

## Ahmed Rashid's *Descent into Chaos*

Reviewed by David Waterman

Rashid, Ahmed. *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*. New York: Viking/Penguin, 2008. 484 pages, ISBN: 978-0-670-01970-0.

Ahmed Rashid's latest book, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, continues this Pakistani journalist's long-term project regarding the geopolitics of Central Asia. This detailed study is the result of careful research by a hands-on journalist who has an intimate knowledge of the terrain he covers and the people of whom he speaks. The Introduction, "Imperial Overreach and Nation Building," frames the essential question which organizes the rest of the book: Why is the terrorist threat now, seven years after 9/11, even greater than it was in 2001? The failure of nation building is, according to Rashid, the principal reason for this disaster.

Part One is entitled "9/11 and War," and begins with the portrait of Hamid Karzai, the "man with a mission," who would become Afghanistan's president. It also briefly traces some of the region's history before bringing Afghanistan into the Cold War with the Russian invasion, not forgetting the competing interests of various tribes, the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. Rashid then expands upon the long-running mistrust between the United States and Pakistan, especially as concerns the ISI's support of the Taliban while pledging cooperation in the hunt for extremists, as well as the thorny issue of nuclear proliferation. Next, Pervez Musharraf's role is detailed, who is described as a schizophrenic by the author. According to him, he was unable to carry out reforms due to the army's support of religious extremist groups, *jihadis* "which would become the biggest obstacle to reform and nation building at home" (47). US involvement in Afghanistan, after 9/11, was to be undermined almost immediately by the US invasion of Iraq, and later military successes further undermined by the Bush administration's rejection of nation building in a post-Taliban Afghanistan (74). Part One concludes with an assessment of US strategic mistakes, such as the preventable escape of Taliban and al Qaeda leaders in Kunduz and Tora Bora, as well as human rights violations

regarding prisoner transfers (which would fuel pro-Taliban sentiments); the section closes with Karzai's official nomination as president.

Part Two, "The Politics of the Post-9/11 World," dwells first on the tense relations between the neighboring nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, often with Kashmir as the point of contention: at least four wars have already been fought since the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Liberal Pakistanis understood what the army did not, that "after 9/11 the international community would have zero tolerance for Islamic extremism," and hence the world was now keenly watching what Pakistan would do in the fight against militants (115), even as Musharraf continued to use extremists as a means of bringing India to a settlement (124). Rashid then describes the role of warlords in Afghanistan, supported by Washington but notoriously corrupt and uninterested in nation building, at a time when the country ranks near the bottom of the Human Development Index (130). "Musharraf's Lost Moment" describes US political expediency – not only in Pakistan but in five Central Asian states – and the resulting authoritarian policies

"The Failure of Nation Building" is the subject of Part Three. It describes Afghanistan's dire situation after more than two decades of war, and Kofi Annan's insistence on the link between peacekeeping and nation building, even as reconstruction projects were contracted out to people whom Rashid calls Washington's "Beltway bandits," well-known for corruption, incompetence and overcharging (173-174). In the context of nation building, Rashid reminds us that security means more than soldiers patrolling the streets: "human security" means jobs, education, food, and sustainable institutions, a long-term strategy effectively ignored by US policy (196-197). In January 2004, a new Constitution was adopted, but other problems – increased Taliban activity and booming opium production among them – muted its reception (218). Pakistan's "double dealing" with Islamic extremists again comes to the fore, as Islamabad had predicted a short term of US influence in Kabul, which would then allow Pakistan to have more sway in Afghanistan's governance, although Islamabad would come to regret its collaboration with extremists (219). Once again, Washington's turning a blind eye would allow the Taliban to gain strength, especially in the months preceding the US election in 2004, when Rumsfeld denied the obvious insurgency (252).

Part Four, "Descent into Chaos," begins by describing the seven tribal agencies (FATA) between Afghanistan and Pakistan as "terrorism central," as well as a short history of their administration, inherited from the British Raj (265-266). In this undeveloped region, forgotten by most – and certainly by US policymakers – *madrassas* are the only option for education, and hence very popular (272). Rashid reminds us that most recent al Qaeda plots are connected to FATA, as it is a breeding ground for recruiting and training militants (278). He goes on to say that the

US policy of mistreating the enemy combatants, or secret renditions of prisoners, promoted hatred against America and hence furthered the cause of extremist groups within the region, a loss of American credibility which will take years to restore (293-294). Then we are reminded that the failure of nation building was also at least partly to blame on the failure to deal with the drug trade, the relationship of opium, warlords and insecurity, as well as the large-scale involvement in drug trafficking by politicians, administrators and the police (318; 324). Rashid dedicates a chapter to the loss of Uzbekistan, a recipient of US aid and a partner country for the US program of secret renditions, blaming the Bush Administration's policy of prioritizing "security" at the expense of nation building, a policy which then allowed Russia and China to develop their sphere of influence in Central Asia. Finally, the lack of commitment is expanded to include NATO as well, citing their numerous caveats limiting engagement, thus allowing increased operational flexibility for the Taliban (354).

The book's Conclusion recalls Benazir Bhutto's assassination in December 2007, and the fragility of progress in Pakistan and Afghanistan that her death represents (374). A good deal of hope, especially regarding a power-sharing arrangement, died with Bhutto. Threats to Musharraf's power came from the courts, as well as from Islamic extremists after the government's attack on the Red Mosque, and the ensuing state of emergency further alienated him from Pakistan's citizenry, ultimately resulting in the election of Asif Ali Zardari's Pakistan People's Party, with 120 seats in the National Assembly (390). As a consequence of the troubled history that the book deals with, it ends with some understandably pessimistic forecasts for the future of the region, especially if we do not heed the lessons which could be learned from the multitude of mistakes which have been made in Central Asia since 1947. Included in this detailed study are several maps (geographic / demographic), a glossary and guide to acronyms, copious notes, a long list of suggested books for further research, and a complete index. Ahmed Rashid's book is required reading for all serious students of Central Asia, especially those interested in current geopolitics and the importance, on a global scale, of this region for the future. Ahmed Rashid is to be congratulated on a work of practical, real-world importance.