

“The Dispensable Nation - American Foreign Policy in Retreat”

Review of Vali Nasr's Book

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Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

I chose to read this book for two reasons: first, the curiosity of the title by an author of Iranian descent; and secondly because the author, Vali Nasr, has had by his account some significant contact with the U.S. government establishment.

It proved to be an interesting read for the political commentary on his own time inside the establishment and for its additional information concerning how the Obama administration operated during its first years. The information used in the book, the ‘facts’, are inarguable and verifiable, but it is the assessments, implications, and interpretations of the significance of these facts that is typical U.S. rhetoric and hubris. The latter range from sadly amusing, to fantasy, to absolute rubbish.

The major irony, intended of course, is that The Dispensable Nation is a ‘hook’ and the obvious tendency of Nasr’s argument is that the U.S. is indeed indispensable. Vali Nasr claims to be a child of the Iranian revolution, although being educated in England before going to the U.S. after 1979. It is fully obvious that he has incorporated the fundamental U.S. ideology of the benevolent nation guiding the world into his thought processes regardless of the high militarization of U.S. foreign policy throughout its history.

In sum, he argues that the U.S. should not retreat from the Middle East because of the need to stop the influence of hegemonic China. The indispensable nation can solve all the problems there. Indeed!

The book has two big misses apart from its poor interpretations. Published in 2013 means having been written probably in 2010-12, which makes the book obsolete almost immediately as events in Syria and the Ukraine have added great significance to both Russia as more than a regional power. That is no fault of the author’s other than as a thread that he did not consider on his own radar of U.S. ideological intentions. Of course, had he written later, it could be readily assumed that he would write about “Russian aggression” and the “evil Putin” in full accordance with current U.S. foreign policy propaganda.

The second miss is an apparent complete lack of understanding of the global financial situation and its ongoing restructuring with the BRICS bank, and the many countries that are doing their best to avoid using the U.S. dominated systems such as the World Bank, the IMF, SWIFT, the BIS. That all reflects on Nasr’s lack of mention that in the Middle East, it is the control of the U.S. fiat petro-dollar as reserve currency rather than the oil itself that is the largest threat to U.S. hegemony around the world. Without that reserve currency status and oil priced in dollars, the U.S. becomes insolvent and bankrupt.

Finally in general terms, this work suffers from “Vietnam Syndrome”: our intentions were good, we are an honourable nation, we just made some mistakes along the way. We are indispensable none the less.

Trying to build the “indispensable” line of thought without stating it too early, Nasr continually reiterates that if the U.S. were not where it was, if it were to actually retreat then the world would be “chaos.” That is a highly arguable proposition as it has been the U.S. imperial hegemonic drive that has brought chaos to so many regions of the world (see William Blum, Stephen Kinzer, Andrew Bacevich among many others to read the many military depredations of the U.S. around the world.)

Domestic ruminations

Nasr begins with an insiders view of the U.S. policy establishment under Obama, having worked with Obama, Richard Holbrooke, and Hillary Clinton. An attempt is made to separate the “military intelligence complex” as being against the “foreign policy establishment.” That may be all well and good for domestic consumption, but for an observer of the effects on foreign policy, what matters is what is done rather than what is argued about between various government sections.

The admission is made that “we had got the Middle East badly wrong” yet says “retreating from the region would be disastrous,” without saying disastrous for whom. Previewing his conclusion – as good writers should – he indicates that “the coming geopolitical competition with China will not be played out in the Pacific theatre...but played in the Middle East....none of the issues that brought us to the Middle East in the first place have been resolved.”

War as diplomacy

While attempting to keep “diplomacy” and “war” separate, Nasr only succeeds in showing how the war option is the U.S.’ ultimate diplomatic solution. Holbrooke says, “fighting is the means to facilitate [reconciliation].” Clinton follows the same strategy as “hard power is to facilitate diplomatic breakthroughs.” Really!? It is not a diplomatic breakthrough if the military is used to subjugate the other side – other than from the Washington consensus perspective.

The work voyages through Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and the “Arab Spring” before arriving in China. Iran of course is “obdurate” while the U.S. has used “persistence and a clear headed strategy for managing the system.” By Nasr’s account, “Our current policy will eventually turn Iran into a failed state.” Possibly, but more likely it will turn Iran into a successful state aligned with China, Russia, and many other countries around the world attempting to shake off the U.S. hegemon.

As for Iraq, “the region lost trust in American power...we had neither the patience nor perseverance to see through what we started.” Left unchecked “strife...could produce a belt of instability.” Again, really!? That arc of instability has been the U.S. goal all along in order to gain control of the region, not for ‘democracy’ or ‘freedom’ or ‘rule of law’ but for simple primal hegemonic control of the people and resources – in that respect they have succeeded quite well. Perhaps Nasr should read Pepe Escobar’s “Empire of Chaos” to grasp a glimpse of how the ‘rest of the world’ sees the U.S. – and who actually controls the “New Silk Road.”

Enter China

Without berating the reader with a long litany of Nasr's ideological perspectives through this voyage, the real argument centers on China.

Throughout the China discussion, Nasr reiterates the Chinese drive towards hegemony while the U.S. is the paragon supporter of an "open international economic system – built on the principles of free trade and open exchange of goods, services, and money," while fearing that China's drive is "carving out various regions of the world into spheres of influence from which America would be excluded."

Nasr wants to encourage "China to fully embrace the rules and institutions that govern global economics and international politics...the normative global order that we helped create and have enforced for more than sixty years, and which China had no part in creating."

Well of course, China should submit itself to the Washington consensus, the very institutions that are doing their best to harvest the wealth of the world for the corporate elites. The "normative global order" is only the norm for U.S. hegemony, wherein everyone is subservient to the new world order ruled by the U.S. Not likely.

It continues throughout the finale, where what is desired is "a rules based system – the one base on Western liberal values and reflecting the fundamental tenets of the international system," a desire to "entrench rules and norms." Yes, of course, a "Western" system, with – at least in this work – an undefined set of fundamentals for an international system.

Simply put the author is well behind the game and carries a set of wishful thinking that the U.S. is the leader of a well regulated and orderly economic order. Take away the military, take away the US petro-dollar reserve currency, take away the not so free trade agreements that favour corporations over sovereign nations and indigenous peoples, and perhaps the world might find an international system based on real democracy, and not the democracy that comes from the barrel of a gun or an Apache helicopter fired Hellfire missile – or some drone managed by some internet stick jockey ten thousand kilometers away.

The unintended irony on the 'hook' of the title is that the U.S. is truly a dispensable nation. Perhaps not all of it, but its military that has created so much "chaos" that Nasr fears looms if the U.S. withdraws from being the global hegemon. Further, its economic system, teetering on the edge of collapse as the Federal Bank prints trillions of petro-dollars, will need by necessity to accept its place as just another devalued fiat currency in the world. Yes, China is rising while the U.S. declines.

U.S. foreign policy is not in retreat, perhaps in tatters and rags, wrapped in a flag stained in the blood of far too many millions of people around the world. Works such as The Dispensable Nation simply highlight the arrogance and hubris of an empire in decline.

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