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SHASHI ON SUNDAY

How America made a mess of Afghanistan

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In the fall of 2002, the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid could be seen and heard at every significant podium and office in New York and Washington. Ostensibly in the US to promote a book, Rashid spent most of his time making an impassioned plea to every influential American who would listen: don't take your eye off the ball in Afghanistan. It was clear by then that the Bush administration was committed to building up its forces for an impending invasion of Iraq. The attitude to Afghanistan, in the hubristic arrogance of the Rumsfeldians, was "been there, done that". Kabul had fallen; Karzai had been installed as president; the war, as far as Washington was concerned, was over. Nobody paid Ahmed Rashid's arguments the slightest attention.

The irony was that almost everybody who had an opinion to express on Afghanistan, especially in the subcontinent, knew that the greatest danger from Islamic radicalism emanated from there and not from Saddam Hussein's secular autocracy in Iraq. The tragedy of 9/11, orchestrated from Osama bin Laden's command centre in the Taliban-ruled state, made it obvious that the most important strategic objective for the US had to be to ensure that Afghanistan never again became the kind of state that could provide a base for a future bin Laden. But the neo-conservatives around president Bush had long been obsessed with the "unfinished business" of Iraq, and many went around quite deliberately misleading the American public into thinking that Saddam was somehow behind 9/11 and in league with al-Qaida. Iraq's attractive oil reserves, its educated middle class and the potential for the country to become, under American rule, an alternative pro-American "model" for the Arab world, all weighed heavily in Washington's calculations. To the neo-cons, Afghanistan, a hard scrabble land of caves, deserts, poorly-developed infrastructure and warring tribals, looked like yesterday's problem.

Well, yesterday's problem has become tomorrow's threat, and many of us feel, like Ahmed Rashid, that America has only itself to blame. Distracted by its misadventure in Iraq, the US neglected Afghanistan for too long, failing to convert its stunning military success in 2001 into a larger developmental and political triumph. Osama has still not been captured, and he periodically releases mocking messages to the world to taunt his would-be captors and inspire his revived followers. Al-Qaida stays secure in its mountain redoubts, and the Taliban, which Washington thought had been scattered to the winds in 2001, is enjoying a resurgence, harassing the belatedly-augmented NATO forces and regularly killing Afghan civilians and government security personnel. Some reports suggest the insurgents now include some 2,000 local and foreign fighters, trained in the mountains and armed to the teeth. Last month (June 2008), for the first time, more American soldiers were killed in Afghanistan than in Iraq.

Saying "Afghanistan" is, however, shorthand. Much of the menace in the region comes from the other side of the Afghan borderlands — the lawless "federally administered tribal areas" (FATA) inside Pakistan. When they were routed in Afghanistan and hounded relentlessly by American air power in 2001 and early 2002, many of the Taliban fighters sought refuge in FATA, particularly in South Waziristan, where the Pakistani government's writ barely runs. At the same time, both the legitimate Afghan government of president Hamid Karzai and the US-led NATO forces were handicapped by not being able to pursue their tormentors across the border into Pakistan.

Islamabad is a key US ally, a fact that paradoxically appears to have hampered America's ability to act decisively against threats emerging from FATA. Washington was, after all, obliged to be sensitive to Pakistani claims of sovereignty over the area (a sovereignty Islamabad is ill-equipped to exercise in practice). The Bush administration, all too prone to personalise its foreign policy preferences, was also anxious not to undermine its friend president Musharraf by leaning too heavily on him. The increasingly beleaguered Musharraf, in turn, was concerned at all costs to avoid any military action that might provoke a tribal rebellion against his forces. He tried to buy himself more political space by cutting deals with the insurgent leaders in FATA, signing peace agreements with the very chiefs his Army should have been pursuing. The leaders gratefully used the ceasefires to shore up their defences, build up their weaponry and recruit more fighters. When the ceasefires inevitably collapsed, they were ready again. After a few futile skirmishes, all Musharraf could do was to sue for another

peace agreement.

Another complication was, of course, the Iraq distraction. Current and former military and intelligence officials cited by the New York Times have stated that the war in Iraq "consistently diverted resources and high-level attention from the tribal areas." According to the paper, "When American military and intelligence officials requested additional Predator drones to survey the tribal areas, they were told no drones were available because they had been sent to Iraq." US intelligence capabilities were similarly affected: the Iraq war, the Times reported, had "drained away" most of the CIA officers with field experience in the Islamic world. "You had a very finite number" of experienced officers, one former senior intelligence official told the newspaper. "Those people all went to Iraq. We were all hurting because of Iraq."

The result is that the threat from Afghanistan made graphically apparent on 9/11 still persists, except that it has moved from the environs of Kandahar to the Pakistani FATA. Some in India may feel that as long as Pakistan is tied up on its western border, we can breathe a little easier, since it keeps the Islamic radicals too busy to stir up trouble in the east. Such complacency is premature. As long as al-Qaida and the Taliban are at large and free to plan their next spectacular assault, there is no guarantee they will confine their targets to NATO or New York. After all, New Delhi is a lot closer to Waziristan.

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