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<sup>1</sup> VALI NASR, *THE DISPENSABLE NATION: AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY IN RETREAT* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 252.

<sup>3</sup> President Barack H. Obama, State of the Union Address (Jan. 24, 2012) (quoting former U.S. Sec'y of State Madeleine Albright), available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/state-of-the-union-2012>.

<sup>4</sup> Vali Nasr presently serves as Dean of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University. He is also currently a member of the U.S. Department of State's Foreign Affairs Policy Board and a director of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and the National Democratic Institute, and has life membership on the Council on Foreign Relations. Selected by Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, Nasr served as a key advisor on the Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) team from 2009 to 2011, leaving the State Department soon after Holbrooke's death in December 2010. *Faculty Directory*, JOHNS HOPKINS SCH. OF ADVANCED INT'L STUD., <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/faculty-and-scholarship/faculty-profiles/vali-r-nasr-phd> (last visited July 29, 2014) [hereinafter *Faculty Directory*].

<sup>5</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 3.

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<sup>6</sup> Beginning on 18 December 2010, the Arab Spring was a series of protests, demonstrations, and rebellions that swept across the Middle East and North Africa, resulting in several governments being overthrown. For more background and perspective, see Lisa Anderson, *Demystifying the Arab Spring*, FOREIGN AFF. (May/June 2011), available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67693/lisa-anderson/demystifying-the-arab-spring>, and Jack A. Goldstone, *Understanding the Revolutions of 2011*, FOREIGN AFF. (May/June 2011), available at <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67694/jack-a-goldstone/understanding-the-revolutions-of-2011>.

<sup>7</sup> See *Faculty Directory*, *supra* note 4.

<sup>8</sup> For further discussion on the internal strife within the Obama administration, see JAMES MANN, *THE OBAMANS: THE STRUGGLE INSIDE THE WHITE HOUSE TO REDEFINE AMERICAN POWER* (2013); RAJIV CHANDRASEKARAN, *LITTLE AMERICA: THE WAR WITHIN THE WAR FOR AFGHANISTAN* (2013); and BOB WOODWARD, *OBAMA'S WARS* (2011).

<sup>9</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 7.

Holbrooke was “a brilliant strategic thinker in the same league as such giants of American diplomacy as Averell Harriman and Henry Kissinger.”<sup>10</sup> Yet even with his diplomatic bona fides and notable accomplishment of overseeing the 1995 Dayton peace accords, Holbrooke was stymied on practically every front during his tenure, including when he was finally leading Afghanistan on a path to reconciliation.<sup>11</sup>

For his part, Nasr portrays Holbrooke—and to a lesser extent, Hillary Clinton—as a sympathetic figure, cast as the champion who was always overruled by the White House, military departments, and intelligence agencies. Nasr depicts a White House “on a warpath with Holbrooke,”<sup>12</sup> where marginalizing Holbrooke’s role was an effort that ultimately undermined U.S. policy abroad, including the assertion that the White House deliberately did not “[talk] to the Taliban [because it] would give Holbrooke a greater role.”<sup>13</sup>

Given Nasr’s daily interactions with Holbrooke and his own extensive knowledge of Middle East geopolitics, such a narrative is understandable; however, it fails to account for the harm Holbrooke did to his status in 2009 with the Obama administration,<sup>14</sup> and it glosses over apparent shortcomings with Arab leaders<sup>15</sup> while never identifying what success looks like in AfPak. To be sure, Holbrooke’s treatment by the White House and others was degrading, including being left out of important meetings and conferences.<sup>16</sup> It is

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 29.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 56. The *General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, also known as the *Dayton Agreement*, is the peace agreement that formally ended the Bosnian War. In November 1995, the warring factions reached an agreement at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio, and formally signed the agreement in Paris on 14 December 1995. Richard Holbrooke was the lead negotiator and chief architect who helped broker the peace agreement. For details into his role leading up to and during the tense period of negotiations, see Roger Cohen, *Taming the Bullies of Bosnia*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 17, 1995, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/05/17/daily/holbrooke-profile.html>.

<sup>12</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 38. Nasr acknowledges that each administration deals with internal turf battles. However, Nasr believes that Obama’s inner circle “resented losing [Afghanistan and Pakistan (AfPak)] to the State Department,” which meant that Holbrooke “was in their way and kept the State Department in the mix on an important foreign policy area.” *Id.* Nasr points out that the “White House tried to blame Holbrooke for leaks to the press[,]” and blocked any attempt by SRAP to propose reconciliation and diplomatic engagements with the Taliban and region at large. *Id.* at 36–37.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 40.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., CHANDRASEKARAN, *supra* note 8, at 93–94. Holbrooke openly supported opposing presidential candidates to incumbent Afghan President Hamid Karzai during the election of 2009, and Karzai’s indignation was relayed thru the U.S. Embassy to the Obama administration. *Id.*

<sup>15</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 8–10.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 39. “Holbrooke was not included in Obama’s video conferences with Karzai and was cut out of the presidential retinue when Obama went to Afghanistan . . . . [O]n one occasion the White House AfPak team came up with the idea of excluding Holbrooke from the president’s Oval Office

evident that Nasr exudes passion, almost reverence, for his former boss, but his passion seemingly wanes into parochial complaints that diminish the efficacy of his arguments.

Despite these minor flaws, Nasr is at his best when he is stating the problems of the U.S. foreign policy process, framing the issues in the respective Middle Eastern monarchies and South Asian nations, illuminating the nuances of political Islam, and attempting to recommend the way ahead for each challenge. This is clear when Nasr boldly suggests that the Obama administration’s foreign policy should have followed Holbrooke’s diplomatic lead on Afghanistan<sup>17</sup> instead of employing a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy: Holbrooke believed that COIN operations would never work because Afghanistan’s government was too corrupt and that the more earnest issue at hand was Pakistan.<sup>18</sup>

Too often, President Obama would defer to his military commanders, choosing the “politically safe option that he did not like: [giving] the military what they asked for” by fully resourcing COIN, which “failed to achieve its objective.”<sup>19</sup> Nasr argues that had the administration implemented Holbrooke’s plan to talk to the Taliban beginning in 2009, the outcome of the exit from Afghanistan would have been noncatastrophic and could have potentially ended with the Taliban’s surrender.<sup>20</sup> More importantly, though, President Obama was signaling his message that diplomacy would take a backseat to military intervention as the cornerstone of his foreign policy.<sup>21</sup>

### III. Troops over Diplomacy

In reality, President Obama chose Soldiers over diplomats because he did not want to be seen as “soft.”<sup>22</sup>

meeting with Karzai and then having Obama tell Karzai, ‘Everyone in this room represents me and has my trust’ (i.e., not Holbrooke).” *Id.*

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 28.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 16.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 57.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at 50. But see Mark Landler, *Obama Defends U.S. Engagement in the Middle East*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 24, 2013, available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/us/politics/obama-iran-syria.html?ref=middleeast&\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/25/us/politics/obama-iran-syria.html?ref=middleeast&_r=1&). Based on his recent actions, President Obama has placed diplomacy at the forefront of his foreign policy as it relates to the United States’ involvement with Iran, Syria, and Ukraine. See also Ryan Lizza, *The Consequentialist*, NEW YORKER (May 2, 2011), available at [http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa\\_fact\\_lizza?currentPage=all](http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/05/02/110502fa_fact_lizza?currentPage=all) (arguing that the Arab Spring helped reshape President Obama’s foreign policy, which others have commented as a “lead from behind” doctrine).

<sup>22</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 36. “A Democratic president may be too vulnerable to public opinion on national security issues to make tough decisions.” *Id.* at 127.

Nasr views the optics of placing hard power before diplomacy as shortsighted, asserting that “[m]ilitary might is supposed to be an instrument in the diplomat’s tool kit,” not vice versa.<sup>23</sup> In other words, successful intervention is the result of diplomatic efforts and economic assistance, in addition to military and intelligence involvement. Otherwise, a monolithic solution is fleeting; even past military leaders have recognized this belief.<sup>24</sup> Nasr points out that America’s influence in the AfPak region has lessened due to the advent of COIN operations there, only to be followed up with the abrupt decision to withdraw all troops by a specified deadline.<sup>25</sup> It is not a stretch to say that Nasr, consistent with his former boss’s thinking, believed that the military was in over its head.

To bolster his argument, this notion is reinforced in Nasr’s chapter on Pakistan, one of the most significant in his book. In Nasr’s estimation, military successes in Afghanistan can partly be attributed to “Pakistani cooperation.”<sup>26</sup> He candidly labels Pakistan as “a failure of American policy, a failure of the sort that comes from the president handing foreign policy to the Pentagon and the intelligence agencies.”<sup>27</sup>

Is this position a fair criticism of the Obama administration regarding Afghanistan and Pakistan? Maybe not. Ironically, in describing the bases for failure, Nasr lays out the very reasons the administration made the choices it did. For example, it is understandable why President Obama chose to import a COIN strategy in Afghanistan when it had worked, at least nominally, in Iraq;<sup>28</sup> the architects behind that strategy were available to implement the same model in Afghanistan;<sup>29</sup> and the U.S. public was growing weary of war and wanted it to end soon.<sup>30</sup>

Along the same lines, the administration operated in a mode to pressure, instead of encourage Pakistan because the country still “support[ed] the Taliban [and] terrorism.”<sup>31</sup> Nasr’s case that winning Pakistan was simply a matter of “giving Pakistan more (much more) aid for longer (much longer)”<sup>32</sup> too easily dismisses the environment of fiscal austerity the United States was facing, plus the difficulty in 2009 of getting large amounts of international economic aid through Congress. Arguably, Nasr’s positions can be construed as myopic because they are viewed retrospectively, not from the time when the decisions and the calculus behind those decisions were actually made.<sup>33</sup>

Nasr also attacks the president’s approach to Iran and the Arab Spring.<sup>34</sup> Although Nasr applauds the lack of military action against Iran, he finds fault with solely using sanctions and isolation as the means to affect the situation in Iran because the end result will likely “cause regime collapse,” invariably “turn[ing] Iran into a failed state.”<sup>35</sup> Rather than take a hardline stance against Iran’s nuclear ambitions, which has had the opposite effect of amplifying Iran’s aggressiveness in pursuing enriched uranium in order to gain “strategic parity,”<sup>36</sup> Nasr promotes offering real incentives because “[t]ightening the noose around Iran’s neck is not changing its mind on going nuclear.”<sup>37</sup> To highlight this point, Nasr effectively draws a parallel between Iran and North Korea, stating that “[t]he problem with North Korea is not that it is a nuclear state . . . but that it is a dysfunctional and failing state, militaristic and radical, in a vital area of the world.”<sup>38</sup> In short, sanctions and isolation portend a similar fate for Iran.

Nasr does not parse words concerning his assessment of the Arab Spring. President Obama had an opportunity to shape the region but could not because he did not have a strategy in place<sup>39</sup>—“he was not really committed to

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 34.

<sup>24</sup> See 147 CONG. REC. S18457 (daily ed. Oct. 3, 2001) (statement of General Hugh Shelton) (“The military . . . is a very powerful hammer. But not every problem we face is a nail.”).

<sup>25</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 59. President Obama will withdraw all U.S. troops by the end of 2016. Andrew Tilghman, *Obama: Time to Turn the Page on Decade of War*, ARMY TIMES, May 27, 2014, available at <http://www.armytimes.com/article/20140527/NEWS05/305270037/Obama-Time-turn-page-decade-war>. President Obama’s plan calls for leaving approximately 9,800 military personnel in Afghanistan for one year after the current combat mission ends in December 2014, and will drop to 5,000 U.S. troops by the end of 2015. *Id.*

<sup>26</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 64.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 94.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 20–28.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 18. For the views of the commanders who led counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, see GEN. STANLEY MCCHRISTAL, MY SHARE OF THE TASK: A MEMOIR (2013), and FRED KAPLAN, THE INSURGENTS: DAVID PETRAEUS AND THE PLOT TO CHANGE THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR (2013).

<sup>30</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 14; see also Jennifer Agiesta & Jon Cohen, *Poll Shows Most Americans Oppose War in Afghanistan*, WASH. POST, Aug. 20, 2009, available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/08/19/AR2009081903066.html> (“A majority of Americans now see the war in Afghanistan as not worth fighting, and just a quarter say more U.S. troops should be sent to the country[.]”).

<sup>31</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 81.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 79.

<sup>33</sup> For a counterpoint to Nasr’s description of events, see Sarah Chayes, *What Vali Nasr Gets Wrong*, FOREIGN POL’Y (Mar. 12, 2013), available at [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/12/what\\_vali\\_nasr\\_gets\\_wrong\\_obama\\_afghanistan](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/03/12/what_vali_nasr_gets_wrong_obama_afghanistan).

<sup>34</sup> See *supra* note 6.

<sup>35</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 137.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 107.

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 139.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

democracy in the Middle East.”<sup>40</sup> More troubling still, the administration did not have an answer for the broader issues affecting regional stability: lack of “basic public services and infrastructure” to support a growing, youthful, and unemployed population,<sup>41</sup> as well as the deepening divide in Sunni–Shia relations.<sup>42</sup> Such a view, however, ignores the reality that these greater issues are not necessarily indicative of inadequate U.S. action, yet rather are a function of generations of repression, among other influencing factors. Quite somberly, the United States may not really be able to solve the vexing problems of the Middle East that have flummoxed American foreign policy throughout the past decade.<sup>43</sup>

Indeed, Nasr raises serious points. He crafts what are, on the surface, seemingly sensible solutions to those issues, but in truth they appear oversimplified, glossing over complexities of the region with slogan-like retorts.<sup>44</sup> Are his expectations too grand? Nasr’s conclusions are drawn upon counterfactuals, a “could, would, should” game that is too soon to be definitive as the president is still in office and the events described are still evolving today without absolute resolution. Regardless, that in no way reduces Nasr’s brilliance, which lies in issue spotting with precise clarity, stage setting, often in great detail, and explaining strategic thinking—this is apparent when he writes about the changing dynamics of China and how the turf war with the United States will occur in the Middle East and not throughout the Pacific Rim.

#### IV. Challenging China in the Middle East

Nasr insists that the foremost concern of U.S. foreign policy, and where the United States can make its biggest strategic blunder, is its policy to contain China, dubbed the “pivot to Asia.”<sup>45</sup> Nasr’s chapter on China conveys the

singular importance of why engagement is needed in the Middle East: “The Middle East remains the single most important region of the world . . . because it is where the great power rivalry with China will play out and where its outcome will be decided.”<sup>46</sup> As the United States continues to disengage from the Middle East, China is delving into the region feet first, strengthening long-term friendships with Iran and Pakistan<sup>47</sup> as a way to procure oil and energy assets, secure logistics routes, and “as part of its policy of managing America.”<sup>48</sup>

Offering a refreshing and novel take, Nasr builds the case to compel Middle East engagement by showcasing how intertwined China already is with Middle Eastern countries, from being “Pakistan’s largest defense supplier”<sup>49</sup> to “Iran’s largest trading partner.”<sup>50</sup> If the United States does not sustain or enlarge its footprint and consequently continue to exert its influence in the region, then China will sweep in and “fill the vacuum” to act as its steward.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Nasr laments that “a region dominated by China will begin to look like China,”<sup>52</sup> and as such, China should supplant counterterrorism as America’s number one foreign policy priority.<sup>53</sup> Undoubtedly, China will continuously attempt to position itself as the preeminent global power vis-à-vis its currency, military, gross domestic product, trade, etc. But it may not be entirely accurate to classify a possible void in the Middle East as simply a problem-set with only a binary choice: either a U.S. or China hegemony—such hubris may be a narrow and limiting approach, or worse, a dangerous one.

#### V. Conclusion

Contrary to what the title suggests, Nasr does not “believe America is declining.”<sup>54</sup> Rather, he beckons for

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<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 160.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 148.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 192.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 200–14.

<sup>43</sup> Foreign policy columnist Aaron David Miller astutely observed, “[t]here are no solutions to any of the Middle East’s problems, only outcomes.” Aaron David Miller, *No Good Options: U.S. Can’t Fix the Middle East, Nor Leave the Region*, NEWS TRIBUNE, June 29, 2014, available at <http://www.thenewstribune.com/2014/06/29/3266943/no-good-options-us-cant-fix-the.html?sp=99/447/>.

<sup>44</sup> For further discussion echoing the sentiment of Nasr’s use of generalizations, see Michiko Kakutani, *Superpower, Leading from Behind*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 18, 2013, at C27 (“The problem with this book is that its genuinely interesting analyses are often undermined by Mr. Nasr’s certainty about matters that are subject to an incalculable number of variables . . .”).

<sup>45</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 215.

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<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 216.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 240, 242. Pakistan also refers to China as an “all-weather” friend, implying America is not. *Id.* at 239; see also Krista Mahr, *How Pakistan and China Are Strengthening Nuclear Ties*, TIME (Dec. 2, 2013), available at <http://world.time.com/2013/12/02/how-pakistan-and-china-are-strengthening-nuclear-ties/>. For evidence of China fortifying its ties with Iran, see Ben Blanchard, *China Aims to Boost Military Relations with Iran*, REUTERS, May 5, 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/05/us-china-iran-idUSBREA4407A20140505>.

<sup>48</sup> NASR, *supra* note 1, at 247.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 240.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 244.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 236.

<sup>52</sup> *Id.* at 247.

<sup>53</sup> *Id.* at 249.

<sup>54</sup> *Id.* at 251.

“diplomacy and economic engagement [to return] to their rightful place.”<sup>55</sup> While the book—more or less a primer on current American foreign policy in the Middle East—may not yield a blueprint to necessarily overcome the challenges in the Middle East (although Nasr makes a valiant effort), it is undeniably beneficial for military professionals or denizens of foreign policy to keep as a resource in their kit bags.

On one hand, *Dispensable Nation* is a provocative read that attempts to serve as a rallying cry for more U.S. engagement; on the other hand, *Dispensable Nation* may unintentionally serve as a sobering reminder that “there cannot be an American solution to every world problem.”<sup>56</sup> The prudent approach will likely be somewhere in between.

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<sup>55</sup> *Id.* at 252.

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<sup>56</sup> President John F. Kennedy, Commencement Address at the University of Washington (Nov. 16, 1961), available at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Asset-Viewer/Aw3MwwJMf0631R6JLmAprQ.aspx>.