

CFR Conference on Diversity in International Affairs

The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), along with the Global Access Pipeline (GAP) and the International Career Advancement Program (ICAP), hosted the Conference on Diversity in International Affairs in Washington, DC, on April 4–5, 2014. The goal of the conference, part of CFR's Expanded Diversity Initiative in Foreign Policy, was to connect professionals and students from diverse background to career opportunities in international affairs. The following sections summarize the keynote address, the special guest discussion, and the two plenary sessions.

Welcoming Remarks and Keynote Address With Vali Nasr

The conference opened with welcoming remarks from James M. Lindsay, senior vice president, director of studies, and Maurice R. Greenberg chair at CFR. Vali Nasr, dean of Johns Hopkins University's Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, spoke at the opening session and Kendra Gaither, executive director of Carnegie Mellon University's Center for International Policy and Innovation, presided over the session.

The discussion began with Gaither asking Nasr for his thoughts on the 2014 Afghanistan presidential elections and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian peace process. He noted that Afghanistan has changed since the last election, and he expressed his hopes that the election will be seen as credible and legitimate. Gaither asked about the stability of Pakistan and of the region more broadly. Nasr noted that Pakistan fears Indian influence in Afghanistan and that Pakistan seeks to weaken and control Afghanistan. This stance influences Pakistan's policy toward the United States and Afghanistan. Nasr also reflected on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and admitted that he had always been pessimistic about the chances for success. He pointed to unfavorable regional conditions and a busy U.S. administration as the potential drivers for the lack of results.

Gaither then turned to professional development and asked Nasr if he could offer advice to students looking to enter the foreign policy field. Nasr noted that it is an exciting time to enter the profession. He also stressed the importance of a good education that provides the right tools to operate at the intersection of different policy areas. He also noted the importance of a possessing a solid depth of knowledge and maintaining interest in other cultures and languages. He also noted, later in the session, the importance of remembering that there is no substitute for hard work and knowledge.

Nasr offered his thoughts on other foreign policy topics such as women's rights in Afghanistan, the International Criminal Court, Egypt's future, and the degree of influence that financial markets have on international affairs. He also discussed youth empowerment across the world and commented on the importance of economics and growing the middle class. In order to do this it will require large investments from the United States, not in the form of aid but as investments in other societies. Nasr

concluded with his thoughts on Egypt and noted that it is likely to be more authoritarian post–Arab Spring than it was under former president Hosni Mubarak.

Special Guest Discussion on Diversity in International Affairs With Susan Rice

Susan Rice, the U.S. national security adviser, spoke at a special guest discussion on diversity in international affairs. James M. Lindsay presided over the session.

Lindsay started by asking Rice about her passion for diversity in international affairs. Rice responded, saying, “We are a nation that has every element of the world represented in it, and it is one of our, I think, extraordinary strengths, [but] when you look at the profile of those who are making and running our national security and foreign policy, it doesn’t look anything like the diversity of America.” She noted that “it is still, overwhelmingly, predominately white and male, less male but still predominantly male, and there are very few visible minorities.” She continued, “We have so many strengths as a nation besides our size, our wealth, our resources, our military, our intellectual capital, our technology; one of our greatest strengths is our people. If we were harnessing that diversity we would be making better foreign policy decisions.”

“I am deeply troubled that we are not generating the next and the next generation of diverse leaders in national security and foreign policy,” Rice continued, “and it pains me now, as somebody who has risen high in the field, that I have not succeeded in finding enough young people that I can nurture and bring along.”

“We have a broader problem that goes beyond the field of foreign policy and national security,” she added. “We have a problem of attracting visible minorities into careers that involve social sciences, liberal arts and out of the professional fields.” Rice described this situation as a “serious pipeline problem that goes back to youth and all the way up to the senior levels.”

Lindsay followed up by asking to what extent minority professionals face obstacles because they are closed out of networks or lack mentors. Rice said that “it is critically important to have mentors.” She continued, “I don’t think the background of the mentor matters as much as having somebody that takes an interest in you.” She also stressed the important of finding a mentor who is “willing to challenge you to do what you are passionate about.”

Lindsay asked if Rice had any career advice for young and mid-career professionals. Rice said to “do what you love doing” and urged “people to get out of their comfort zones and learn and try things that they don’t feel they’re good at.” She reiterated that “challenging yourself is critically important.” She also said that “careers, life, professional pursuits are not zero-sum outcomes; you ought to be able to learn from one another” and that students “should be supporting and leveraging one another—

leveraging in the most positive sense.” Rice continued, “The more time you can spend abroad and the better you can be at a language—that’s an advantage.”

Rice also discussed work and life balance and career transitions. She noted that she has been “very fortunate” with a healthy family and a husband “who is incredibly supportive,” but she doesn’t “prescribe to anyone else because everyone’s circumstances are different.” She also noted regarding career transitions that students should “embrace change” and “not . . . be scared” of transitions. She concluded the session by discussing preserving the language ability that immigrant communities provide. She noted that “we are, perhaps, not utilizing a capacity or resource that we have to our greatest ability. Maybe there is a way . . . that we can begin to encourage and nurture the preservation of languages in families and education.”

Plenary Session: Development: Women and Youth

Gwendolyn Mikell, professor of anthropology and foreign service at Georgetown University’s Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, and Zeenat Rahman, special adviser on global youth issues at the U.S. Department of State, spoke at the first plenary session on the second day of the conference. Nancy Walker, president of AfricaNet Consulting, presided over the session.

The speakers began the session by describing their own areas of interest. Mikell discussed women’s empowerment in international affairs, assessing whether and to what degree women have gained in education and economic access and participation. She stressed the importance of political empowerment for women. Rahman discussed youth developments in international affairs. She noted that over 60 percent of the world’s population is less than thirty years old. Her focus is on ensuring that youth, which makes up such a large part of the world, gain access to “ladders of opportunity.”

Rahman discussed how young people contribute to the foreign policy discussion. She noted the importance of young people holding political leaders accountable, particularly if they want economic opportunities and other participation. Mikell added that inclusive economic growth is also a women’s issue. One of the challenges she identified was ways for societies to “cut through some of the constraints placed on women.” Only when women are fully engaged in the economic and political arenas, she explained, will women see rising levels of economic growth.

Walker then asked the speakers about careers in foreign policy and noted that international careers can be difficult on families. Mikell discussed her personal travel and sacrifices to work in this field, but she also noted that these difficulties should not inhibit someone from pursuing their passion. Rahman agreed and noted that there are many different professional options and ways to be involved. Walker noted that it is important to be open to different opportunities. She also noted that as a mother, raising a family internationally can be rewarding.

The discussion then turned to role models and networking. Mikell noted the importance of professionals coming back and supporting their home communities. Rahman discussed the lack of readily available role models and solid networks for women of color. Particularly, she noted, there is a need for role models who are younger and at a more similar stage in their careers. Mikell agreed and pointed to sororities and fraternities as useful networks.

Mikell and Rahman discussed the importance of working with diaspora communities in the United States. Mikell also commented on the fact that women constitute only 17 percent of the U.S. Congress. She said that other countries are coming up with ways to solve this problem and that the United States should as well. She also raised the idea that some young men are suffering from the same dearth of role models as women.

The session concluded with a discussion of professional development and women's empowerment issues. Rahman suggested crafting a personal narrative within the context of the larger framework of the field of interest and to then make clear what skills are needed to be successful in that field. She also noted that it is important to take criticism seriously, not personally, and that there are no shortcuts to being successful. Mikell ended by noting how important it is to speak with conviction, and that students should consider crafting their own career paths in foreign policy.

Closing Plenary Session: How Technology Is Changing the World We Live In

Albert Cho, vice president, strategy and business development at Xylem, Inc.; Maria Teresa Kumar, president and chief executive officer of Voto Latino; and Peter Singer, director of the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, spoke at the closing plenary session on the second day of the conference. Guillermo Santiago Christensen, an attorney at Baker Botts LLP, presided over the session.

The session began with a discussion of which technology each speaker thought will be the most disruptive. Singer said the “where” and “when” of war has changed and that has potentially frightening implications. Now, with drone technology, a soldier who is three thousand miles away can operate in that battlefield. Kumar noted that technology has disrupted politics. For example, young people have been able to start political movements using technology like text messaging. Christensen then asked Cho to reflect on the contrast of Mexico having widespread access to cell phones but not clean water. Cho noted that technology is certainly part of the solution to many sustainable development problems, but that government institutions, rule of law, and transparency are also important. The most disruptive technology in sustainable development, according to Cho, is the convergence of information technology and infrastructure. This allows for “real time situational awareness” of infrastructure weakness.

Christensen then asked how important understanding technology is for professional success. Kumar noted that her business uses technology to reach millions of people overnight and that has been critical to success. Singer pointed out that technology is no longer just for technology professionals, but that everyone operates in this space. He noted that everyone will need fluency in this new realm. Cho commented on the importance of working in both the public and private sectors. He found, through his own professional development, that a diversity of experience helped him bring innovation to other jobs, including innovations involving new technology.

The discussion turned to the recent Supreme Court ruling on net neutrality. Kumar noted that free and easy access to the Internet is vital to her organization and she fears that the ruling on net neutrality will stop the economy from growing “smart, safe, and quick.” Singer largely agreed and noted that trust, which he characterized as the fundamental tenet of the Internet, is being attacked more broadly through the rise of cyber crime and the National Security Agency’s mass data-collection program. He worried that the Internet the next generation inherits will not be as free and open as the Internet that currently exists.

Cho commented on the issue of increasing access to technology in the inner city and other low-income areas. He noted that as cloud technology improves, it will allow for technology to move out of the hardware experience and into the cloud. Kumar and Singer both agreed that there needs to be a change in the way students are taught. Kumar pointed out that often teachers do not understand the technology themselves. Singer noted that the concept of “cyber hygiene,” or protecting oneself online, needs to become part of the curriculum in schools.

Cho discussed how to best navigate institutional constraints. He advised the group to try to do more with the resources available before asking the organization for new resources. He also suggested finding a higher-level “champion” in the organization who will vouch for projects and ideas. Kumar agreed that it was important to have buy-in and consent from superiors. Cho also suggested making sure to communicate success to the organization. Singer added that it is important to be at the cutting edge of the field, and to try and address a problem that the organization wants fixed.

Singer commented that expertise in programming is not necessary to succeed in today’s job market, although it is a useful skill. Programming does open up career options, he said, but it is more important to understand technology and have an adaptive attitude to new technologies. Kumar noted that it is critical to be knowledgeable enough to ask the right questions regarding technology. Cho agreed and added that there are other technical skills, such as statistical modeling and data mining that are also useful and attractive to potential employers.

The speakers also discussed the next technological revolution and directions for their future work. Kumar discussed singularity, or the melding of man and machine, as a likely end point. She also questioned what continued automation of manufacturing means for the U.S. workforce. Cho suggested that by opening data sets to other individuals who might be able to use that data, there will be increased innovation. Singer noted that's it important to remember that humans are still the common denominator for technology and that there are consequences and costs for all advances.

The discussion concluded with professional advice. Kumar and Singer noted the importance of remaining intellectually curious. Cho added that it is vital to remain focused and relevant. He suggested that professionally, first try to identify potential problems, and then decide what to equip oneself with to find the solution.