

Crises collide in Afghanistan

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Ahmed Rashid, the Pakistani author and journalist, has a bleak view on the region's future

Against the backdrop of the latest spasm of violence in Kabul, the Pakistani writer, Ahmed Rashid, is in London to give his take on the situation in the region.

Unsurprisingly for an author whose last book was titled 'Descent into Chaos' and whose new one is called 'Pakistan on the Brink', Rashid's outlook is pretty sombre. Talking at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, he argued that a perfect storm of multiple crises was descending on Afghanistan.

First, the global economic crisis. Rashid does not think that the US and its European partners will be able to sustain the Afghanistan security forces or, for that matter, the country's economy after the combat troops leave in 2014. Nor does he think that Kabul and Washington will arrive at a strategic compact in the face of determined regional opposition.

As far as the region is concerned, US relations with Iran and Pakistan are at a low, as is its leverage to get them to participate constructively in Afghanistan's future.

Internally, Rashid said, the West has failed to jump-start a sustainable economy, and the job losses triggered by the 2014 withdrawal will be a huge blow to many Afghans' livelihoods. That will be compounded by the US military policy of arming militias and community police forces around the country, which he predicts will constitute a destabilising pool of guns for hire for warlords and drug kingpins, when their American paymasters are gone. 'Warlordism is a great threat,' Rashid said.

Meanwhile, he said Northern Alliance forces are arming themselves as a hedge against a resurgent Taliban. Non-Pashtuns are set against talks with the insurgents which have stalled anyway. Rashid, who has just come from talking to administration officials in Washington, said that the Americans struck a confidence-building bargain with the Taliban late last year in Qatar which involved letting five Taliban figures out of Guantanamo Bay. (The White House denies it ever did such a deal.)

Since then, the Obama administration has been unable to get the prisoner transfer through Congress, although it proposed handing the five over to Qatari custody as a compromise. Rashid said the bigger obstacle is the complete opposition of the Pentagon to changing the strict rules on Guantanamo releases.

When he tries explain the complications of the inter-agency process to Taliban contacts, they stare at him in disbelief. They see the failure to deliver the detainees as a breach of faith. Given that Obama is now in election mode, Rashid expects no movement on the political front until November, and maybe not even then, given the strength of resistance from the American military.

One of the few bright spots in Rashid's view is the fact that Kabul is considering bringing the Afghan elections forward a year to 2013, which would at least offer the possibility of fresh leadership before the withdrawal of western combat troops. It might help Afghanistan even more if the US elections could be put back a year. But that of course, is not an option.