

## Talks with Taliban: war by other means

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Talks with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have occupied the centre-stage in Pakistani politics today. However, these talks are not new. The state of Pakistan has had so many deals with the militants in the past, such as the Shakai Peace Agreement in 2004 with Nek Muhammad; the Sararogha Peace Agreement in 2005 with Baitullah Mehsud; the Swat Agreement in 2008 with Mullah Fazlullah. Nevertheless, all these talks were followed by military operations. During 2008-2009, for example, the army had launched operations like Operation *Sirat-i-Mustaqeem* (Righteous Path) in Khyber, Operation *Rab-i-Rast* (Thunder Storm) in Swat, and) Operation *Rab-i-Nijat* (Path to Salvation) in South Waziristan. While such operations succeeded in pushing back the Taliban advance, they could neither reverse the trend of Talibanization in Pakistan, nor demolish the terror infrastructure in the tribal terrain.

The ground realities are different now. The situation in Pakistan today is very fragile. Despite the progress on the democratic front, there is a sense of helplessness on how to tackle the menace of terrorism. Unlike in the past, Islamabad appears quite weak vis-à-vis Taliban while it keeps chanting its commitment to talks with TTP, despite the provocation and retaliation from the army.

At the moment, the TTP has succeeded in dividing the political elite in Pakistan. It is competing with the Pakistani state at various levels—first and foremost, at the psychological level. Over the years, it has managed to induce ideological sympathy for its Islamist agenda among certain groups and instilled fear among others. Thus, the society seems to be divided into two groups— one which empathizes with TTP and provides political and ideological support to it, and the other wants to fight it, but feels demoralized by the timid policies of the government. In all, the people are getting resigned to the possibility of either a TTP takeover or greater Talibanisation of Pakistan.

Since the last one decade, people have been fed with the conspiracy theory that TTP is a reaction against the US presence in Afghanistan and Pakistan's support to war on terror. The truth lies somewhere else. Afghan Taliban existed even before 9/11 and there were sympathisers of Taliban in the tribal areas of Pakistan, some of whom had joined the Taliban army in its efforts to establish control over whole of Afghanistan. Following the US attack on Afghanistan, the Pakistani contingent came back home to roost. Within few years they called themselves TTP. These forces have gone from strength to strength,

primarily because of the inability of the state to evolve a coherent and consistent strategy to handle this menace. The result has been obvious; the TTP has declared Pakistan army its principal enemy and killed more than 6000 security personnel so far.

Since the latest round of talks began, after offer of fig leaf by Nawaz administration on February 9, the TTP has not stopped its terrorist attacks. They have launched more than 20 attacks in which over 120 have been killed.<sup>1</sup> The Army which has been asked to keep restraint and support peace talks is losing its patience, in the face of growing attacks on its men, the latest being the beheading of about 23 Frontier Corps soldiers, who were under TTP custody.<sup>2</sup>

It is quite interesting that even in the midst of these attacks and counter-attacks the two sides are expressing their commitment to go ahead with talks. So it appears they may still “talk” as the government is showing infinite patience for settling the issues through dialogue.

But what are the two going to talk about? The TTP has taken the lead and said that they do not recognize the constitution and talks should only revolve around the issue of how *Sharia* can be enforced in Pakistan, because they regard Quran and Sunnah as a divinely ordained constitution for the Muslims. They hold that no clause in the present Pakistani constitution is Islamic.

On the government’s side, the argument is that the present constitution has ensured that no legislation would be repugnant to the principles of Islam, and therefore, the constitution upholds the values of Islam. The talks, the government appointed committee insists, must be held within the parameters of the constitution. In fact, if one evaluates the Pakistani constitution there are so many articles and clauses which make it Islamic. For example, the Objectives Resolution, which states that sovereignty over the entire universe, belongs to God”.<sup>3</sup> The other Islamic provisions in 1973 constitution comprise articles 227-231. Apart from it, the Constitution has also number of other features with distinct Islamic characteristics. For example, the Shariat Laws often known as Hudood Ordinance, which were enforced in 1979, by Zia-ul-Haq.<sup>4</sup>

What else constitutes the Islamic constitution for Taliban? Actually what they demand is actual implementation of the Hudood Ordinance. Taliban will be pleased if flogging, amputation of limbs and hanging in the public will be allowed.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thenews.com.pk/article-138381-Taliban-present-three-demands-for-ceasefire->

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dawn.com/news/1086243/army-maintains-its-considered-silence>

<sup>3</sup> For detail see, Afzal Iqbal, “ *Islamization of Pakistan*”, (Delhi: Idarahai-i-Adabiyat-i-Delhi 1984) pp.42-57

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

The second most important point is the seriousness of TTP about the talks. Do they really want to engage the government? If yes, then why do they go on provoking the military? Each time the government proposes to talk, the TTP orchestrates seemingly well-contemplated attacks on the security forces. The assassination of Maj Gen Sanaullah in October 2013 and the recent killing of FC soldiers were deliberate provocations either to signal their strength and gauge the tolerance threshold of the army, or to spoil the talks. From their strategy of selecting the committee for talks, the TTP ambivalence for talks also becomes quite clear. Their committee consisted of people, most of whom (with the exception of Mullah Abdul Aziz) adhere to the constitution of Pakistan and have cut their teeth in mainstream politics. With this strategy, they tried to drive a wedge between the existing civilian leadership as well as spoil civil-military bonhomie. The conditions put forth by Taliban— for example, withdrawal of military forces from tribal areas and release of the Taliban prisoners— would be hard for the military to digest.

No military in the world would like to retreat from a place within their country which they have under their control. The other condition of releasing of Taliban prisoners, which include the hardcore elements and those who masterminded the GHQ attacks, will be unacceptable to the army. While raising these demands, the TTP knows fully well that any attempt by the civilian government to convince the army to comply with these conditions will only lead to a rift between the two. Alternately, if the army concedes, it would signal the weaknesses of the armed forces, while they can get back their guys to regroup and re-launch attacks on a demoralised army, and possibly find it easier to take over Islamabad.

As it appears now, the civilian and military leaders have chosen to retaliate and re-establish state predominance before any dialogue can be started. However, will they go the whole hog to establish their authority and then talk? Will they go after all the militant groups residing in Waziristan or pick and choose bad Taliban from good, as they usually do? Will the “strategic depth” calculations no longer come under consideration? What will they do to the Haqqanis and the Gul Bhadur group in North Waziristan? More importantly, will ISI allow the new military leadership to reevaluate its strategic thinking vis-à-vis Taliban and Afghanistan? Is there any possibility of a paradigm shift in the military’s thinking about the use of non-state actors as foreign policy tools?

All these questions are inter-related. The leadership in Pakistan will have to find a way of redefining its priorities, identify its policy mistakes and deal with TTP in a strategic manner. So far, the TTP has dictated the terms as far as dialogue is concerned. Now the government needs to reaffirm its position and bring some semblance of reason to the dialogue process without succumbing to TTP pressures for fear of failure of talks. Failure of talks is more welcome than the prospect of Taliban securing its demands through talks, not war.

*Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.*