



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Transcript

Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US Withdrawal

Ahmed Rashid

Author, *Pakistan on the Brink*

Chair: Xenia Dormandy

Senior Fellow, US International Role, Americas, Chatham House

20 April 2012

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Xenia Dormandy:

We are extraordinarily lucky today to have Ahmed Rashid talking to us. I will give him a little bit of a formal introduction, but he is one of the – as far as I am concerned – he is one of the best and smartest people on Afghanistan and Pakistan out there. Somebody who really knows it from the inside, who is Pakistani, who has lived there, who grew up there, and really has a...not just an insider's understanding of the country and the region more broadly also into central Asia, and the people, but also combines that with an absolutely superb understanding of the policy process, and what is possible and what isn't both for the United States and some of the other allies and friends of Pakistan. And I say this coming from somebody who used to work for the US government doing Pakistan, and it was wonderful to have a good interlocuter who could explain to me what was going on.

But, I am now speaking as the head of the US programme [Americas Programme] here at Chatham House, and we are extraordinarily lucky to have Ahmed with us. So, thank you very much. I have already really introduced Ahmed... the other thing you need to know about him is he has produced three fantastic books, most recently this one: *Pakistan on the Brink*, and I noticed as we walked in they are available if you are interested, I can highly recommend them. And with that, I will pass straight to you, thank you very much, and thank you all for coming.

Ahmed Rashid:

Well, thank you very much. It is lovely to be back here again, and a great pleasure, especially having a new book, thank you – all of you – for coming during your lunchtime. I'm going to talk briefly about Afghanistan, and then about Pakistan, and I'm going to try and squeeze in as much as, you know, I can.

Let me... let me start with Afghanistan. My bottom line in Afghanistan has been for several years now is that the US withdrawal, the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan cannot take place if this present civil war is going to continue. In other words, the belief in the Pentagon that somehow US forces can withdraw and the Afghan forces can suddenly come into the same trench and replace them and keep firing at the same Taliban, and that everything will – this is exactly what they mean by 'transition' – that this thing can pass off very smoothly, is fraught with enormous problems for anybody who knows and understands Afghanistan. What we have to do strategically is to reduce the conflict in Afghanistan over the next 18 months through talks between the

US and the Taliban, hopefully ending in some kind of ceasefire; and, at the same time, encourage talks between [Hamid] Harzai, or the government, and the Taliban to create some kind of power-sharing structure in Afghanistan, which could finally end the civil war. I cannot envisage an Afghanistan being deprived of foreign forces and then being able to sustain itself against the Taliban and all the machinations of the neighbours of Afghanistan who will then erupt on top of Afghanistan. If there is peace, the neighbours will have nobody to play around with. So, that is the bottom line.

I think there are three points of crisis in Afghanistan that we are faced with, which I fear, unfortunately, that the international community is not living up to, and it is not really accepting, it seems to be in denial about all of them. The first is the international crisis. That is, some countries will be withdrawing earlier than other countries, we have heard Australia, the French, and others. There is an obligation that the international community will support the Afghans for at least another five to ten years, especially regarding finances and money. There is no guarantee that is going to happen, and nobody is putting their money where their mouth is, and unfortunately the Afghans are voting with their feet, and are not expecting Western support beyond 2014, and many of them are leaving the country, especially the best and the brightest. So, I think there has to be much more commitment; it is no good prime ministers and presidents saying, you know, 'we are committed to post-reconstruction and funding the army, and funding schools and all the rest of it', if there is nothing on the table.

And the third thing is the whole presence of US soldiers in Afghanistan after 2014. The Americans want about 10,000 - 20,000 forces left. Whether that will be actually doable and meaningful... because a number of things mitigate against it. The first is that all of the six neighbours of Afghanistan are against a prolonged American presence in Afghanistan, and they will do their utmost, I am sure, once the bulk of the US forces leave, to sabotage that presence for all sorts of reasons.

The second thing is that a lot of Afghans are against a prolonged American presence, and anti-American in Afghanistan is spreading like wildfire in the last year or so, with all these recent incidents that have happened, and recently now we have had another the incident of, you know, photographs of Afghan dead bodies *et cetera* being badly mistreated by American soldiers. So, the international crisis is, there is...you know, has to be addressed. And if you remember what happened in Iraq, the Americans were supposed to stay there for 20,000... keep 20,000 troops and the Iraqis woke up one day and said, 'please go', and they had to leave. Today there is not a single American

soldier in Afghanistan [sic, he meant Iraq]. So, I think that that is a possibility of happening also in Afghanistan.

The second kind of crisis is the regional crisis. So, the... President Obama came in with intentions to have a regional strategy that would bring all the six neighbours of Afghanistan, and the three near-neighbours – that is Russia, Saudi Arabia, and India – to some kind of understanding that there would not be interference in Afghanistan. Remember Afghanistan has been a victim of its neighbours' interference for a very long time. Unfortunately, where we are now is we are even in a worse situation than we were in 2008; there is no dialogue with Iran, obviously, because of the nuclear issue, and there cannot be any dialogue now. There was hope in 2008 that when he appointed [Richard] Holbrooke [as US Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan], Holbrooke would somehow create some independent dialogue with Iran, but I mean, that seems impossible now. Relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan that there hasn't been any dialogue between the countries for five or six months. Dialogue has just re-started; we don't know how long it is going to take to get back to some kind of normal functioning.

And China, Russia, the central Asian states... they are all against a prolonged US presence. The only people who are in favour are probably the Indians. So, it is very difficult at the moment, and India-Pakistan is another issue, of course. I mean, the Pakistanis don't want the Indians there, the Indians say, 'We insist on being there,' and that issue is still very far from resolved. So, the regional issue is still fraught with difficulties, and we are nowhere nearer a solution.

The third problem is the domestic crisis inside Afghanistan. You know, we could talk endlessly about everything from opium to, you know, corruption, to all the things many of you have heard about. I will just focus on three things. The first is the growing ethnic divide in Afghanistan, which is very serious, and has gotten worse ever since Karzai in the government expressed a desire to talk to the Taliban. The north does not – the non-Pashtuns – do not want to talk about the Taliban, by-and-large. And the fact that there has been talks but little progress, means that the north is even less convinced about the need for talks with the Taliban. So, the ethnic divide is growing over talks with the Taliban, it is growing over the power structure because the non-Pashtuns want a more autonomous... you know, more power in the provinces rather than this deeply centralised constitution that was given to the Afghans in 2004, they want a much looser federation, and obviously these issues are going to emerge. Elections are coming up in 2014; Karzai cannot stand, I hope he doesn't stand. I hope there is a fresh face and a fresh cabinet, which

could, you know, build a new relationship with the Afghan people and the international community.

The second domestic crisis which [sic] I will focus on is the economy. In ten years you have, you know, given \$670billion – don't quote me on that, but it is something like that – to Afghanistan, the US alone has spent over \$600billion on Afghanistan. And yet, in a country of just 35 million people no self-sustaining economy. We do not yet have an economy even to the extent that the Afghans had an economy, frankly, back in 1978, when the communist coup took place, where at least there was more-or-less self-sufficiency in food, there was a small, exportable surplus of luxury food stuff like fruit and vegetables *et cetera*. We haven't been able to achieve that. We have made a lot of progress in the social sector: education, health, and infrastructure, but actual economy, which provides jobs to people, and that I find really difficult because in a few months tens of thousands of Afghans who serviced the foreign troops are going to be out of a job. And these are the very best of Afghans who have grown up in this ten years, I mean, they are educated, they speak English, they are pro-democracy, they are pro-Western, they are... whatever, you know, and these are the very Afghans, who are part of this generation, who are going to be abandoned. And I think that is really a cause of enormous concern, and, you know, these are the very people who are going to turn into economic refugees around the world and create an illegal, black market Afghan diaspora as they try to get out the country.

And, finally, is the question of the Afghan army. That the Afghan army is essentially, you know – yes, it is riddled with drugs, it is illiterate, it is, you know... there is an enormous, a 20% desertion rate, or even more – but, the key issue to me for the US and NATO is: who is the army going to be loyal to? Have the Afghans and the international community built enough of a state structure, and enough of a state to which this army will be loyal? And I would say 'no'. Has Karzai got the credibility that the army would be loyal to the president, and the next president who comes along? No.

So, essentially the army is going to remain loyal to its ethnic warlords, its tribal chiefs, the people who... the warlords who got them recruited into the army in the first place. And most important of all, past Afghan armies, whatever their weakness is, had an officer corps – largely made up of Pashtuns – in Afghanistan, who were able to re-build the army in times of great strife and tension. I mean, I was there throughout the Soviet period, the Afghan army was actually re-built three times by the Soviets because there was a core officer group who were capable of doing that, and who were loyal to the state, to the communist cause, to the state... and to the Soviets of

course. Today, you don't have any of this; first of all, you don't have enough Pashtuns in the officer corps, and you don't have this kind of professional officer class who are capable of building the army.

So, these are, you know, these are some of the domestic issues which need to be addressed more coherently by the US and NATO than what we have been hearing so far, which is that, you know, everything is hunky-dory, everything is fine, the transition is on schedule, as though the transition were some kind of robotic mechanism which will just happen automatically because we said so. I mean, there are all these problems.

Well, certainly one of the biggest problems for Afghanistan is Pakistan; and, the tensions that exist between Afghanistan and Pakistan have not diminished in any way, they have grown. President Karzai has blown hot and cold constantly, but the real issue for the Afghans is the following: the Taliban leadership is housed in Pakistan. It is supported there by the military, the inter-services intelligence, and by the religious extremists groups who today are back on the streets in large numbers. There is an enormously large support structure, which didn't exist just in 2001, it has been there since the 1980s, and certainly since the 1990s when the Taliban emerged and they took over Kabul and ruled Afghanistan.

And the support structure in Pakistan to be increased and widened. There are more extremist religious groups wanting to fight for the – Pakistani groups – wanting to fight for the Afghan Taliban today than there were ten years ago. I remember, when I wrote my first book, *Taliban*, I estimated that 80,000 had fought for the Taliban in the 1990s, before 9/11. So, you can imagine what that figure might be today after ten years, well, seven years of warfare against the Americans. And, by the way, I mean, it is much easier to organise militants to kill Americans than it is to attack, you know, the northern groups.

So... and the key issue for the Afghans now is that, look, Pakistan now, in my opinion, supports a peace process, it supports talks with the Taliban, it fears a Taliban government in Kabul, it would much prefer a power-sharing agreement. So, in that sense it is completely in line with what Karzai himself wants, except the one difference, Pakistan... Karzai has been asking, time and time again, for Pakistan to deliver the Taliban so he can speak to them, and Pakistan has refused so far. And this is the essential conundrum. Not only that, you know, at this... I mean, if you read, you know, my earlier book, *Descent into Chaos*, the fact was, why did the army determine that we should give sanctuary to the Taliban back in 2001? And the determination was, you know, we didn't like the Northern Alliance, who were then in government, we

didn't like growing role in Afghanistan, but the essential thing was: when the end game happens, we will have this major card in our hands, we will have the Taliban, and we will deliver the Taliban for peace talks, in which Pakistan itself will play a major role, and we will deliver the Taliban to Americans, to Karzai, to whoever. And yet, so far, despite the Americans asking and wanting – Karzai asking and wanting – for the last four years Pakistan has so far not delivered the Taliban for any dialogue. And as a consequence of that the dialogue that is taking place between the Americans and the Pakistanis [sic], the Americans have actually bi-passed Pakistan and the ISI, and the dialogue, as you know, is being held in Qatar through the good auspices of the Germans. And the Taliban asked for this dialogue, and they asked for a dialogue that did not include Pakistan, their sponsor. So, they are frustrated and fed up, also, with Pakistan, and really there is a crying need for both sides now to engage with one another, the Taliban and the Kabul government, the Taliban and the Americans. And this needs to be done with the help of Pakistan, which so far seems unwilling to do so.

Now, having talked about, you know, this conundrum... You know, Pakistan is in a crisis, you know, and faced with a huge economic crisis, that is not just at the macro level, but is affecting day-to-day events. We have no energy, industry has collapsed, I mean, in my home city of Lahore there has been no gas for six months, electricity is off for 18 hours a day... how do you expect hospitals, schools, factories, you know, anything to function, reasonably?

Insurgency in two of the country's four provinces: the northwest, as well as Balochistan, which is a separate insurgency. We have mayhem in Karachi, for a multitude of...many different reasons. We have an unbearably fast-growing intolerance to minorities. The massacres of, you know, intolerance towards Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, and within the Muslim fold particularly to Shias, Ahmadis, Ismailis, almost every minority in Pakistan is being attacked, and without any state protection whatsoever. And the minorities are not able to go, to seek protection from anywhere. And, so, there is a real sense of, you know, the title of my book is... many people feel that Pakistan really is 'on the brink'. This time the argument is, you know, people have always said, 'Pakistan will muddle through', but this time, really, you know, the very basis of ordinary people's lives are being made worse by the present crisis.

Now, how did we get into this mess? Now, many people will go back to 1947 and the British, and partition, and [Lord Louis] Mountbatten, you know, the whole thing. Others will go back to the war with East Pakistan, the loss of East Pakistan, and the creation of Bangladesh, and the defeat of the Pakistani army in 1971. And, you know, and others will go to the betrayal of

the Americans, or... *et cetera*. I really take as my starting point, and I think it is a critical starting point, and that is the end of the Cold War, 1992. What the end of the Cold War does in the Third World: it forces countries to drop their dependence on one superpower or the other, drop the kind of bailouts that they were receiving to be – and, you know, Pakistan was a major recipient of the American bailouts, we were very much a part of the Cold War alliance against the Soviets *et cetera* – and, you know, stand on their own feet. That involves, of course, building good neighbourly ties, you know, building trade, building up new industries, you know, encouraging the private sector. We do absolutely none of this. None of this. We persist in our old ways: no new industries built, globalisation passes us by, high-tech goes to India but passes us by; and there is absolutely no economic or social reform that is carried out of any value whatsoever in this period.

And the reason? Because the military is fighting *two wars* throughout the 1990s. This period, you know, the Clinton period of growth in so many...if you look at Indonesia, Singapore. The military is fighting a war in Kashmir, we turn the nationalist movement in Kashmir into a jihadist movement, which spawns all kinds of deep uncertainties for Pakistan by the late 1990s, and we are fighting a war in Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban. We have hundreds of soldiers and technicians, and thousands of fighters, fighting with the Taliban against the northern alliance. And, as you know, in Afghanistan in 1996, [Osama] Bin Laden comes and the Taliban refuse to listen to Pakistan anymore, you know, because the support they were getting now comes from Bin Laden.

So, in the 1990s, rather than face up to the end of the Cold War and deal with these, you know, real need for domestic, economic, and social reform; we are fighting two wars, we are obsessed with keeping our so-called 'enemies' at bay; we do not make friends with our neighbours, we make enemies with our neighbours; we do not build trade ties, and encourage pipelines and gas and oil from central Asia and feed it into India, which was a big thing.

So, the crisis of the state, I think, really, you know, starts from there. And that, of course, was then followed... the American, you know, the American invasion of Afghanistan, the occupation of Afghanistan, and then we have a military regime, which for ten years, basically, conducts a covert, secret foreign policy with the Americans, at the expense, basically, of the Pakistani public. We don't know what happened, but drone attacks, this... all these renditions, you know, Guantanamo, almost every facet of US policy was carried out on behalf of the Americans by General [Pervez] Musharraf, completely covertly. And, clearly, that policy had to come to a crunch

because, you know, when we had elections, we had a civilian government, tragically Benazir Bhutto was killed, I think she understood the conundrum that we face far better than, perhaps, any other politician in the country. But she was killed, tragically, just before the elections, and we have had a People's Party government since then, but it has veered between either complete capitulation to the military, or some kind of opposition to the military, in which it has been put down very swiftly.

So... and what we really need now is to carry out those social and domestic reforms, which we failed to do 20 years ago; we need to build ties with our neighbours and stop this playing ducks and drakes, and cat and mouse with all our neighbours; and we need to carry out sufficient economic reforms, which will convince both Pakistanis and the world that we are very serious about economic reforms. We are – I was just discussing with some friends – we are in such a state today, that few countries are willing to invest in Pakistan, few private sector investors are willing to come. Perhaps the only countries that will invest in Pakistan are our neighbours. And it is precisely...you know, India is investing around the world, and I hope that these trade links with India could develop, but so far the army is blocking investment, Indian investment in Pakistan. This has to change. We cannot be depriving ourselves of private sector investment at this critical moment, when we need this aid so badly.

Anyway, I am going to end here and just, you know, hope that... I do have some, believe it or not, very some positive messages in my book about the future of Pakistan. I mean, the youth, I think, is very much active, there is frustration with the existing political parties, and there is a lot of other activity that goes on in Pakistan, but unless we get the overall strategy right, we are not going to be able to get our domestic scene in order.

And lastly, on Afghanistan, I hope that there will be much more introspection by the governments who have troops in Afghanistan and want to withdraw, much more introspection about the problems of leaving, and the problems for the Afghan people. Thank you very much indeed.

[Applause]