

# Book Review: Crisis in Central Asia

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Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid. 544 pages, Published by Viking, a division of Penguin Books. US\$27.95 (US\$18.45 on Amazon)

Lahore-based Ahmed Rashid has been writing fearlessly and with much sense about events in Pakistan, Afghanistan and the neighborhood for 20 years. Unfortunately not too many of the policymakers in either the US or Pakistan have read his accounts, let alone learned from them. So it is with a mixture of muted anger and not-so-muted anguish that he describes the succession of policy failures which created the self-explanatory title of his latest book: Descent into Chaos – the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia.

Here are two principal villains, the administration of George W. Bush and his neocon ideologues, and Pakistan's ISI and its captive, President Pervez Musharraf. Heroes there are none, though Afghan president Hamid Karzai comes close as an intelligent and honorable man doing his best in very difficult circumstances, not least having to deal with Pakistan's ISI — the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate — which was probably involved in the murder of his anti-Taliban father.

The villains are real enough. A US campaign run from the Pentagon by Donald Rumsfeld, which was unwilling to commit ground troops to efforts to capture Osama Bin Laden when the latter was forced from Tora Bora. A US which instead of putting its weight behind the reconstruction of a post-Taliban

Afghanistan embarked on an Iraq war on a concocted excuse, in the process diverting manpower and money from Afghanistan, alienating vast swathes of moderate Muslim opinion, notably in Pakistan, and most of its European allies, and continuing to back Musharraf despite his failure to end ISI support for the Taliban. Although Osama remained at large, for the US Afghanistan and the Taliban became a sideshow as the US set about reshaping the Middle East according to the neocon (and Israeli) blueprint.

More than six years after 9/11 and the rout of the Taliban by US-backed forces, the Taliban are again on the offensive in Afghanistan and have sunk deep roots into Pakistan, presenting a challenge that may defeat and even undo NATO, the oldest and most powerful military alliance of modern times.

The mixture of arrogance and ignorance displayed by the US leadership is not news. But this book lays out in gruesome detail its impact on this crucial part of central Asia. By contrast, the machinations of the ISI were at least logical within the terms of reference by which this unaccountable body acts. It has two interrelated obsessions to which have been added some of the military's own leanings towards fundamentalist ideas. Firstly to counter perceived Indian threats by causing trouble for India (notably in Kashmir) and secondly that forces sympathetic to Pakistan rule in Kabul. This is doubly important given that Pakistan must also attempt to have a loose hegemony over Pashtus on both sides of the border to keep the issue of Afghan claims on Pakistan territory, or demands for a separate Pashtunistan, at bay.

This interpretation of Pakistan national interest explains why Musharraf has done the bare minimum in reining in the Taliban. But it is not one which sits well with the author, who fears that it has made Pakistan a playground for suicide bombers, suppressed democracy and fostered separatism in Baluchistan. The US may have alienated Pakistanis but as the ballot box shows that has not made them any more sympathetic to religious extremists.

Rashid also notes the knock-on impact of events in Afghanistan and Pakistan on the neighboring former Soviet republics where militant Islam is now squaring up against old-fashioned thug rulers, notably Uzbekistan's Karimov.

But for all the strength of this book, perhaps Rashid is too focused on the misdeeds of the US and Musharraf. Maybe Afghanistan – which was assembled by an expansionist Pashtu monarch and then became a convenient buffer state between British, Russian and Persian empires – no longer has a *raison d'être*. Maybe it can't be put back together again. Maybe too, Pakistan's democrats are far too focused on politics and money, on the heartlands of Punjab and Sindh, to get to grips with the Taliban and the problems of the tribal areas, and too afraid of the military to get to grips with the ISI.

For sure, Afghanistan and Pakistan would both benefit if NATO put more men and money into defeating the Taliban, and put more pressure on Islamabad to help. But maybe the west is right in thinking that the Taliban are now a sideshow from their point of view and that the mainsprings of militant Islam are closer to home. Rashid, as a close neighbor, naturally wants to see the emergence of a peaceful, modern, non-militant and perhaps even democratic Afghanistan. Pakistan for sure would benefit from that. But NATO members now losing troops by the day might wonder whether to quit and let Pakistan sort out a problem which it helped create.