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Darkness visible

First, a reality check of our troubled neighbourhood. June was the deadliest month for foreign troops in Afghanistan — the second month in a row in which their casualties exceeded those in Iraq. Nato says more than 900 people, including civilians, have died since the beginning of this year. A suicide attack targeting the Indian embassy in Kabul recently felled more than 40 people, including two diplomats, and wounded over 100 others — this was the biggest attack in Kabul after the fall of the Taliban.

Across the border in Pakistan, where hopes floated after a bloody and chaotic restoration of democracy, the blowback continues: suicide attacks undermine the government's efforts to negotiate an end to Islamic militancy. And an uneasy ruling coalition continues to squabble over restoring judges sacked by President Musharraf.

Ahmed Rashid's *Descent Into Chaos*, a masterly investigation into the war against extremism in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia, could not have come at a better time. Rashid has impeccable credentials for the job: his *Taliban* remains the most authoritative book on the movement and the journalist-writer has worked extensively to unravel the tangled skein of radical Islam, oil, and hegemonic aspirations that makes Central Asia one of the world's most volatile regions.

Afghanistan, writes Rashid, has been a tragic story of missed opportunities, goof-ups, and bad planning by the international community after a short and swift war ousted the Taliban nearly seven years ago. The high-tech aerial war by the Americans left few boots on the ground which, he says, facilitated the easy escape of Osama bin Laden and his Arab fighters, and the return of the Taliban. Moral of the story: there is no substitute for old fashioned warfare when you are going after a motivated and radical insurgent enemy.

What worsened matters, Rashid writes, was the molycoddling of the warlords by the CIA which undermined President Karzai's authority and left the coffers of a desperately poor state depleted. And when Afghanistan direly needed a well-funded nation building exercise on the lines of the Marshall Plan, the US followed a 'minimalist policy' of going after high value al-Qaeda targets.

Rebuilding a post-conflict nation is never easy. But Afghanistan, as Rashid shows, appears to have been short changed by its prime donor. He quotes an expert who calls it the "least resourced" nation-building effort in the history of US: one study found that Afghanistan received a paltry \$ 57 per capita to stabilise it after the war for the first two years after 2001, compared to \$ 679 received by Bosnia and \$ 526 by Kosovo. And now, even seven years after the war, there are fears that millions of dollars of aid may have been wasted.

This, in what is easily one of the most complex nations where a quarter of century of war has destroyed all institutions and infrastructure. Farming is the key to lift people out of poverty, but it isn't easy — 80 per cent of the people live off land, but only 12 per cent of the land is arable. To make matters worse, only a third of the arable land is irrigated. Much of the country's oil, gas and mineral wealth lies and holds out hopes for the minority Tajik-Uzbek-Hazara dominated north. The Pashtuns, who make up 42 per cent of the country's population and mostly live in the south, have been historically loathe to share power with the minorities-dominated north and vice versa; and the Taliban was born and bred in the south.

Since Afghanistan became the theatre of the bloodiest and longest Cold War proxy battle after the Soviets invaded the country in 1979, its fortunes have been inextricably linked with Pakistan. Even after President Musharraf's promises and efforts, Rashid says, Taliban redux is bred in Pakistan, and responsible for attacks at home and across the border. There is still no sign of a significant bloc of moderate Taliban — or Taliban Lite — who are willing to talk to the state. And Pakistan itself is fighting to stem a rising tide of militancy which sometimes threatens to tear the country asunder. The fact that it is a nuclear state sharing a restive border with a nuclear-armed rival does not help matters.

So like Afghanistan, Pakistan presents formidable challenges. Stephen Cohen finds Pakistan “interesting and alarming” in equal measure. Rashid echoes a similar sentiment. He writes about the Pakistani army fighting a “civil war” and the state “coming under the threat from Islamic extremism”. The lawless Fata area, an insurgent haven, has been “perceived as a global threat”. There is no alternative, writes Rashid, for Pakistan but to move towards more democracy and less army to prevent it from become, as Cohen said, a “pariah state.”

That is not going to be easy. Ayesha Siddiqa estimates that Pakistan's military-industrial complex is worth round \$20 billion — covering hotels, malls, insurance companies, banks, farms, industries and 12 per cent of the state-owned land. They also make cornflakes, bread, sugar and cement.

Rashid's eloquent prescriptions to reform two precariously poised states, which hold the key to the future stability of Central Asia, are simple —Afghans need to “evolve a system of governance capable of delivering services to the people and relatively free of tribalism, sectarianism and corruption” with ample help from the international community. Pakistan, on the other hand, “needs national reconciliation that brings about an end to the demonisation of politicians by the army; a new military culture that is taught to respect civilians, institutions and neighbours; and reformed intelligence agencies that cease to interfere politically”.

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