

Stalelated Talks with TTP:

Role of the Afghan Taliban and Implications for Pakistan

Peace negotiations between the Pakistan and TTP (Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan), an outlawed terrorist organization that for years has been spearheading terrorism in Pakistan are taking place in Kabul. The process began in October 2021 and is being mediated by the Afghan Taliban. The dialogue that is anticipated to bring peace in the country is so far marred by a stalemate due to a clash over the demands set by the both sides, however, both the sides seem unwilling to walk out of talks.

The article will discuss various aspects of the talks by looking at its different components. It will also scrutinize the role of the Afghan Taliban that under the garb as mediator could be pursuing their own agendas by colluding with TTP.

Pakistan's rationale for talks with TTP?

The TTP's terror activities had come to a grinding halt in the years after 2016, mostly because of the large-scale military operations conducted by the Pakistan Army.

Since 2020, there has been an uptick in the terrorist activities of TTP, especially after the ascendance of the Afghan Taliban to power in Afghanistan. According to the Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS), 207 terrorist attacks took place in Pakistan in 2021 — an increase of 42% relative to 2020. This year alone, during the first six months, according to Pakistan Institute for Conflict and Security Studies (PICSS), 153 militant attacks claimed lives of 293 people. A large number of these attacks have been carried out by TTP.

After Afghan Taliban took over power in Kabul, Pakistan sought their mediation in dealing with TTP. Afghan Taliban, on their part, facilitated direct talks between Pakistan and TTP. As a result of initial talks, a ceasefire was announced in early November, 2021, as talks continued. Despite the ceasefire understanding, there are reports of clashes of TTP militants with security forces as well as sporadic attacks of TTP militants on security forces and civilians. Public resentment against TTP in Pakistan has lately grown due to such incidents, which made Pakistan's military hint at a tougher stance against TTP by late August, 2022. This was done to warn TTP against its continued activities while the representatives of both the sides are holding talks.

As Pakistan's economy is in dire straits and that US assistance is also unavailable, strategic implications of large-scale military operations can negatively impact the security situation in the country. Therefore, dealing with the group militarily seems infeasible.

Keeping this in the view, the rationale of Pakistan for the talks appears to be to resolve conflict permanently through political means. Pakistan demands the TTP leadership to give up violence against the state institutions, disband their organization, and return to their areas with a promise of amnesty for their past crimes.

While on the other side, some of the glaring demands of TTP which have also proved to be obstructing any progress on the talks include: reversal of the FATA merger, and reduction of

the military presence in tribal areas to the 2002-03 levels. Discord is further inflated by TTP's disinclination to end violence, its unwillingness to disarm or disband itself, and its desire to bring FATA under its exclusive control.

Pakistan recently sent a delegation of Deobandi religious scholars and tribal leaders to Kabul to convince TTP to soften their stance on various of their demands especially the one to de-merge FATA from the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province; but the militant group has refused to budge from this core demand.

It should be noted that almost certainly all of the TTP fighters and leadership have fled to Afghanistan and currently resides there as a result of past military operations of Pakistani military.

Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and the talks

It was earlier thought that PTI, the governing political party in the province KPK, has been taken on board by the State in the talks with TTP. It was natural to believe as such because TTP is mainly perceived 'the issue of KPK province', as the province is the terrorist group's birth place and has always acted as its breeding ground. Aforementioned core demands of TTP are concerning the KPK province, therefore, PTI's involvement in the process was inevitable at all levels.

However, contrary to such expectations, different statements by the PTI leaders create ambiguity around the talks. Recently, Barrister Saif, a PTI leader, who is Special Assistant for Information to Chief Minister KPK, claimed that rising terrorist activities in KPK under the label of TTP are perpetrated by 'anti-TTP' elements who want to sabotage the ongoing peace talks. He has also been a part Jirga that has been involved in the negotiations with the terrorist group.

Conversely, Murad Saeed, one of the young leaders of PTI, hailing from Swat in KPK province, lashed out at the federal government for the not taking the PTI in confidence in the peace process in a YouTube interview. He raised alarmed that the terrorist activities are on the rise in KPK province and that there is an influx of TTP terrorists from Afghanistan in the province. The state, he believed, is not taking the situation seriously, which he thought would engulf the whole country if not countered properly. The PTI leader was also seen requesting the federal government to apprise the KPK government of the commitments made in the talks with TTP. He also seemed to be unimpressed by the fact that the future of KPK is at stake and its people are being ignored.

Such contradictory statements by the PTI leaders can create hurdles in the peace process in the future, where a representative of the KPK government is saying something different to that of another PTI leader.

TTP and Afghan Taliban Ties:

Since TTP started resurgence in 2020, it has been greatly rejuvenating, mainly, after the Afghan Taliban's grab of power in Afghanistan. Both the TTP and Afghan Taliban historically share a close bond. It was glaringly reflected when Siraj Haqqani, acting interior minister in Kabul, applauded TTP for it supporting the Afghan Taliban in its struggle against the previous Afghan

government and the US. Their closeness can also be gauged from the way Afghan Taliban brought TTP into talks with Pakistan.

However, TTP wishes to move into Pakistan due to abysmal quality of life in eastern Afghanistan, which is one its main aims for going into talks with Pakistan. Not to ignore that TTP also shares close links with the transnational jihadists. As the Afghan Taliban are in power in Afghanistan, in such a suitable scenario when TTP sets its demands, it does so from the position of strength.

In this way, the group seems confident as it hedges bets to pressurize Islamabad to get FATA de-merged. Once FATA merger is reversed, FATA region could be turned into an Afghan style 'mini-emirate' to relaunch a new war on Pakistan.

Implications for Pakistan:

The Taliban militants never stick to their words, as in the past Pakistan went into several agreements that date back to 2004, even before the proper formation of TTP, with the various Taliban factions as well as TTP, but none of these agreements lasted more than a few months. Therefore, trusting TTP again with another agreement, when the environment is much more ideal for them to assert themselves, would be a disastrous venture and accepting their demands would be paving the way for a 'state within a state'.

It should also be realized that fulfilment of the TTP demands would indirectly help the Afghan Taliban to accomplish its expansionist position at the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Afghan Taliban's newly released anthem clearly reflects their expansionist ideology, in which it is claimed that the Taliban Emirate extends from *Badakshan* to *Attock*. Badakshan is located in Afghanistan, whereas Attock is in Pakistan's province of Punjab. This needs to make Islamabad wary that the Afghan Taliban, whom they are blindly trusting, might be staging a grand scheme to expand their emirate through TTP.

TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud in a CNN interview indicated that if Pakistan pushes them too much to give up on core demand, i.e., de-merge FATA, then they might end up allying with Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), a sectarian outfit and a regional off-shoot of ISIS, that has potential to disturb sectarian fault lines in Pakistan.

This can be perceived as a blackmailing tactic but such intentions of TTP chief influenced policymakers in Pakistan. Its impact was seen when the government of Pakistan, after a security meeting in which the military briefed the parliamentary committee on the ongoing talks with TTP in June this year, announced that one of the primary rationales of Islamabad talking to TTP was to prevent its fighters from joining ISKP.

Since TTP and ISKP hold different religious ideologies as TTP are followers of Deobandi school of thought whereas ISKP are predominantly Salafists, their future their nexus is unlikely. Besides, Afghan Taliban are fighting ISKP at home, therefore, TTP, which has safe havens in Afghanistan will never risk breaking its close relationship with the Afghan Taliban. Hence, the Afghan Taliban and TTP, both share the same religious ideologies and have a long history of cooperation at all levels, this renders them natural allies.

Keeping above in the view, the Afghan Taliban might never wish TTP to be completely dismantled. If a strong group like TTP prevails, and that it remains closely connected with the Afghan Taliban, it could be used as a bargaining chip against Pakistan in the future.

As stated earlier, the TTP could also be used as an instrument by the Afghan Taliban to achieve its expansionist agendas as enshrined in their new anthem. Which can also be discerned from the fact that the Afghan Taliban regime has so far refused to accept the status of border between Pakistan and Afghanistan, implying an irredentist intention which should not be ignored by the policymakers in Islamabad.

Conclusion

The stalemate continues over demands between Pakistan and TTP in the talks that began in October 2021. Pakistan desires TTP to relinquish its terror activities and disband organization, whereas, TTP is persistently showing its reluctance to disarm and disband itself and wants FATA to be de-merged so that it could make it its exclusively controlled zone. Al though ceasefire exists between the both sides, at least on paper, yet there has been a huge spike in the terrorist activities of TTP as per first six-month statistics. Islamabad is blindly trusting the Afghan Taliban in these talks as a mediator; however, it needs to be wary of a hidden nexus of Afghan Taliban and TTP that could hurt Islamabad's interests. Since the demands put forward by the TTP overlap with vested interests and agendas of the Afghan Taliban. Therefore, policymakers in Islamabad need to adroitly come up with a policy that can formidably protect Pakistan's interests in an all-embracing manner.

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