

No easy way out

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The policy failures of Nato and the United States have left Afghanistan and Pakistan dangerously unstable, argues Ahmed Rashid. And any solution will be difficult as long as Pakistan's army and military intelligence continue to support the Taliban and al-Qaeda

Descent Into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism Is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia

Ahmed Rashid

Allen Lane, 544pp, £25

This is not a catalogue of doom as its title suggests. Nor does central Asia, or more particularly the former Soviet republics, play a central part in this story. It is, rather, the most graphic, detailed and worrying indictment of US and Nato policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the 11 September 2001 attacks.

Eight years on, Afghanistan is a state in name only, bereft of any effective government, the world's largest heroin producer, unsettled and lawless, with its southern and eastern provinces in the grip once more of a resurgent Taliban. Casualties among the several thousand Nato troops who are actually doing the fighting are increasing. Its neighbour, Pakistan, a nuclear state dominated by its armed forces, offers sanctuary to the Taliban leadership, and is now home to al-Qaeda and its training camps. Pakistan has become the cockpit for Islamic terrorism around the world. The awful paradox today is that it has been targeted by its own, Pakistani, army-sponsored Taliban and al-Qaeda as a suitable case for conquest. If there is a message in this book, it is that the genie has escaped from the bottle.

Ahmed Rashid has written a profound and lively history far removed from the usual desk-top analysis by a well-read pundit. It reads like a thriller, galloping through Washington, New York, London, Kabul, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Kandahar, Tashkent, Quetta, Lahore, Dushanbe, Islamabad and Herat with confident ease. The narrative is racy and gripping. It smells of the region. It captures the atmosphere and the haunting emptiness of Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush, its cruelty, beauty and treachery. It reveals the strengths and weaknesses of those involved, and the folly and arrogance of outsiders. The author is not a historian, but one can see from this book that although the cast has changed in Afghanistan over the past 200 years of foreign intervention, the setting and the issues are essentially the same and the lessons still have to be learned.

There are no heroes in this story, only villains, fools and buffoons: President George W Bush, Vice-President Dick Cheney, the former defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz (the man who wanted to "end" states that supported terrorism), the former prime minister Tony Blair and his obfuscating defence minister John Reid, President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, President Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan, Nato governments, Afghanistan's rapacious warlords and thuggish Taliban leaders. Above all there is Pakistan's vast, powerful, uncontrollable secret military intelligence, espionage, subversion and black propaganda service, the ISI, an acronym for the Orwellian-sounding Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence. The only individuals to escape the author's wrath are from the United Nations and the Swiss-based International Committee of the Red Cross, and one or two frustrated Nato military commanders.

Rashid is a distinguished, Pakistani-born international journalist who emerges from this book as both author and participant. He is invited to Islamabad by the British high commissioner to brief a visiting Tony Blair on Afghanistan and finds the British prime minister both asks the questions and gives all the answers. The author is at the UN and in Geneva briefing officials there. In Kabul he argues with the Afghan president. In Herat he takes tea with the region's warlord. In London he briefs a gathering of the defence staff. In Scandinavia he lectures university students. In Quetta he listens to a local Islamic party leader disassembling the history of Pakistan. Back home, he is summoned to the military headquarters in Rawalpindi for a dressing-down by President Musharraf in the presence of two other generals for traitorously misrepresenting Pakistan. He is warned to stop writing articles about ISI support for the Taliban. The scheduled half-hour meeting goes on for two and a half hours with Musharraf giving an astounded Rashid a lecture on the real truth of Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan. The general insists that far from giving sanctuary and assistance to the Taliban, Pakistan, since 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, has never interfered there - ever.

Rashid is best known for writing the first definitive book on the Taliban and its rise to power. Published in 2000, a year before the attack on the twin towers, *Taliban* was admired by diplomats and academics but little read. After 9/11 it became a bestseller. *Descent Into Chaos* starts where the Taliban book left off, on the eve of 9/11. Once the US bombing campaign began in Afghanistan, the search was on for an ethnic Pashtun, non-Taliban leader. Enter Hamid Karzai, a youthful, western-educated subtribal leader from near Kandahar, the Taliban stronghold. Will he survive or will he be murdered by the Taliban who are hunting him? A US air strike saved him just in time, but according to Rashid, he showed an almost fatal indecisiveness that has come to dog his term as president of Afghanistan. His one firm decision apparently has been to reject out of hand the appointment of the Bosnia-blooded Paddy Ashdown as UN chief co-ordinator in Afghanistan, because of his own fear of being overshadowed and undermined.

With victory, error followed error. The US saw the war as a prelude to invading Iraq. Rebuilding Afghanistan and establishing the institutions of government and a civil society were not provided for in the Pentagon's brief. The term "nation-building lite" was coined in Washington and became nation-building not at all. Troops were pulled out and security and policing were left to local warlords, who resorted once more to milking the countryside. These were the very same people whose greed and violence

had led to the emergence of the Taliban in the 1990s. Nato made promises that were never kept. Corruption and injustice thrived. A revitalised Taliban, flush with opium money and a safe haven - Baluchistan Province in Pakistan - stepped into the vacuum.

Throughout this period, according to Rashid, Pakistan's military authorities played a double game, aiding the Taliban (which they had helped to create) and Pakistan's own Islamic extremists in the extralegal Pashtun tribal border areas, Waziristan, Kurram, Orakzai, Khyber, Moh mand and Bajaur. Musharraf told the United States that he was the only bulwark against an Islamist takeover. Vice-President Cheney was reportedly the White House point man dealing directly with Musharraf, fending off demands from the state department for political change and ensuring that billions of dollars in military funding got through. From time to time, the Pakistanis would hand over a "foreign al-Qaeda militant" to deflect American criticism and to show willing.

Ahmed Rashid is an interventionist. He supported the US-led overthrow of the Taliban in 2001 and he dismisses the common belief that Afghans, especially Afghan Pashtuns, will always oppose foreign troops. He argues that, on the contrary, they welcomed Nato's forces for the change they represented. The initial refusal of the US to put soldiers on the ground and decision instead to rely on local warlords to do the fighting enabled al-Qaeda's leadership and hundreds of supporters to escape to Pakistan, some rescued from a besieged Kunduz in a Pakistani-organised airlift that was approved by the Americans. The dependence on air power and the indiscriminate killing it causes, as an alternative to putting troops on the ground, has been the cause of much anti-Nato feeling and has helped the Taliban to return in such force.

The author believes that in the long term the region can be stabilised only when Pakistan and India stop seeing each other as enemies. This deeply ingrained psychosis, which began over Kashmir 60 years ago, is responsible for every move Pakistan's military authorities have taken in Afghanistan and beyond. Islamist extremism is their latest weapon to counter India's power and its supposed hegemony. Perhaps the best the west can do for Pakistan is to forget aid and succour and despatch a brigade of psychiatrists to the army's command headquarters in Rawal pindi and its military academy in Quetta. Rashid, however, puts his faith in democracy to lift the region out of what he describes as its seemingly inevitable slide into more conflict and violent upheaval. Democracy is an easy answer, but a difficult way out. The strength of this book is that it tells a story from which everyone can learn. It is slap-in-your-face history, with clear lessons about Afghanistan and Pakistan that few in western governments took note of until the recent fighting in southern Afghanistan and the mounting loss of British lives. Warnings made in 2001, that the Nato-backed US intervention in Afghanistan had the same markings as the Soviet invasion in 1979 and could end with an equally humiliating withdrawal, were dismissed as "too much historical baggage". But Afghanistan is an unchanging and unforgiving place and that is at last recognised.

There is one shortcoming in Rashid's account. He does not shift from the big picture to the detail and tell us how this descent into chaos can be halted on the ground. How do we tackle it? What measures are to be taken? In Pakistan, for example, how can extremism be stopped? How can the Taliban be pushed back into Afghanistan from their sanctuaries? How can Pakistan's home-grown Taliban be neutered and the

foreign fighters and al-Qaeda leaders who are safely hidden in the Pashtun tribal areas be removed? Who, or what, can control the army and the ISI?

These questions are unanswered, though perhaps they never can be answered as long as the armed forces dominate Pakistan and its politicians are forever wanting.

Michael Fathers was Reuters correspondent in Islamabad and covered Afghanistan before and after the 1979 Soviet invasion. Before and after the 11 September 2001 attacks he was Time magazine's south Asia bureau chief, based in New Delhi