

Ahmed Rashid, a well-informed Cassandra

From the print edition, 14/04/2012

By Ahmed Rashid

Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Viking; 234 pages; \$26.95. Allen Lane; £20. Buy from Amazon.com, Amazon.co.uk

AHMED RASHID, a well-informed observer of both Afghanistan and Pakistan, is unsure which of the two countries to be most gloomy about. Afghanistan's prospects are evidently grim. American soldiers will soon quit. At best, Afghanistan will fall into a severe slump, for American funds account for a huge proportion of its economic activity; at worst, its vying neighbours will push it into full-scale civil war. Taliban insurgents remain strong; Hamid Karzai's government in Kabul is so rotten and unpopular it risks collapsing altogether.

Yet it is Afghanistan's much bigger neighbour, Pakistan, that is probably in greater danger. Pakistan is vulnerable to its neighbour's turmoil, mostly via the badlands of its Pushtun tribal areas. Pakistan's own religious extremists and insurgents are well dug in, and the army chiefs in Rawalpindi are more likely to seek collaboration with them than confrontation. Military men, spies and politicians leech away state resources. Economic, environmental and demographic trends all suggest looming disaster. "These long-term problems, if not tackled immediately, may well plunge Pakistan into the failed-state category very soon," the author concludes.

Such anxious analysis does not come out of the blue. Mr Rashid, a Lahore-based journalist, has made a career as a professional doomster, foreseeing worsening gloom for two countries he cares about greatly and explaining how that threatens the rest of the world. Sadly, he has got a great deal right. His previous book, "Descent into Chaos" (2008), is an essential read for understanding the region. It is hard to think of a better three-word summary of recent developments there.

Mr Rashid's reputation, in turn, has won him access to the people who shape the region. An early authority on the Afghan Taliban, he now frequently meets rulers of Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as senior Western policymakers. Thus he has authority when he warns that nuclear-armed Pakistan is on the brink of turning yet more unstable and threatening.

His main worry is the armed forces, which consume the lion's share of state resources and have imposed disastrous policies. These include a hostile foreign policy towards neighbouring countries; abetting violent extremists who threaten opponents abroad and risk ripping apart Pakistan itself and building an arsenal of nuclear weapons which may not be secure, if for example, the army itself were one day to split in two. Worse, he sees the Inter Services Intelligence agency, the main military spy network, becoming a "state within a state", with the spies in effect getting control of the army, and thus having an unhealthy sway over other institutions.

All this deserves a close hearing. Mr Rashid occasionally overstates his case, for example when claiming that with better rulers Pakistan could somehow become uniquely prosperous. A suggestion that "no other country in the world has such potential to become a hub for trade and business" makes no sense, given the human, environmental and social problems that Mr Rashid spells out so clearly. But his core argument is convincing: that the unaccountable army and spies set rotten policies as hapless and thieving civilian politicians take the blame; the result is that Pakistan grows more fragile, posing still greater threat.