

Descent into Chaos – an Overview of the Last Six Years

Ahmed Rashid

Journalist and Author

The situation in Afghanistan from 2001 until today

There are no doubts that today the US and NATO are not winning in Afghanistan. They cannot loose either since they have the firepower and the manpower to hold the cities.

The current situation in Afghanistan is very reminiscent of the end of the Soviet period where much of the countryside in the south and east is falling into the hands of the Taliban. There is fighting now very close to Kabul and a lot of terrorist attacks in the cities itself, which has not been seen in the last seven years.

On the other hand, the perception amongst the Taliban is that they are winning, but they cannot win either. They cannot win because they do not have the capacity to take the cities, and there is a very strong opposition against them among Pashtuns, in Northern Afghanistan, and of course in the urban areas.

The situation is deadlocked at the moment in this spiralling escalation of violence and counter-violence. The counter-insurgency is not working from the western or the Afghan government side, and the Taliban offensive is reaping a terrible death toll, but it is not really going to become effective.

The other major problem is that there has been a series of major blunders made by the Americans over the years, which has contributed to dividing NATO. Many of the European countries are extremely reluctant to supply more troops or to allow them to fight in Afghanistan. There is a widespread public opinion in Europe that these troops in fact should be withdrawn. A poll from BBC says that 68 percent of the British people want British troops withdrawn from Helmand. Britain has a huge role in NATO and is committed and willing to fight, willing to do a lot of things that other NATO countries are not doing.

As a result of the crisis of the war, there are a lot of development activities which have been paralysed or reduced. Many NGOs

have had to return back to the cities and a lot of activities in the rural areas have had to stop. There is a fear of killing, kidnapping and other sorts of security issues, which western aid agencies and NGOs are now facing.

This has led to that the whole process of nation building, which was never carried out properly but had taken place to some extent, is now grinding to a halt unless there is going to be a change of policy. The Afghan government's capacity to expand into the provinces, to do the things that a government should be doing in order to build up the nation, has now been restricted even further in the last few months.

The Taliban are now no longer an Afghan phenomenon; they have become a regional phenomenon. Today there are Pakistani and Central Asian Taliban who are fighting in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Another danger concerning the Taliban is that the idea and the model of the Taliban is becoming a new model for the whole region as how to oppose western forces and how to overthrow regimes.

The Taliban, with the help of al-Qaida, have introduced an explosion of tactics, of new methodologies and new technology, they have recruited followers from around the world, something that did not exist two or three years ago.

The Taliban today are carrying out much more efficient ambushes, they make much better use of bombs and mines and use urban guerrilla warfare for the first time, capacities that they never had before. The issue of continuing safe havens in Pakistan for the Afghan Taliban leadership has proven critical and has not been adequately addressed by the Bush administration or by NATO. Even today, despite the problems that Pakistan has right now, such issues have not been seen addressed by the military, which is the body that keeps control of foreign policy.

There are three major issues in Pakistan. First of all there is a perennial tension and conflict between what is now a newly elected civilian government and the military. Civil-military tension has always consumed much of Pakistan's resources in struggling for its existence in the last sixty years. Pakistan has seen the end of one military regime, but still the military controls

its foreign policy, the policy towards Afghanistan and India. There is a very weak civilian government which has been in exile or in jail for the last eight years. It has now come back to power, and has to deal with many issues. Most important of all is trying to strike a partnership with the military and to convince the military to approach the issue of national security in a different way than before. The military does not necessarily see Afghanistan as a threat, it sees India as a threat. But much of what it is doing in Afghanistan is related to attempts to keep the Indians out of Afghanistan, and to keep the Afghan government on a constant state of alert, so that it does not commit itself too much to the Indians.

The other issue Pakistan faces is a major economic crisis, which has nothing to do with the international crisis. It is the result of Musharraf's policies, the failure of the elected government to address this issue much earlier, in March, when it came to power. As a result of this neglect, everything has now accumulated. Pakistan needs a massive bailout of five to nine billion dollars. With the international global crisis it is very difficult to get a bailout, and the countries that Pakistan has approached have refused to give any money. Pakistan needs to go to the IMF, which will probably provide the bailout but on the other hand keep Pakistan on a very tight leash. This might do good financially but it will give the civilian government trouble and concern.

The third major issue is the growth of the Pakistani Taliban, the issue of terrorism. The Pakistani Taliban are an outcrop of the events in 2001. Many of the Pashtun tribesmen live in the northwest frontier province and in FATA, the federal administrated tribal areas. There are seven tribal agencies that border Afghanistan, but which are not directly ruled by Islamabad. After the defeat of the Taliban in Afghanistan, many Pashtun tribesmen went to rescue the Taliban and al-Qaida. They brought them back, housed them and looked after them, they gave them shelter and food, and they were paid handsomely to do this. With this new friendship and new money, these Pakistanis, who used to be mule drivers or camel drivers, were able to rise in

the ranks and become commanders and leaders of their own militia.

Al-Qaida encouraged this process, because these Pakistani Pashtuns were able to create a new layer of security for al-Qaida and the Afghan Taliban, which had not existed before. For almost four years, everybody in the tribal areas was left to live completely peacefully alone, untouched by the Pakistani military. As a matter of fact, the Pakistani military encouraged this for some time, because this also created support for the Afghan Taliban leadership living on the Pakistani side. The growth of the Pakistani Taliban changed from being a support network for the Afghan Taliban and for al-Qaida to becoming multiple militias and eventually, about two years ago, to have their own agenda. This agenda was to Talibanise Pakistan, at least to try to create an emirate – what they called the emirate of Waziristan – or to create a sharia state out of parts of northern Pakistan which they would split away from Pakistan. The army moved in with enormous reluctance and it carried out a policy of attack and then ceasefire, which only strengthened the presence of the Pakistani Taliban.

The situation in Afghanistan cannot be looked at without looking at the situation in Pakistan. This has been one of the problems of the American policy which for much too long looked at the two countries separately. They put Afghanistan in one box and Pakistan in another and addressed the two boxes apart, not understanding that the two issues were very intimately linked. It is only in the past six months to one year that the American policy has changed a bit.

How did we get to today's crisis from this apparent victory in 2001?

The rhetoric of George Bush and Tony Blair was that “We will rebuild Afghanistan. We will carry out nation building. There will be a Marshall Plan. We will do everything right this time. Everything that we did wrong with the Afghans in 1989 when the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan we will now do right.”

What went wrong with this plan of USA and Britain can be summarised with one word, Iraq. It was very clear within literally

a few weeks after winning the war in 2001 that the Americans were going to go into Iraq. The best resources that the Americans had, which were very limited, won the war in Afghanistan. It was won by six hundred CIA people, groups of CIA working with the Northern Alliance. But even those limited resources were pulled out by March-April 2002, and then sent for retraining for Iraq. These were the special forces of surveillance and other special groups within the American army. Iraq, on the other hand, pulled in enormous troops, resources, money, plans. Iraq consumed the time of Washington and divided the international community. As the international community became divided over Iraq it became less reluctant to help the Americans in Afghanistan.

Secondly, Iraq led to some very severe domestic consequences. The most important of those was that given that the Americans were unwilling to provide troops for security in Afghanistan they handed power to the warlords. Even though they had been part of the Bonn process, they had supported the election of President Karzai who was internationally accepted and had been chosen by the Afghans, they handed power to a part of the warlords to keep the peace in the countryside. The issue was then that the Afghan people were horrified, because the Afghans had spent the last twenty years fighting these warlords.

One of the most welcoming things the Taliban did when they came to power in 1994 was actually to defeat the warlords and drive them out of Afghanistan. Now the Americans, the so-called liberators of Afghanistan, brought back to power these very people who had attacked, harassed, raped and pillaged their way through Afghan villages. This was of course a huge blow to the Afghan society. These warlords were empowered by the CIA, they were given money and arms to raise a militia. They were supposed to keep the peace but actually they were creating bigger law and order problems than keeping the peace. Secondly the lack of resources meant that the central government was not given the capacity to do the work, to really reach out to the people, to train the army and the police, to form the bureaucracy, and create justice systems – all these things that were needed for Afghanistan after thirty years of war.

Unfortunately the lack of government capacity led to a spiralling situation, where the government became more incompetent. Decisions were taken very late, corruption and the drug economy boomed which also fed corruption. Lack of capacity led to a lack of governance. The situation is now that President Karzai is increasingly unpopular, some would say isolated, and the governance has really fallen through the floor.

Most important of all things was the lack of resources for Afghanistan for the first four to five years, which meant that the international community failed to build the infrastructure of the country. A nation cannot be built without infrastructure, an economy cannot be kick-started without infrastructure. Today the whole international community, including all the big international aid agencies, is sitting in Kabul, and nobody has been prepared to set up a power plant in Afghanistan. So far nobody has built an electricity power plant in Afghanistan, electricity in Kabul is very intermittent – a few hours a day – so, if that is the situation in the capital, one can imagine how it is in the rest of the country, with no electricity at all. Some cities have made deals with neighbouring countries, but there is no real power supply in Afghanistan. How can there be an economy without power? How can children go to school if they cannot read at night? How can factories be started and give jobs, machine workshops set up etc, without power? Any attempt to build a nation while there is a lack of an infrastructure will fail.

There are things that are absolutely vital for building up Afghanistan: investments must be made in roads, power, water and agriculture. Only this year the US budgeted about a billion dollars for agriculture. This has not happened until now, after seven years. Afghanistan is a country where 70-80 percent of the people make their living from agriculture. If the US had invested in agriculture in 2002, as many people urged the US government to do, then perhaps the whole Taliban insurgency would have been averted. Maybe the drugs phenomenon would have been averted, and maybe the five million refugees who came back to Afghanistan would not have flooded into the cities and created such a massive poverty problem. They would have gone back to their villages, because they would have seen that water or seeds

or new crops were being generated there by the donor community.

Lack of capacity, lack of troops to provide security, lack of infrastructure building and donors were the problems. The US had one aim in Afghanistan, which was clearly expressed by President Bush saying: “We will capture and kill al-Qaida”. That aim, intention and policy were extremely narrow minded and very narrowly based, but it fit in to what Pakistan and the Pakistani military wanted. President Musharraf was happy to go after al-Qaida, because al-Qaida was considered also to be a threat to Pakistan and certainly the Pakistani military had to go after them. But the Americans had made no mention of the Taliban. There was not even the concept of a fear that the Taliban may regenerate and create counter-insurgency again in Afghanistan. That suited Musharraf perfectly, because the military wanted to keep the Taliban as a proxy force in case anything went wrong in Afghanistan, in case Karzai fell or the Northern Alliance came back, in case India gained excessive influence, or in case NATO and the Americans withdrew from Afghanistan because of the crisis in Iraq, the full blooded insurgency there.

It was American policy to actually let the Pakistani military off the hook by allowing the military to go after al-Qaida but keep their powder dry with the Afghan Taliban on their soil. This led to the issues that exist in the region today. It led to the strengthening of the Pakistani Taliban and extremism, and to the strengthening of the whole madrassa network. When Musharraf went to Washington in 2001 he said: “We will reform the whole madrassa network”. Today the estimate is that in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP), the madrassa network has expanded perhaps by three times what it was in 2001, simply because there is so much money coming in from drugs and other sources to the Pakistani Taliban. That has enabled them to set up these madrassas, where they are brainwashing children into fundamentalism. The suicide bombers in Pakistan and in Afghanistan are today young boys in the age from 13 to 16. Pakistan has problems with democracy; and Musharraf kept postponing and delaying any kind of moves to an elected government.

Several other layers of support for the Afghan Taliban were also built up in Pakistan. There were rigged elections in 2002 which brought power to NWFP and Baluchistan, the two provinces which are bordering Afghanistan and which are the two provinces where most Afghanistan Taliban are based. They brought to power an Islamic party, the JUI, the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, which was the original godfather of the Taliban. It is a political party which has the power in those two provinces and has provided all kinds of resources to the Afghan Taliban leadership. It means that the Taliban can move around freely, they can live in safe houses and have access to transportation, they can recruit and set up training camps, they can basically do whatever pleases them. The party and the Taliban had the support not only from the military; they were also supported by the provincial government. This was a huge mistake made by Musharraf because the JUI has a massive madrassa network in Baluchistan and in NWFP. That network is given to the Afghan Taliban. They can keep their recruits and soldiers there, they can train people and educate them there in their ideology.

There are other incidents, for example the earthquake in Kashmir where the military rejuvenated the Kashmiri militant extremists groups who had been fighting in Kashmir for nearly fifteen years. There had been a cease-fire with Prime Minister Vajpayee of India in 2004, hostilities had been reduced, and a lot of the militant groups had gone home, most of them to Pakistan. They were suddenly rejuvenated by being given power, and a lot of the aid that was coming in for the earthquake was given to them – the militant groups suddenly became NGOs. They were given a new lease of life as relief workers, but they spent that money on setting up madrassas to make sure that their ideology was being forwarded in the relief fund.

The second major thing that happened was the Red Mosque incident, when the Laal Masjid was seized. It was a militant mosque in the middle of Islamabad, located between the diplomatic quarter and the ISI, the Inter-Services Intelligence. Foreign militants came and captured the Red Mosque and said “We demand Islamabad to become a Sharia state, that Islamabad turns the laws around.” It was the first indication that the

Pakistani Taliban were serious about seizing power. The military procrastinated, for six months it did nothing. Musharraf thought it was a very good thing to keep telling the Americans “Look, we have been faced with these fundamentalists; they are right in the middle of the capital. We cannot do what you are asking us to do because we have to bring these people down.” But for six months he did nothing, until there were eight or nine thousand militants in the mosque. It was then the army had to go in and clean them out. Hundreds were killed and there was a huge political backlash.

Unfortunately, the military regime in Pakistan has taken a number of steps which have contributed to creating problems for the whole region. From the Red Mosque event, the state of the suicide bombers can be grasped as well as the growth of the Pakistani Taliban who have adopted their own agenda for a Talibanised Pakistan.

What will happen now?

An enormous hope for the future is generated by the American election. The incoming president Obama does have a more comprehensive understanding of Pakistan and Afghanistan than President Bush. The sound bite of both the presidential candidates that “We will send more troops to Afghanistan” is not necessarily what the Obama team thinks. Obama has an understanding of a more comprehensive policy, a surge in Afghanistan does not just mean a military surge, like it did in Iraq. It means a surge in resources, development, building government capacity, in dealing with the insurgency and fighting the Taliban but also talking to them. A surge means a multi-pronged, comprehensive strategy that the people hopefully can accept. The key is a new attitude by Europe and NATO. The Americans will not be able to take any measures in Afghanistan unless they have a NATO which is more willing to fight, help and send more troops. The first step that Obama has to do is to come to Europe and rebuild a European alliance, because otherwise he will not make much of progress in other parts of the world.

If the Taliban today are a regional phenomenon, if today half of the problems of Afghanistan are related to the crisis in Pakistan, and the other half to the problems of Iran, and even Central Asia and Russia, there is a need of a comprehensive policy, and as part of that we need a regional policy. The West, the Americans and NATO need to look at this region as a whole, since it is an interlocking region. Everyone now keeps trying to fund and fuel an armed proxy in Afghanistan, either because they want to see the Taliban win, or because they want to make sure that the Taliban do not conquer Kabul. So all the neighbours are back doing what they were doing in the nineties, and Afghanistan will not survive this time.

Afghanistan survived then because there were persons to lead them like Ahmad Shah Massoud, and there was the Northern Alliance. They were fighting with their backs to the wall, but there was at least a resistance movement.

This time unfortunately, the neighbours' interferences, unless this is addressed, is going to be overwhelming. There are now tens of thousands of potential recruits for the Taliban in the region, in Central Asia, Pakistan and Iran.

What is the solution?

The UN Security Council needs to become more involved, to create a new very high level contact group and carry out a multi-pronged diplomatic initiative. The main threat of the Pakistani state is the army's policy, it cannot be changed by beating them on the head and saying "Do more", which is what the Bush administration did. The only way the policies of the army can be changed is if there is more accommodation from India. An India-Pakistan dialogue is needed to help resolve some of the multiple problems between the two countries. There is a need for a dialogue that will reduce the threat for the Pakistani military, so that it can start moving its forces away from the Indian border to the Afghan border, which has been one of the main problems for Americans for the past months. A dialogue has to be established between Afghanistan and Pakistan which will look into concrete issues like the Durand line in order to improve their relationship. The Afghans still do not recognize the border between

Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Americans do not have a dialogue with the Iranians, and the Iranians are petrified. They do not see the Afghans as a threat, but what they fear is that the Americans are going to use Afghanistan as a soil for possibly attacking them or destabilising the country.

Along with these things, there is a need for a regional economic strategy. The belt of trouble runs along the Afghan border: at one side there are Pakistani Pashtuns and on the other side Afghan Pashtuns. A regional economic strategy is needed to melt these two regions and economic developments together. The same applies to the northern parts of Afghanistan and the bordering southern Tajikistan, southern Uzbekistan and eastern Turkmenistan, which are the three most poverty stricken areas of Central Asia. Poverty there is actually far worse than in Pakistan or even in Afghanistan. These are areas from where the Central Asian recruits are coming, and therefore the international community needs to address these issues in a cross-border economic strategy.

Thirdly, there has to be meetings and talks with the Taliban. There are Taliban who are willing to talk and negotiate, who are fighting not for al-Qaida or for global Jihad or for bombing Washington but for a large variety of very local parochial reasons. They may be willing to come and talk.

Finally, there is a hope that a comprehensive strategy can be adopted and that the new US administration will reach out towards such policies so that the next few months will be more fruitful than the past ones.