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Afghanistan's Missed Opportunity

How U.S. shortsightedness and Pakistani duplicity are allowing the Taliban to regroup and thrive.

Reviewed by Pamela Constable
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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 pp. \$27.95

CROSSED SWORDS

Pakistan, Its Army, and the Wars Within

By Shuja Nawaz Oxford Univ. 655 pp. \$34.95

There was a brief period after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, when history seemed to offer Afghanistan a chance for deliverance from years of bloodshed and draconian rule. In short order, American and Afghan forces routed the Taliban regime. The military rulers of neighboring Pakistan reversed policy and embraced the Western war on terror. International support poured in to both countries, Afghanistan held elections, and hopes for political and economic modernization surged.

In *Descent into Chaos*, Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid lays out the policies, prejudices and plots that sabotaged those hopes. His title may seem melodramatic, but it becomes less so with each new report of suicide bombings, drug trafficking and U.S. casualties in Afghanistan, as well as of militant attacks and creeping Talibanization in Pakistan.

Much of the factual material here is not new, and at times Rashid falls into I-told-you-so mode. A keen observer of regional politics, he recognized sooner than most of us that the momentary promise of 2002 could be undermined by American shortsightedness, Pakistani perfidy and Afghan exhaustion.

But the value of *Descent into Chaos* is its compelling narrative, laced with tantalizing insights into the regional leaders who reinvented themselves as the Cold War gave way to the war on terror. Rashid notes, for example, that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed -- the terrorist who confessed to masterminding the 9/11 attacks and decapitating Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl -- had been, in the 1980s, a close aide to an anti-Soviet Afghan militia leader on the CIA payroll.

Rashid's sharpest criticism is of Pakistan's military and its murky covert arm, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which he blames for sabotaging democracy, fomenting Islamic extremism and pursuing a destructive foreign policy based on fear of India and development of nuclear

weapons. It was one thing to send young jihadis abroad to fight in Kashmir or Kandahar, but by 2004, when terrorists began beheading tribal elders and bombing military convoys inside Pakistan, he writes, "it was clear that the ISI no longer controlled the monster of extremism it had created."

As Rashid sees it, the Bush administration was both accomplice and victim of Pakistan's two-faced strategy after 9/11. For six years, he writes, Washington ignored a litany of abuses and blunders under Gen. Pervez Musharraf as long as he cooperated in the hunt for al-Qaeda. The ISI seized this opportunity, offering up terrorist suspects to the United States while secretly sponsoring Taliban insurgents and making deals with militants in Pakistan's tribal belt.

Meanwhile, Rashid writes, U.S. officials committed their own mistakes. One was the decision to eschew "nation building" and rely on Afghan warlords to keep order in the hinterlands. Pocketing millions in CIA handouts, these militia leaders extorted and bullied their way back into power, enriching themselves while most Afghans struggled in poverty.

A second U.S. error was to declare victory too soon and ignore evidence that the revived Taliban movement was gaining strength. Rashid portrays Afghan President Hamid Karzai as charming but weak. In a telling anecdote, he describes the newly installed Karzai greeting his first defense minister, a former warlord who had once held him prisoner. As Karzai stepped off a plane in Kabul in December 2001, the militia boss asked him, "Where are your men?" With a disarming smile, Karzai replied, "Why general, you are my men, all of you."

In *Crossed Swords*, Pakistani American scholar Shuja Nawaz fleshes out the history of the Pakistani army in a dense but carefully researched book that bolsters several of Rashid's key points. Both authors conclude that the military domination of Pakistani society has stunted the country's political growth, and that the army's obsession with Indian hegemony has perverted relations with neighbors and allies.

On the other hand, Nawaz is generally supportive of the Pakistani military as an institution. He comes from a family of officers and dedicates the book in part to his brother, Gen. Asif Nawaz, who died of a heart attack in 1993 while serving as Pakistan's army chief. The author portrays Asif as liberal and incorruptible, and he argues that the gradual replacement of such old-school, British-educated officers with political intriguers and Islamists is what poisoned Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan.

Like Rashid, Nawaz explores the flaws in U.S. and Pakistani thinking that helped allow the Taliban's comeback. To Pakistan, the Afghan militants and their ethnic Pashtun supporters were a bulwark against India; to the Bush administration, they were a junior menace compared to the high-priority goal of catching Osama bin Laden. The United States was quietly dealing with the Taliban until 9/11, and Pakistan actively assisted its leaders long after publicly shunning them.

The upshot of all this, Rashid concludes, is looming disaster. As popular frustration with corruption and insecurity grows among Afghans, the Taliban's tentacles have reached further into their society. U.S. military forces in Afghanistan have been thinned by the conflict in Iraq, while NATO troops are hamstrung by rules of engagement imposed by European governments, making them seem like "scared rabbits."

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are now governed by civilians, but they are still at each other's throats. And although U.S. officials have belatedly realized that the insurgents are a serious threat, it may be too late for the anti-corruption reforms, security improvements and more visible aid delivery that could have sapped their popular support. Millions of dollars have been spent and thousands of lives sacrificed, Rashid writes, while Muslim states are failing, Islamic terror is spreading, and U.S. credibility lies in ruins across Central Asia and the Mideast. We can only hope that his thesis, like his book's title, is a deliberately overstated warning rather than an accurate prediction of what is to come. ·

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