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by Nadia Rasul 19/03/2012

**Interview: Ahmed Rashid on the Road to Reconciliation in Afghanistan**

Preeminent Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid considers the challenges facing the United States as it withdraws from Afghanistan and reviews its long-term engagement with Pakistan in his new book *Pakistan on the Brink*, a follow-up to his acclaimed *Descent into Chaos* (2008).

In *Pakistan on the Brink* Rashid argues that contradictory Western policies and a lack of clarity about U.S. aims and objectives in the region have significantly contributed to the deteriorating political and military situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Rashid hopes that "the Americans are not looking for just a military deal with the Taliban to ensure their withdrawal," but will also consider political solutions for a peaceful future.

Rashid will address the long-term problems confronting the major players as they attempt to create a peaceful future for the region in his talk at Asia Society New York on [March 26, 2012](#). For those who can't attend in person, a free live video webcast will be offered on [AsiaSociety.org/Live](#) at 6:30 pm ET; online viewers are encouraged to submit questions to <mailto:moderator@asiasociety.org>

**Do you see Pakistan playing a meaningful role in Afghanistan's political reconciliation process and a peaceful future for the region, given its domestic turmoil – in particular, the rift between the civilian government and the military establishment?**

At present there is abject confusion in Pakistan because of multiple domestic crises, the insurgency in Balochistan and the rupture with the U.S. and NATO. Pakistan's Afghan policy is equally chaotic at present, even though it is entirely in the hands of the military and the Inter-Services Intelligence with no meaningful input from the civilian government. The Foreign Office and its minister reflect the views of the military rather than the government.

Nevertheless, having said that, Pakistan's biggest card is the presence of the entire Afghan Taliban leadership on its soil – a card that it has yet to play. Pakistan needs to help "deliver" some top Taliban leaders to both the Afghan and U.S. government for negotiations and it needs to free senior Taliban it has imprisoned for holding independent talks with Kabul. Pakistan's failure to deliver so far and the inordinate delay in restarting its relationship with the U.S. is slowing down the entire reconciliation process in Afghanistan.

**What are some of the most common misconceptions that the Western media have about Pakistan's relationship with Afghanistan, the U.S. and the Taliban?**

The most common misconception is to view Pakistan as a constant spoiler in the Afghan reconciliation talks. Despite the fact that Pakistan has housed the Taliban leadership for 11 years, it did so on its rationale that it had genuine security fears from the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan, the Indian influence in that country and the role of other neighbors seeking influence there. There has been no real attempt to discuss and deal with these issues with the military. President Obama promised to do so when he came into office but quickly dropped the idea.

**To what extent are Afghanistan's people and ethnic minorities represented in international debates about reconciliation among the Taliban, the Afghan government, Pakistan and the United States?**

President Karzai has failed to make the reconciliation process all-inclusive and bring on board, especially, the non-Pashtuns in northern Afghanistan and even those Pashtuns who have been threatened by the Taliban. There is no political process of reconciliation under way amongst the pro-government and the anti-Taliban elements in Afghan society and this is a big mistake. The lack of an Afghan consensus will become a big problem as U.S.-Taliban talks progress.

**How do you compare the Soviet withdrawal from the region with the the upcoming (2014) exit of U.S. troops from Afghanistan?**

The Soviets looked for a deal with the Mujheddin, just as the Americans are looking for one with the Taliban, before they withdrew. The Soviets negotiated with the major Mujheddin groups to ensure a safe and orderly withdrawal for their troops, but they failed to persuade the Americans and Pakistan to back an interim coalition government in Kabul to ensure an inclusive political process in Kabul.

I hope that the Americans are not looking for just a military deal with the Taliban to ensure their withdrawal, but will make any such deal conditional on having the Taliban agree to form an interim coalition government with Kabul.

**When we talk about a peaceful future for Afghanistan, it is mainly seen in connection with Pakistan and its policies towards the Afghan government and the Taliban. What kind of a role do the other regional players such as Iran, India, China, Russia and the Central Asian countries play? And how do they factor into a peaceful and stable future for Afghanistan?**

All the neighboring states have to be brought into the peace process eventually, and Pakistan has to make room for that to happen. At present all the neighbors of Afghanistan are opposed to any overwhelming influence by Pakistan.

However, the U.S. has to be more pro-active in creating a regional consensus about non-interference in Afghanistan – a consensus that is meaningful to the Afghans, because they have had enough of interference by their more powerful neighbors.

#### **Related Links**

[Ahmed Rashid at Asia Society New York, 3/26/12](#)

[Excerpt: Ahmed Rashid's 'Pakistan on the Brink'](#)