

Descent Into Chaos, by Ahmed Rashid

Chronicles of a chaotic state

Reviewed by Kim Sengupta
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When journalists flocked to Afghanistan in 2001, many of us were clutching Ahmed Rashid's book on the Taliban: an invaluable insight into the regime which at the time had little outside exposure, and was now about to be toppled. Another book much in demand among the hacks was George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman*, not only a rollicking tale but also one that gave a pretty good account of the First Afghan War in the early 19th century.

Seven years into the "war on terror" as Britain fights its fourth war in Afghanistan, Rashid, a distinguished and brave journalist, gives us his analysis of how and why the West, as he believes, is losing to the forces of militant Islam in this conflict. Some of his thesis on the Afghan debacle is pretty well-known and widely accepted: that the US and Britain effectively abandoned Afghanistan in their quest to topple Saddam Hussein, allowing the Taliban to return, the warlords to retrench themselves and Afghanistan to become the heroin exporter to the world, with 93 per cent of global supply. We remember Tony Blair declaring after the fall of the Taliban in 2001, "this time we will not walk away", before doing precisely that by following America into the quagmire of Iraq.

However, when it comes to Rashid's interpretation of Washington's guiding strategy, one must take issue. His assertion that "naming the adversary as 'terrorism' enabled the neocons to broaden the specific struggle against al-Qaeda into a global conflict with Islam" does not really stand up to scrutiny. The neocons driving foreign policy in the Bush White House had some outlandish ideas, but to say that there was a grand plan for a crusade against Islam is simply wrong.

Rashid is better on things closer to home. He has travelled in the region from his base in Lahore and gives a glimpse into what has been unfolding in the former Soviet central Asia, with its mix of resurgent Islam and the trafficking of Afghan opium. Islamist fighters from these countries are now an integral part of the international jihad, a development not much covered by the international media.

Rashid's knowledge of Afghanistan is extensive. He was following what was going on there as Soviet forces withdrew, when most of the rest of the world had lost interest. Many prominent Afghans he met, in exile from the Taliban, are now leaders. This access allows him to chart the shifting political and tribal dynamics of the country particularly well.

Rashid sees President Hamid Karzai, an acquaintance of long standing, turn increasingly bitter at American and British failure to make the necessary investment in his country, and enraged at Pakistani attempts to destabilise it. Karzai and other Afghans watch in disbelief as America fails to prevent Osama Bin Laden's escape from Tora Bora into Pakistan and allows the Pakistanis to fly away some of al-Qa'ida's top lieutenants out of Kunduz.

On Pakistan, the land of his birth, Rashid comes into his own. His knowledge of events and people there is second to none and the information he has gathered, often at great personal risk, makes alarming reading.

Those of us who go to Afghanistan quite frequently are only too aware of the "Pakistani connection". The Taliban make no secret of their safe havens across the border. We meet suicide bombers trained at Pakistani madrassas. Mullahs across the border commission the murder of women in public life. Afghan and Nato officials complain bitterly that elements in the Pakistani military, and the intelligence service ISI, protect the insurgents.

Pakistan's policy in Afghanistan is tied in with its great rivalry with India. The military sees Afghanistan as offering a hinterland, "strategic depth", and also training facilities for a future conflict. India also cannot escape blame. The world's second most populous country, desperate to be seen as a great power, still sees foreign policy through the prism of the feud with its neighbour. India's huge aid programme in Afghanistan, Rashid points out, adds to Pakistan's paranoia.

Not just Afghanistan, but Pakistan, has been damaged in the process. Rashid reminds us just how much the West, America in particular, was culpable in creating this incendiary scenario, with their unstinting support for generals who deposed elected governments, imprisoned politicians and nurtured fundamentalist Islamist parties. Billions of dollars were sent from Washington to the military as supporters in the Cold War, and significant funds to Muslim fundamentalists.

General Musharraf, Rashid points out, was just the latest military strongman successfully to manipulate Washington. He received huge funds and weaponry while being portrayed, by both himself and the US, as a staunch ally in the "war on terror". It was only belatedly that US officials began to complain that the Pakistanis were not only doing little to pursue al-Qa'ida and the Taliban, but senior officials were complicit in harbouring them.

Elections have now taken place while the assassination of Benazir Bhutto shows just how fragile the situation remains. Rashid believes that the emergence of civil society in Pakistan and a dissipation in the influence of the military may help to heal the violent fractures in the region. But events since this book was written do not support such optimism. As the New York Times pointed out last week, four months after the election Pakistan remains in leaderless drift while the military and ISI carry out their private deals with the Islamists.

One result has been a sharp increase in Taliban attacks in Afghanistan, leading Karzai to threaten cross-border pursuits – something his forces do not have the capacity to do – while US and British commanders speak of their exasperation at taking losses from

an enemy with a safe haven. British casualties in Afghanistan continue to rise faster than those in Iraq. It is still a long way from the massive losses of the First Afghan War, described by General Sir Henry Durand as a "wild, ill-considered and adventurous scheme of far distant aggression". But the UK will be there for a long time yet. The "descent into chaos" that Rashid has chronicled shows no sign of ending early. One suspects that we shall be needing his dispatches from this, the most dangerous front line in the "war on terror", for a long time to come.