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To Save Pakistan, Author Says U.S. Needs Plan for Afghanistan

By Michael Coleman

News articles and media commentators frequently describe Pakistan as a dangerous place — the world's most dangerous, according to many observers — but few, if any, can match the vivid, sometimes frightening reporting of celebrated journalist Ahmed Rashid.

Rashid, once called Pakistan's "best and bravest reporter" by the late author Christopher Hitchens, exploded into the international consciousness in 2001 with "Taliban," a New York Times number-one bestseller that was translated into more than 20 languages. The book helped readers better understand the brutal regime that hijacked Afghanistan and incubated the terrorist group behind the 9/11 attacks. He earned widespread acclaim for his 2008 follow-up, "Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia."

Now, Rashid, based in Lahore, is back with "Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan." The book examines U.S. policy toward Pakistan and Afghanistan and how the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will affect international terrorism and a region vital to world security. While the subject matter is grim, Rashid offers clear-eyed suggestions for a peaceful path forward, including the provocative notion that the United States and Pakistan should negotiate a political compromise with the Taliban.

In a wide-ranging interview with The Washington Diplomat, Rashid said he wrote his book "with the very acute realization that Pakistan was literally going down the tubes."

In fact, just days after the interview, Taliban fighters stormed a prison in northwestern Pakistan, freeing nearly 400 inmates in what is being called the biggest jailbreak in the country's history. At the same time in Afghanistan, officials in that country were blaming the Haqqani network of the Taliban, based in Pakistan, for a coordinated series of attacks that paralyzed the capital of Kabul in mid-April.

As for U.S.-Pakistani relations, they seem to plunge to ever-lower depths as each new crisis explodes. Bilateral ties — already strained in the wake of the U.S. raid that killed Osama bin Laden at a secret compound about an hour north of Islamabad — ruptured following a NATO air attack in November that mistakenly killed 24 Pakistani soldiers. As a result, the Pakistani Parliament underwent a complete review of its relationship with the United States, demanding an immediate end to drone strikes and an unconditional apology for the strike on Pakistani soldiers.

There was speculation that with the review finished, Pakistan might reopen a critical NATO supply route to Afghanistan. "We are a responsible nation," Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani told Parliament, though he wouldn't confirm if the route would reopen. "We know our obligations as well as the importance of the United States."

Yet Rashid argues that Pakistani leaders have long fostered a narrative that blames everyone — and especially America — for the South Asian nation's precarious state, when the overwhelming evidence is that many of its troubles are homegrown. Rashid's newest book begins in 1989, at the twilight of the Cold War.

"When the Cold War ended, Pakistan did not change at all," Rashid said. "It remained heavily dependent on the United States, the elite refused to pay taxes, and we pursued a foreign policy that was expansionist and

aggressive."

Rashid argues that while Pakistan made terrible domestic political decisions, the United States enabled the country's government by pouring aid into a Pakistani military that made no effort to account for its spending. The situation dramatically worsened after al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon, Rashid said. In the decade since 9/11, the U.S. government has sent $20 billion to Pakistan and has little to show for it.

"That's a hell of a lot of money," Rashid said. "Eighty percent of that money has gone to the military, and there has been no accounting of that money in the civil sector. How do they account for it?"

Rashid says the gravy train started with former President George W. Bush and former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who made backroom deals that allowed CIA agents and U.S. Special Forces to infiltrate the country in exchange for truckloads of American cash.

"People essentially said, 'Give us something that is visible and tangible,'" Rashid charged. "They said, 'Don't give us this democracy support bullshit.'"

However, rank-and-file Pakistanis, who are among the world's poorest people, resented the aid, which went almost exclusively to the all-powerful military.

"There was deep suspicion about America's intentions," Rashid said, adding that the two countries should have been more transparent. "I think if [Pakistan] had been more responsive earlier to this whole notion of civilian aid and a strategic dialogue with the U.S., we could have worked out something that would be more balanced."

Rashid says the Obama administration has largely continued these secretive policies, as evidenced by the record number of surreptitious drone strikes in the country.

"These secret deals deeply annoyed the people of Pakistan and that's one of the reasons for this anti-Americanism," he said. "There is a horrendous spate of anti-Americanism that's going on, which is extremely dangerous because along with that comes anti-democracy, extremism and outright religious conservatism."

Rashid also argues that the glut of American money has made the deadly, decade-long U.S. exercise in Afghanistan — inextricably linked to neighboring Pakistan — vastly more expensive and ineffective than it needed to be. During the initial U.S. invasion in 2001, Rashid and other experts in the region met with top officials at the White House and suggested a modest plan to rebuild the country after the toppling of the Taliban.

Over the past 11 years, the United States has sunk more than $500 billion into the war in Afghanistan. Rashid and the other experts argued that stabilizing the country could have been done for a fraction of that amount.

"We estimated if you gave the Afghan government $5 billion per year just for development for 10 years, that was all the Afghans could absorb," he said. "It would have sufficiently rebuilt the economy to where it was in 1978 before the Soviets came in.

"I would claim right now that unfortunately the West has not even been able to do that despite spending billions on so-called development," Rashid continued. "Apart from some areas where there have been huge contributions, particularly education and health care, as far as developing an indigenous economy, agriculture, infrastructure, there hasn't been much done at all. It's difficult to see how it has come up to the level even of what it was in 1978."

Although President Obama pledged and delivered more resources toward the fight in Afghanistan, he's largely pursued a military-centric approach in both Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan, especially given the successes of drone strikes and special ops raids that have decapitated the bulk of al-Qaeda's leadership.

The hallmark achievement of this counterterrorism strategy was the killing of Osama bin Laden a year ago during a covert U.S. raid in the midsize town of Abbottabad, where the terrorist mastermind had essentially been hiding in plain sight of Pakistani military forces.

While celebrated in the United States, bin Laden's death marked a pivotal turning point in U.S.-Pakistani relations, especially after the circumstances of the midnight raid came to light, Rashid told The Diplomat.

"Initially, people welcomed his death," the author said. "But then what happened is the Pakistani press lambasted the military and raised two issues that remain unresolved.

"Were they hiding Osama? And if they weren't hiding him, they were incompetent," Rashid said. "That caused immense embarrassment and questioning inside the military. Then the military came back and [said] these are not the questions. They said the real question is, 'Is America breaking our sovereignty by intruding into Pakistan, etc.' That then became the new mantra."

Rashid explains in his book, and in his Diplomat interview, that he's not buying the military's attempt to change the subject.

"The military tried to change the narrative," he said. "We can get to the sovereignty question later, but first they need to answer these questions. Not only did nobody answer them, but there was no accountability. Nobody was sacked or fired and nobody was held responsible."

Why not?

"There was acute embarrassment, but also in the lower ranks of officers there was acute anti-Americanism," he replied. "I think the high command was faced with a barrage of criticism from the mid-level officers who wanted the army to denounce the Americans."

So what can the United States do to try to lift the abysmal state of relations with a hostile, nuclear-armed, Muslim nation?

The most important thing it can do, according to Rashid, is to get out of Afghanistan.

"I do think a withdrawal will be hugely beneficial to Pakistan," he argues. "We have our own Taliban now who are very dangerous. If there could be a political settlement between [Afghan President Hamid] Karzai and the Taliban and the Americans that allows the Americans to withdraw in a peaceful situation, I think it would have a huge effect on de-fanging and de-legitimizing the Taliban.

"One of their claims of a legitimate jihad is that they are fighting with their Afghan brothers against the American occupation," he added. "That is a legitimate jihad, but if that reason was to disappear tomorrow, or in 2014 [the planned U.S. withdrawal date], so does one of their main planks. That would have a huge impact."

Rashid contends that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will also remove a convenient excuse for Pakistani leaders trying to explain the sorry state of affairs in their country.

"We would no longer have this excuse that everything is going wrong because of the Americans or the American presence in Afghanistan," he said. "We would be forced to look at ourselves and sort out our own problems, rather than blaming others for them.

"Pakistan would be forced into a kind of self-sufficiency."

But Rashid does not advocate a hasty withdrawal, especially in the absence of a political agreement in Afghanistan, where he says the Taliban must be dealt with somehow before U.S. troops head for the exits.

"There has to be a negotiated political settlement with the Taliban," Rashid said. "The Americans cannot leave Afghanistan with that country in a state of civil war as it is today. The Americans can only leave that country with a relative reduction of violence.

"If you leave that country in a state of civil war, the Afghan army isn't going to stand up to the pressure of the Taliban," he warned. "I think in a year or two, the government would collapse and there would be a multidimensional civil war. It would spread its tentacles into all the neighboring states and even allow al-Qaeda to come back."

Rashid suggested a two-pronged approach. The first phase would be a military ceasefire between the United States and the Taliban after extended exercises in "confidence and trust building." The second part would be a power-sharing agreement between the Afghan government and the Taliban, with representation from all sectors of Afghan society — including women.

"The Taliban has to meet with Afghan women and be exposed to Afghan women who have in the last 10 years gotten educated, gotten jobs and are working," he said. "This is a generation of women the Taliban have never even met with. They can't even conceive of them."

He also suggested that the primitive religious group be given modern offices.

"If we can open an office for the Taliban [in Afghanistan] and have negotiations, the more you can expose the Taliban to modern Afghan society — urbanized Afghans — the more you'll be forcing the Taliban to moderate their positions."

Of course, that's assuming the Taliban is even willing to enter into peace talks, a concept that's been tentatively in the works for years, only to be derailed by incidents such as the alleged massacre of 17 Afghan civilians at the hands of a U.S. soldier, as well as the Taliban assassination of Burhanuddin Rabbani, a top Karzai emissary in the proposed negotiations.

Despite the difficulties, Rashid says the alternative is worse. "The grimmest outcome would result from a botched, overly hasty Western withdrawal, the absence of a political settlement with the Taliban, a continuing civil war in Afghanistan, the Pakistani leaders' continuing resistance to internal reform, the army's refusal to seek a compromise on Afghanistan with the United States and Afghans, and a consequent meltdown of the Pakistani state," he warns in "Pakistan on the Brink."

To that end, if the region implodes, Rashid says there would be plenty of blame to go around. "Obama and his senior officials share a major part of the blame because their failure to act as a team has resulted in contradictory policies, intense political infighting, and uncertainty about U.S. aims and objectives in the region," he wrote.

At the same time, Rashid blasts the Pakistani military for its obsession with Indian hegemony, the Kashmiri cause, protecting its nuclear program, and ensuring a pro-Pakistani government in Kabul — despite U.S. pressure and money.

"Its political and military leadership has shown neither the courage nor the will nor the intelligence to carry out major reforms in the country's foreign and economic policies," he charges. "The military has allowed the Afghan Taliban factions and their leaders safe sanctuary and support ever since 2001 — something the Americans knew well but failed to raise effectively. Social services are near collapse, law enforcement is abysmal, economic hardship is widespread, natural disasters occur with little or no government assistance, and the majority of the population has no security."

This kind of blunt talk is unquestionably dangerous in Pakistan, where shadowy violence abounds — as does shadowy Machiavellian politics. (Islamabad's former ambassador in Washington, Husain Haqqani, became ensnared in a bizarre controversy last year revolving a memo purportedly orchestrated by the civilian government asking the U.S. for help reining in the military.)

The Committee to Protect Journalists declared Pakistan the most dangerous country in the world for reporters in 2011, with seven journalists dying in the tumultuous nation that year. Rashid said he's well aware of the perils of his work.

"I'm very outspoken, but one tends to play a cat-and-mouse game with the extremists and the terrorist agencies," he said. "It's become very hard to become a journalist in Pakistan. The threats and harassment journalists face are very real. I feel them all the time.

"But this is very important and I don't think Pakistan can be ignored."

Rashid also encourages American policymakers to re-evaluate their attitudes toward Pakistan, especially those

who might want to dismiss the nation as a lost cause.

"The tendency of some in Congress to say 'let them go hang' doesn't make sense," he told us. "It's a geostrategic linchpin in South Asia and West Asia, and its location on the Gulf makes it extremely important for the U.S. oil supply and global stability.

"It also happens to house the full range of Islamic extremists — local, Arab, Central Asian, the Chechens."

So what to do about those terrorists, especially the radical Taliban? Rashid proposes the radical notion of rehabilitating them, when possible, rather than killing them.

"There has to be a change in foreign policy," he said. "We have to wake up to the new reality that we have to de-fang these militants, not through military action necessarily but through some kind of reconciliation program."

He pointed to a program in Saudi Arabia in which young al-Qaeda recruits were captured and initially imprisoned, then gradually re-indoctrinated through the intervention of moderate mullahs.

"They didn't kill them, but put them into jails which became residential accommodations and they kept them there for many years and had them indoctrinated by mullahs, got them degrees and skills, got them married, and gave them psychological treatment.

"It's been a very successful program and we could probably get funding for something like that," he said. "We need to do that on a much larger scale in Pakistan, and I think if we did that there would be a lot of Western support.

"In the 21st century, we cannot maintain extremists on our soil as an arm of foreign policy," he added. "That era has gone. It was possible during the Cold War because the fundamentalists were anti-Soviet and the Americans also funded extremists — Osama bin Laden and all kinds of groups. After 9/11, that era has ended."