

Rashid On Sharif: 'I Don't Think The Military Will Be A Hindrance To Him'

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By Ahmed Rashid.

Pakistan's Prime Minister-designate Nawaz Sharif is seen as keen on improving relations with the country's neighbors. In an interview with RFE/RL correspondent Abubakar Siddique, Pakistani author Ahmed Rashid weighed in on Sharif's likely approach to relations with Pakistan's neighbors and the United States.

RFE/RL: Do you see Nawaz Sharif pushing for a major overhaul of Pakistan's relations with its neighbors?

Ahmed Rashid: I think he has the mandate to do that. If his major aim is bring Pakistan out of this economic mess that we face, he will have to improve relations with the neighbors. The economy cannot improve as long as there are tensions with India, Afghanistan, and other neighboring countries.

Any strategic policies that he has depend on dealing with the neighbors. Dealing with the Taliban threat, dealing with the terrorism -- all the domestic issues hedge on the fact that we have a terrible relationship with the neighbors and we must improve that.

RFE/RL: Sharif was the only elected Pakistani leader who reached out to India but was deposed by the military for doing so in 1999. How do you see his future relationship with the military?

Rashid: Well, the military's attitude towards India has changed. The military also knows that the country is in a terrible mess and it needs to improve relations with its neighbors. So I don't think the military will be a hindrance to him. It may try and slow him down a bit because the military would not like to move too fast with India.

I think on both Afghanistan and on relations with India, Sharif has come in with a very strong mandate and people are expecting him to deliver. And if the military is seen to be trying to resist that, I think the military will be damaging its own reputation.

RFE/RL: How do you see his relations with the United States given that Sharif has spoken against the drone strikes and has said that Pakistan will pull out of Washington's war on terrorism?

Rashid: Every political leader, during the election campaign, was speaking against the United States because that was a vote-getter. But I think now that he is in power he will be practical because Pakistan needs the United States' support in order to get help and loans from the IMF and the World Bank. I think there will be a relationship.

He knows very well that whatever Pakistan does, the Americans are not going to stop drone missile [strikes]. And this is the main stumbling block. So the issue is how does Pakistan get the best deal with the Americans on the use of drones? I don't see Sharif trying to tell the Americans to stop the use of drones because that is not going to happen.

RFE/RL: Given Sharif's history of being closely allied with Saudi Arabia, how do you see his relationship with its archrival Iran moving forward?

Rashid: Sharif is going to try and balance relations between Iran and the Arab world. And he would not like to get involved with the American boycott and sanctions with Iran. He also realizes that Iran has the potential of being the quickest provider of gas to Pakistan, and Pakistan does face this enormous energy crisis. So I don't think he is not going to cut out all the options.

RFE/RL: Do you see Sharif pushing for a central role in Afghanistan? Do you see him facilitating reconciliation among Afghans?

Rashid: He needs a safe American withdrawal from Afghanistan. He needs the Afghan Taliban to be talking to the Americans and talking to [President Hamid] Karzai. I am sure we will see him playing a role to try and get the Taliban to open an office in Doha and preparing the Americans to do the same thing.

Remember, so far the military has been making all the policy decisions on Afghanistan. Now there is going to be a powerful prime minister who in order to improve the economy will take some tough decisions with Afghanistan and with India. And I think the military will go along with that because the military also needs an economy that is functioning.

RFE/RL: During his previous stint in power in the 1990s, Sharif pledged regional cooperation. Do you see him building infrastructure to plug Pakistan to Central Asia?

Rashid: His first intention will be to improve the domestic economy -- whatever that takes -- and improving relations with India and Afghanistan. I think the wider region will come later on.