

## Books: Gareth Price on Ahmed Rashid

Gareth Price, March 2012

**The World Today, Volume 68, Number 3**

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Gareth Price finds few grounds for hope in Ahmed Rashid's latest work

Ahmed Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink: the Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West*, Allen Lane

When Ahmed Rashid's first book, *Taliban*, was published in 2000, it warranted a relatively small print run. Then September 11 happened and it suddenly became an international bestseller, with the White House and Downing Street requesting copies.

*Pakistan on the Brink* is his latest work, a collection of essays that continues the theme of his earlier works charting the rise and fall and subsequent re-emergence of the Taliban and Islamist extremism. But while earlier works contained a critique of US policy, George W. Bush and of Pakistan, this book looks at a period which ostensibly should contain grounds for optimism.

In Pakistan, after the ambivalent, if not duplicitous, rule of Pervez Musharraf, a fairly elected civilian government came to power. And the new US president, Barack Obama, saw Afghanistan as the 'good war' which should be won, in contrast to Iraq. Combined, this should have given grounds for hope that earlier wrongs could be righted.

In practice, the situation within Pakistan has deteriorated dramatically, as have its relations with the United States. Afghanistan's future is unresolved despite moves by the West to announce the date of a 'conditions-based' timetable for troop withdrawal. Moves to engage with the Taliban are slowly getting underway, although as the date of departure approaches it is hard to see that the West's leverage is strengthened when some kind of structured political process finally begins.

All of the main protagonists have made errors. Reading Rashid's account of each makes for depressing reading. In the case of Pakistan, the failure of the military high command to recognise that the threat from internal insurgency presents a greater risk to the country's well-being than the perceived threat from India has led to numerous wrong turnings. The apparent transition to civilian rule failed to allow new policies to be formulated because both the President and the Prime Minister appear, in Rashid's words, to be 'terrified' of the military. Remaining in office appears contingent on not upsetting the military.

The truth of this has been seen in recent months. Soon after setting out a bold initiative aiming to liberalise trade with India, a mysterious memo appeared, apparently seeking US support for the civilian government to counter the threat of a military coup. 'Memogate' led to the resignation of Pakistan's ambassador to the US, but failed, thus far at least, to bring down the government.

US policy errors have varied. The decision to invade Iraq, and subsequently transfer both resources and political attention from Afghanistan, remains the first and foremost.

But Obama inherited a string of problems, not least the growing recognition that accounting procedures for the billions of dollars channelled to Pakistan were lax, to say the least. Fear that funding would be tightened up made Pakistan's military wary immediately of the new president, and within months of his presidency beginning, the Kerry-Lugar Bill, under which assistance required the military to be subordinate to the civilian government, further riled them. And while Obama has a more nuanced approach to foreign policy than his

predecessor, he was 'utterly trapped' by the Bush legacy.

Perhaps the most important element in this was that policy was driven by the US military. A wide range of voices has argued for years that success in Afghanistan will require a politically-led, not militarily-led strategy. As Rashid argues, 'the key question for the Americans before 2014 is not how many Taliban they kill but whether an Afghan state - army, police, bureaucracy, justice - neglected so badly under Bush, can be enabled to take charge of the country'.

Unfortunately, this has not always been the question asked. Elections had become the key matrix by which success in intervention could be determined. The US commitment to the 2009 election in Afghanistan in the midst of insurgency was misguided, and the West continues to suffer the consequences.

Vote-rigging undermined President Karzai's domestic legitimacy. But while the US perceived Karzai to be weakened, the Afghan leader felt that he could 'get away with anything', given the failure of the West to hold him accountable.

Where Karzai was ahead of the West was in his recognition that the solution was political. Rashid's chapter exploring the gradual, and still incomplete, western acceptance of the need for talks, in some format, epitomises the over-arching lack of strategy and lack of vision for Afghanistan. In the same vein, the failure of the US administration to 'detail its aims in the region beyond 2014' has given rise to 'speculation and conspiracy theories'.

Is the US priority to stabilise Pakistan, Rashid asks. Is it to challenge Iran and China? Or to support allies, such as India and Turkey? Each position would have its proponents within the US. But policy towards Afghanistan would differ markedly depending upon which was the priority.

The current introspection in strategy has allowed more strident voices to fill the vacuum. A hearing into Baluchistan work by a US Congressional committee caused outrage in Pakistan, though actually stirred Pakistan to take some steps to reach out to Baluchi nationalists. Many Pakistanis doubt that the dismemberment of Pakistan is as far from US policy as officials claim.

What is the solution? Rashid believes that the US needs to articulate its long-term strategy, and engage in a dialogue with the Taliban. Afghanistan's government needs to become more transparent and politically-inclusive. Finally, Pakistan needs to entrench democracy and its politicians have to act more responsibly. While the wish list is correct, the odds on a convergence of good intentions would be long.

Pakistan on the Brink is an incomplete history, describing a stuttering work in progress. What is apparent is that progress is painfully slow. If steps towards dialogue with the Taliban continue at the same pace, it is difficult to see a successful denouement by 2014. If there is to be a happy ending, a range of actors will need to shift their approach, and expedite political solutions.

Events, on the other hand, conspire against this. The recent discovery that US forces had burnt copies of the Koran sparked violent protests across Afghanistan, and led to the deaths of six US troops, two of whom were inside the Interior Ministry, which was presumed to be secure. The situation worsened after a US soldier went on the rampage in Kandahar Province, killing 16 Afghan civilians, including children. These incidents came while the US and Afghanistan are negotiating a 'strategic partnership', which will presumably include some form of immunity for US military personnel; the decision to fly the perpetrator of the Kandahar massacre quickly out of Afghanistan will do little to engender trust.

At the same time, the Western narrative that Afghan security forces are being built up to replace western troops has been undermined by the infiltration of the Afghan army by Taliban sympathisers.

This in turn has increased distrust. None of the players - the Afghan government, the Taliban, Pakistan or the US - has agreed the scope of talks.

A number of confidence-building measures remain stalled, given continued Taliban attacks on the one hand, and US reluctance to transfer Taliban prisoners from Guantanamo Bay on the other.

At the same time, the entrenchment of democracy in Pakistan is also under threat, with the Supreme Court charging the Prime Minister, Yousuf Raza Gilani, with contempt of court, leaving the threat of dismissal over

his head. While the case may be legally valid, its timing is avowedly political. In the 1990s the military used the President to dismiss governments; the Supreme Court's current action certainly strengthens the hand of the military in relation to the civilian government.

In sum, it is difficult to be optimistic for the future, which is a shame for, as Rashid notes, there is an 'enormous Afghan desire for security, peace and economic development'. The same could be said for the overwhelming majority of those in Pakistan. If Pakistan and/or Afghanistan do go over the brink, Rashid's book provides a cast list of those responsible.

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