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### South Asia

Pakistan on the brink: the future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West. By Ahmed Rashid. London: Allen Lane. 2012. 234pp. Index. £20.00. isbn 978 1 84614 585 8. Available as e-book.

The future of Pakistan. By Stephen P. Cohen and others. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press. 2011. 311pp. Index. Pb.: £19.99. isbn 978 0 81572 180 2. Available as e-book.

If there is one question that has come to dominate recent works on Pakistan it is this: how to make the best of a bad job? The two books under review are no exception. Both underscore the severity of Pakistan's problems: its tortured history; its perilous dalliance with religion; its chronically dysfunctional institutions; its troubled relations with regional neighbours.

Yet both authors persist, bravely, in trying to chart a way forward. The tone is set by Ahmed Rashid, who in the preface to his new book, *Pakistan on the brink*, pre-empts charges of playing Cassandra by emphatically drawing on the power of hope to extricate his country from its present traumas. While refusing to be lulled by false optimism about the prospects for Pakistan, he confesses that, 'I am constantly looking for that open window and hoping it will stay open long enough for peace to emerge' (p. xx). Stephen Cohen in his lead contribution to *The future of Pakistan* also declares that, even if hope is not a policy (taking his cue from George Shultz), we must still 'hope for the best, but at least think about the worst' (p. 59). These wise words, lined with an albeit fragile faith in Pakistan, deserve our attention, for both Rashid and Cohen can justly lay claim to having given us some of the most penetrating insights into Pakistan over many years of close and sympathetic observation. Rashid needs little introduction. His analysis of the complex regional dynamics that bind the fortunes of Pakistan and Afghanistan with Central Asia are today quite simply unparalleled.

His prescient and ground-breaking study, *Taliban*, published in 2000 (Yale University Press), which warned of the rise of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan (and which some at the time dismissed as scaremongering), became the stuff of legend after 9/11 and earned him the ear of world leaders. He followed it with his magisterial study, *Descent into chaos* (Allen South Asia 1167 International Affairs 88: 5, 2012 Copyright © 2012 The Author(s). International Affairs © 2012 The Royal Institute of International Affairs. Lane, 2008, reviewed in International Affairs 85: 2), which still stands out for its coruscating analysis of how America's decision to go to war against Iraq effectively wrecked the chances of a successful transition in Afghanistan—an analysis that has since been widely echoed in the corridors of the policy-making establishment. And it is the legacy of the flawed decision to lose sight of Afghanistan and Pakistan that constitutes the main focus of Rashid's latest book.

As such, it serves as a fitting end to a trilogy in which Rashid, the otherwise inveterate reporter, sets aside reportage to reflect on the 'arrogance, hubris, rigidity, and stubbornness' (p. xx) that have widened fractures in the world's most unstable region. Those reflections range widely and are undeniably gloomy. Much of Rashid's disillusionment centres on the three main players he holds responsible for squandering the opportunity for peace: the US administration of President Barack Obama, the current Afghan leadership under President Hamid Karzai and Pakistan's present hybrid regime, which maintains the façade of civilian control while bowing to military fiat.

All have disappointed Rashid, who makes no secret of the expectations he harboured about Obama's radical vision to end the war, about Karzai's unflinching devotion to the cause of Afghan national reconciliation, and about Pakistan's elected government's resolve to shelve the military's security-dominated narrative in favour of economic and political reforms. However, it would be a mistake to regard this book as merely an account of one man's thwarted hopes. Its real significance lies in the warning it carries for the future stability of Pakistan (and given Rashid's prescience in judging the course of regional affairs we would be well advised to listen). For Rashid is convinced that ultimately 'the core issue is what happens in Pakistan'. The country's strategic

location, its nuclear weapons, its massive population, its terrorist sanctuaries, and its crumbling economic and political institutions, all 'make it more important—and more vulnerable—than even Afghanistan' (p. 189). As for the much vaunted capacity of Pakistan's army to hold the whole structure together, Rashid gives it short shrift. He argues, rightly, that it is in fact the army that is very largely to blame for keeping Pakistan chained to a narrative which has been the source of much instability. This narrative, which is predicated on war with India, driven by the patronage of militant proxies, and obsessed with securing 'a friendly government' in Afghanistan, must be jettisoned if Pakistan is to avoid meltdown.

But Rashid is no less clear-eyed about the abject failure of the United States to take responsibility for a war it precipitated. US irresponsibility, he argues, extends to both 'action and inaction'. By allowing the CIA to manage legally questionable drone strikes against Pakistan without the accountability that would normally attach to military decisions such as 'who should live and die' (p. 55), the US has sought to avoid responsibility for the dangerous spiral of rage that now fuels Pakistan.

The US is also culpable of inaction. Rashid warns that the continued refusal of the United States to detail its aims or outline its policies for the region has not only accentuated regional instability but threatens to take Pakistan over the edge. Precisely what constitutes 'the edge' is a moot point, which nevertheless occupies Cohen and his team of well-known experts assembled to explore The future of Pakistan. They are agreed that, in the complex case of Pakistan, 'the edge' must be open to a range of definitions and include a spectrum of possibilities: 'at the minimum another military takeover; at the maximum the break-up of the state'. Indeed, the broad consensus that flows from this lively discussion is that we would almost be better advised to think in terms of futures, rather than a future, for Pakistan.

It is not surprising therefore to find that none of the contributors chooses to predict any single outcome for Pakistan. Instead, most prefer to hedge their bets and to conclude that Pakistan will 'muddle through' over the next five to seven years even if some anticipate Book reviews 1168 International Affairs 88: 5, 2012 Copyright © 2012 The Author(s). International Affairs © 2012 The Royal Institute of International Affairs.

unexpected challenges. Few entertain the prospect of complete 'state failure', but fewer still envisage an easy ride to a stable democracy. In between there lie any number of plausible scenarios, each dependent on a host of variables. This approach, however instructive, may leave some readers frustrated and none the wiser about the current course of Pakistan, even if they can rest assured that 'extreme' scenarios involving a breakup of the state are unlikely in the short to medium term. That said, this volume represents a valuable undertaking brimful of keen insights and, sometimes, much needed cold logic.

Cohen's excellent introduction serves as a model. In it he lays out the four main sets of variables (domestic concerns; issues of identity; structures of state and society; and foreign relations), which he believes will shape Pakistan's future. Many of these variables will be familiar to those already acquainted with Cohen's earlier work, *The idea of Pakistan* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004). What is new and interesting here are the sharply diverging perspectives that are brought to bear on the analysis. Some are quite obviously informed by national perceptions. The Pakistanis, who form a minority of the contributors, appear to be relatively more sanguine about the future of their country and confident of its potential to correct itself given the right policies and political will—although neither seems anywhere in sight.

By contrast, the non-Pakistani contributors tend to project a bleaker future based on their belief that structural constraints and issues of identity may now be so deeply divisive in Pakistan that 'extreme scenarios [the breakup of the state] were no longer inconceivable' (p. 288). This points to yet another conspicuous difference between the contributors. For while the non-Pakistani contributors are ready to wrestle with the question of Pakistan's collective and constitutional identity, especially its complex relation to Islam, as a key variable in determining the future of the state, the Pakistanis studiously avoid this difficult (even discomfiting) issue. Ultimately the real worth of Cohen's endeavour will be judged against how things play out in Pakistan. At a time when the country is entering yet another period of intense uncertainty many will want to turn to this volume for guidance. Scholars and policy-makers would do well to keep a copy of both books to hand.