

**Book Review**  
**By**  
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**Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Double Day Random House, 2013), pp. 300**

The book titled “*The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat*” is written by Vali Nasr who is a renowned American academic and foreign policy expert of Iranian origin. The author has previously served as a senior advisor to late Ambassador Richard Holbrooke at the State Department’s office of Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) from 2009 to 2011. The author is currently serving as the dean of the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University and has been the author of several bestselling books on Muslim World.

This book is essentially about three interrelated issues in US foreign Policy. One, waning US influence in the world, second, threat of other international players, particularly China, in filling the leadership vacuum in critical regions of the world and third, increasing failure of United States to shape the outcome of Arab Spring, a phenomenon described by the author as a *destabilizing force* for American influence in the region.

Contrary to the perception one might get from the title of the book, Vali Nasr has maintained in this book that US is not a declining global power but instead there has been a surge in challenges confronting the US in the critical regions of the world which are Middle East, South Asia and Asia – Pacific.

There are two themes throughout the book particularly in the chapters related to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Middle East and China. One is that United State’s response to changing geopolitical situation in these important regions has not been proportional to the magnitude of challenges that these changes pose. Two, while Obama administration announced its rebalancing strategy towards Asia – Pacific, it will not be able to achieve the desired outcome without “fixing” Middle East. This perhaps explains the use of the word RETREAT in the book’s title.

Based on an inside perspective, Vali Nasr also dwells briefly on the internal mechanisms of US foreign policy making process. He has underlined the tensions between the State Department and Pentagon that impacted on the outcome of US policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This tension was one of the reasons, according to

the author, why Pakistan was “lost” which is also the title of a chapter in the book. Furthermore, he gives details of institutional differences within United States in policy/approach towards Afghanistan and particularly how the late Ambassador and then head of SRAP Richard Holbrooke’s initiatives were frustrated by White House and Pentagon. This can be useful material to test the assumptions of relevant theories in International Relations concerning the role of domestic politics and bureaucracy in influencing foreign policy behavior of the states.

The underlying theme of the chapters regarding Pakistan and Iran is that United State’s policy of threats and pressures as opposed to aid and diplomacy has failed to yield the desirable outcome for US interests in Afghanistan and the region. On Pakistan, Vali Nasr correctly summarizes that Washington cannot contain Pakistan in South Asia and its efforts to do so have failed miserably in worst years of relationship in 2011 and 2012.

The author also narrates the viewpoint that exists within US policy makers regarding Pakistan: that it is an enemy state and the least US can get from that country is issue based cooperation and not a long term relationship. Similar viewpoint dominates within Pakistan regarding the US. Vali Nasr argues in favor of trade and diplomacy with Pakistan for the relationship to be salvaged.

On Iran, Vali Nasr has warned against too much pressure of sanction regime because Iran can implode from within that will not be good news for a region which is already in turmoil. Iran, according to the author, is a balancer against “Sunni fundamentalism” and political Islam in the region. Excessive US pressure on Iranian nuclear program can disturb this balance which will be determinantal to US interests in the Muslim world. After all, the Iranian regime has played a stabilizing role in Iraq and Afghanistan and this has promoted not receded US interests.

The chapters on Arab Spring and the China challenge give an incisive view of how Obama administration thinks about these two phenomena that will certainly have global implications. On Arab Spring, Vali Nasr argues rightly that, from the US perspective, the uprisings are destabilizing for its interests and have given rise to forces that are Islamists and anti-American. Vali Nasr resents US response to these uprisings as weak and in his view US could have done much more to promote “real democracy” in Middle East.

On the China challenge, Vali Nasr does not shy away from describing US’s rebalancing to Asia- Pacific as China containment policy. He argues that China is poised to play a bigger role in Middle East and Central Asia due to its energy needs. US in his opinion cannot manage China’s rise while pivoting away from Middle East as both Middle East and East Asia are connected in a complex web of dependencies of East Asian economies on energy imports from Middle East.

While the author has discussed Arab spring and its different dimensions, the issue of the Syrian uprising and American policy towards it should have been covered in more detail. The conclusion of Arab spring and the emerging geopolitical order in Middle East has much to do with the outcome of Syrian uprisings. This is because the ongoing upheaval in Syria is distinct as compared to what happened elsewhere in the region: that revolution is neither nationalistic nor quasi-Islamic nor democratic but essentially Islamic as is evident that the overwhelming number of general population and majority of independent rebel groups are struggling to establish the basis of a transnational Islamic political order in Syria.

It is evident that US, Russia and regional Middle Eastern regimes are working together to prevent this outcome since the start of Syrian uprisings. The collapse of the Sykes-Picot agreement is very much a possibility and Syria may well be its starting point in the region. Its tremors will effect the entire Islamic World. This is the reason why in my opinion the center of gravity of Middle East is not shifting from East and South (areas bordering Syria and Jordan and Egypt) towards Persian Gulf and Iran, as opined by the author but will remain where it has always been.

Author's perspective on Turkey's "pivot" towards Middle East and being a role model for countries struggling for political identity in Arab world have been covered in his earlier book *Forces of Fortune*. Although demonstrations in Turkey have been a recent phenomenon but still its has exposed many assumptions made by academics and foreign policy experts regarding the stability of Turkish model i.e. coexistence of Islam and Democracy. The analysis in this book seems to take for granted that Tayyab Erdogan's regime will remain immune to such societal pressures.

On China's challenge to US position in Middle East, the analysis seems to ring alarms bells regarding China's imminent domination in the Middle East even though the author identifies caution and patience as the overriding factor in Chinese strategic thinking earlier.

China in my view has two basic problems due to which it will not be able to challenge US position in Middle East. One, China lacks political instruments to control that region as compared to US. This situation is unlikely to change unless some drastic anti-American political change occurs in Arab world. Second, China's own economic slowdown and a looming financial crisis will keep China focused inward and more dependent upon US for stable import of oil.

This is an excellent book which must be read by academic researchers, practitioners of policy and strategy in the fields of security, foreign policy and importantly the observers of US-Pakistan relations, Middle East, US Policy and China.

The book is divided into eight chapters, and the sequence is set in a coherent manner that fits the narrative built by the author on the subject while the language is simple

and easy to understand for the readers, something that is not easy to achieve considering the complex nature of the problems discussed by the author.

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