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Descent into Chaos

Review by Quentin Peel

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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

Allen Lane £25, 544 pages

[FT Bookshop](#) price: £20

In October 2001, just weeks after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, most of the world was united in backing US military action against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and its allies in al-Qaeda. It was seen as a justified response to the terrible destruction of the World Trade Center in New York.

One leading US expert on central Asia, however, was worried about how it might develop. “The danger in Afghanistan is that the campaign will be won too fast, or too slow,” said Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington. “In either case, it will not be enough to satisfy the desire for retribution in America. So then we will invade Iraq.”

It was a prescient observation. The war in Afghanistan seemed to be over in weeks and the neo-conservative hawks in the Bush administration did indeed press ahead in Iraq, leading to the dreadful quagmire in which the US and its allies still find themselves today.

But the Afghan campaign also failed to deliver stability in that benighted country because the Bush administration, just as it was wedded to “pre-emptive action” against states supporting terrorism, was also determined not to get involved in “nation-building” after any invasion. That was left to organisations they despised and undermined, such as the United Nations.

The truth is that the Afghan war went both too fast and too slow. That is the story that Ahmed Rashid, the most outstanding independent journalist in Pakistan, tells in his daunting, depressing and fascinating new book, *Descent into Chaos*. It should be required reading for the next president in Washington and all Nato leaders who have put the future of their military alliance on the line in Afghanistan.

This is really two books in one, but the story is of one inextricably tangled tragedy of miscalculation, misunderstanding, double-dealing and corruption in central Asia. It is about the failure of the intervention in Afghanistan. Perhaps more importantly, it is a

devastating analysis of the disintegration of neighbouring Pakistan into a haven for terrorists and Islamist extremists, condoned and even actively encouraged by that country's mighty and secretive Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI) – the military intelligence service. It also spells out the danger of the contagion of extremism, terrorism and drugs spreading through the former Soviet republics of central Asia.

The failing state of Pakistan is at the heart of the story, and the obsession of the country's military rulers, now led by President Pervez Musharraf, with India and the interminable conflict in Kashmir. Rashid tells in great detail how Pakistan trained and exploited supporters of extremist Islam both to fight India in Kashmir and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. And it goes on to show how the ISI adopted the Taliban – the most extreme of the Afghan *mujahideen* – to ensure that Kabul was ruled by a pro-Pakistani, anti-Indian government.

In Washington, the neo-cons and nationalists, led by people such as Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy defence secretary, Donald Rumsfeld, his boss, and Dick Cheney, the vice-president, were instinctively sympathetic to such military rulers but blind to the dangers of the Taliban. They were obsessed by the desire to capture Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda leaders and did not care about the rest of the web of Islamist supporters that was spreading in Pakistan and Kashmir. It was a fatal blindness and one that has led both to the resurgence of the Taliban insurrection in Afghanistan and a deadly new wing of the movement forming in the tribal areas and cities of Pakistan.

This book is not a hysterical tract that sees Islamist extremists under every rock and tree, however. It is a sober, serious and well-documented account of the deliberate cultivation of a fanatical ideology to bolster unpopular military rule in Pakistan, and of how it has got out of control. It is also a very sad story of how the early hopes of an enlightened and independent Afghanistan have been shattered by Washington's disinterest and obsession with Iraq, and its tolerance of the double-dealing of the ISI in Islamabad.

The Bush administration – and especially Rumsfeld – comes out very badly for its tolerance of the Afghan warlords as a surrogate force controlling their own independent militia, and the rapidly expanding drug trade, at the expense of attempts to form a national army and police force. But the rest of the western world is also to blame for their belated and miserly support of Afghanistan's daunting task of nation-building. This was an intervention done on the cheap and the ongoing war, plus the confusion and weakness of the Kabul government headed by Hamid Karzai, is the price we are paying.

This is not a book that seeks to produce sensational new information, rather one that brings together a complete jigsaw of how all of central Asia is interrelated. But what it does is underline the devastating recovery and rise of al-Qaeda and the Taliban inside Pakistan, in Balochistan and in the so-called tribal areas of North and South Waziristan, with the full knowledge of the ISI in Pakistan. For years they kept the prying eyes of the CIA away by offering the occasional intelligence on Arab members of al-Qaeda, while allowing the Taliban to regroup and relaunch its Afghan war.

It is not a particularly easy book to read, drawing on what must be an extraordinary file of information plus the personal interviews and involvement of Ahmed Rashid himself. He was regularly consulted in Washington and London for his knowledge of Afghanistan and Pakistan but his advice seems to have been equally regularly ignored.

Rashid does not leave the reader entirely without hope. He calls for a new global compact among the leading players – the US, EU, Nato and the UN – to help the region solve its problems, including the oft-ignored Kashmir dispute that poisons any hope of reconciliation between Delhi and Islamabad. The Pakistan army, he says, must abandon its notion of a centralised state based solely on defence against India, and exploiting jihadi groups to that end. And the Afghan elite must appreciate the opportunity to be born again as a nation, which means overcoming tribalism, sectarianism and corruption.

That is a huge wish-list. Recent history suggests it is hopeless. But without it, Afghanistan and Pakistan will both be failed states. And one of them has nuclear weapons.

Quentin Peel is the FT's international affairs editor

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