

Pakistan on the Brink by Ahmed Rashid – review

This authoritative study of Pakistan and its neighbours reveals bleak but undeniable truths about a region hanging in the balance



Pakistan: the country's elite is increasingly out of touch with the general populace. Photograph: Daniel Berehulak/Getty Images

Back in the spring of 2002 everything seemed possible. You could drive from Lahore, Pakistan's eastern city close to its border with India, across to Peshawar on the border with Afghanistan, and then on through the mountains and gorges to Kabul without any great concern for your own security. After years of neglect, Kabul itself was full of bustling aid workers, consultants, soldiers and journalists. The "international community" had arrived.

Now, of course, the border regions of Pakistan are unstable and violent, home to the remnants of al-Qaida and a series of other newer militant groups. Unable either to defeat a tenacious insurgency or to fashion a stable semi-democracy out of Afghanistan despite vast expenditure, the "international community" is now vacating Kabul almost as rapidly as it arrived.

Over the past 15 years Ahmed Rashid has established a well-earned reputation as a meticulous, reliable and authoritative chronicler of events in south-west and central Asia. This latest work is effectively an update of his lengthy and important *Descent into Chaos* (2008). Despite its title, it actually covers Afghanistan in as much detail as Pakistan. Rashid touchingly talks of his own occasional "exhilaration and hope" and says he is still "constantly looking for that open window and hoping that it will stay open long enough for peace to emerge". But *Pakistan on the Brink* is not a cheering read.

It is all here. In Afghanistan, Rashid revisits the early hubris of the west, the diversion of resources during the war in Iraq and in particular the strategic flip-flops of the Obama administration, the infighting between the Pentagon and other parts of the US government and the continued, increasingly frantic search for the silver bullet.

Nato, Rashid baldly states, has achieved none of its strategic aims. In Pakistan he takes us through the plunging relationship between the Pakistani security establishment and their American interlocutors, the violence in the "tribal agencies" of the frontier zone, the corruption of the political elite, the arrogance of the generals and the sufferings of the common man.

Many have covered this ground but few have the same access or depth of knowledge. Rashid mentions in passing having dinner with three presidents – Pakistan's Asif Ali Zardari, Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai and Barack Obama – and innumerable conversations with other key players. The detail doesn't always make for an easy read, and it would have been rewarding to have heard more about the characters he has viewed at such close quarters. The occasional brief reference – to Karzai ruminating on whether to abandon the flawed elections of 2010, for example – leaves the reader hungry for more.

Unlike many journalists, however, Rashid does have the courage to outline how he believes the catastrophic situation in both his homeland (Pakistan) and its neighbour can be improved. For Afghanistan, he sensibly talks of the importance of a regional solution which would give countries including Russia, China, India as well as the various central Asian "Stans" a genuine stake in the stabilisation of the shattered country. Pakistan, he says bluntly, "must act as a normal state, not a paranoid, [intelligence service]-driven entity whose operational norms are to use extremists and diplomatic blackmail". He suggests that Turkey might be

"an example of what success might look like in such a volatile region".

Many analysts have been looking at Turkey with interest in recent months, inspired by its successful mixture of economic growth, diplomatic sophistication and political stability in a time of rapid and radical change. Rashid describes Turkey as "a heavily Islamicised civilian power". This is interesting stuff. Pakistan is currently the opposite – heavily militarised with a weak civilian government. It also has an elite whose members are, crucially, considerably more secular, westernised and moderate than most of their countrymen. It is this elite that the US and western politicians like dealing with, in their own language, and when they have sought to support at every opportunity. But recent decades in Turkey have seen a fierce cultural and political battle between old secular elites based in the bureaucracy and military and a new elite, with its constituency of middle-class businessmen and small country towns. The latter have largely won the battle. The lesson is that no true stability will come to Pakistan (or to Afghanistan) while the elite there is not authentically representative of the culture of the country more generally. And that culture is increasingly pious and socially conservative, influenced heavily by the values and perceptions of populations in countries to Pakistan's west, rather than to its east. Rashid does not push his argument to this conclusion, but the depressing truth may be that the only stable Pakistan may be one that shares less with the west, not more.

Jason Burke is the south Asia correspondent of the Observer and the Guardian