

**Book Review****By  
M. Faisal****Ahmad Rashid, *Pakistan on the Brink:  
The Future of Afghanistan,******Pakistan and the West*****(London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 234**

*Pakistan on the Brink* is a collection of essays by Ahmad Rashid on the war in Afghanistan, turmoil in Pakistan and inaction of the West. It is a part of the trilogy which included his earlier books i.e. *Taliban* and *Descent into Chaos*. It charts the rise and fall of Taliban and Islamist extremism in Pakistan and ongoing insurgency in Afghanistan from start of 2009 till end of 2011. It depicts Pakistani state and society facing a severe economic crunch and social breakdown with an indifferent political leadership. Pakistan's ties with the United States have been on a downward spiral since the American raid that killed Al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, in Pakistani town of Abbottabad. This relationship is in such trouble that "the United States and Pakistan are just short of going to war," Rashid writes, and blames both sides for it.

In the author's assessment, situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating gradually and its prospects for the future are grim. Major chunk of the US and NATO forces will return to their native lands by the end of 2014 but they have already handed over security responsibilities to Afghan security forces. Phased withdrawal of Western forces and the upcoming presidential elections in April 2014 may once again push Afghanistan into chaos. American efforts to jumpstart the Afghan economy have not produced any tangible results as economic activity has been mired by the growing Taliban insurgency. The fragile political setup in Afghanistan and vying for influence by regional nations for securing their respective interests in the post-American Afghanistan is leading the country towards full-scale civil war.

The implications of the ongoing war and impending civil war in Afghanistan for Pakistan will be terrible, as it is already in a grave situation. Terrorist organizations have established camps in its tribal belt and are carrying out planned attacks against civilian population and security infrastructure. The author is of the view that Pakistan has been reluctant to take decisive military action against extremist and terrorist networks due to its insecurities vis-à-vis India, as well as a lack of national consensus in the regard. In fact, sufficient attention is not being paid by the Pakistani state to host of other problems ranging from slow economic growth, lack of energy, civil-military relations and consolidation of a political system that meets people's aspirations.

Aside from deteriorating conditions in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, Rashid blames action and inaction of the United States for its failure in Afghanistan. US policy makers, in his assessment have not articulated their objectives, plans and long-term interests for Afghanistan. Disconnect between various sections of US government has added to complexity of war. A case in point was troop surge in 2009, when without defining precise political objectives and a strategy to secure those goals the administration decided to increase troops on ground. US had relied on its military might to indiscriminately kill the Taliban, so as to gain a position of strength when negotiating their terms of withdrawal from Afghanistan. Its assessment has however failed to gauge resilience and fighting ability of its adversary, in author's analysis. Meanwhile, the US has continued to blame Pakistan for sponsoring Haqqani network and providing it sanctuaries in its tribal belt.

The future of Afghanistan is uncertain. Moves for reaching a political settlement involving all actors and regional players have been pursued at various tracks. Negotiations between the United States and Taliban appeared to be underway but haven't made a significant headway yet. The divergent positions of the United States and Pakistan have to be reconciled for undertaking fruitful talks. United States should acknowledge sensitivities of Pakistan, and Pakistan should also show flexibility for regional approach for bringing an end to over a decade long conflict in Afghanistan. It should be mentioned that the author put forward his reforms for Pakistan during the term of the previous government and action of new Pakistani government should not be seen in this context.

This study is a journalistic account of the happenings in the region. It doesn't raise any new questions because the doubts expressed by the author are already commonly known and being discussed in various policy circles and academic communities. However, the book provides a narrative of the war and instability in the region in a coherent manner with much detail and analytical insight. But a shortcoming of the book is repetition of the events time and again, which disappoints a reader. Nonetheless, this book is a must read for those interested in understanding evolving dynamics of endgame in Afghanistan.