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Descent into Chaos: How the War Against Islamic Extremism Is Being Lost in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia by Ahmed Rashid

The Sunday Times review by Max Hastings: where the West has gone wrong in the war in Central Asia

Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist of the highest narrative and analytical gifts, is baffled by the West's almost demented indifference and folly towards Afghanistan and his own country. The stakes are huge. If either state fails, as is highly plausible, global stability will be rocked. The United Nations, Nato, the European Union and, of course, America will see their purposes and credibility set at naught.

Yet, as Rashid writes: "The international community's lukewarm commitment to Afghanistan after 9/11 has been matched only by its incompetence, incoherence and conflicting strategies — all led by the United States." Meanwhile, in Pakistan, Washington's commitment, since 2001, to support President Pervez Musharraf's military dictatorship rather than to promote the interests of the Pakistani people, "has created immense hatred for the US army and America, hatred that penetrates all classes of society".

These are strong words, yet Rashid is no foaming leftist, still less an enthusiast for Islamic militance. He merely tells a story from the viewpoint of a highly informed Pakistani who knows intimately almost all the leading players, including Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, many of the Afghan warlords, and, of course, key figures in his own country.

The severest criticism that can be made of his tale is that we know some of it already. A group of ignorant, immensely powerful and thus dangerous men in Washington, of whom Donald Rumsfeld, the defence secretary, was probably the worst, sought to exploit America's shock after 9/11 to pursue their own global agenda, on which taking out Saddam Hussein was tops.

Rashid inks in much detail about the post-conflict failure in Afghanistan after Kabul fell to the Northern Alliance in December 2001. Rumsfeld's rejection of nation-building, matched by America's willingness to deliver much of the country to warlords paid by the CIA, destroyed any chance of achieving post-Taliban stability, or making a Karzai national government work.

Americans on the ground ladled out cash to the wrong people, ignored mass killings of prisoners and presided over systemic and illegal brutality to captives. "Suspects" as old as 88 and as young as 13 were shipped to Guantanamo Bay. The neocons cared about only one objective, hitting Al-Qaeda, and were indifferent both to collateral damage and to the importance of salvaging the Afghan society that they had overrun.

The book asserts that America's refusal to deploy even a few thousand ground troops enabled thousands of Taliban, not to mention Osama Bin Laden, to escape into Pakistan. The author flatly states that the opportunity was there to catch Bin Laden at Tora Bora at the end of 2001, if America had displayed greater commitment and skill.

Coupled to failure on the Afghan side of the border was Washington's decision to give Musharraf carte blanche to rule Pakistan as he chose, in exchange for his declared support in the "war on terror". The Americans were extraordinarily naïve, says Rashid, in failing to realise how far Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, continued to give active support to thousands of Taliban fighters escaping from Afghanistan. Washington even allowed Pakistani military aircraft to cross the border and evacuate ISI personnel, Arabs and key Taliban just before Kabul fell.

The Americans continued to indulge the regime in Islamabad after the 2003 revelations of Pakistan's sales of nuclear technology to rogue states. Nine-tenths of Washington's \$10 billion aid to Pakistan since 2001 has gone to its military rather than its people. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan, run by President Islam Karimov, one of the nastiest dictators in central Asia, became a key American base and CIA rendition centre. Karimov himself was received at Bush's White House.

British readers are thrown a small crumb of comfort: Rashid identifies two British generals, John McColl and David Richards, among the few foreigners who perceived what needed to be done in Afghanistan. Above all, they understood that if the Karzai regime was to succeed, it was essential to face down the regional warlords, and extend security beyond Kabul. Yet in the face of American opposition and chronic shortage of resources, the opportunities were missed.

The roll call of blunders seems unending. American planes bombed Afghans who were maliciously denounced to the CIA by rival warlords. Drug barons were offered free rein and, indeed, American subsidy. Ashraf Ghani, Karzai's unpopular but able finance minister, was deprived of the cash to make reconstruction work. America indulged in surges of generosity in advance of its own elections — notably when Bush was seeking his second term in 2004 — but turned off the tap again once the polls closed. Too much so-called "aid" was offered to suit the interests of donors or of consultants and contractors, some closely linked to the US administration, rather than those of the recipients.

Rashid gives Musharraf credit for one significant success. The president perceived that Pakistan could no longer hope to compete head-on with India, and must thus end more than half a century of attempts to take over Kashmir. Yet today, Pakistan is riven with internal conflicts, and Islamic militants possess such influence, especially in the western tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, that the prospects of promoting stability, never mind effective democracy, seem bleak.

Pakistan's intelligence service is still playing a deadly double game. It provides just enough assistance to its western counterparts, especially the British security authorities, to keep alive hopes of a working co-operation to crush Al-Qaeda. But the ISI stays deep in bed with the Taliban, and shelters all manner of dangerous people.

Reading this book, contemplating the hideous mess that today extends from Iraq through Iran to Afghanistan and Pakistan, one is left with a puzzle. We live in a world in which more information is available, communications are faster and travel easier than ever in human

history. Yet, somehow, our rulers contrive to make decisions based upon ignorance and misunderstanding of other societies of a kind that would have seemed bizarre in the mid-19th century.

Nato in Afghanistan, says Rashid, has displayed “little understanding of the Afghan conflict, a lack of realism regarding public opposition at home, a complete lack of transparency in dealing with the public, and an overreliance on US leadership and analysis of the conflict”. He is uncomprehending of those Nato nations such as Germany that display the cynicism to send troops to Afghanistan, but refuse to let them fight the Taliban or, indeed, perform any useful function.

The difficulty in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as in Iraq, is how now to undo the consequences of years of policy blunders. Even generous cash aid, were it to be made available, is hard to use well when western Pakistan has succumbed to law-lessness, and anti-western sentiment is endemic. In Afghanistan, the drug industry is all- powerful and the Taliban widely resurgent.

A growing body of western critics such as Simon Jenkins argues that we must recognise failure in Afghanistan, and quit. It seems impossible to dispute their view that defeat is the most likely outcome. Yet, as Rashid so vividly shows, the consequences of abandoning the region to anarchy are so awful — above all, for its own peoples — that it seems to me we must keep trying.

The key message of his book is that while it is essential to use force against violent insurgents, in isolation tactical successes are meaningless. Unless we implement more generous and sophisticated strategies for making failing societies work, our soldiers are fighting wars in which “victory” is unattainable.

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