

Review Pakistan Daily

Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan and Afghanistan and in Central Asia by The United States of America

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The popular news reporting from Pakistan is limited, even more so than that coming from Afghanistan, which is even more limited than that from Iraq, in turn now becoming more limited as attention is directed towards Iran. For the most part it has all dropped off the scale as the U.S. elections start to power up for November, almost as if the main political contenders in each area are waiting to see what the outcome will be in order to determine their own next best move in the power games of the Middle East. Even when there is news front and centre, the observer is more often than not left without context as to what machinations are truly transpiring both on the scene and off the scene, as well as being ignorant of the historical context as well. There are a few observers whose work covers these areas much more thoroughly and help the curious, the interested, those looking for truths in amidst all the quick-hit sensational news reports to fill in the big picture. Ahmed Rashid's "Descent Into Chaos" stands out among the best that I have read over the past several years.

There may well be other strong works on this part of South Asia, but I would hazard to say that for someone to truly understand global terrorism/current events in a wide-angle perspective combined with telephoto accuracy, this is certainly a book that should be read. From all that I have seen, heard, or read, this work has only corroborated and amalgamated those pieces that I have obtained into a strong picture, one that unfortunately remains difficult to focus on - as indicated in the title, the overall situation rests on the word 'chaos'.

The information contained is dense, providing thorough coverage of the relationships between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the U.S., with minor excursions into Central Asia. The style is that of an accessible historical read, combining anecdotes, many personal encounters and references to key people and many subordinates, with a strongly referenced background of information. It fills in many gaps left by the usual news media and fills in gaps that one might never know existed in the first place. As Pakistan has more or less resided on the edges of media reports, with Afghanistan joining it in obscurity after the invasion of Iraq, "Descent Into Chaos" should bring them back front and centre. That is at it should be, because for all the talk about a "war on terror" and all the emphasis incorrectly applied to Iraq, the real core of the problem remains in the unattended areas of Afghanistan.

Essentially, the U.S. is using Pakistan for its own purposes as it has for a long time, being generous (with mostly military money and goods) when it needs Pakistan (in particular starting with the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the creation/strengthening of the mujahideen against the Russians), and ignoring it at other times (mostly when a democratically elected government managed to hang on for a few years, a rarity). As for Afghanistan, they were basically abandoned by the U.S. after the Russian defeat, and abandoned a second time after the initial attack against the Taliban under Mullah Omar as a response to 9/11.

The problem historically goes back centuries, but part of the current problems arise from the Durand Line, one of those magical lines drawn on a piece of paper so beloved of the British imperialists. It winds its way through the mountains but more importantly through the traditional territory of the Pashtun people. From that, and the creation of Pakistan, an artificial divide - not

really identified by the Pashtun and not officially recognized by Afghanistan as reconstituted under Karzai - has been part of the problem with the ongoing insurgency in both countries.

I will not recount the history here, that is the purpose and success of Rashid's work, but the scene is truly one of chaos, with tribal, ethnic, national, cultural, political relationships entwining around each other. Add a good harvest of opium, American CIA money (which seems to be the preferred manner in which Americans have treated the Afghans, buying them off rather than actually doing something to help the country), British MI6 personnel, various warlords of various leanings, a hesitant NATO, a reluctant UN, an aggressive al-Qaeda, expatriates wanting their piece of the power and money, and a mix of command structures in Afghanistan, a mix of loyalties in countries and the entire scene is one dedicated to volatility and chaos.

Similar to other works critical of U.S. foreign policy, Rashid denounces the "arrogance and ignorance" that were "in abundant supply as the Bush administration invaded two countries in the Muslim world without any attempt to understand the history, culture, society, or traditions of those countries."

Even more critically, he says, "American power lies shattered. The U.S. Army is overstretched and broken, the American people are disillusioned and rudderless, U.S. credibility lies in ruins, and the world is a far more dangerous place." The problems existing now are the bankruptcy of the United States, full blown Taliban insurgencies in Afghanistan "American power has been squandered, and hatred for Americans has become a global phenomenon. This book is an attempt to explain how that came about in Washington and on the ground in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia."

As indicated at the beginning Rashid succeeds remarkably well. After having read it, there is still much confusion, if not from the prolific number of names, groups, organizations, and places involved in the story, then from the reality that, yes it is confusing, as chaos tends to be.

Rashid offers little in the way of solutions, other than to summarize that "the peoples and regimes of this region have to understand that unless they themselves move their nations toward greater democracy, the chaos that presently surrounds them will, in time, overwhelm them." Therein lies one of the big problems. How do countries with such severe problems, created in large part by invading forces who show no signs of operating capably towards reconstruction, ever approach democracy? Those same countries that are doing most of the fighting – the U.S. and Great Britain in particular – are much less democratic themselves than they used to be, wilfully ignoring international law, abrogating international treaties, denying human rights at home and abroad, and weakening their own constitutional protections by allowing so many unilateral government decisions. With the U.S. foreign policy in the region pretty much attached to and determined by Israel's interests, how much of a chance is there that the U.S. will change its pattern of behaviour in the rest of South Asia?

Yes, it is chaos, and unfortunately looks to remain that way or become worse before it gets better, especially with the intricate and convoluted politics of Pakistan as the focus. Ahmed Rashid has written an important history that should relieve much of the "arrogance and ignorance" should the public and politicians care to educate themselves about the situation. Then perhaps from the chaos a chance for a long-term solution might start to develop otherwise the world will continue to experience the "Descent into Chaos."