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Transcript

Pakistan: Implications of the Afghanistan Drawdown

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PAKISTAN: IMPLICATIONS OF THE AFGHANISTAN DRAWDOWN

Bridget Kendall:

Good evening, everybody. My name is Bridget Kendall. This session was supposed to be chaired by Chatham House Associate Fellow Farzana Shaikh but unfortunately she's not available, so you've got me, BBC's diplomatic correspondent instead, I'm afraid. But we're all here to hear Ahmed Rashid, who really needs very little introduction. He is a bestselling and award-winning journalist and author, and written extensively on the security and politics of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Central Asia. His most recent book is *Pakistan on the Brink*, which I can see over there, and also *Afghanistan Revealed*. He's here to talk to us today about the future of Pakistan, Afghanistan and their relation to the world as a whole in the context of what's going to be happening there this year: Afghanistan elections and withdrawal.

Just before we start, a few housekeeping notes. This is being held on the record. There is a twitter hashtag, #CHEvents. Please put your phones on silent if they're not already. We're going to talk for about 25 minutes and then we'll open up for questions until seven o'clock.

Let's start, Ahmed, with Afghanistan and what's going to happen this year. There are elections there. This is the year of withdrawal. How do you see the year in Afghanistan?

Ahmed Rashid:

I think this is the \$20 million question, and I'm as clueless as everyone else in this room as to what possibly can happen. But I will say one thing very forcefully, which I think unfortunately has not been taken up by the Americans or by NATO: rather than the military transition being critical to the outcome in Afghanistan – meaning the handing over to the Afghan army, will the Taliban capture or not capture Kabul, what happens on the ground – the critical thing is the political transition. Is there going to be a successful presidential election in April? By that I mean, is it going to be moderately free and fair? Is it going to be moderately acceptable to the majority of Afghans – not all Afghans, but the majority of Afghans – so that you have a president in place who can then deal with the international community, foreign aid can continue or resume, and the Taliban could become more willing to talk to this new president. On the other hand, if the elections are rigged, like all elections have been in the last ten years – especially the 2009 elections – we are really facing a crisis.

I find it very unfortunate – we were just having this argument – that the Western clout to actually pressure [President Hamid] Karzai and the warlords to have a decent election is about zero at the moment. Karzai and the warlords are all quite happily defying whatever the Americans, NATO, the Europeans have to tell them. This is really tragic. This should not have been the case. I think there's a whole series of mistakes that the West made earlier on which allowed the situation to be created. Now, you will say, as many people will say, this is self-determination of the Afghans – they have to take control of their own thing. But look, you occupied Afghanistan for 13 years, and then at the end of it you're saying: now it's self-determination for the Afghans so we're not interested, or we won't intervene. But for Afghans themselves, I think, if this election is a failure, they will blame the foreigners for that. Just like Karzai did in the 2009 elections – he said [Richard] Holbrooke rigged the elections, 'it wasn't me at all'. So there's this tendency of the local players to constantly blame the outsiders, so the outsiders have got to have some powder dry which they can use at the appropriate time, and we don't have that.

Bridget Kendall:

So what would you think would count as a moderately successful election result?

Ahmed Rashid:

That there is not major rigging by the government. Essentially in 2009, what Karzai said at that time was that the Pashtun vote – 40 per cent of the population, his own tribes and backing – would not come out and vote because the Taliban were threatening everyone that they would kill them. So he said, well I've got to rig this election to make sure that the Pashtuns do have a majority and I'm re-elected as president. Consequently what happened, there was rigging in the north as well by all the various warlords, etc., the non-Pashtuns. So the first fear is the ethnic stability is really at stake again, meaning we haven't really solidified ethnic stability after 13 years of occupation.

But more than that is this whole question of legitimacy. The Afghans for 35 years have suffered from a leadership which has always been viewed as illegitimate by half the population. Daud [Khan] did a coup against the king, the communists came in, then the Russians came in, then you had a civil war and then the Americans came in. So everybody has been somebody's stooge

at some point in time or the other. The question of legitimacy becomes critical, absolutely. Karzai's legitimacy was essentially built on the fact that he was being backed by foreign forces. That's something that today he is trying to get rid of that legacy, which is why he's creating all these problems with the bases and not giving the bases to the Americans. But I think there are a whole range of issues that could emerge and which would be intractable, unfortunately. We don't have a mediator. We don't have an international presence as such. We desperately need an international mediator to be given the powers by the West and hopefully by the Afghans to ensure that there's not a complete mess in these elections.

Bridget Kendall:

The critical question is: what might be the outcome of this election and who might be president in Afghanistan after the elections?

Ahmed Rashid:

I'm not going to predict that, because the Afghans would then jump down my throat and say that I was trying to rig the elections like Holbrooke was or something. I think the common assumption is – the common denominator is – that it will probably be a Pashtun president, in alliance with some of the other ethnic groups. Hopefully this president will be considered legitimate not just by the majority of Afghans but by the Taliban too. That could encourage the Taliban to actually talk to the government, something they've refused to do with Karzai because they've labelled him as the stooge of the Americans.

Bridget Kendall:

You're sort of complaining a bit about the withdrawal as leaving a vacuum of authorization and coordination surrounding the elections. But it is a fact, the drawdown in 2014, this year. How do you see it playing out? What do you think it will look like by the end of the year?

Ahmed Rashid:

I think the real fear in the region – by that I mean Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan – the real fear actually is everybody is walking away and there's going to be a replay of 1989 and the Soviet withdrawal. The West does not

have the money, it does not have the will, it does not have the intentions to do anything more in Afghanistan – and Pakistan, for that matter. This aid junket that has helped Pakistan sustain itself under [Pervez] Musharraf and all that is going to disappear in a year or two, and we have to stand on our own feet and we are totally incapable of doing that right now. Same goes for the Afghans. I think the overall fear – and this whole pivot to the Far East that [President Barack] Obama is talking about, the importance of China. The mess in the Middle East which is obviously going to take up far more attention than ever before, even though nobody seems to have any answers to Iraq, Syria, Libya, all these other problems. The feeling is that the West is really going to walk away. There's the promise of aid to Afghanistan for five years for the military, five years for the budget – if you talk to most Afghans they will say: we'll be lucky if we get one year or two years max. After that Congress will just scuttle the whole thing, the British Parliament will just scuttle the whole thing and the Europeans will not give that kind of money, because there will be so many other pressing demands.

That's why you're seeing this huge capital flight out of Afghanistan, even Pakistan. You're seeing talent flight, the whole educated elite which emerged in Afghanistan in the last decade – a lot of them want to leave or are leaving. That doesn't bode well for the future.

Bridget Kendall:

What do you see that impact being on Afghanistan on the ground? There is an argument that says other regional players may walk into the space left by the departure of Western forces.

Ahmed Rashid:

I know there's been a lot of that, and a lot of people saying this will be a rehash of the 1990s, when all the neighbouring states plunged into backing one warlord or another in Afghanistan. There are a couple of big differences. The first is that most of the states around Afghanistan today are failing states. We should remember that. The Central Asians, Pakistan, Iran, are failing states.

Bridget Kendall:

Iran, a failing state?

Ahmed Rashid:

In many respects. It's totally isolated from the world, unless this whole Obama deal goes through. The economy is in a total -

Bridget Kendall:

But so far there has been progress there. In Iran, there is progress on that, isn't there? On the nuclear deal.

Ahmed Rashid:

There is, and they also have oil, which of course if they were to comply with everything and the sanctions are lifted, of course oil would again refloat them. Iran perhaps is a long shot. But certainly Pakistan and the Central Asians are in a very bad way. Even the Arabs – the Arabs are not going to arm the Taliban the way they armed them in the 1990s. The Arabs are far too preoccupied with their own, Syria and Iraq and all the rest of it. So I think that's the first difference.

Secondly, all the neighbouring states genuinely do want to see peace and stability in Afghanistan. I don't think there's a bad egg here in which you can say that Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) wants to support Mullah [Mohammed] Omar or the Iranians want to support [Abdullah] Abdullah or whatever it is. I think everybody genuinely wants to see peace and stability, because they know that their own countries are in a mess. They don't have the money to back an endless civil war in Afghanistan. They would like to see a reconciliation.

But that goes with a caveat: if there is a meltdown in Afghanistan after the elections, then if one country or more feel the need to back their particular horse in Afghanistan as a result of that meltdown, then everybody will pile in again. That will then create a very dangerous situation.

But again, that's why I'm saying we really need an international mediator and we need some international focus on post-election Afghanistan, precisely in order to prevent this kind of intervention by the neighbouring powers. We need a regional settlement. We need the regional countries – something Holbrooke tried two or three years ago, which has basically been abandoned by Obama now, and by the Europeans and by NATO. There's no real movement on this idea of a regional settlement. There are several processes going on – the Istanbul process and other processes – but they haven't yielded anything and they're unlikely to.

Bridget Kendall:

A critical player here, of course, is Pakistan, so let's talk a bit now about Pakistan and Afghanistan. What's the view there about what the year might bring in Afghanistan and its implications?

Ahmed Rashid:

I think Pakistan's position, compared to three or four years ago, has certainly changed. That's partly because of the domestic situation in Pakistan – the growth in terrorism, the collapse of the economy, etc. Even the military now realize that the days of intervention in Afghanistan, à la the 1980s and 1990s, is now over. So I think Pakistan by and large wants to support stability in Afghanistan like all the other neighbours. But Pakistan has several problems that it faces. Number one, it houses all the Taliban. The entire Taliban leadership is housed in Pakistan. I've been one of those who have been saying for the last one year that Pakistan has been helping the reconciliation process between the Taliban and the Americans, and the Doha process which collapsed, unfortunately, and trying to get the Taliban to talk to Karzai and other things. But I think there's much more that Pakistan can do and should be doing.

I think Pakistan has to play a much bigger role on the positive side rather than still trying to hedge its bets between not annoying the Afghan Taliban too much, and pushing a bit here but pulling back here. So I think Pakistan has a much larger role to play, a more significant role to play. Certainly the Afghan Taliban are not going to feel the need to go in quickly for a settlement with Kabul unless there is going to be real push from Pakistan. Unless Pakistan really tells the Afghans, listen, I'm sorry, you've lived here long enough – you've been living here since 1993 or even earlier – it's time for you Taliban to go back home. We're not going to force you to go back home but we want you now to have a settlement with Karzai. Settle things, go back home as citizens of Afghanistan.

Pakistan – the military, officialdom – will all say, well, yes, but where's the West? Where are the Americans in this? The Obama White House is at loggerheads with the Defense Department and State Department over these issues. We're not going to move an inch until we're sure the West is backing us. Well, it's like the Middle East right now. The point is that the West is not going to be there to back any – it's going to be up to Pakistan to take the initiative. I think [Prime Minister] Nawaz Sharif certainly realizes this and realizes what needs to be done. But he's hampered by many of these

problems – the fact the Taliban are there, the fact that there's domestic terrorism, the fact that he has to build a relationship with the new army chief who's just come in, the fact that the economy is down the tubes completely. But I think people now at the top in the army and the civilian do understand that if they want peace and stability they probably, at the end of the day, will have to do more.

Bridget Kendall:

Do you think there's a coincidence of views now then between the army and the security and the civilian government in Pakistan on this?

Ahmed Rashid:

I think there is a much coming together for the first time. But that is not to say that the army and the intelligence services are not going to keep some of their powder dry. In other words, some of these Afghan Taliban groups – like the 'Haqqanis', for example, and other such groups – are going to be kept in reserve in case everything breaks down and there's a meltdown, as I said, in Afghanistan and muscle is needed at some stage of the game. If muscle is needed then we will be keeping those people. Actually surrendering the muscle back to Kabul is going to be the last step, if you like, of a peace and reconciliation process. Will we actually get there is the real question. I hope so.

But everybody is going to keep – the Iranians are going to keep certain warlords on their payroll in case everything breaks down. The Russians are going to do the same, through the Central Asians, through Uzbekistan in particular. They can do that but as long as they don't interfere directly by sending arms, ammunition, and fuelling civil war and dissension inside the country, like the neighbours did in the 1990s.

Bridget Kendall:

One regional player you haven't mentioned is China. Some people say we're seeing Western powers removing themselves from Afghanistan at this point – maybe a change with history will be that China will come in. It needs the raw materials, it's already investing.

Ahmed Rashid:

I think the frustration with China is what you all face when you deal with China and North Korea: that China will not play a political security role in these problem states which border it. Afghanistan is a direct neighbour of China. China is not going to move in and be a peacekeeping force or a peacekeeping factor or a mediating factor between Afghan factions after the elections. China will wait for somebody else to do all that. That's the real problem. I think right now the Americans and the West would love the Chinese to come up with some political solution in North Korea, come up with some political solutions in some other places also. But China is certainly not going to do that in Afghanistan. It's not going to get involved.

If, in five years' time or three years' time, peace breaks out and the Taliban are reconciled with Kabul, etc. – yes, the Chinese are going to become by far the most important players in Afghanistan. There are huge resources of oil and gas, minerals, which China can exploit directly and take back to China. India is also a potential source but India is one step removed – India doesn't share a border with Afghanistan and in between is Pakistan, which of course creates problems for India. But nevertheless, India and China are the two countries that will – but investing in Afghanistan, in the mineral wealth, and for people who are saying the mineral wealth is going to save Afghanistan because that's going to be the real income – nobody is going to invest that kind of billions and billions in Afghanistan unless there is real peace, stability and a legitimate government. I think people have had their fingers burnt far too much, especially if you remember the 1990s with the pipeline projects bringing gas from Turkmenistan and other such things. Western companies, Chinese companies, Indian companies are not going to get their fingers burnt.

In fact, in the last few weeks, both the Chinese and the Indians who have invested considerable amounts – or promised to invest considerable amounts in copper and iron ore and other things – have actually pulled out some of their sums. They are reducing their projects. There was much talk about a railway being built in Afghanistan so that this copper ore and iron ore could actually come out of Afghanistan. They both scarpereed that programme now.

The Chinese are not going to bring peace to Afghanistan. To expect them to do so would be pie in the sky. But if there is peace, certainly the Chinese will help develop that country.

Bridget Kendall:

You talked about, could there be a possibility of a new president being someone who the Taliban would talk to. Another way for the Taliban to come back is just to come back, take over territories – they already seem to be doing. You paint quite a potentially gloomy scenario in Afghanistan. Let's take it a step further in gloom. Do you think the Taliban could come back and it could once again become this ungoverned space – part of it anyway – which would present a real threat to Western nations, a springboard for extremists?

Ahmed Rashid:

I think the Taliban right now are very divided amongst themselves and quite confused. I think there is a genuine peace lobby in the Taliban. There is a genuine lobby in the Taliban who believe several things: we don't want another 20 years of civil war; we are Afghans and we will have to leave Pakistan eventually and go back to Afghanistan; we don't want to be called the stooges of Pakistan, just like the Afghan government is already calling us the stooges of Pakistan. Nobody will support us. Even this black money which is coming in from the sheikhs in the Arab world and from the Pakistani militant groups and others, a lot of that black money is being shut down by the Americans – stricter regulations and all the rest of it.

And lastly, most sensibly – sensible Taliban will tell you directly: we failed at governing the country when we ruled the country in the 1990s, and we will still fail if we were to rule because we don't have anyone. We don't have any educated people, we don't have any technocrats or anything else. So rather than rule the country and earn the wrath of the Afghan population within the first three months of ruling Afghanistan, better that we seek some kind of political alliance with the existing government which is accepted by the West, which means that aid will continue to flow and Afghanistan will not just be the basket case as it was under Taliban rule in the late 1990s. Remember, when 9/11 happened, Afghanistan was on the verge of collapse. People tend to forget that. There was a massive exodus of people, there was a new stream of refugees, there was starvation, there was drought. There were huge problems. Osama bin Laden was just the icing on the cake at that time.

But yes, there are hardliners in the Taliban. There are people who are very influenced by global jihad, influenced by reconquering Afghanistan, wanting the whole sharia/Islamic law bit in the country. But again, if we have a free and fair election, if there's a good leader in Kabul, if this American base issue is more or less resolved, I think we may well see a further shift and a

strengthening of the peace lobby rather than a strengthening of the war lobby, if you like.

Bridget Kendall:

That's a fantastic *tour de region* to get us going. We can open up the floor to questions from you to continue the discussion.