

The Final Word on Taliban

There is new American realization that resolution of Kashmir is important for the peace and stability in Afghanistan.

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By Murtaza Shibli

Ahmad Rashid, a Pakistani journalist and writer, is the author of four books, including the best selling Taliban and Jihad - the Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia. In June 2008, he published his latest book Descent into Chaos: US Policy and the Failure of Nation Building in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia. He writes for the Daily Telegraph, the BBC, the Washington Post, El Mundo, The International Herald Tribune, the New York Review of Books and other newspapers worldwide, as well as for Pakistani newspapers.

Ahmad Rashid has been covering the wars in Afghanistan since 1979. He is a member of the Advisory Board of Euroasia Net of the Soros Foundation, a scholar of the Davos World Economic Forum and a consultant for Human Rights Watch. In 2004, he was appointed to the Board of Advisors to the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva. He is also a fellow at the Pacific Council on International Policy.

At the invitation of then-United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Ahmad Rashid became the first journalist to address the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2002. He also became the first journalist to address NATO ambassadors in Brussels in September 2003. After the 2001 war in Afghanistan, he donated one third of his book earnings to set up the Open Media Fund for Afghanistan, which has so far given about \$400,000 in start up funds to different Afghan newspapers and magazines. In 2001, Ahmad Rashid won the Nisar Osmani Courage in Journalism Award, given by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP). He was born in Rawalpindi and lives in Lahore with his family. The News on Sunday interviewed him recently in Brussels. Excerpts follow:

The News on Sunday: Is it true that you are currently working as an advisor to the US Central Command?

Ahmad Rashid: It is rubbish. This propaganda is unleashed by the Indian media. They have been claiming that I am in the United States giving advice to General Paetrus, but I am here in the European Parliament in front of you. I have been on a book tour in Europe for the past one month, but the Indians claim that I am in Florida with Paetrus. The US military personnel have met with me, but I am a Pakistani citizen and, therefore, cannot be an advisor to the US Central Command. The Indians seem to have been worked up about my references to Kashmir and how its resolution is important for long term peace in the region, including Afghanistan. For the last 30 years, the Indian media never noticed me. Now they are creating a negative image of me because of my article in The Foreign Affairs that has references to Kashmir, and that highlights how the Indian role in Afghanistan is negative to the peace and stability in the region.

TNS: Is it true that your article in The Foreign Affairs is behind US President-elect Barack Obama's recent reference to Kashmir?

AR: Well, I know for sure that Barack Obama has read my article in The Foreign Affairs and it has been subject of discussion among his aides. Therefore, I am glad that this line is being explored seriously. But let me be straight: I don't think the US is interested in Kashmir per se. However, there is new American realisation that resolution of Kashmir is important for the peace and stability in Afghanistan and, therefore, the whole region, because it would commit the Pakistani Army to fight the Taliban and other terrorist groups.

TNS: Where does this supposed new thinking in Washington place the Kashmiri resistance movement?

AR: The Kashmiri militant movement is badly fragmented; some have left it, while others have joined the Pakistani Taliban and are involved in terrorism within the Pakistani territory. The Pakistani military establishment created these groups and now they are the biggest problem for the country's stability. The Kashmiris have also had enough of these jihadis; the nature of their movement is more nationalistic than jihadi. The recent mass uprising has proved that the Kashmiris want to surge ahead in their struggle without

jihadis. Therefore, the Kashmiri militants who still want to take up the Kashmir cause should use political means. Similarly, Pakistan should follow Saudi Arabia's example of re-educating the militants. The Saudis have already re-educated and reintegrated about 1,000 former militants and Pakistan can do the same with the Kashmiri militants.

TNS: So could Kashmir see some change?

AR: There is going to be a shift in the US policy under Obama. The Bush era is dead and this could offer Kashmiris a new chance. The recent mass uprising in Kashmir is great. It has given the Kashmiris new visibility and legitimacy that they now need to exploit. The uprising has shown that the Kashmiris are not driven by jihadis or by Pakistan. Now the onus is on the Kashmiri leadership to make a pitch to the Indian government and invite it to address the Kashmir issue. These leaders must show an Obama-like attitude and defy the odds against them. In the coming months, there is going to be international pressure on India to sort out the problem, but Kashmiri leaders need to place themselves well. India must also understand the change and cease the moment to play its part in building long term peace in the region.

TNS: What about Pakistan?

AT: Let's be honest. Pakistan has shown utmost flexibility and moved away from its traditional stand on Kashmir, but India has not matched this. India has failed to address even smaller issues like Siachen.

TNS: How is Kashmir connected with Afghanistan?

AR: The main problem in Afghanistan stems from sanctuary and recruitment of the Taliban inside Pakistan. On the other hand, Pakistan feels highly insecure because of India's growing influence in Afghanistan and, therefore, is reluctant to act against the Taliban. Insecurity comes from India rather than Afghanistan. To overcome the crisis in Afghanistan, the issue of Kashmir has to be addressed first. This will make Pakistan secure and raise its stakes in the 'war on terror'.

TNS: You advocate Chinese involvement in Afghanistan. How will that change the situation?

AR: China made a very positive contribution during the North Korean crisis. It should be seen as a partner with legitimate concerns and energy interests in the region, and it could bring investment too. Moreover, China is as concerned about the spread of Islamic extremism as are the West or Russia; therefore, it could play a very positive and stabilizing role.

TNS: What about the Chinese contribution in Kashmir?

AR: I don't think they have a role and I don't think they are interested in a stake in Kashmir. Kashmir is very sensitive for the Chinese and they even withdrew from supporting Pakistan's position on the issue. However, they will closely monitor the subject and remain vigilant.

TNS: There are already voices that the new Pakistani government is failing on many fronts, including security. What is your view about this?

AR: You need to give it time. Democracy was obliterated for such a long time in Pakistan that it will need time to function properly and develop mechanisms for course correction. I believe that even a bad democracy is better than a dictatorship.