

Review: Pakistan On The Brink

Posted By Readiscover, 08/06/2012

By Ahmed Rashid

By next summer, the 130,000 Nato-led combat troops in Afghanistan will leave. The transition to Afghan control is “irreversible”, Nato leaders chimed at a recent summit in Chicago. In return, they pledge \$4 billion a year to train Afghan security forces. “The coalition is committed to the plan to bring the war in Afghanistan to a responsible end,” US President Barack Obama says. This, at a time, when violence is peaking in Afghanistan: last year, over 3,000 people died, the majority of them in the hands of militants.

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid, an astute chronicler of the troubled region, believes that talk about a peaceful transition to a workable Afghan state in 2014 is delusional, and smacks of tired spin. In *Pakistan On The Brink*, a collection of essays on the future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West, Rashid’s vision of the region is unrelentingly bleak. Nuclear-armed Pakistan, he writes, is on the verge of State collapse and becoming an international pariah, Afghanistan is far from ready for competent self-rule, and the US has no strategic vision for stabilising the region. So it is hurtling towards “greater conflict and contradiction rather than peaceful resolution and reconciliation”.

It is difficult to disagree with Rashid’s endgame scenarios though some of them sound unduly dire. A responsible end to the war, in his opinion, would have meant a “deliberate, carefully considered Western withdrawal from Afghanistan, the existence of a political settlement with the Taliban and Pakistan’s willingness to rein in Islamic extremism and prevent a potential State meltdown”. The grimmest fallout would result from a “botched, overly hasty Western withdrawal, the absence of a political settlement with the Taliban, a continuing civil war in Afghanistan, the Pakistani leaders’ continuing resistance to internal reform, the army’s refusal to see a compromise on Afghanistan with the United States and the Afghans, and a consequent meltdown of the Pakistani State”. Afghanistan could easily become an aid-dependent basket case with a resurgent Taliban ruling large swathes of the country and Pakistan could continue to lurch from one crisis to another, but a full-blown civil war in Afghanistan or a State collapse in Pakistan don’t look like imminent threats.

Rashid’s vision of Pakistan’s future is dimmer. The essays in this collection are not the outcome of his trademark razor-sharp journalism but thoughts of a deeply engaged but increasingly cynical policy wonk. So the reasons behind his disillusionment with Pakistan are unexceptional: a military, which has ruled Pakistan for 33 of its 65 years and consumes 30% of its budget, has a vested interest in running a security State, a political elite with a stranglehold on political and economic power is torpid, corrupt and unaccountable, the political parties are family dynasties (a South Asian malaise, really), and everybody seems to be happy peddling myths and false narratives, making the country a haven for conspiracy theorists out of touch with the changing world.

There’s also a struggle for Pakistan’s soul (Islamic or secular?) and worry over a failure to develop a shared national identity in a country where 70% of the army and bureaucracy are drawn from one province (Punjab), which, in turn, contains 60% of the country’s population. To pull itself out of chronic instability and violence, Pakistan needs to fight a war on illiteracy (literacy is a paltry 57%) and joblessness. Rashid is correct when he writes that Pakistan’s geostrategic location, nuclear weapons, large population, enfeebled economy and polity and low literacy makes it more vulnerable than Afghanistan. To function as a normal State, Pakistan desperately needs a “new narrative from their leaders, one that does not perpetually blame the evergreen troika of India, US and Israel, for its ills”.

All is not lost, surely. The pullout of Nato troops from Afghanistan could be a moment for Pakistan to seize and forge a new narrative. For the first time, an elected government – albeit weak, indecisive and in power from an election where only 45% of the voters cast their ballots – is nearing a full uninterrupted term. Another military coup looks highly unlikely in a country with a newly assertive civil society, a busy judiciary and a thriving, noisy media. Changing times bring about changing narratives.

At the end of 235 unusually depressing pages, Rashid holds out a modicum of hope. “Pakistan needs several elections and several elected governments before democracy becomes the acceptable mode of governance,” he writes. “There must be no public rejection of democracy, and democratic aspirations must defeat extremist ideology.” There is no evidence to show that extremist ideology is winning the hearts of people in Pakistan. But making Pakistan stable – a precondition for a peaceful Afghanistan – is going to be long, hard work. Will Rashid’s next book be called ‘Back From The Brink?’