

## Part 2: Ahmed Rashid on U.S. Relations with Pakistan and Afghanistan, Drones, and Journalists in Danger

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**AMY GOODMAN:** We continue our conversation with Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani journalist who has written a number of books, including, most recently, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** In the past year, relations between the U.S. and Pakistan have soured following the raid that killed bin Laden, an increase in drone attacks, the killing of two Pakistanis by CIA contractor Raymond Davis, and a U.S. air strike last November that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. Pakistan subsequently cut NATO supply lines into Afghanistan.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ahmed Rashid, with President Obama meeting with the Pakistani prime minister, talk about the significance of this meeting, and then let's talk about what—the ongoing fallout from the killing of Osama bin Laden, and what exactly the Pakistan relationship with the United States was around this.

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, five months ago, after the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers, the Pakistanis broke all relations with the U.S. So this is the first time that an American official of the President has actually met with Pakistani leaders.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And explain how that happened with the 24 soldiers.

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, 24 soldiers were camped on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. The Americans say that they were fired upon by the Pakistanis. They retaliated with gunships and shot back, killing the whole camp, as it were. The Pakistanis say this was an unprovoked attack by the Americans. You know, we'll never know the real truth, but it certainly prompted—you know, the death of these soldiers prompted enormous anger in the army, in the public, and led to this breakdown of relations.

Most critically of all, the road that supplies U.S. forces in Afghanistan and starts at the port of Karachi and then drives up, all the way up to the north into Afghanistan, that was shut. That's been shut for five months now. And a lot of fuel and supplies for U.S. forces came through that road.

Now, what has happened is that the parliament has issued a list of 40 demands that they want the U.S. to comply with. Now, a lot of these demands are a bit, you know, ridiculous and far-fetched. But most of the demands are very real. And basically, they are there to try and control and make more transparent the U.S. relationship with Pakistan and what the army will—how far the army will be allowed to cooperate with the Americans and how far it won't. Ultimately, of course, given Pakistan's polity, the army will decide what will be done and what kind of relationship they want with the Americans.

So, these meetings are just a start of a very complicated negotiation that now has to take place between the two sides, essentially between the two armies. And the Americans want, obviously, lots of things; the Pakistanis also want lots of things. For example, the aid to the Pakistan military has been suspended. They were—the military were getting up to \$2 billion a year. That's been halted by Congress for the time being.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Because?

**AHMED RASHID:** Because of this—what Congress believes is Pakistan's inaction in dealing with the Taliban on its soil.

Now, it's saying it will resume the aid, only if the secretary of defense, secretary of state, can show that Pakistan is helping the U.S. On the other hand, the Pakistanis are very miffed that, you know, the U.S. is demanding so much and giving very little in return.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Well, one of the things that the Pakistanis are upset about has to do precisely with the talks that you mentioned earlier between the Taliban and the U.S., from which Pakistan has been excluded, or remains excluded. Is that correct?

**AHMED RASHID:** Yes. I mean, you know, I mean, one of the key themes right now is, how do we end this war before 2014? Can we bring about a ceasefire between the Taliban and the American and Afghan forces? Now, clandestine talks, I've written about these talks extensively in my new book. Clandestine talks have been held now for almost nine months between the Americans and the Taliban. But these talks were organized by Germany and Qatar, and they in fact bypassed Pakistan's military and its Inter-Services Intelligence, its intelligence arm, which annoyed the Pakistanis considerably, because they had the Taliban leaders on their soil, and they expected that when the time came for talks, the Americans would come to the Pakistanis and say, "Well, you know, now help us deliver Taliban to the talks table." Instead, the Americans go around the ISI and hold talks with the Taliban really without even the knowledge of the ISI. So that has been another bone of contention.

Now, Pakistan is meant—is now really faced with the dilemma of cooperating with the Americans and the Taliban, which I think it will do, even though it does not have a seat at the table. It is not part of the talks. But I think it's going to be up to the Americans now to somehow include Pakistan, because if they want a broader-based dialogue with the Taliban, they will need the Pakistanis to facilitate that, because all the Taliban are living in Pakistan.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And what has the killing of Osama bin Laden—how has it played into all of this, with the U.S. accusations that if they were to tell the Pakistani government, if they were to tip them off what they were doing, that someone would have tipped off Osama bin Laden?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, you know, initially—initially, at least—for the first four or five days after this happened, the leadership, including the army chief, the prime minister, the president, they all congratulated President Obama. But the press lashed out very strongly against the army. What was the army doing? Did the army know about the presence of Osama? If so, was it guilty of keeping him there? And if it didn't know, is it so incompetent that they couldn't even guess where he was, and it took the Americans to guess where he was?

So, then the army, in kind of self-defense and in a way of retaliation, basically said, "This is not the issue. The real issue is that the Americans impinged on Pakistan's sovereignty by invading Pakistan's territory and launching this attack in Abbottabad." So the whole argument was shifted, you know, by the military, essentially, and that this was all about America's breaking our sovereignty. And the key argument, which was accountability of the army and the ISI, were completely left behind.

And what happened, the army still had enormous influence in the media, amongst the politicians. It managed to turn this whole argument around. And as a consequence, this, you know, public opinion, to the media, etc., changed and then started questioning the Americans as to what on earth were the Americans doing trying to attack Pakistan? What happens if they repeat this and kill other people through such raids, etc.? And to date, quite frankly, there has still been no accountability, and no questions have been answered about what Osama was doing there, you know? Did anyone know that he was there? Was anyone helping—

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Wasn't there some kind of a commission set up, though, an independent commission to find out what happened, who—you know, to hold some—I mean, I know no one was held responsible, ultimately—

**AHMED RASHID:** Yeah.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** —but there was a commission that was established to look into—

**AHMED RASHID:** There was a commission. It's been going on for about eight months. It still has reached no conclusion. They have interviewed everyone under the earth. But, you know, they haven't come—I mean, and frankly—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Were you—were you surprised, Ahmed?

**AHMED RASHID:** —they're not expected—

**AMY GOODMAN:** Were you surprised what—that—where exactly Osama bin Laden was, right there in a military town in the—maybe one of the biggest houses in town?

**AHMED RASHID:** I mean, I was convinced that he was in Pakistan and that he was in a city. But I really had no idea that they would put—or, you know, whoever it was, would put him so close to, you know, the military. Abbottabad is a military town with the main training school for—it's the West Point of the Pakistan army. And it's a small, sleepy, dozy kind of place. It's not the kind of—you know, I thought he would be in a place like Karachi or some big city, you know, mega city, where you could hide, and nobody would notice you. This was a town that if you appeared, I mean, you know, people wouldn't know your face.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Republican Congressman Dana Rohrabacher yesterday accused the Pakistani government of being radical and supporting the Taliban. Earlier this year, Congressman Rohrabacher introduced a controversial resolution on self-determination for Pakistan's southwestern province of Balochistan. He also introduced two bills honoring the Pakistani doctor Shakil Afridi, who helped lead the CIA to bin Laden. In an interview last month with Voice of America, he said the government of Pakistan had played the U.S., quote, "like suckers."

**REP. DANA ROHRABACHER:** We have trusted Pakistan way too long, and they have played us like suckers. We have—Pakistan is the embodiment—the Pakistani government, the ISI, is the embodiment of radical Islam that slaughters people in the name of their own religion. They have been providing the guns, the ammunition and the support system. That's why Osama bin Laden ended up for eight years sitting right next door to the ISI headquarters.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** That was Dana Rohrabacher. Ahmed Rashid, your comments on what the congressman said?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, you know, this congressman is very controversial in the United States itself, leave alone what he says about Pakistan. Certainly, you know, this hearing he had on Balochistan, it caused an immense sort of furor back home. But at the same time, it must be said that he did provoke the government, the prime minister, the president, to actually—and the army chief—to issue very conciliatory statements in Balochistan. Remember, there is an insurgency going on in Balochistan of a particularly brutal nature, and the government seems to have kind of really forgotten the issue, that the Baloch have very serious grievances, with the center, the lack of economic development, education and other such things. And Rohrabacher, by holding this session in Congress, initially elicited great wrath of the Pakistani authorities, but then the Pakistani authorities actually started saying, "Well, we better do something about Balochistan, because now it's reached the American Congress." So, you know, sometimes the things he does can have very good spinoff effects.

**AMY GOODMAN:** I wanted to turn to President Obama defending the use of drones. During a so-called virtual interview that was conducted online in January, he also acknowledged the U.S. was carrying out drone strikes inside Pakistan. Obama made the comment after he was asked how he feels about the large number of civilians killed by drones since he took office.

**PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA:** I want to make sure that people understand, actually, drones have not caused a huge number of civilian casualties. For the most part, they have been very precise precision strikes against al-Qaeda and their affiliates. And we are very careful in terms of how it's been applied. So, I think that there's this perception somehow that we're just sending in a whole bunch of strikes willy-nilly. This is a targeted, focused effort at people who are on a list of active terrorists who are trying to go in and harm Americans, hit American facilities, American

bases, and so on. It is important for everybody to understand that this thing is kept on a very tight leash.

**AMY GOODMAN:** That's President Obama. Ahmed Rashid, veteran Pakistani journalist?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, you know, the drones have antagonized Pakistan enormously, and the Afghans also. And in fact, one of the very difficult things in this new dialogue between Pakistan and the Americans is going to be the issue of drones. Pakistan will say, "No more drones." The Americans will say, "I'm sorry. We're going to continue doing it." And this tension is probably going to remain, for the time being.

The problem with the drones and the way that Obama has used them, as compared to the Bush administrations, has been that Obama has literally turned the drones into a strategy. The drones were always a tactic. They were a tactic which was to be matched by a political strategy of how to deal with—and a military strategy, of how to deal with the Taliban, how to deal with Pakistan. Now, by turning the drones into the only, basically, strategy to deal with the Taliban living in Pakistan, having this deadlock with the Pakistani authorities about a political strategy of how to deal with them, obviously the drones have intensified. They're much more. They're being used much more.

And now, you know, we have the CIA using these drones to carry out what are called signature strikes, which are the killing of large numbers of fighters, and it's a hit-or-miss operation. You don't really know if those fighters are, all of them, fighters. Some of them might be kids hanging around, you know. And any gathering of tribals in the tribal areas on the Pakistani side of the border is deemed the—to receive a signature strike, which could kill 20, 30, 40 people. And not all of them—some of them may be fighters, but not all of them usually are. A lot of civilians are killed that way.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Ahmed, in your book, you conclude by giving—your book, *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*, you conclude by giving a number of recommendations for how the situation in the region could be improved and what the U.S. ought to be doing. Can you say a little about what you would advise the U.S. government to do vis-à-vis Pakistan and Afghanistan now?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, I think the very first thing is that this dialogue with the Taliban has to lead to an end to war in Afghanistan before the U.S. leaves in 2014. You cannot leave behind a continuing, simmering civil war in Afghanistan. And I think if you can achieve that, there will be huge positive spinoffs in Pakistan, particularly related to the Pakistani Taliban. The Pakistani Taliban can't be dealt with until the war in Afghanistan comes to an end. We can't talk to them, and you can't deal with them in a political—

**AMY GOODMAN:** What's the difference between the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban?

**AHMED RASHID:** Oh, there are big differences. I mean, first of all, the Pakistani Taliban is a late arrival. I mean, they set up in about 2006 as a result of the influence of al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban who were living with them in the tribal areas. And they kind of started out as bodyguards and drivers for the Arabs and for the Afghan Taliban and then developed their own militias and then developed an ideology and started attacking the Pakistan army. And now they speak of, you know, overthrowing the whole government and imposing Islamic law and all the rest of it. They are—they remain particularly vicious and nasty. The army has essentially tried to play divide-and-rule amongst them and created pro-army groups and anti-army groups. That has not really worked. And all the killings, the bombings, the suicide attacks in Pakistan are usually taken place by the Pakistani Taliban.

So, I think any solution has to start with this premise of, you know, how do we end the Afghan war? How do the Americans withdraw in good order, without leaving a war behind? How can then the—Karzai and the Taliban, how can they broker some kind of power sharing in Kabul? How can Pakistan, you know, facilitate that? And here, what I'm saying is that Pakistan has not facilitated such processes before. The ISI and the army have played very negative roles.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Why is that, though? Can you say just a little about why it is that the ISI or the Pakistan military would be playing—

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, they invariably have, you know, their own agenda. I think there's still a lot of thinking in the army from the '80s, in which literally Afghanistan was treated as the fifth province of Pakistan. This is just in a sort of, you know, "We should be the strongest player and the strongest influence in Afghanistan." The very thing that we told the Russians—you know, nobody can influence the Afghans—we told the Americans: "You can't stay there very long. The Afghans don't listen to anyone." Yet the Pakistanis insist on micromanaging Afghanistan. And that has really been a huge mistake.

You know, I think, even now, we should, you know, set a deadline for delivering these Afghan Taliban to Karzai and say to the Afghan Taliban, "Look, you've got six months. You work out something with the Americans, work out something with Karzai. And please go home. And we don't want to interfere. We're not trying to, you know, finish you off or anything like that. We want you to go home and compromise with the people in Kabul." I think, you know, that would be a positive step. But instead, we still have not facilitated any talks between Karzai and the Taliban or between the Americans and the Taliban. We need to do that.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** You also talk in your book about the death of the Obama special envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke, and the effect that that had. Can you elaborate on that?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, I mean, one really unfortunate factor has been that the Obama administration has never been united on a common Afghan policy. Even this talking to the Taliban policy, there have been huge divisions. The military is not in favor of it. The CIA is not in favor of it. The White House is, but the President refuses to put his stamp on it, as it were. So people are kind of hedging their bets.

Now, in this talks process, you know, there's this one issue of the five Taliban prisoners who have to be sent to Qatar, and in exchange, one American prisoner will be released by the Taliban. Now, this was being negotiated by the State Department. It's now been taken over by the Defense Department. So, you know, I mean, there's this constant tussle going on. And I think, you know, the—what—as you know, at the beginning of this administration, the rival, Hillary Clinton, was given the State Department. But unfortunately, what happened there, she brought in her own people into the State Department, and the White House basically ignored the State Department for the first two years.

So even though the President had appointed Richard Holbrooke to do AfPak, what was called—you know, Afghanistan, Pakistan—and India, he was—you know, the Indians protested, and Obama told him to drop India and don't do India, which of course had a very negative effect in Pakistan. But nevertheless, the fact was that Holbrooke, for two years, two-and-a-half years, was doing all this. There were floods in Pakistan. There was, you know, huge crises, political crises, elections in Afghanistan, etc., etc. He could not meet the President one to one once, you know, and this was the President's main envoy to AfPak.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ahmed Rashid, you are a Pakistani journalist. There are many Pakistani journalists who have died over the last few years. Talk about the threats to journalism and the reporters in your country.

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, you know, Pakistan has always been a very dangerous place for journalists. Eight journalists have died in the last year, which, you know, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, is the largest number anywhere in the world. And so, what—you know, look, the threats have always been, in the past, from the fundamentalists and the extremists. Pakistani journalists have been threatened. They've been thrown out of the tribal areas. They've been thrown out of Balochistan, basically, because of—you know, they have had to move their families out because of threats by journalists.

And threats from the authorities, there were always red lines about these, whether it was the army, the intelligence services or the government. And it must be said that this government has never threatened journalists. It's done other very silly things, but it hasn't threatened journalists. These red lines were always that there were—no physical harm would ever come to journalists. You would get hauled in by the intelligence. You would get blasted for what you had written. You would get—you would be watched. Your phones would be tapped. You might get harassed. Your wife would get telephone calls. But, you know, physical harm would not come to you. But what has happened in the last

two years is that, very clearly, that red line has been crossed, and physical harm is now coming to journalists who are being picked up by the intelligence agencies or by the military. And that is a huge shift and a huge new danger.

I mean, what can you do about it? You can't do anything about it. Who do you complain to? The government is too weak. It's not prepared to take up these issues with the army or with the intelligence services. And in one sense, this is a sign of weakness of the military, that, you know, it's having to take these extreme measures, not out of a position of strength, but out of a position of weakness. And it's quite devastating, because, you know, as you know, Saleem Shahzad, this journalist, was killed. And almost all the evidence he left behind, and everything—

**AMY GOODMAN:** And he was investigating?

**AHMED RASHID:** He was investigating the ISI and the army, etc. And all the evidence—and he left a lot of messages and all that behind—all points to the fact that he was killed by the authorities. Now, there was, again, an investigation. Nothing was resolved. The Americans, the European ambassadors were livid. There was apparently conclusive evidence with the Americans about individuals in the military discussing his death. So now, you know, people are very scared. There's a lot of harassment.

And a lot of very ordinary—I mean, you don't have to start criticizing the army. I mean, there was a cameraman who shot something in Karachi during a riot of a policeman maltreating someone in the street, and the cameraman and the sound recorders had to leave the country. I mean, you know, nobody knew of them. I mean, they were very poor, simple people, I mean, who had been hired as a cameraman, and they were helped to leave the country by CPJ, basically, and by the Pakistani press union, because they were being—their families were being hounded.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Is Pakistan on the brink?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, you know, I mean—I mean, Pakistan has been on the brink for a long time. But I really do—I mean, the main theme of my book is that we cannot continue the way we have been. We are still stuck in the Cold War. We have a foreign policy that is stuck in the Cold War. We took no advantage of the end of the Cold War, and the globalization passed us by. You know, all these new industries passed us by. We were still dependent on, you know, aid and relief from the Americans as though we were still in the Cold War.

And most importantly, the military still depended on foreign—on their foreign policy implementation, on Islamic extremists. Whether we were talking about India and Kashmir, or whether we were talking about Afghanistan, the military's national security agenda, which dominates, you know, the civilian thinking and everything else, includes the support for Islamic extremism. Now, frankly, I mean, that really came to an end after the Cold War. It was—

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Sorry, it came to an end, then. But when did it begin?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, it really began during the Cold War, because it was permitted by the Americans.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Encouraged, in fact.

**AHMED RASHID:** Of course. I mean, because it—you know, the Islamic extremists were anti-Soviet, anti-communist, so they became part of the Cold War, you know, certainly in Afghanistan and even in other places, in places like Yemen and other places. So—

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Do you have any idea, Ahmed, how many people were involved, how many Islamists were fighting the Soviets on behalf of—

**AHMED RASHID:** Oh, several tens of thousands.

**NERMEEN SHAIKH:** Tens of thousands. And what happened to them once the war concluded?

**AHMED RASHID:** Well, a lot of them—a lot of them stayed on in Afghanistan, which led to the—and they fueled, helped fuel the civil war in the '90s. But the majority of them went home and created their own movements. I mean, Algeria, if you remember, in the '90s, a very bloody civil war. In Saudi Arabia. A lot of them become al-Qaeda and get scattered around the Middle East. Some of them go back to Egypt and try and launch the jihadist movement in Egypt, which was crushed. So, I mean, you know, but no state has continued, in 2011, to use jihadists as a tool of foreign policy. And to me, I mean, what I'm arguing is that we have to change our national security agenda. And we have to look inwards, into—see, we can't blame everything, as we tend to do—the media, the military—you know, on this Indian conspiracy or some American-Israeli conspiracy. We should be looking inwards.

**AMY GOODMAN:** And how unpopular is the United States in Pakistan? What do the polls show? What is your sense as a journalist who lives there?

**AHMED RASHID:** It's very unpopular. It's very unpopular. It's partly unpopular because of, you know, the actions the U.S. has taken—the killing of these soldiers, you know, the drone missiles, other things. But it's also been unpopular, as I point out, that this unpopularity of the U.S. has also been state-sponsored. It has been sponsored by elements in the military and the intelligence services, you know, encouraging journalists to take on an anti-American stance. So, you know, it's a double—it's a double hit.

**AMY GOODMAN:** If there was a poll done of President Obama versus Osama bin Laden, who would win?

**AHMED RASHID:** Very difficult to say. Very difficult to say. Obama is deeply unpopular. You know, initially, of course, there was enormous enthusiasm—a black man, you know, his whole background, etc., etc. But, you know, he has become deeply—he really—I mean, you know, I write quite considerably in my book about his failure to connect with the Afghan and the Pakistani people in any meaningful way. Here is a man who's got enormous PR skills—I mean, charming, sense of humor, a black man, you know, who goes around—he's a swinging, you know, guy. I mean, you know—and he just fails to connect.

Bush was a much better communicator. Now, I hate to say this, you know, but Bush was a much better communicator with the—he had Afghans in the White House every second week. He had Pakistani artists, musicians, actors, official—all sorts of people. Laura Bush did this huge campaign for education in—you know, I don't want to be singing the praises of Bush on your program, but, you know—but the point was, we want—you know, the need for a president—I mean, this is the major foreign policy—before the Arab Spring, this was the major foreign policy challenge that Obama faced. Yet he didn't—you know, I cannot remember a single group of civilian Pakistanis being invited to the White House for praise or for meeting the President. Likewise with Afghans. You know, this has been the failure, I think.

**AMY GOODMAN:** Ahmed Rashid, we want to thank you very much for being with us. Ahmed Rashid is a veteran Pakistani journalist. He is usually based in Lahore. He's teaching at Columbia University for the next two months. He writes for a number of international newspapers, as well as those in the U.S. His latest book is called *Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*. Thank you so much.

**AHMED RASHID:** Thank you.

**AMY GOODMAN:** This is Democracy Now!, [democracynow.org](http://democracynow.org), The War and Peace Report. I'm Amy Goodman, with Nermeen Shaikh

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