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All Fall Down

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Descent into Chaos

By Ahmed Rashid

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SOME authors have opinion, no facts; some have facts, no opinion. Ahmad Rashid has both, and that is why his views carry weight. His thesis, borne out of decades of first-hand knowledge of 'the region', is shocking but true: the region was 'lost' the day America chose to abandon Afghanistan and invade Iraq. By 'the region' he means the turbulent but energy-rich area extending from Pakistan through Afghanistan to Kazakhstan. Rashid is a mine of information coupled with a deep insight into the subject and personalities he writes about. His new book is about the issue of the day — terrorism — and about the personalities involved in the 21st century version of the Great Game. The Game this time is far more deadly than it was in the 19th century.

Fata occupies centre-stage in this drama. Waves go out from Fata to as far as Kazakhstan only to return, reinforced, each wave more deadly and ferocious than its predecessor. In theory there are sovereign states with governments, borders, passport controls, and customs posts. But in reality, the region between Fata and the fringes of Kazakhstan is one big theatre of operation in which guerillas, mercenaries, armies with or without uniform, drug barons, double agents, profiteers, warlords, and cut-throats in power or out of it move about freely. The cheapest commodity is, of course, blood — of innocent men, women and children, mostly Afghan, caught in crossfire, killed, maimed or made homeless. Save Vietnam, says Rashid, no country has, since World War II, been 'so comprehensively destroyed' as Afghanistan.

Rashid's knowledge isn't bookish, for he has traversed the area as possibly no other journalists has. He mixes and talks with people ranging from truck drivers to spy chiefs, mullahs — pious and impious, some of them rapists and looters — generals groping in the dark, and foreign and defence ministers and prime ministers, often in the same government, working at cross purposes. Donald Rumsfeld once declared that American homeland security is not possible without a strong military presence in the Middle East. He then went on to announce a 20 per cent cut in American troops in Afghanistan, while sending more troops to Iraq. Colin Powell was understandably stunned.

But no organisation receives as much mention in Rashid's narrative as Pakistan's Inter-

Services Intelligence Agency. From the day the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on Christmas eve in 1979 till this day, the ISI has been in the picture, sometimes openly, sometimes behind the scenes, to influence personalities and manipulate events in a way that in the end have hurt Pakistan's long-term interests.

Taliban's ferocity is unbelievable, and the facts and figures documented by Rashid are shocking. In 2006, the Taliban murdered 85 teachers and students and burned down 187 schools. Another 350 more schools were shut down because of the Taliban threat.

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The differences between America and Nato governments and among Nato's European officials themselves are shocking. There is no Nato fund for Afghanistan, and every government manages its own role in the war. The governments win parliamentary approval by saying they would undertake 'risk-free operations', many Nato commanders do not send their soldiers on night patrols, while others insist their job is to maintain security and not fight. Once, for six months, Nato could not find three helicopters to go to Kabul. The only point on which Nato generals agree is to hide their own reluctance to fight behind a barrage of allegations against Pakistan.

One man is ubiquitous in the book — Musharraf. If you dislike him you can call him clever, unreliable, wily and duplicitous; if you are his admirer Musharraf emerges as a remarkably intelligent man who followed Mao's dictum — 'win over the neutrals, and neutralise the enemy'. He ate humble pie where necessary, was stubborn when required, courted danger, showed flexibility and often kept both the US and the Taliban guessing as to his true intentions. In the end he got what he wanted — Bush support for his rule and massive doses of aid, which since 9/11 comes to \$20 million.

The conclusion to which Rashid comes constitutes a harsh commentary on the managers of American foreign policy. The US, he says, has failed to consolidate South and Central Asia — 'the homeland of global terrorism' — and chose instead to invade Iraq.

The idea in Chapter 16, 'Who Lost Uzbekistan?', holds good for the entire region. Islam Karimov is a tyrant cast in the Stalinist mould, except that the Georgian never lowered his dissidents into boiling water. Karimov has played off America against Russia and China and in the end has remained a victor.

He has received plentiful doses of economic and military aid from the three sides, especially America, and has in turn been given a free hand to tyrannise his own people. The world was made to forget the terrible massacre at Andijan on May 13, 2005, when Karimov's police murdered a minimum of 850 people. Said an eyewitness: 'From the sky there was a storm of rain, from the streets a storm of bullets'.

On the whole in the region, says Rashid, 'the regimes won' and the United States lost public sympathy'. International aid, UN help and troops did not stop East Timor from becoming a failed state, and he makes the chilling prediction that Afghanistan too could go the same way. The book gives the reader Rashid's penetrative analysis of the torrent of cataclysmic events, and motives of the bewildering number of forces involved in conflict in a region that is the biggest source of threat to peace, not only regional but international.

The book is, no doubt, crammed with facts and figure but needs more attention on the analytical side. Also, Rashid tends to share the tendency only too common among western analysts and journalists to view Kashmir and Indo-Pakistan rivalry as the Pakistani military's stunt. The rivalry between the two countries, and their contention over Kashmir, in fact stems from a long history.