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Review of *The Dispensable Nation*

by Alan Hickey, Shanna Dungan, and Corey Cherrington

Not long ago, Vali Nasr released a revealing account of his time with the U.S. Department of State as an advisor to Richard Holbrooke, the U.S.'s special representative to Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his book the *Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*, we learn that the Obama administration did not live up to its potential in the realm of foreign policy. In fact, Nasr goes so far as to contend that the current leadership of the United States has hindered the U.S.'s ability to enact effective policy decisions abroad and has weakened our nation's world leadership role.

While Nasr's book is descriptive about the situation surrounding U.S. relationships with countries in the Middle East, Nasr does not bring forth any new conclusions about international decision-making today. He does manage to give a unique view on the issues with U.S. policies abroad by offering specific examples of what he has experienced. Indeed, Nasr provides readers supporting evidence for the widespread claim that the U.S. presidency has failed to make informed decisions concerning foreign politics. He accomplishes this by discussing Holbrooke's impeded actions in the State Department, along with drawing attention to the executive branch's blindness to long-term outcomes for U.S. foreign policy. Although Nasr adds relevant points to the current conversation on the efficacy of the State Department, he clouds his arguments with meticulous attention to political detail and a sudden focus switch from U.S. failures in the Middle East to worries about China. Despite these weaknesses, Nasr still accomplishes the mission he sets out on in his book—to call attention to actions (or rather inactions) by the U.S. government that are rendering an "indispensable nation" a "dispensable" one.

One of the greatest strengths of Nasr's book lies in the portrayal of Holbrooke's legacy of diplomacy throughout the Middle East. According to Nasr, Holbrooke worked

tirelessly to create opportunities for diplomatic solutions to the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan rather than resorting first to military options. A great success of Holbrooke's diplomacy resulted in the signing of an economic treaty between Afghanistan and Pakistan, allowing Afghanis to travel across Pakistan to sell their goods in Indian markets. To accomplish this, Holbrooke and other diplomatic officers coordinated gathering the representatives from Afghanistan and Pakistan in the same room and not letting them leave until the deal was signed. Nasr quotes Holbrooke who said, "Don't let them out before they are done; don't go in, but stay right outside in case they need technical help." The pressure Holbrooke put on Afghanistan and Pakistan to cooperate on an economic deal paid off; the two countries signed the first treaty between them in decades.

Another strength of the book comes from Nasr's critique of the executive branch's failure to enact foreign policy based on long-term planning. Nasr lambasts President Obama's changing stance in handling the conflicts in the Middle East. He lashes out against the directions that America's foreign policy has taken, from supporting military solutions to troop withdrawals in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Nasr points out how the Obama administration was crippled because of its focus on maintaining public opinion in preparation for the 2012 elections rather than focusing on actual, long-term solutions that might have mitigated conflict in the region. Many of Holbrooke's policy suggestions fell upon the deaf ears of the executive branch, and the opportunities to diplomatically bring peace to the region slipped through U.S. hands like sand. By examining the failures of the executive branch to implement diplomatic solutions in the Middle East, Nasr reminds readers of the need for politicians and policy makers to have a "diplomacy-first" attitude rather than resorting to military action or not acting at all.

One of the most apparent weaknesses in Nasr's book is the incredibly over-considered minutia of foreign policy strategy, giving it the air of a strategic play-book. Nasr may have been afraid that his foreign policy criticisms would be taken too lightly or lost in the detailed initiatives and considerations of the State Department. As a result, he packs his work with cumbersome information and drawn out guides to possible foreign actions and potential U.S. responses. Nasr focuses on several countries in the Middle East and attempts to create a comprehensive political and cultural guide for each region—an admirable task but one that is far too ambitious and lengthy for a single book. Each of his chapters could easily be broken apart into separate volumes, each with the purpose of advising the State Department on feasible and appropriate actions in the various countries.

A second weakness lies in Nasr's less comprehensive but alarmist views of China. Almost the entirety of his book focuses on the woes of the Middle East and only occasionally references China waiting patiently to the east. At the very end of his work, he suddenly brings China on stage, pronounces it the villain with great pomp, and then drags it off stage leaving the reader concerned but entirely unsure as to why. When he discusses China in the last moments of his work, he references

China's economic rise as "not . . . as disruptive as that of Japan or Germany" but then almost immediately describes China's rise as militaristic, with the growing potential for conflict. He continues to describe his concerns regarding China as the U.S.'s main competition in the Middle East, but this does not match his earlier analysis of economic conditions in these regions. Nasr's economic understanding throughout the book appears limited and does not capture the full picture of the economic issues he so briefly discusses.

In weighing the strengths and weaknesses of Nasr's book, we find that Nasr's core message of the importance of seeking long-term, diplomatic solutions to the ills that plague the Middle East shines through. Nasr's elegy for Holbrooke captures the vision of how diplomatic solutions are worth the effort to nail them down. Further, his critique of the attitudes in the Obama administration illustrates how politics and elections can dismember foreign policy initiatives that focus on long-term solutions when staying in office is the main concern. Though readers may get a little lost in Nasr's discourse on U.S. foreign policy strategies and feel unsure about the economic situation between China and the Middle East, the essence of Nasr's narrative gives readers a good foundation for understanding what matters most in U.S. foreign relations: diplomacy.