

## **How not to repair a failed state**

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### ***DESCENT INTO CHAOS***

The United States and the Failure of Nation-Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia

By Ahmed Rashid

Viking, 484 pages, \$31

Just 24 days after Sept. 11, 2001, a Western-led offensive sent the Taliban running from Kabul - although not very far, as it turned out - and began the excruciating processes of reconstructing the failed Afghan state, stabilizing the conflicted regions of South and Central Asia, and re-equilibrating their relationships with the West.

As distinguished Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid chronicles in *Descent into Chaos*, most of these efforts have failed - some with a bang, others with a whimper, and all with grave consequences for the region and the globe. The war that brought the Taliban temporarily to its knees was an ill-conceived combine of insecurity and hubris, organized in ignorance and on the cheap. Quick battles fought alongside badly chosen allies, an interim government organized from the outside by outsiders, underfunded rehabilitation efforts superintended with the lightest of touches by the United Nations: Each step of Afghanistan's recovery ignored the politics and needs of the place itself, and the burdens that Afghanistan would be forced to bear in the name of fighting the world's terrors.

From the start, the West's struggle was about global terrorism, and not really about Afghanistan and its neighbours. As it had been in the 19th and 20th centuries, Afghanistan in 2001 became the ground on which others fought their own battles, with little heed to how important that war really was to Afghans themselves. That singular misunderstanding has cost everyone dearly.

Rashid, who favoured foreign intervention in 2001, documents a now-well-known diagnosis: Little has been done to eliminate the causes of extremism in the region, and even less attention has been focused on making Afghanistan or its neighbours safe. In the "virtuous circle of cause and effect," as the Canadian government describes it, good governance and lasting development require security. This is a lesson few in the West fully appreciated, and even fewer in Central Asia can absorb.

Repairing failed states is an inexact art at the best of times, and Afghanistan continues to challenge received wisdom and experimentation alike. Reconstructing the Afghan state would have been daunting even without an ongoing war, but the Afghan government has been given little say in who and how the West fights. As a result, its own leadership is reactive and sharply constrained, and its fragile economy and polity remain indebted to warlords, narcotics and deeply seated inequities. Fledgling state institutions have yet to gain effective footholds across much of the country, and Afghanistan and Pakistan remain locked in a foreign-policy stranglehold dictated by the failed bargains that each has reached with extremists (in Pakistan) and warlords (in Afghanistan).

Descent into Chaos offers a scathing, almost breathless indictment of shallow thinking and poorly conceived, risk-averse policy. For Rashid, the blame for this litany of wrongdoing lies with the Bush administration - first for its misconceptions (about everything, it seems), then for the crimes of its anti-terror policies, and finally for a misguided proto-imperialism that edges would-be Muslim moderates toward militancy. His anger, and his disappointment at being ignored, are palpable as he asserts that the Bush administration "created a far bigger crisis in South and Central Asia than existed before 9/11."

The proof of these failures is Afghanistan's deepening poverty and insecurity, a burgeoning Taliban threat to both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and an acidic uncertainty that laces the entire region. "Central Asia is al-Qaeda's new frontier," Rashid proclaims as he documents the inroads that extremists have made since the Central Asian states became independent in 1991.

But Rashid does not explore the difference between reactive, anti-state (and anti-American) sentiment and other sources and forms of extremism. Long-standing corruption and the absence of political reform in the autocratic Central Asian republics, for example, stifled movements for political change long before 2001, and cynical aid-for-democracy swaps provided entree for Uzbekistan's participation in the U.S. prisoner-rendition program.

Neither the United States nor its Western and Asian allies seems to understand the causes of extremism and powerful anti-state social movements. Rashid's depiction of Pakistan's implausible military-extremist alliance - the culmination of a 60-year experiment in the failed democracy of a client state - offers a stunning portrait of political self-delusion.

The army's persistent missteps are not explained, but they are underscored, as a recent Rand Corporation report notes, by U.S. policies that rarely distinguish between conveniently assisting tyrants and tackling the hard work of reform.

Like many others, Rashid's post-2001 predictions about Afghanistan's fate

were accurate. Descent into Chaos's strength is its reportorial narrative of big-picture diplomacy (occasional errors in detail notwithstanding), and of the plague of political miscalculation that is fostering further instability. This is a book for Washington and London, less for Peshawar and Kabul, where the requirements for recovery require an analytical rigour that is still lacking.

The futures of South and Central Asia, Rashid avers, lie in local efforts to democratize - a pleasing but paradoxical prospect, given the dismaying evidence he marshals against this very likelihood. Indeed, the only voices missing from Descent are those of the Afghans and Pakistanis and Central Asians themselves, the very people whose charge it will be to overcome years of misplaced, injurious power.

This is surprising, since Rashid has long supported the cause of open media in Afghanistan. This distinctive perspective didn't make it into this Western-centred volume, just as the voice of Afghans is still missing from the policy debates that Rashid chronicles. Perhaps this is where future accounts must begin.

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