

Program Fresh Air

Ahmed Rashid Offers An Update On The Taliban

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The situation in Afghanistan is changing. Could this be a turning point? The Taliban's top military commander was captured a few days ago. The

U.S. military and the Afghan army began a major offensive on Saturday, fighting the Taliban in one of their strongholds, Marjah. It's in Helmand Province, which is considered the poppy producing capital of the world, key to the processing and the funding of the Taliban.

My guest Ahmed Rashid is a journalist who lives in Lahore, Pakistan, and has covered the region for about 30 years. He's the author of the bestseller "Taliban," which was published before 9/11. His latest book is "Dissent Into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia." Ahmed Rashid is on a visit to the U.S. We caught up with him in New York.

Ahmed Rashid, welcome back to FRESH AIR. Tell us what you know about Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who was just captured.

Mr. AHMED RASHID (Journalist; Author "Dissent Into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia"): Well, I knew him in the 1990s as a co-commander for the Taliban.

He helped conquer northern Afghanistan, very quiet, soft-spoken man.

But after 9/11, his stature rose. He remained loyal to Mullah Omar.

They both retreated back into Pakistan, and he was then virtually given control of the day-to-day running of the Taliban insurgency once it started in 2003 and was responsible for the provision of logistics, supplies, ammunition to the Taliban fighters inside Afghanistan from Quetta, the Taliban base in Pakistan.

And about last summer, in fact, after General Petraeus and several American officials had threatened that they would use drones to attack the Taliban leaders in Quetta, most of the Taliban leaders, including Mullah Omar and Mullah Baradar, moved to Karachi, and they were running

the show from there. And it's there that he has been arrested.

GROSS: And did he also write a code of conduct for Taliban fighters that kind of changed their messaging?

Mr. RASHID: Yes. I mean, he was generally considered to be a moderate, more-reasonable Taliban.

And I think he was responsible for the ousting and deaths of several very hard-line Taliban commanders who carried out brutal human rights abuses against Afghan civilians, especially Mullah Dadullah, who was very ruthless, particularly in 2006, 2007.

Many of these Taliban commanders were either removed from their position or killed. And Mullah Baradar then issued a code of conduct for the Taliban which, you know, has been adhered to, to some extent, even though they do kill civilians, especially with their suicide bombings.

But I think they are trying to be more careful than they were before, and that's probably due to Baradar.

GROSS: So how do you think Baradar's capture affects the Taliban's military operation, since he was the head of it?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think the very big question is why now? I mean, why have the Pakistanis now arrested him? Because his whereabouts were certainly known to the Pakistani intelligence services, the ISI, for many, many years. And if it means that the Pakistanis are now serious about reining in the Taliban, well, of course, that's a very positive step.

That's something that NATO and the Americans have wanted all along.

However, speculation from Kabul - and I've been speaking to officials in Kabul - their speculation is somewhat different. The first is that, you know, the Americans, the CIA could have discovered his whereabouts and then, you know, insisted that the ISI arrest him.

The second thing is that it was very well-known for several months now, and I knew this personally, that Mullah Baradar was actually in touch with the Kabul authorities, holding talks with them through - not directly, but indirectly through his representatives.

They were meeting in Saudi Arabia, and he was also meeting with Kabul representatives in Kandahar, the major - the second city in Afghanistan.

Now, one speculation is that these talks were moving forward, and perhaps the Pakistanis arrested him because he was talking to the Kabul authorities above and beyond the Pakistanis, who are very keen to make

sure that any dialogue that happens between the Americans and President Karzai and the Taliban take place with Pakistani mediation, Pakistani brokering, if you like.

GROSS: So what kind of information do you think that interrogators are trying to get now from Baradar?

Mr. RASHID: Well, you know, I don't think that - I mean, obviously, there's going to be a mild sort of interrogation, if he knows where

Mullah Omar is or Osama bin Laden or anyone else. But I think he's going to be treated very well because I think in the long term, what both the Americans and the Pakistanis would want out of him is to use him in negotiations with the Taliban leadership.

I mean, one speculation is that now that he's been arrested, he could be used much more effectively to negotiate with Mullah Omar and others because he could be allowed to meet with the other Taliban leaders, he could meet with Kabul authorities, he could meet with the Americans, et cetera.

So I don't think he's going to be, you know, tortured or anything like that. I think he's going to be kept in a safe house.

He's probably going to be interrogated about, you know, other leaderships, et cetera, and certainly the Americans will pursue him about the whereabouts of al-Qaida.

But I think this arrest will mean that we may well see a speeding-up of the negotiations between the Taliban and the Americans and others.

GROSS: Well, what kind of credibility would he have as a negotiator if he's been arrested by the CIA and the Pakistani intelligence? I mean, isn't he kind of tainted goods right now in the eyes of the Taliban?

Mr. RASHID: Well, you know, I mean, this is all speculation. We really don't know, Terry, as to what exactly happened and why. But I mean, if he has been arrested, this is a kind of way of telling everyone that look, you know, I didn't surrender. I was forcibly arrested. So it kind of keeps him clean, in a way, as far as his fellow Taliban are concerned.

Perhaps he wanted to come in. I mean, this could have well been even a gesture from himself, saying, you know, the best way to have me promote negotiations is to bring me in in such a manner so that my reputation remains clean. I'm still considered to be under arrest, an enemy. So this would enhance his negotiating ability.

GROSS: You know, the interpretation you're giving this is so different from what I've been reading in the newspaper, which is that, you know, his arrest signifies that now Pakistani intelligence, which has distrusted the CIA, is willing to cooperate and work together to bring down leaders of the Taliban.

Mr. RASHID: Well, I don't discount that theory. I mean, that could be very possible. And General Kayani, the head of the Pakistan army, has given four or five very public press conferences to the local media in Pakistan, indicating that there is a change of heart within the Pakistani military and the ISI towards the Afghan Taliban.

Remember that the Afghan Taliban have been in sanctuary in Pakistan since 2001, so this could very well be the case. But I think what we need to watch for is what the response from Kabul is going to be. If the Kabul response is celebratory and happy and congratulatory to the Pakistanis, well, then, you know, clearly they have supported this action, and they don't mind it.

If it's very muted, then you can presume that the Kabul authorities are upset because they were already involved in negotiations with Mullah Baradar, and this arrest has stymied those negotiations.

GROSS: So since Baradar was the head of the Taliban military operation in Afghanistan, do you think that his arrest had a crippling effect on the military operation in Afghanistan?

Mr. RASHID: I think in the long term, it could have because this whole - the last few months of speculation about, you know, whether the Taliban are actually talking to the Kabul government has rested on the fact that there are very strong indications that the Taliban are getting very tired.

The commanders are tired. The rank and file are tired. They're having problems finding suicide bombers. They're having problems finding fighters to go in.

So, you know, I think what Mullah Baradar perhaps is representing is one section of the Taliban who feel that this war has gone on long enough.

We are Afghans. We are patriots. We are nationalists. We need to make a settlement with the Kabul authorities before the Americans may start leaving in June 2011, as President Obama has indicated, and we don't want to be manipulated by outside powers anymore.

In other words, we don't want to be manipulated by the Pakistani intelligence or by Iran or by anyone else. I mean, it's better we make some kind of power-sharing arrangement with Kabul.

GROSS: Now, even General McChrystal, who is the head of the military, the U.S. military operation in Afghanistan, has basically said this isn't going to be won militarily. So were you surprised by the major offensive that's going on now in Marjah, Afghanistan, which is the largest U.S.-led military offensive since 2001?

Mr. RASHID: First of all, I think, you know, when - last year, when this whole reassessment was - of the military situation was done by President Obama and General McChrystal and General Petraeus, I think there has been an acknowledgement by the U.S. military that the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily. And that was a very significant, I think, conclusion, because, of course, that has affected the tactics and strategy that they're now pursuing.

Now, I think the strategy that the U.S. military's pursuing is, basically, of talking and fighting at the same time. In other words, they want to pressure the Taliban. They want to show that the American Army, the Afghan army - which is also involved in this offensive - have clout, and they will pursue the Taliban wherever they can. And at the same time, they're not averse to secret talks with the Taliban. The U.S. military's already supporting this policy of reintegration - that is, bringing in Taliban

commanders and fighters and foot soldiers who might want to surrender and putting together a package of incentives which could include an amnesty and some compensation and send them home, basically, after disarming them. And the second part of this is what is called reconciliation, which is strategic talks with the Taliban leadership.

Now, President Karzai has been conducting these talks for quite a long time, nearly a year now, through Saudi Arabia. The Americans have not got publicly involved in this, but there's a very big debate going on now, I think, in the White House about whether the Americans should pursue this talking with the Taliban.

I think this arrest of Mullah Baradar will probably speed up the American decision to talk to the Taliban. And I think also the military acknowledgement that the Taliban can't be defeated is going to have a big impact on American politicians, too.

GROSS: Well, if you're just joining us, my guest is Ahmed Rashid, and he lives in Lahore, Pakistan. He's a journalist who's covered that region for about 30 years, and his books include the bestseller "Taliban" and the book "Dissent Into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia." Let's take a short break here, and then we'll talk some more. This is FRESH AIR.

(Soundbite of music)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Ahmed Rashid. He's a journalist from Pakistan who has covered the region for about 30 years.

He's the author of the bestseller "Taliban" and also of the book "Dissent Into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia." Now, a couple minutes ago, you said that the Taliban are really tired, and now you're saying they can't be defeated militarily. But if they're really tired, and they're having trouble recruiting suicide bombers, why

can't they be defeated militarily?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think they spread too far and too - I mean, they have penetrated the fabric of not just southern and eastern Afghanistan, where many of the Taliban who belong to the Pashtun ethnic group, many come from, but they are now in the west and the north. They've expanded all over the country.

They are able to carry out urban terrorist attacks.

So, you know, they are very much rooted in the fabric now of the country. And, you know, and certainly, you know, they're not popular.

A recent BBC poll said that only 6 percent of Afghans wanted the Taliban government back. But it's not a question of popularity because they are a guerrilla force, and they have been able to create fear and terror and sympathy within chunks of the public who do see them as a force for good.

So the question is that, you know, militarily defeating them would mean also killing very large numbers of Pashtuns, which I think would really be a ruinous policy to pursue.

GROSS: Now, the policy of winning over Taliban fighters, trying to get them jobs, helping them get money, disarming them, giving them amnesty, do you trust that people who have been Taliban fighters can be won over and stay won over as opposed to, you know, getting their job, laying down their arms and then deciding I'm going to take up arms again?

Mr. RASHID: You know, a lot of Taliban fighters are non-ideological in the sense that they have been recruited for all sorts of reasons: revenge, anger at the Americans because their house was bombed, or

their village was hit for money because the Taliban are paying their soldiers quite well.

So there's a whole variety of reasons. I mean, I still maintain that the Afghan Taliban are very much still a peasant army. They're an army of farmers basically who have been, you know, for the last eight or nine years in the south and the east of the country. They've been deprived, or they feel deprived of the kind of development and other things that the West promised them.

They've been alienated because the Americans in the early years after 2001 were targeting not just the Taliban but basically all Pashtuns, which alienated a large chunk of the Pashtun tribes.

So I think there are many reasons why Taliban have joined. And consequently, I think, you know, for Taliban fighters and low-level commanders to come in is not a big deal. I think they could be brought in if there was this effective package put together by the Afghan government and the NATO and American forces.

GROSS: Now, the area where the military offensive against the Taliban, the major offensive, is being waged now is in the Helmand Province, which is the province where most of the poppy is grown for opium. And the Taliban make a lot of money by selling the poppy.

So, what impact do you think this offensive might have on the Taliban's ability to financially support itself?

Mr. RASHID: Well, you know, the new military strategy being carried out by General McChrystal is basically to try and secure the population centers - in other words, the American military is not going into every single village in Afghanistan to drive the Taliban out. They're securing population centers.

And as you said, this population center, there are about 80,000 people living in and around Marjah. Now, that's not a very large number, but it's an absolutely critical factor in the production and export of heroin, because a lot of the heroin which is developed and grown and then manufactured from poppy into heroin in Helmand Province is exported through Marjah, across the border into Pakistan and Iran.

So, if you can stop the supply route and you can also stop the supply of ammunition and guns coming from the other way, from the Pakistani border, then, you know, this offensive is, I think, very important for that.

GROSS: Now, don't a lot of farmers in the Helmand Province make their money with poppy crops? And what's going to happen to them?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think, you know this offensive is going to be a very strong message about the poppy crop, because on the back of this offensive, hopefully, is going to also come in a civilian surge - in other words, experts, both Afghan and American and foreign will be coming in with free seed and fertilizer and projects to develop agriculture.

This was a critical element that has been missing all along in American strategy. For nearly seven

years, the Bush administration never invested in Afghan agriculture.

Now, the point is, if the farmers can be encouraged to grow crops which provide a sufficient income or nearly the equivalent income of opium, there's no reason why they won't grow it. Perhaps there's going to be a need for several years that the American's subsidize, for example, wheat production or fruit or vegetable production, so that the farmers get a good return, which will satisfy them and make sure that they don't go back to opium.

GROSS: So, you think that the military offensive in Marjah in Afghanistan, in the Helmand Province, is part of a multi-prong strategy to show that the U.S. has military power, that it can use it. But the ultimate goal is some kind of negotiation with the Taliban, because the war can't really be won militarily, because the Taliban are too integrated into the fabric of Afghan society now.

There have already been secret talks going on, and there were secret talks last spring sponsored by Saudi Arabia that you alluded to before, and this apparently was at Afghan President Hamid Karzai's request.

What can you tell us about these secret talks?

Mr. RASHID: Well, first of all, let me just say one thing about the strategy, that I think both the Taliban and the Americans are pursuing a strategy of talk and fight - that is talking and fighting right to the last day.

And if we look at other - the way other insurgencies ended, I mean in Vietnam, in Northern Ireland, in Cyprus, this is how they have played\ out. Both sides will fight to the last day, until the negotiations have been perfected.

Now, President Karzai, with all the criticism that he's been facing from the West, from Afghans about the lack of lack of good governance and providing services to the people and corruption, one thing he has pursued very aggressively has been talking to the Taliban leadership.

Now, these talks were indirect talks in the sense that we didn't have leading members of the Quetta Shura, that is what is called the leadership council of the Taliban, coming to Saudi Arabia to meet with basically Karzai's brothers, who were leading the negotiations from the Afghan side.

But these talks did lead to further talks, and senior Taliban leaders from the Quetta Shura actually came to Saudi Arabia over the autumn, over this winter, and met with the Saudi officials and met with some Afghan officials. And, in fact, it has been speculated very strongly that Mullah Baradar himself was in Saudi Arabia very recently, meeting with Saudi officials.

GROSS: Ahmed Rashid will be back in the second half of the show. He's the author of "Dissent Into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia." A new edition of his bestseller "Taliban" will be published this spring.

I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

(Soundbite of music)

GROSS: This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross, back with journalist AhmedRashid. He lives in Lahore, Pakistan and has covered the region for about 30 years. He's the author of the bestseller "Taliban" and "Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia." When we left off, he was talking about how insurgencies usually end through a strategy of fight and talk, with both sides fighting until the talks reach a resolution. He says that might be what's happening in Afghanistan. The Afghan-Taliban have participated in secret talks with Afghan officials and Saudis. The talks were held in Saudi Arabia.

Why there?

Mr. RASHID: For the Taliban and for Karzai, Saudi Arabia is a kind of neutral venue. And, of course, it

has the additional clout of being the home of the prophet and, you know, a lot of religious connotations which are very important to the Taliban. Now, Pakistani intelligence has a long agenda; it wants to broker these talks and it wants to extract concessions from the Americans and from the Afghan government if it does broker these talks.

So it's a very complicated scenario at the moment, where you've had Saudi Arabia play a kind of neutral role bringing together elements from Karzai and the Taliban, do you bring the Pakistanis in? Do you keep them out? And can you afford to keep the Pakistanis out? Because, of course, you know, it is the ISI which has the most control over the Taliban because so many of their leadership is living in Pakistan.

GROSS: Why would the Taliban want to keep Pakistan out of negotiations?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think there's several reasons. I mean I think the Taliban; many of them are very tired of being manipulated by the ISI over many years. And secondly, I think, you know, Pakistan certainly, as a broker, Pakistan, you know, Pakistan would want a certain quid pro quo from Kabul and from the Taliban and from the Americans.

I mean, for example, one of the main Pakistani gripes is that India's presence in Afghanistan is unacceptable. Now, and it, of course, we remember in the 1990s when Pakistan was supporting the Taliban regime India had no presence in Kabul. Now, of course, Afghanistan is a sovereign country. You can't tell a third country to suddenly leave, but the Pakistanis want a deal in which somehow the Indian presence in Afghanistan will be controlled. So there're all sorts of things which the Pakistanis would throw in, which would not just be about bringing peace and stability and an end to the war in Afghanistan, but would also be about Pakistan's own interests.

GROSS: So that really complicates things, that the Pakistanis are officially involved.

Mr. RASHID: Well, of course it does. And, of course, other neighboring countries also would throw in a span also into the works. I mean Iran has enormous interest in western Afghanistan. The Central Asian states and Russia have interest in northern Afghanistan. Now, for example, Russia and the Central Asia states would certainly not like to see any kind of Taliban power-sharing with the Karzai government, if these negotiations are successful which would bring for example, Taliban commanders or Taliban governors in the northern provinces, adjacent to central Asia. So it's not going to be easy because all the neighboring countries are going to throw in their two bits as to what they want out of these negotiations.

India, of course, will fight tooth and nail against any kind of Pakistani involvement and any kind of Pakistani conditionality.

GROSS: If the ultimate goal of negotiations with the Taliban are some kind of power-sharing arrangement between the Taliban and the Afghan government and the Taliban becomes an official political party, in what way is that victory, because it doesn't make the Taliban any less extreme and it gives them a more official presence in the government. I mean in what sense is that victory for the United States or for Pakistan or most of all, for the Afghan people who don't really like the Taliban?

Mr. RASHID: Well, Terry, I don't want to jump ahead of the game. You know, I mean we are still very much in the initial stages, and how this will ultimately pan out and how it will end I think is very difficult to say. But, I mean, I think what ultimately we're talking about is a compromise. There will have to be some kind of compromise. Now whether you call it power-sharing or coalition or, you know, giving the Taliban some kind of rights in their areas, there will have to be some kind of compromise.

Now obviously, there's a lot of Afghan civil society; people who benefitted from the last few years, the small middle class in the urban areas; women, of course, who've had, you know, been able to go back to school and have an education who are very weary of any kind of dialogue with the Taliban. But I think, you know, when we look at what the objectives are. The objectives are really to end the war - to end the state of insecurity in Afghanistan. Now this has to be balanced obviously, with satisfying all the needs and aspirations of the Afghan population.

For example, when I mean Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of State had voiced, several times, her apprehensions about having talks with the Taliban unless they changed their attitude on women. Now, I mean she's perfectly justified and saw Afghan women in expressing those views. But my own gut feeling, let me tell you is that, what we've seen with this, you know, Afghanistan is a tribal society. They have an incredibly absorptive capacity. It's like a big sponge, you know, they can suck in all the water and all years and years of fighting and killing.

We've seen, for example, these tribal feuds sometimes that go on for eight or nine generations and then they come to an end and there's a settlement and one party pays the other or whatever and then, you know, everybody lives at peace. And we've seen this since 2001. You've had many - you've something like 21 or 22 members of parliament who come from these militant groups, either the Taliban or their allies, who are sitting in parliament today.

Now they haven't raised issues like, you know, women should stop being educated or, you know, women should go back to being in the veil. They've sat in parliament and they're being quite reasonable. They haven't demanded the imposition of Islamic law. They respect the Constitution. Now maybe, you know, you can get the Taliban to be absorbed into the body politic of Afghanistan without too many major concessions.

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Ahmed Rashid. He's a journalist from Pakistan who's covered the region for about 30 years. He's the author of the bestseller "Taliban" and of the book "Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Disaster in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia." He's in the U.S. on a brief trip.

Let's take a short break here, and then we'll talk some more.

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We've been talking about Afghanistan. Let's switch over to your country of Pakistan. You know, the Pakistani-Taliban took credit for the suicide bombing in coast Afghanistan on the CIA base and this was a really important CIA base because it was the one that was the most prominent one in investigating the extremist Islamic groups. And so it was a very bad blow to the CIA. Several American CIA workers lost their lives.

What does it mean that Pakistani-Taliban took credit for crossing over into Afghanistan to kill CIA agents and attack this base?

Mr. RASHID: Well, the actual bombing was carried this Jordanian who was a double agent who the Jordanians thought was working for them and the Americans but, in fact, he was working for al-Qaida. So I think this was a plot that was actually put together by al-Qaida. But because it was all put together in territory controlled by the Pakistani-Taliban, they were very much part of it. But what think it shows most of all is that, you know, all these groups are interlinked: the Pakistani-Taliban, al-Qaida and the Afghan-Taliban.

All of these out of non-Pakistani groups depend on the Pakistani-Taliban for sanctuary, for safety, for, you know, for getting their money through, for foods supplies, for everything. So the Pakistani-Taliban are a very critical part and you can't carry out operations even in Afghanistan without the support of the Pakistani-Taliban.

For example, I mean the most recent military analysis by the Americans is that large numbers of the suicide bombers were carrying out suicide bombings in Afghanistan are coming from the Pakistan side of the boarder.

In other words, they are being brainwashed and trained and tutored by the Pakistani-Taliban and then being handed over to the Afghan-Taliban to be used as suicide bombers in Afghanistan.

GROSS: How does the Pakistan government's policy towards the Pakistani- Taliban compare with the Afghan-Taliban? Is the government going after one more than the other?

Mr. RASHID: Well, certainly, until recently that has been the case. The Pakistan army last year took a very decisive decision to go after the Pakistani-Taliban. And we first saw, last year, the clearing out of the Pakistani-Taliban from the Swat Valley, which was very close to Islamabad. And we've now seen military operations in several of the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan where the Pakistani-Taliban are based.

Now until now, there's been extreme reluctance for the Pakistan army to after the Afghan-Taliban. In the tribal areas the Afghan-Taliban are based in North Waziristan. Now just a few weeks ago, when General McChrystal was in town and, in fact, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was in town as well, the Pakistani army categorically said, we will not be going into North Waziristan, no matter what kind of pressure the Americans put on us.

Now that's why I mean this arrest is very important. Does the arrest of Mullah Baradar in Karachi signal a real change of strategy? Well, I think the real indicator for that will come if the Pakistan army shows a willingness to go into North Waziristan, and in particular, deal with the two elements who are living there. One, are the Arab al-Qaida, who are known to be living there. And the other, of course, is the Hakani Network.

So far Pakistan has treated the Hakani Network as its own asset. Even though the Hakani Network had bombed and killed large numbers of NATO troops, we have not seen any military action against the Hakani Network. If that happens, then we can presume that the Pakistan military's attitudes have now changed to the Afghan-Taliban also.

GROSS: So what does the Pakistani government have to gain by not going after the Pakistan or Afghani-Taliban in the frontier territories?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think, you know, as I said earlier, I mean I think they would like to use - the Pakistan military and the intelligence had been convinced for a very long time that the Americans are going to pull out of Afghanistan. Now this date that was set by President Obama of June of 2011, which has been talked about as handing over responsibility to the Afghan army and the security forces and the gradual withdrawal of the Americans. Now, I don't think an immediate withdrawal or a full- scale withdrawal would take place but the Pakistanis are convinced that basically the Americans and NATO are on the way out. And if they're on the way out, they want to have influence in Kabul and their main proxy for that influence is the Taliban.

And they've hung on to the Taliban for the last eight years. If they hang on another year - a year and a half, they could well be in a very strong position to be able to negotiate the return of the Afghan-Taliban to some kind of power-sharing in Kabul and get a lot of the other conditionality satisfied as well. I think that has been the primary strategy of the Pakistani military.

And this kind of dual policy of helping the Americans, I mean they've been providing intelligence to the Americans. They've been allowing all the goods and supplies that the American forces need to come up from the port city of Karachi and go through Pakistan and then into Afghanistan - they've allowed all that to happen. So, you know, what the Americans have been very keen about is that this dual policy - that you're helping us, the Americans, but you're also helping our enemies, the Taliban. What they want is for that to end. We could be seeing the beginning of that change of policy.

GROSS: So, Ahmed Rashid, how close have attacks come to your home so far? Mr. RASHID: Well, I live in Lahore and there have been numerous suicide attacks in Lahore - very devastating, but most of them have been targeted at police stations, for example, or the intelligence office in downtown Lahore. They haven't been that close but obviously, they've been very paralyzing to have these attacks in your own city and for days afterwards there's enormous security in the city; the police is out, the army's

out, all the cars are being checked, the enormous traffic jams, people tend not to guard too much to the big bazaars and cinemas, people just take care.

GROSS: And, you know, you've written about how there's a lot of joblessness in Pakistan, now, and especially among the youth, so a lot of young people are turning toward extremism. And I'm wondering if you know young people in Lahore who are examples of that, who...

Mr. RASHID: Well, actually it's been very interesting because, you know, with all this confusion about sort of double dealing with the Taliban and all the rest of it, after a very long time I've been asked by many colleges and universities to go and lecture and to try and explain to them what I feel is going on and...

GROSS: In Pakistan?

Mr. RASHID: In Pakistan and I've been traveling a lot in Pakistan, talking at universities and colleges and young people. And the very, you know, and obviously, we talk about the economic malaise. And the first thing that they're very worried about is that they're all going to come out with degrees and be very qualified, but, you know, many of them just, you know, feel that they're going to end up driving taxis, because there are just not the jobs in the economy for them. And that's because there's been this huge economic recession, there's been a financial crisis, there has been a power energy crisis, a lot of factories have shut down. And, you know, in Lahore itself, I mean I just left a few days ago and, you know, we are having up to 14 hours of no electricity a day. Now, you can imagine, I mean without electricity, electricity going off every other hour, how could you run factories and how can people work? How can computers run? How can you even study in a university or in a college when you have no light in the middle of winter? So there is an enormous economic problem and young people are very, very concerned about their future.

But I think a lot of young people now - I would say that, you know, a couple of years ago there was much greater militancy among young people. But now when I go, I get a lot of very sympathetic questions asking, you know, asking me to explain how I see the situation and where I see Talibanization going. And the young people seem very worried by Talibanization.

GROSS: Of course, the people who you're not reaching on these college lecture tours are the uneducated people who are perhaps more likely to join the Taliban.

Mr. RASHID: Well, exactly. I mean absolutely. And they, of course, are suffering more and more,

because a lot of these young people are coming to the cities looking for work, coming off the lands because their farms are not so productive. It has been a huge blow to agriculture because the lack of electricity means that a lot of water and irrigation is pumped irrigation for which you need electricity, and if there's no electricity, there's no water. So a lot of these young, uneducated farmers are coming to the cities looking for work, and there's no work there.

GROSS: So when you look at President Obama's strategy for dealing with the Taliban and Afghanistan now, what kind of grade do you give him?

Mr. RASHID: Well, I think he's had a very positive strategy, because his political strategy has emerged at the time when the U.S. military was developing its new counterterrorism strategy, which has been - which was effective to some extent in Iraq and is going to be probably effective in Afghanistan. And President Obama's emphasis on economic development, on agriculture, all these things are a good thing.

I think what the Obama administration has been very undecided about is to what degree to talk to the Afghan-Taliban. I think they have to come to a decision, quickly, on this. I think there has to be a united decision. At the moment, my sense is that there are big divisions between Defense Department, State Department, The White House, the NSC, within Obama's advisors as to, you know - and it's a complicated issue for them. Because, you know, the left wing of the Democratic Party is going to say, well, you know, we've been fighting these guys, they hate women, why are you making peace with these guys, you know. And the right wing Republicans are going to say, well, this is a sell out, you

know, to the Taliban. Now I think, you know, he's got to face political flack from both sides of the divide in the United States. But I think for the betterment of the region, he has to come to a quick conclusion about whether the Americans are going to support this dialogue.

GROSS: Well Ahmed Rashid, thank you so much for talking with us again. Be safe, be well, and I look forward to talking with you again.

Mr. RASHID: Thank you very much.

GROSS: Ahmed Rashid lives in Pakistan. He spoke to us from New York.

A new edition of his book "Taliban" will be published this spring.