

BOOK REVIEW

Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West

By Ahmed Rashid¹

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Reviewed by Courtney Matson²

Ahmed Rashid's newest book, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West* is a hard look at the recent events in Pakistan and their connection to the rest of the world. Part of a trilogy, *Pakistan on the Brink* is the latest addition to Rashid's regional analysis and offers a critical look at the situation in Pakistan. Rashid's book picks up where his first two books – *Taliban* and *Descent into Chaos* – left off. *Pakistan on the Brink* is an academic yet accessible tour of key events in recent years in Pakistan and Afghanistan, focusing in large part on the period from 2008 to late 2011. Rashid's contribution in this volume highlights the core issues surrounding Pakistan's political, military, security and international positions. From the beginning Rashid explains why we should be concerned and what it might mean for the future. He writes, "Pakistan is now considered the most fragile place in the world ... It is the most unstable country and the most vulnerable to terrorist violence, political change, or economic collapse... It is not yet a failed state, but ... is sliding down the path of becoming one"³.

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³ Rashid, A. (2012), *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the West*, New York: Penguin Group, pp.11-12

Rashid addresses a number of difficult questions that are at the forefront of discussions with the US, NATO and other stakeholders in Pakistan and Afghanistan as the next chapter of foreign involvement in the region unfolds. How can the situation and relations in Pakistan be improved? What does Pakistan need to be self-sufficient, who can provide it, how, and is it at odds with what Afghanistan needs? Is it too late? Is Pakistan doomed to fail?

Given the current situation in Pakistan, there are two issues the book raises that are most salient to address: The first is the role of the U.S. in the region – from a military, foreign assistance, political and psychological perspectives. The second is Pakistan's lack of self-sufficiency and its inability to provide for its people.

On the first issue Rashid simultaneously praises and criticises the US, and a large portion of the book emphasises the US role in Pakistan and its strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the country and regional level. On the vital US-Pakistan relationship, there has been a steady process of breakdown and deterioration of dialogue and trust. While Rashid believes the tracking down and killing of Osama Bin Laden was a positive tick on Obama's scorecard, he insists that the US President has not had a real emotional connection with the region, visiting Kabul as rarely as possible and failing to describe Afghan realities to the American public or connect with the Afghan people. Rashid seems somewhat let down by Barak Obama, even though he alludes to a strong personal respect for, and high expectations of him.

Rashid points out that both the Pakistani and the Afghan governments resented the fact that a major US escalation of troops was announced in late 2009 without consulting representatives from either country. As a result, both governments have grown increasingly bitter about American engagement and decision-making in the region. The problem, as Rashid explains it, is that President Obama has not been consistently strong on his policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rashid's criticism is not without strong foundation: he explains that Obama has been "flexing American muscle, then stopping short by putting a time limit to the surge ... insist[ing] that any pullout be conditions-based but then [giving] an actual pullout date"⁴. He stood strong, but then backed down quickly.

The second issue Rashid makes most evident is the issue of Pakistan's lack of self-sufficiency, yet stubbornness to receive help. With over one-third of the population living below the poverty line, a sinking economy heavily dependent on Western donors, a corrupt and stubborn government that wants to be self-reliant but isn't, and no production, jobs, or strong infrastructure, Pakistan's issues may seem insurmountable. The economy is probably the biggest factor in the equation that will determine Pakistan's future, and its relationship with the US. Pakistan is extremely dependent on American resources and assistance. Rashid explains that beyond the billions of dollars in "annual military and economic aid that it has received since 2001... [Pakistan also] needs the United States to maintain its loans from primary lenders such as the IMF, World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, and Japan"⁵.

⁴ Rashid, 2012, p.100

⁵ Rashid, 2012, p.168

This relates back to Rashid's first point on the relationship with the US – any major confrontation with the US means Pakistan stands to lose US\$4.8 billion in foreign assistance per year. It is here that the two issues really collide: In its current tensions with the US, the Pakistani government insists that it can and will be self-sufficient, but it gives no sign of implementing the large-scale economic and tax reforms, revenue-raising measures, or defence cuts that will be needed in order for Pakistan to stand on its own two feet. Rashid accurately questions where the money will come from, but the growing weakness of Pakistan's government, and the battles it is fighting with its neighbours, Afghanistan and India, and with the US show no solution in sight⁶.

Rashid's recognition of the interconnectedness of Afghanistan and Pakistan is clear, but his argument stops short of emphasizing the shared future of these two distraught countries. While he elucidates that the region seems to be moving toward greater conflict and contradiction than peaceful resolution and reconciliation⁷, after 256 pages Rashid is still unable to tie all of the pieces of the puzzle together. The reader is left wondering how to connect the dots – what role Afghanistan's future plays in Pakistan, and how the West writ large (not just the US) can work together to ensure a positive outcome.

Rashid's book does not provide a positive outlook on the situation but he gives cause for some hope. Rashid believes that there is still time to rectify this difficult situation, recognizing that it takes the work and cooperation of all three major players. He believes the US needs an enhanced political strategy, increased dialogue and a closer working relationship with allied forces. He explains that the US must determine what it wants the endgame to be, and what it wants its relationship with both Afghanistan and Pakistan to look like post-2014 in order to ensure peace and stability, preventing the deterioration of either country into a failed state. Afghanistan must work to eliminate corruption, and create a transparent political strategy that is recognized and accepted by the entire country, not just the elites and the government officials. Additionally, the Afghan government must prove that it is willing and able to support its people, providing them with basic needs, goods, and services. For Pakistan, the way forward is threefold: it must deal with the issue of extremism, which cannot be tolerated in the country. Second, it must transition from a military-ruled to a civilian-ruled country (but those civilian rulers must be responsible to the nation, not to themselves alone). Finally, Pakistan must deal with its economic woes head-on. It can no longer be reliant on the U.S. and other donors for military and economic aid.

On the whole, Rashid's book is an overarching criticism of how the situation in Pakistan has been handled, and while its title focuses on Afghanistan and the West, Rashid is really only interested in the role of the US. He articulates that now more than ever, Pakistan's needs are intrinsically tied to so many other players in the region, but NATO and other Western allied forces are only briefly mentioned in the book. Rashid also lacks a strong theoretical framework to tie the book together, while he articulates the importance of state versus non-state involvement in Pakistan's affairs, he doesn't use a liberal or realist approach to ground his viewpoint. While Rashid's analysis lacks a theoretical framework, it has analytic rigor – he questions and analyses recent events thoroughly.

⁶ Rashid, 2012, p. 169

⁷ Rashid, 2012, p. 187

The main problem with his book is its lack of clear direction at the end; with such strong criticisms, one would expect a clear set of recommendations, especially for the US, since he seems to focus so much energy on the US' role in Pakistan. And while he makes basic suggestions, he falls short of advising other Western players or Afghanistan to improve their work and relations in Pakistan, surprising given the book's title.

Rashid's final prescription is a general cure-all for a seemingly specific ailment. He explains, "a positive outcome for the region will depend on 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"⁸. His book could go further if he asserted the importance of non-state actors and other players relevant to Pakistan's future besides just the US.

Pakistan on the Brink is an interesting if not grim read, but is an important perspective that can serve as a useful general resource in understanding a complex situation.

⁸ Rashid, 2012, p.189