

What Negotiations with Taliban Mean?

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“Rebellions can be made by two percent active in a striking force and 98 percent passively sympathetic.” – T.E. Lawrence¹

Introduction

Pakistan government's ongoing negotiations with Tehrik-e-Taliban, Pakistan (TTP) mark a decisive moment in our history. Our future, irrespective of their outcome, could be remarkably different from either our past or present. One sincerely hopes that the ongoing talks between the state of Pakistan and the non-state actors will succeed but the very notion of success is very different for both the state and the non-state actors. Both sides are saying they desire peace, but that's not a solution or an end state but actually represents the main challenge. What peace means for one and on whose terms is the core dispute. War, most people neglect, is not an end but a means to an end for an actor or a state, which perceives violence as affordable, necessary or profitable. A sovereign state's overt negotiations with a non-state actor challenge its identity, form and composition. It also means that coercion could be used to force a state into renegotiating what it ought to be, how it should be governed and by whom. Most importantly, TTP's success in extracting even a minor concession from the government could embolden other non-state actors, such as those active with divisive agenda in Balochistan, to make similar demands.

Negotiations or Compromises?

In realist terms, negotiations mean compromises made by two or more sides with competing interests. However, when negotiations involve complex factors such as conflicting identities and political ideologies, as is the case between the government of Pakistan and TTP, it make compromise unlikely. More importantly, it also means both the state and non-state actors are willing to renegotiate what state is and how it ought to be governed and by whom. The biggest problem with this approach is that within a constitutional democracy like the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, these negotiations are between a terrorist organization comprising two thousand militants and the popularly elected

government to re-negotiate Pakistan's social contract and not between state and the representatives of the entire society. This means not the representatives of its 180 million strong nation, representing all schools of thoughts, interest groups, territories, ethnicities and classes, decide what Pakistan is, and how it should be governed. But this is being done by an armed group belonging to a single school of thought, whose sole claim to its mandate is based on its ability to kill and destroy the very society it wants to reform. This group considers killing thousands of fellow Muslims legitimate, a religious duty, and claims monopoly over defining what *Shariah* or ideology of Pakistan ought to be.

Why Win-Win Situation With Terrorists is Not Possible?

Peace between a state and a non-state actor cannot yield a win-win situation for both. Usually, state accommodates a non-state actor by convincing it to give up violence in return for it to become a part of the political mainstream. This gives the non-state actor more time, political space, legitimacy and further builds its support base. This is exactly what the terrorists desire. They perceive state's willingness to negotiate with it as state's retreat and its own victory. Therefore, a state should never negotiate with a terrorist organization unless it has successfully isolated the non-state actor ideologically, politically, socially and economically. Objectively speaking, today TTP seems politically, socially and economically stronger than it was a decade ago. If any state negotiates with a non-state actor merely because it is tired, or the war has become too costly, long and unpopular, its external support has dwindled or regional environment has changed, is more likely to strengthen the terrorists by conceding to it more time, space, legitimacy and public support. For the terrorist, an overt negotiation is a gain, for the government it is a retreat.

In addition, in terms of capability and reach, TTP's ability to strike targets across the country has grown not reduced. Although overwhelmingly unpopular, their tactical support base in other parts of the country such as South Punjab, Karachi and Northern Areas has also gradually expanded. It ranges from sympathetic religious leaders to criminal gangs, who provide them local, tactical, logistical and financial support in the form of refuge, ground intelligence, transport and revenues from abductions, extortion and ransom, from major cities such as Karachi.²

Strong Afghan Taliban Means Strong TTP

Moreover, the exponential growth in international recognition and political legitimacy of their ideological brethren in the neighboring Afghanistan provides them 'strategic depth' in the form of moral, diplomatic and logistical support and safe havens inside the increasingly ungoverned Afghan territory³. This could be strategically crucial if the negotiations fail both in Kabul and Islamabad. The failure of negotiations, both in Islamabad and Kabul, will allow various factions of TTP and Afghan Taliban to politically, socially, strategically and economically consolidate their respective positions across both sides of the long and porous Durand Line.

A Costlier, Lonelier War for Pakistan

Meanwhile, the US drawdown from Afghanistan will make this struggle against the terrorists more challenging for Pakistan. Gradually, Washington's political, financial and strategic support, for whoever is in power in Kabul and Islamabad, will decline significantly. This implies that the international economic and military assistance to Pakistan will also gradually reduce, making our fight with TTP a lonely one, at a time when it increasingly becomes financially more costly for Pakistan, politically more costly for its government and operationally more costly for its armed forces. However, reduced external military assistance for our conventional armed forces could further enhance the significance of our nuclear deterrence as a 'long-term and robust factor of stability' in the region, which unlike our conventional forces, is immune from the harmful effects of provision or stoppages of temporary external assistance, spares and supplies from the US. However, international aspersions towards safety and security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal could further intensify in an era of reduced western military commitments in this region and in case TTP's attacks resume or expand across the country.

Changing Global and Regional Geopolitics: New Challenges for Pakistan

More importantly, the long-term US Asian Pivot strategy could transform the US approach towards Pakistan, currently based on cautious sympathy into one reflecting gradual neglect. This would further complicate security challenges for Islamabad, both internally and externally and the issue of terrorism could

increasingly be seen with an Indian lens in Washington. The US' political and diplomatic positions towards various regional and international issues including Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iran and nuclear non-proliferation could also increasingly tip in favor of New Delhi. The latest US Quadrennial Defense Review for the year 2014 indicates long-term US policy direction.⁴ This will translate into more US diplomatic, media, think tank or even economic pressure on Pakistan to crack down on militancy, particularly on those outfits disliked by India.

The US expects Pakistan to deal with India pretty much how Anwar Sadaat dealt with Israel after the 1973 war. We do not like the growing US bias towards India, but besides continuously attempting to remain delicately relevant to both Washington and Beijing at the global level and to Riyadh and Tehran at the regional level, we do not have many long-term foreign policy options. However, due to the dynamic nature of global, regional geopolitical transformations afoot, sustaining this delicate global and regional geo-strategic and geo-economic balance will become increasingly challenging for Pakistan in future.

But one of the biggest long-term worry for Pakistan will be the expansion of US, Iranian and Indian geopolitical convergences. This means these countries also do not want Taliban back in power. Geopolitics is a more useful lens to understand and interpret these complex state-non-state actor relations than ideology. Riyadh's assistance to certain overseas elements does not mean it is willing to provide them space and refuge inside its own territory but only to be employed as a distant strategic asset to counter balance the growing influence of Iran, its main regional rival, similar to Tehran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine. This is yet another reason why it is easier for a state to negotiate with another state, including those with whom it may have adversarial relations, instead of a non-state actor that are active inside its own territory.

Since 1999, both Washington and Beijing have asked Pakistan to improve ties with India and deal with the terrorism issue domestically.⁵ This means if Taliban return to power in Kabul, it will put additional stresses upon Pakistan's relationship with both the US and China at a time when Afghan Taliban are themselves politically, economically and strategically ascendant inside Afghanistan. If the unsuccessful US negotiations with the Afghan Taliban, spread over many years,⁶ provide any useful lessons for Pakistan, Islamabad's negotiating with TTP will only provide them greater legitimacy, political space,

raise their expectations and embolden them to make greater demands in future. These could include political recognition, imposition of their own version of *Shariah*, justice, public administration systems. and eviction of Pak Army from areas controlled by them. All such concessions would mean renegotiating the territorial sovereignty of Pakistan, ceding political and administrative authority over a certain territory of Pakistan and allowing a terrorist group to dictate terms to moderate Pakistani majority.

Fight or Negotiate: Isolate the Terrorists in Both Cases

Overwhelming majority of Pakistanis have a tolerant view towards religion and its role within the society and cannot allow an outfit responsible for the killing of over 60,000 peaceful fellow Muslims to tell them what Islam means. Fighting them in accordance with a comprehensive, coherent and long-term strategy, aimed at reducing their political and social space inside Pakistani society and economy should be the core national security objective⁷. This requires a long-term sustained effort, far beyond the political, ethnic or religious divides, synergizing all elements of national power and bringing all institutions particularly mosque, madrassa, schools, colleges, and media on the same page. The state should gradually exercise its control over overseas funds, donations, madrassa syllabi and literature being imported and distributed in Pakistan. Without this, the state of Pakistan cannot negotiate with the terrorists from a position of strength. Negotiating with Taliban without consolidating its position vis a vis Taliban's support system would not lead anywhere.

Conclusion

In this war against the terrorists being waged inside Pakistan, the struggle to gain social space is more vital than the effort to capture physical space. This war on terror may end this year for those who planned and started it in Afghanistan or Washington but for Pakistan, it is now actually entering its decisive phase. The success or defeat in this defining battle will not be measured in terms of operational details such as type of weapons or number of troops used, territorial gains or lives saved but in terms of determining the future identity of Pakistan. It is a struggle for determining what role religion ought to play in our lives, whether state controls the mosque or *vice versa*. The state of Pakistan has majority of people on its side but like Lawrence of Arabia warned in 1920, the

majority should not be a silent bystander in this decisive struggle but the state and society must forge close unity to isolate the terrorists and prevent them from exploiting political, social and economic space. The stakes of Pakistan army, our moderate and peace-loving majority, liberal media, independent judiciary and an all-encompassing constitution of Pakistan are synchronized towards a type of peace, which denies any individual or a group the right to kill, harm, or condemn anyone. This monopoly over both violence and definition of virtue must rest only with the state and its institutions. The version of peace the terrorists want is to acquire the right, not merely to wage violence within the society but also to wield power to influence social norms and values through coercion, and define what is right and wrong.⁸ This will have huge long-term implications for the role of constitution, parliament, judiciary, armed forces, education and media in the country.

Peace, if achieved, by compromising on the fundamental principles of our state, may save some lives and allow economy to take a short breath but will cost us much more dearly in terms of defining the philosophy and rationale on which Pakistan was founded. Such a peace or subsequent war, in case negotiations fail, will play a decisive role for what Pakistan is and what it will be, both for itself and to the rest of the world. This will be the decisive battle for the identity and future of Pakistan, which it will have to fight on multiple fronts within its society, alone.

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Endnotes

¹ T.E. Lawrence, "The Evolution of a Revolt", *The Army Quarterly* 1, No. 1, (1920): 69.

² Zia ur Rehman, "Karachi: Enter TTP," *DAWN*, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1091918/karachi-enter-ttp>

³ "Foreign support: Afghan Taliban bankrolling our fighters says TTP", *The Express Tribune*, October 7, 2013, accessed March 15, 2014, <http://tribune.com.pk/story/614557/foreign-support-afghan-taliban-bankrolling-our-fighters-says-ttp/>

⁴ "Quadrennial Defense Review 2014," Department of Defense, March 4, 2014, accessed March 13, 2014,

http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_Quadrennial_Defense_Review.pdf

⁵ "Negotiations with TTP is Pakistan's internal matter: US," *Pakistan Today*, February 5, 2014, accessed March 14, 2014,

<http://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2014/02/05/national/negotiations-with-ttp-is-pakistans-internal-matter-us/>

⁶ "Peace Talks With the Taliban," *New York Times*, October 4, 2012, accessed March 14, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/opinion/peace-talks-with-the-taliban.html>

⁷ "Text of National Security Policy 2014-18", *Pakistan News Day*, February 27, 2014, accessed March 13, 2014,

<http://www.pakistannewsday.com/text-of-national-security-policy-2014-18/>

⁸ "Pakistan," Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, May 15, 2013, accessed March 13, 2014,

<http://childrenandarmedconflict.un.org/countries/pakistan/>