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## “American Foreign Policy in Retreat? A Discussion with Vali Nasr”

The Brookings Institution

Tuesday, May 14, 2013 9:30am – 11am

The Brookings Institution, Falk Auditorium, 1775 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, D.C.

The Brookings Institution held a discussion titled “American Foreign Policy in Retreat? A Discussion with Vali Nasr” to explore the future of American power and foreign policy engagement. Brookings Nonresident Senior Fellow **Vali Nasr** contributed thoughts from his new book. **Robert Kagan**, Brookings Senior Fellow, contributed to the discussion and **Martin Indyk**, Vice President and Director for Foreign Policy at Brookings, moderated.

Nasr offered reflections on American foreign policy engagement with Afghanistan and Pakistan, focusing on the Obama administration’s strategic review for a military surge in the Afghan war and the failure of the U.S. to foster a viable peace settlement with the Taliban. Outlining the U.S. military strategy for the Afghan war, Nasr posited that a diplomatic option to bring the war to a close and craft a reconciliation process with Taliban fighters was “never really discussed or put on the table.” That missed opportunity resulted in negative outcomes of the war in Afghanistan and is indicative, he argued, of how the U.S. understands fighting wars – engagements without a broader political solution. **“Afghanistan, in many ways, was a defeat for American foreign policy,”** he charged, saying that those within the administration who held senior foreign policymaking positions believed that the Taliban did not want to talk, and viewed the military defeat of Taliban fighters more important than political negotiation. “Everyone said there was a diplomatic path in Afghanistan except the U.S....the military thought talk of diplomacy was weakness.” Furthermore, he charged that **“If there is one fundamental assumption beyond addressing the Afghanistan security threat...is that broadly we don’t need to worry about the Middle East,”** and pushed back against the notion that the U.S. can continue to stay only minimally engaged in the region. Serious threats to America’s strategic interests exist in the region, and unlike U.S. political and economic engagement in eastern Europe after World War II, the U.S. approach to the Middle East is “by and large a reactive policy.” Singling out Egypt and Syria, Nasr insisted that the U.S. must acknowledge the potential for destabilization unless America engages the transitions politically and economically.

Kagan reminded Nasr that his assessment missed important components, namely the poor situation that President Obama inherited when he came into office, both in terms of poor policies in the Iraq and Afghan wars under President Bush and terrible economic circumstances at home. “American interventionism is heavily influenced by those kinds of [economic] situations,” he said, adding that it would be difficult to imagine a president elected in 2008 that would not dial back political and economic engagement in the world under those circumstances. Similarly, he argued that the Middle East poses a uniquely difficult kind of problem for U.S. foreign policy. **“[There’s] more going on than basic strategic and economic issues...the U.S. is still finding our way.”** Kagan also questioned the feasibility of the U.S.’s policy of instituting a military surge deadline and how such an exit would be perceived in terms on negotiating a peace settlement with the Taliban.

Indyk opened the discussion to the audience and directed a question to Nasr concerning the use of nonlethal options to resolve war. Nasr commented that, in order to prioritize the work of the State Department during wars, **a structural change in the system of leadership must occur that addresses diplomatic options.** He highlighted the crisis in Syria and exemplified the focus in the media on American military intervention as the primary foreign policy question concerning Syria rather than what ancillary options could be deployed, such as organizing international partners and raising the specter of American “convening power,” in order to avoid destabilization. In the case of the work of the special representative to Afghanistan **Richard Holbrooke**, an attendee asked how a diplomatic option that is advanced by such high-ranking official could not be considered by the National Security Council or President Obama. Nasr answered that President Obama early on shot down a diplomatic option in Afghanistan, didn’t ask for other non-military options, and never met one-on-one with Holbrooke to discuss diplomatic efforts.