

## Author Weighs In On Afghanistan-Pakistan Intricacies

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Ahmed Rashid, the author of four popular books on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, is watching whether tentative agreements during a recent informal discussion between the Afghan government representatives and the Taliban will lead to a ceasefire soon.

**RFE/RL: What do you see as the significance of the recent, unprecedented meeting -- or "informal gathering," as they called it -- in Doha between the Taliban and Afghan government representatives?**

**Ahmed Rashid:** I think there was a huge effort before the event to say this would be a second-track meeting, but what has emerged is an agreement on opening up the constitution of Afghanistan for discussion and an agreement on discussing the issue of American troops in Afghanistan. Before this, the Taliban had not agreed to any of these things, and so I think there has been progress.

[There was a] very senior Taliban delegation in Doha, and a very senior delegation from the Afghan government. And maybe this is going to be a second track that becomes the first track. In other words, it has become the official discussion point for the Afghan government and for the Taliban. So while this is an important conference, we have seen these initial breakthroughs many times [before], and things have always faltered, [either] by actions by the Taliban, actions by the international community or by the Afghan government. So I think we all have to hold our breath and hope this process is going to move forward.

**RFE/RL: What should we be watching for in the next few months that could indicate that this "track two" is hopefully becoming a track one or an official peace process?**

**Rashid:** There's no doubt that as far as the Afghan government and the international community are concerned, they would like to see some sort of pause in the fighting that could eventually lead to a cease-fire. I think the first positive move would be if, from the Taliban side and also from the government side -- and from the American side, because American Special Forces are still launching attacks against the Taliban in "night attacks," as they call them, inside Afghanistan. So a pause in the fighting -- which, of course, doesn't look very likely at the moment given the huge offensive that's being run by the Taliban in northern Afghanistan -- is the No. 1 priority, which would win over a lot of very skeptical Afghans who still doubt that the Taliban is really serious about peace.

**RFE/RL: Ever since President Ashraf Ghani assumed office last September, he has tried to convince Pakistan to back his peace overtures toward the Taliban. Do you think Pakistan is helping Afghanistan reach a settlement with the Taliban?**

**Rashid:** I don't think [the Doha conference] had anything to do with Pakistan. Apparently, there were some Pakistani officials at this meeting. Since the promise by army chief General Raheel Sharif's at the end of last year to Ghani and the international community that Pakistan would facilitate talks between the Taliban and Kabul we've seen a lot of moves from the Afghan side to rebuild a more positive relationship with Pakistan, but we have not seen a similar move by Pakistan to help get the Taliban to the table.

There are several factors connected with this; the first is that the Pakistanis say Ghani jumped the gun by announcing very early on, at the beginning of this year, that Pakistan would play a positive role, and that angered the Taliban. It made the Taliban look like they were stooges of Pakistan, and so they had to distance themselves from the Pakistanis so that it doesn't appear that they are just jumping because Pakistan asked them to jump.

The Afghans obviously are very disappointed that nothing has seemed to emerge so far from either the Pakistan track or the China track; the Taliban have also visited China two or three times in the past six months.

Fortunately, none of this has spoilt the relationship or the improvement of relations between the two countries, but there seems to be a stalemate; Pakistan does not seem willing to put real pressure on the Taliban to go to the negotiating table. All the Taliban leadership are living in Pakistan -- they have businesses there, properties there, their children go to school and have jobs there, etc. -- so we're not seeing that kind of pressure, and so long as that pressure's not there, what the Afghans fear is that the Taliban will never come to the table.

If this new meeting, which seems to be a second-track effort at the moment, does lead to a first-track effort, I think the benefit will be apparently free of interference, either by Pakistan, or by China, or even by the Afghan government. And so the Taliban could probably say that this event, which has been organized by the Pugwash group, the peace movement, is a genuine peace process that does not include pressure from all these countries.

**RFE/RL: The Chinese president recently unveiled nearly \$50 billion in investments in Pakistan. How big a role is China now playing in bringing Pakistan and Afghanistan together, and also prevailing on Islamabad to push the Taliban toward the negotiating table in Afghanistan?**

**Rashid:** I think China's playing a huge role -- not necessarily because of its political skills, but because of what it is offering. It is offering this huge infrastructure development in Pakistan and Afghanistan, linking roads and railways and pipelines and bringing them into China and linking them to the Silk Route, which will eventually be the highway from China to Europe.

This really is the last chance for Pakistan and Afghanistan to get their act together and take advantage of this massive outlaying of money and infrastructure that the Chinese are willing to build. Clearly the Chinese have stipulated very clearly that they want to see peace between Pakistan and Afghanistan, they want to see an end to the war, so that they can get on with also exploiting Afghanistan's mineral, oil and gas [resources]. They've already taken contracts there, but those contracts have been stalled because of the continued fighting.

**RFE/RL: Switching gear to another important regional relationship, between India and Pakistan, we recently saw Afghan President Ashraf Ghani visiting India. Do you think his visit means Kabul was so disappointed with Pakistan that it eventually knocked on India's door?**

**Rashid:** I think it's the other way round. I think Ghani owed India a visit and delayed it deliberately for months, hoping this Pakistan initiative of talks with the Taliban would get off the ground, and clearly he has been disappointed that these official talks have not moved forward. But he had to go to India; India has given billions of dollars' worth of aid, it is a key ally of Afghanistan, and many of Ghani's partners, especially in the former Northern Alliance, including his co-leader Abdullah Abdullah and others, are very close to India, and so I think the visit to India had been delayed from the Afghan point of view beyond reason, and now it certainly needed to take place.

I think the problem with this India visit is that Ghani has tied in trade with India; he wants Afghan goods to go into India through Pakistan, and he wants Indian goods to come through Pakistan to Afghanistan, and that is something the Pakistanis have refused to give so far.

I think it has been a mistake for Ghani to have plunged into the tension that exists between India and Pakistan, even over such issues as trade, because he's kind of set an ultimatum for Pakistan to open up the border and Pakistan is not going to do that until the Indian government shows more flexibility on talks regarding Kashmir and other disputes between the two countries.

The complex equation of India-Pakistan is not something the Afghans can really tackle, and they shouldn't really try to tackle it because it is beyond them, frankly. I think what Ghani and the Pakistani leaders need to do is build their bilateral relationship rather than try to extend it into a trilateral relationship with India.

**RFE/RL: I know that you have a very different perspective on the rise of the Islamic State (IS, ISIS or ISIL). What you make of the emergence of IS in Afghanistan and Pakistan?**

**Rashid:** I still don't really think IS is well-embedded in either Pakistan or Afghanistan. I think there are a lot of dissident groups -- even within the Afghan Taliban, people who want to continue fighting, people who have links with global jihad through being part of Al-Qaeda or giving sanctuary to Al-Qaeda -- who see something positive in IS, and who also might be wanting to extract some money from IS, [which is] by far the richest jihadist group in the world today.

The point is that Pakistan and Afghanistan have been the bedrock of extremism and fundamentalism for the past 35 years; even Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda have been around in these regions for up to 25 years now. And you've got 60, 70 militant groups in Pakistan, and similarly in Afghanistan, who have been embedded here for a very long time. Their leaders have a lot at stake; they are earning money through criminal activities, through drugs, through kidnappings, etc. -- they're not likely to give up their leadership and surrender it to a group 2,000 or 3,000 miles away in the Middle East.

There's something quite fashionable, or something attractive, about IS in the minds of some global jihadists in Pakistan and Afghanistan. But I don't see IS really being able to root; I don't see it being embedded into the psyche of jihadism in this part of the world, at least for the time being.

This may change over two or three years, but for the time being we have to contend with the existing groups, and if there is peace between the Taliban, the Afghan Taliban and the Afghan government, I think that will have a hugely positive effect on reducing extremism in both Pakistan and Afghanistan.