

Ahmed Rashid's "Taliban, Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia," is an intelligent analysis of repeated international failures to respond to calls for help and why foreign policy cannot be just trade policy.

Rashid is a Pakistani journalist for the Far Eastern Economic Review. He has worked in Afghanistan for decades where he witnessed events and interviewed players.

Rashid recounts Afghanistan's history. Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Britain, Russia and the Soviet Union were among Afghanistan's invaders.

Rashid describes Afghanistan's geography and resources. Its west is a continuation of the Persian plateau, the central-east cradles the Hindu Kush, an extension of the Himalayas interspersed with fertile river valleys famed for cereal and fruit harvests. The north has minerals, oil and gas. Southern highlands have vast forests. There are large deserts, but also large rivers for irrigation and transport. Afghanistan is the hub of trade between central Asia and Pakistan and between the middle east and China. The cities of Herat, Khandahor, Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif were once centres of great civilizations.

The Afghani people are a mix of southern Pashtun tribes whose territory extends into Pakistan, western Hazaras with ties to Iran and northern Turkic groups. Twenty-five percent of Afghanis are Uzbeki and a smaller percentage is Tajik. Cultural borders differ from political boundaries and political boundaries are regularly traversed by Afghani nomadic farmers and traders.

Modern Afghani history is a tale of unbridled economic exploitation. The British played local leaders against one another to support their imperial interests and to exclude Russia. The Soviet invasion created havoc. Civil war followed the departure of the Red Army and the Taliban emerged.

The Taliban received support from Saudi Arabia and the US through Pakistan because they appeared the lesser of evils. And evil they have been. Their treatment of women is well-known; it was a western cause-of-the-month embraced by Hillary Clinton and Hollywood celebrities. Less publicized were their brutal executions of opponents and attempted genocide of Sunni Islamic Afghanis. Whole villages were tossed live into wells which were then bulldozed. Blood flowed in northern cities where there was resistance to the Taliban. Taliban social policy was reliance on divine provision. Agricultural land become opium fields. The proceeds of drug sales bought foreign weapons and domestic misery. Afghanistan is the most heavily land-mined country on earth.

The Taliban are understandably soulless. Raised in the destitute poverty of refugee camps, they're victims of twenty years of war. They know nothing except privation and terror. Their leadership arose from that same morass and found a receptive audience for their version of Islam of which Rashid is critical.

He explains that a Jihad or struggle to become a good Muslim is internal, spiritual wrestling, not a war. True Islam embraces justice and tolerance. It's understandable that Osama Bin Laden, a soulless terrorist, who bombed US embassies in Africa before his September 11 attack and who was barred by his native Saudi Arabia, found sanctuary with the Taliban.

The US embargo on Iran, the opening of the central Asian republics with their huge undeveloped oil and gas deposits, the Kashmir dispute and arms sales influence international policy towards Afghanistan. The suffering and poverty of Afghani people has less pull.

The tragedy is that Afghanistan with twenty million people - twice Sweden's population - and abundant resources in a land twice Sweden's size, could be a Sweden.

How do we rise above self-interest and help the less fortunate as we would like to be helped? We have to act. As recent history has shown, without peace for everybody, there is peace for nobody.