



IPCS

INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES

Innovative Research | Independent Analysis | Informed Opinion



IPCS SPECIAL FOCUS



TALKS WITH THE TALIBAN

ENDGAME FOR THE MILITARY, POLITICAL
PARTIES AND THE TTP IN PAKISTAN



IPCS

INSTITUTE OF PEACE AND CONFLICT

Pg. No.	Contents
3	Talks with the Taliban: Endgame for the Political Parties Sushant Sareen
5	Talks with the Taliban: Endgame for the Military Rana Banerji
7	Talks with the Taliban: Endgame for the TTP D Suba Chandran
9	Pakistan and TTP: Dialogue or Military action Salma Malik
11	Talks with the Taliban: How far will the state go? D Suba Chandran
RELATED COMMENTARIES	
13	TTP under Mullah Fazlullah: What next for the Pakistani Taliban?
15	Consensus on talks with Taliban; Political parties in Pakistan, however, protect their own turf

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was elected in May 2013 on a campaign platform that included a promise to initiate peace talks with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The efforts were however derailed in November 2013 when TTP leader Hakimullah Mehsud was killed in a U.S. drone strike.

The failing dialogue process was given another chance in March 2014. Both the state and the TTP appointed committees to carry forward the stalled peace talks.

Recently, members from the government and the TTP committees held direct talks; the first ever meeting since the peace overtures began.

This report is a collection of commentaries by scholars from India and Pakistan analyzing the likely outcome of the dialogue.

Edited By
Ayesha Khanyari

Talks with the Taliban: Endgame for the Political Parties

Sushant Sareen

Senior Fellow, Vivekananda International Foundation

The recent developments over the talks with the Pakistani Taliban have raised serious questions about what Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif realistically hopes to achieve through the dialogue. Furthermore, political parties in Pakistan have begun shedding some of their ambivalence on their opinions vis-à-vis the talks with the Taliban. Barring a few who stridently oppose having any truce with the Taliban, most political parties continue to pay lip service to the need for a dialogue, and in the same breath some of them speak about how far the government could or should go with the Taliban.

Right-wing Parties

Broadly, right-wing, conservative, mainstream parties like Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) are willing to go an extra mile to make the talks a success. Religious parties like the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam- Fazal-ur-Rehman (JUI-F), the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Sami ul Haq (JUI-S), Jamaat Islami, and other Shia or Barelvi parties like the Majlis-e Wahdat-e Muslimeen, the Sunni Ittehad Council, Sunni Tehreek etc. are divided on the basis of ideological, sectarian and doctrinal lines on how to deal with the Taliban. Political interests too influence the stances of some religious parties. The left-of-centre, 'secular' and progressive mainstream parties like the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the Search Results Muttahida Quami Movement (MQM) and Awami National Party (ANP), currently either support or virulently oppose the talks.

The ruling PML-N has taken a risky political gamble by entering into talks with the Taliban, especially because the government was on the verge of launching an all-out military operation when it suddenly changed its mind. At one level, the PML-N's soft policy which detractors call appeasement will appeal to its core political constituency that is ambiguous towards the Taliban and other sundry Islamists and would like to see a negotiated end to the violence. An added benefit is that it robs PML-N's main challenger in Punjab, Imran Khan (of PTI), of a platform that he could use to dent Nawaz Sharif's vote bank. Given that Imran Khan was the most vocal advocate of dialoguing with the Taliban, Nawaz Sharif's inclusion of him in the peace talks has disarmed Khan. A major driver behind this decision is that he wants to keep Punjab safe from Taliban retaliation, which would be inevitable in the event of a military operation. On the flip side, if there is any substance in the reports that the Pakistani army is not pleased with the government's policy on the Taliban, one can expect a tense stand-off in civil-military relations if the talks were to break down and/or Sharif is seen as conceding too much.

Liberal Parties

Among the 'liberal' parties, the MQM has strongly opposed any concessions to the Taliban. This is partly due to ideological reasons and partly due reasons of self-preservation, given how the MQM bastion Karachi is constantly under attack. Simultaneously, the MQM is also taking efforts to get in the good books of the military, which it thinks is opposed to the talks.

Meanwhile, the PPP appears split over how far it should go in supporting or opposing the talks. The Party is making half-hearted efforts to recover lost political space by questioning the talks, but also

fears coming out very strongly against the Taliban. While PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto has taken a strident anti-Taliban position (only on Twitter), the Leader of Opposition in the National Assembly, Khurshid Shah, has taken a more nuanced stand. The PPP is also bristling at not being kept in the loop by the government. The ANP made some noises against the talks, only to express faith in the talks in the next breath – but that is understandable, given how they’ve remained in the cross-hairs of the Taliban.

Parties of Minority Communities

The Shia and Barelvi parties are unequivocal in their opposition to the talks. They fear that any space conceded to the Taliban will produce an existential threat for them. The Jamaat-e-Islami has been in the forefront to justify Taliban actions and sees them as warriors against the ‘evil’ US. It is in favour of continuing the dialogue even if they fail and opposes any military operation against them. Their support is not entirely altruistic and the Jamaat sees political benefit in the form of greater clout and perhaps a chance to come to power. However, the Taliban will have little use for the Jamaat if they do come to power.

More interesting is the tussle between the two main Deobandi parties – the JUI-F and the JUI-S. For decades, the latter has been worsted in the political field by the former. In fact, Haq had been reduced to a bit player until the Taliban talks, in which he was nominated as the head of the ‘Taliban committee’ to liaison with the government. His old links with terrorism and the Taliban have catapulted straight to the political centre-stage. Resultantly, JUI-F chief Fazal-ur-Rehman is displeased; what is more, Rehman has for long been trying to promote his own peace talks through the tribal jirgas. But despite his having joined the coalition government, Nawaz Sharif hasn’t bought into Fazal’s formula for peace. As a result, Rehman, though not opposed to the dialogue, has expressed his doubts over the talks yielding any result. Perhaps he is waiting for an opportunity – a breakdown in the talks – to make his next move.

Nawaz Sharif is essentially walking on the razor’s edge and regardless of the outcome of the talks, he will face the brunt of the political fallout.

Talks with the Taliban: Endgame for the Military

Rana Banerji

Distinguished Fellow, IPCS

The March 1 ceasefire announced by the Tehrike-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) holds somewhat tenuously in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) even as the Nawaz Sharif government shows extraordinary patience in continuing to engage with them.

TTP Tantrums Vs. Pakistani Army

The TTP was badly hit by the pinpointed air-strikes undertaken by the Pakistani army in February. The ceasefire resulted due to the TTPs weak position, as their current hide-outs stood revealed and they could not escape to higher mountain reaches immediately due to winter weather.

Though patience of the army leadership appeared to be wearing thin with the TTP's dilatory tactics, on March 12, a meeting chaired by Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Rashad Mahmood, reaffirmed "full preparedness and resolve of the armed forces to fight the menace of terrorism under a comprehensive strategy, within the policy parameters set by the political leadership."

The TTP Shura demanded direct talks with authorised government functionaries, including representatives of the army and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). The army is against any such direct involvement. Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali has increasingly emerged in a frontal or nodal role. He presided over the March 25 meeting attended by the Director General of the ISI, Lieutenant General Zaheerul Islam, which authorised a committee of civilian bureaucrats, comprising Federal Ports & Shipping Secretary Habibullah Khattak, Additional Secretary of the FATA, Arbab Arif, former bureaucrat Rustam Shah Mohmand, sole member of the Government's previous team of interlocutors which broke the ice, all three Pashtuns, and Fawad Hussan Fawad, Additional Secretary, Prime Minister's Office, to talk to the TTP at a secret venue in North Waziristan.

The success of the talks would depend on whether the civilian politicians can take the army along while tackling the main demands of TTP vis-à-vis the imposition of Sharia law, the withdrawal of the army from FATA, and the release of prisoners.

Ceasefire and Negotiations: Various Conundrums

The ceasefire would need to be extended after March 30. Any further extension could tactically redound to the army's disadvantage, helping the TTP militants regroup, and escape to the hills in better climatic conditions. However, a key risk in this regard would be the possibility of maverick actions by smaller militant groups perpetrating localised violence against security forces. Each such act of violence makes further negotiations with the TTP more difficult as it cannot cohesively control militants loosely adhering to its fold. The army has threatened firm retaliation against such incidents.

Demands have come from civil society that ceasefire extension be accompanied by release of kidnapped or arrested 'non-combatants', especially the long incarcerated sons of PPP politicians, Haider Gilani and Shahbaz Taseer and the Vice Chancellor of Peshawar University, Dr Ajmal Khan. Release of prisoners remains a vexing issue. A list of 300 women and children 'prisoners' was given to a pro-TTP mediator, Professor Ibrahim, but the army denied holding any women or children. In the recent past, the execution of Dr Usman, the Punjabi Taliban mastermind of the 2010 attack on Army Headquarters was stayed by the Punjab government after the Taliban issued a threat.

Shahbaz Sharif too has been reluctant to act firmly against militants for fear of retaliation and collateral damage in Punjab. The army would balk at release of prisoners at this stage, especially those arrested or detained for specific terrorist incidents. Phased release of those who may not have committed heinous crimes could be considered later, provided binding progress for peace can be achieved through a longer term ceasefire accompanied by a surrender of weapons. Currently, agreement on this seems a far cry.

Demographic alterations

Whenever there is a military operation in FATA and KP or anticipation thereof, a large outflow of internally displaced persons (IDPs), mostly civilians, especially women and children occurs. IDPs from the 2009 Swat operation continue to live in abysmal conditions in the Jalozai relief camp and other less organised temporary settlements in Tank, Dera Ismail Khan. There is also a burgeoning Pashtun settlement in greater Karachi urban agglomeration. Any new military operation would require the civilian administration to gear up their preparedness to cope for a fresh influx of IDPs. This can be an emotive issue.

The Way Forward?

A withdrawal of army `regulars` from FATA too seems unacceptable, even if the TTP couches this request with the proposal of restoring jurisdiction of Frontier Corps para-military personnel. Persistent infighting within the TTP would also need to be assessed. Mullah Fazlullah, the current TTP leader hails from Swat, and is disliked by the army leadership. Though his ascension may have been endorsed by the Afghan Taliban leadership (Mullah Omar), it is unclear if powerful local leaders like the Haqqanis, Mehsuds and the Wazirs fully accept him. The army/ISI could exploit these differences.

Though a 7 Infantry Division garrison is present in Miranshah, the writ of the State does not run in many areas of FATA. These areas can be used as `launch pads` by insurgents supporting the Afghan Taliban (AT) in Afghanistan, as also against Pakistan's own security forces. The army's responses would have to be carefully calibrated, giving the TTP a sufficient `bloody nose` yet not jeopardising the capacity of the Afghan Taliban to hold ground on the other side of the Af-Pak border.

While the civilian political leadership seems keen to continue the peaceful dialogue, the army sees this as ineffectual appeasement.

This dilemma is likely to intensify as Pakistan's politicians muddle through the current confusion on finding the right answers to curb the growing domestic threat of Islamic terrorism.

Talks with the Taliban: Endgame for the TTP

D Suba Chandran

Director, IPCS

What does the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) want in Pakistan? How far it will go? Is there a change in its endgame today as compared to its original founding objective?

TTP's Endgame: Four Objectives

In a conflict situation, especially while dealing with an armed non-State actor, it is not easy to identify and differentiate between the rhetoric and real objective. In order to gain legitimacy for their illegitimate means, any non-State actor is likely to exaggerate the rhetoric.

Though there has never been a comprehensive exposé of what it aims at and how it plans to achieve the same, the 15 points put forward during the February negotiations reveal the TTP's rhetoric and real demands. They could be classified under four major categories: Afghanistan, Pakistan-US relations, Military operations by the security forces, and a blue print for governing Pakistan, with an exclusive role for itself.

TTP and Afghanistan

The TTP's agenda and objectives vis-à-vis Afghanistan are more rhetorical in nature and do not have any substantial underlines. The TTP is more focussed on Pakistan, and prefers to leave the state of affairs in Afghanistan to Mullah Omar's Quetta Shura and the Haqqani Network. The TTP fights the Pakistani security forces and goes after targets within Pakistan; there haven't been any substantial reports of the TTP and its fighters crossing the Durand Line for fighting the International Security Assistance Forces in Afghanistan.

While they have used the Afghan soil as a temporary hideout, and training grounds, the TTP is unlikely to go after the security forces in Afghanistan. The TTP's objective in Afghanistan would remain limited to provide the space for Mullah Omar and the Haqqanis, by being a cushion on the Eastern side of the Durand Line.

TTP, the US and US-Pakistan Relations

The TTP objects Pakistan-US relations for two reasons: first, ever since the TTP was formed with substantial support from the al Qaeda, it acted as a veritable arm of the latter, to ease military pressure within Pakistan. Since the start of the Global War on Terror in 2001, the Pakistani military carried out select strikes against the al Qaeda, arresting its top leaders and handing over them to the US. Though the military and its Inter-Services Intelligence hid Osama bin Laden, it proactively assisted the US in neutralising the second tier leadership of the al Qaeda.

Second, the TTP was, for most part, a creation of the al Qaeda, with fewer inputs from the Afghan Taliban. Though Mullah Omar was accepted as the supreme leader by successive TTP leaders, the Mehsud clan associated with the TTP was closer to the al Qaeda than the Afghan Taliban. In this context, the TTP has substantially failed in achieving its objectives. Today, the al Qaeda is neutralised within Pakistan and is in the process of migrating to other regions; perhaps, the process is closer to conclusion.

The Present and the Future: TTP's New Blueprint for Pakistan

The third and fourth major objectives of the TTP would remain the most crucial in determining the endgame for the Pakistani Taliban. It is hence essential to take into account two crucial factors: the change in Pakistani Taliban's leadership – from the Mehsuds to Mullah Fazlullah – and the objectives of the multiple franchisees of the TTP.

As mentioned earlier, until 2013, the TTP leadership was closer to the al Qaeda than to the Afghan Taliban. More importantly, despite the occasional emphasis on jihad, until now, the TTP leadership was devoid of any ideological base. The Mehsud leadership acted more as foot soldiers for the al Qaeda's military objectives, rather than presenting any coherent ideological programme, however warped. Mullah Fazlullah's elevation as the TTP chief with support from the Afghan Taliban is likely

to change the endgame for the TTP. In an interview in early 2014, a Taliban spokesperson made a crucial comment: “Swat Taliban is TTP today.”

In this context, one has to go back and trace what the Swat Taliban wanted and fought for in Malakand, and also analyse Mullah Fazlullah’s personality. Unlike the TTP under the Mehsuds, the Swati Taliban (which can be traced back to the erstwhile Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi in the Malakand region, and which came into existence even before the Pakistani Taliban) had an ideological agenda and endgame, despite the comparatively limited geographical hold. The TTP’s demands for imposing Sharia law in Pakistan will have to be interpreted in this context. It is unlikely that the TTP wants to impose Sharia all over Pakistan at this juncture, but it would certainly like to start with the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the Provincially Administered Tribal Areas regions; and unfortunately, the State and its political parties are likely to yield to this proposition in a barter arrangement, further unravelling the FATA.

Finally, the multiple franchisees of the TTP, especially the Punjabi Taliban, are unlikely to stop with limited demands in the FATA or Pashtun areas. Their target would be the heartland of Pakistan, especially Punjab, vis-à-vis the minorities and non-Sunni communities. The real war against Pakistan would begin once the US leaves Pakistan; and not by the TTP in FATA but by the Punjabi Taliban in the heart of Pakistan. There lies the greater threat for the future of Pakistan.

Pakistan and TTP: Dialogue or Military Action?

Salma Malik

Assistant Professor, Defence and Strategic Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University

The verdict is out: instead of supporting decisive military action to break the back of insurgents, the government chose to dialogue, with umpteenth committees to name, shame, blame and footdrag. Interestingly, where the dialogue option has halted government military action as a confidence-building and reconciliatory measure, not only are the Taliban carrying out their signature strikes (such as the latest at a cinema house in Peshawar and a direct attack against security forces) but are already picking on soft targets such as the peaceful Ismailia (Shia) population in Gilgit Baltistan areas to convert or scare them into vacating their homeland. This is also being attempted against the harmless Kailash tribes, as are targeted strikes against government empathisers and Aman (peace) Jirga members, to further their reign of terror and convey the message that they are still in control.

What will be the implication of these talks? Will the talks be successful? Will they usher peace? Or will negotiating with the insurgents lead to the popularly dreaded Taliban interpreted Shariah? Some feel that it is the Taliban and not the government who are at a weaker wicket, and with time the former stands to lose more than gain. This is because such violent movements are inherently self-annihilating in nature, and usually, factionalism, power struggle, and their getting too big for their size will cause their eventual downfall. However, there is little comfort in this theory, as not only will such a scenario entail heavy collateral damages, but would end up substantially destroying critical infrastructure and distort the socio-political fabric before it ceases.

So what do the talks hold, and what is their measure of success? Would they result in bringing forth a pro-government or pro-Taliban stance or a win-win situation for both? Either of the options does not

promise lasting peace. Allowing insurgents and anti-state elements a platform to voice their demands and form even the governmental committee with a few members that enjoy Taliban approval not only legitimises the insurgents but has already placed them on a superior footing. To date, except for supporting the option of dialogue and a choked demand to remain within the constitutional framework, there is apparently no other governmental stance. Any demands and preconditions placed have been entirely by the TTP, whether it be an apparent unilateral ceasefire from the government's side, seeking the release of TTP prisoners, stay on executions as well as retaining their weapons.

Since the commencement of the negotiations, besides photo-ops and Taliban interlocutors enjoying joy rides on helicopters fueled by tax-payer money, the Taliban have not even been asked to give up their weapons or put a halt to the daily dose of select killings and terrorism, beyond lip service by the otherwise glib interior minister. Interestingly, none of the previous accords signed between insurgents and government forces such as Shakai (2004), Srarogha (2005) and Swat (2008), could convince the militants to disarm. And as common sense suggests, if there is no disarmament there is little logic and incentive to demobilise. And as expected, very soon after the conclusion of any of these accords, the militants found an excuse to violate the peace terms and became more lethal.

As armchair analysts, it is easy to support 'decisive' military action, with a similar stance taken by the media. However, one is reminded of 2008, when General Musharraf was urged by a majority of the people, among whom prominent media figures were the most vocal, to crush the Lal Masjid vigilante brigade. What happened next was what the General had apprehensively voiced. The security forces used their lethal might, and within minutes, the media-steered public opinion turned against the government. No one raised a question about why a holy place was stashed with weapons better-suited for a private army, and who had given the vigilantes and their handlers the permission to terrorise the people and hold the capital city hostage. What everyone focused on was how brutal the government was and that those killed inside the mosque were young Hafiz-e-Quran girls and boys. Besides this immediate and severe backlash, the biggest fallout of this operation was a chain of bombings across the country, insurgency in Swat and organised suicide attacks.

Prior to its commencement, most of the political parties supported dialogue, which has been duly initiated. Taking a cue from the TTP's actions, there is little hope for the promised peace that political actors ensure as a follow-up to dialogue. The talks will also not succeed in terms of TTP agreeing with the state perspective. In a way, the much criticised dialogue not only leaves no option unexplored but in the longer-run, also clears all doubts about what is the correct course of action to take. Usually such dialogues succeed only if the other party is at a relative disadvantage and perceives incentives in peace talks. Secondly, the call for Shariah also raises several questions: who would be the Amir ul Momineen - the elected prime minister or the head of TTP? If the TTP's version of the dialogue is successful, would it remain a Pakhtoon-dominated organisation or have the various ethnic 'chapter' lending the supreme commander their full support and allegiance? That is where one can optimistically presume the initiation of factionalism and infighting amongst the TTP cadres. But this remains a thought only. Finally, when the country's constitution is already drafted in accordance with the Islamic code, there is left not space for dissenting voices.

In case the talks fail, fully coordinated and crushing military action appears to be the only option left. There will be violations, collateral damage, killing of own population, deadly reprisal attacks and so on. Media-led debates and print analyses have a very short shelf life. Decisive military action would yield results only if there is a broad-based political consensus supplemented by public support. The military as a state institution has already paid a heavy price in this infighting, and cannot act

Talks with the TTP: How Far will the State Go?

D Suba Chandran

Director, IPCS

The renewed attempts by the Pakistani State to initiate another round of dialogue with the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have gained momentum, and numerous measures are in place. The government has appointed a four-member committee to negotiate with the TTP; the TTP for its part has formed two committees – a political committee led by Maulana Samiul Haq, comprising people outside the TTP to negotiate with the government committee; and a second committee comprising TTP ideologists and fighters to operate as a link between the TTP leadership and the political committee.

Talking to the Taliban: What is the Endgame for the State?

It should be clear at the outset, it is not the TTP that was keen on negotiating with the State; rather, it is the State, especially this government, which is interested in initiating the talks.

What does the State want to achieve through this round of talks with the TTP? It is obvious, that the State would expect the TTP to cease violence and stop militancy. On this issue, the State has a wider consensus – supported by the Parliament, Military and the Civil Society. None within Pakistan (outside the TTP and its multiple franchisees all over the country) would like to see violence and mayhem perpetrated by the Taliban to continue.

Second, the State would expect the TTP to respect its writ, especially in non-tribal areas and the settled districts within KP and outside it. While the State would be willing to live with the TTP as a non-violent and non-State actor within the FATA, it certainly would not want the TTP to cross the tribal agencies.

Besides the above, is the State likely to demand that the TTP should give up its position on Afghanistan and imposition of Shariah within Pakistan? Is the State also likely to demand that the TTP should not provide base for the Afghan Taliban and support them against the established government and the international security forces in Afghanistan?

Unlikely. For the State it is a secondary issue or worse not an issue at all. If the State in Pakistan and its security Establishment themselves are backing Afghan Taliban, it would not make sense that they ask the TTP not to do so.

Talking to the Taliban: Are there Redlines for the State? How far is the State willing to go to achieve the above?

While there is a consensus at the political level (especially amongst the leading political parties both within and outside the Parliament) towards initiating a negotiation process with the TTP, there seems to be no threshold set by the State towards how far it could go to accommodate demands made by the TTP.

In the absence of open documents and/or policy outlines, any answer to the above questions will be conjectural. One of the principal demands of the TTP is the release of Taliban internees who are currently in state captivity. While the State is likely to bargain on the specifics of the releases, one can expect it to yield to the TTP's demand. While the State would not release all Taliban prisoners, a few important members who are part of the leadership are likely to be freed. The State and the TTP would dub this as a goodwill gesture. For, ominous as it may sound, if the TTP has agreed to come to the

negotiating table as a 'goodwill gesture,' the State will have to return the favour. After all, it is the State, and not the TTP, that has been keen on initiating the negotiation processes.

The TTP's second demand is likely to be vis-à-vis the US and Afghanistan. This would include the severing of all ties with the US and its support to the international security forces in Afghanistan, and an end to the drone strikes in the North-West Frontier Province. On this demand, the State will act in a pussyfooted manner. While there would be heavier emphasis on sovereignty and respecting Pakistan's internal peace processes, much would depend on the government's ability to cope with the US pressure on both accounts.

Depending on the value and significance of the targets, the US is likely to go ahead with the drone attacks. Perhaps, the number of attacks would reduce, but only for a brief while. The US is unlikely to abandon the campaign of drone attacks; neither would it stop pressurising Pakistan from doing more in Afghanistan. After all, this would be an intrinsic part of the US-Pakistan strategic dialogue, tied to crucial economic and military aid for Islamabad.

Another major demand of the TTP would be the imposition of Sharia law in the country. In fact, irrespective of what the TTP leadership wants, hard line members of the nominated team, such as Maulana Samiul Haq, are likely to insist on it. While the State would resist such a move in the rest of Pakistan, it would be willing to provide a space, perhaps within the FATA as the previous government attempted in Swat, few years ago.

In fact, while negotiating over the three aforementioned likely demands of the TTP – the release of Taliban internees, the severing of ties with the US and ending drone attacks, and the imposition of Sharia law – the State has little manoeuvring space. Perhaps, it is not strong enough to impose its will. At least for now.

TTP under Mullah Fazlullah: What Next for the Pakistani Taliban?

D Suba Chandran

Director, IPCS

Almost two months after the killing of Hakimullah Mehsud, the former head of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), by a drone attack in the Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where does the TTP stand today? Is it demoralised, or renewed, under the leadership of the new head, Mullah Fazlullah? More importantly, how would the TTP evolve from here, under the leadership of its new leader, who is believed to have been personally chosen by Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the Taliban?

Will Fazlullah make the TTP a more "veritable arm" of the Afghan Taliban and fight for its political cause in Afghanistan? Or will he convert it into a jihadi organization, fighting for a religious cause within Pakistan?

TTP Today: Has it Become Weak after the Assassination of Hakimullah Mehsud?

On the first question, today, the TTP has certainly not been weakened. Despite losing several of its leaders (more due to drone attacks, instead of Pakistan's anti-militancy operations), the TTP remains a deadly organisation. Recent attacks, even after the assassination of Hakimullah Mehsud late last

year, proves how active the TTP has remained.

Mullah Fazlullah's measured response to the Pakistani State's offer for talks also highlights the absence of panic and/or anxiety in the TTP ranks. In a calculated move, it has announced a committee consisting Maulana Abdul Aziz, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUIS) leader Maulana Sami ul Haq, and Jamat-e-Islami (JI) leader Professor Mohammad Ibrahim; two more nominated members, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) Chairman Imran Khan and Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl (JUI-F) leader Mufti Kifayatullah, refused to be a part of this committee.

The fact that the TTP has chosen leaders of political parties as its representatives illustrates the confidence it has. On the other hand, the political leadership in Pakistan has displayed a lot of angst and undertaken extensive preparation, cutting across party lines. The All Parties Meeting for the umpteenth time recommended initiating a talk about talks with the Pakistani Taliban, again. Clearly, the TTP still thinks it is not weakened vis-à-vis the State.

The second set of questions – on the implications of Mullah Fazlullah reportedly being chosen by Mullah Omar himself – warrants a larger discussion, not just in Pakistan, but also in Afghanistan, India, and the rest of international community.

Ever since its creation, the TTP's leadership remained with the Mehsuds in North and South Waziristan. Former leaders such as Baitullah and Hakimullah belonged to the Mehsud clan of the Pashtun ethnic group. They were chosen by the Shura, or imposed themselves over the latter, due to their clout and fighting power. Today, it is widely believed that the Mehsuds in general and the TTP leadership in Waziristan in particular, were supported by the al Qaeda and its affiliates such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.

TTP Tomorrow: Will it Become Deadly Under Mullah Fazlullah?

Mullah Fazlullah, who has taken over as the new leader of the TTP is no ordinary militant. The previous leaders of the TTP – both Baitullah Mehsud and his successor Hakimullah Mehsud – were more aggressive in nature, using violence as a strategy against the Pakistani Establishment. Neither of them were trained in religious discourse; and nor did they use religion even in a crude form. They imposed their own version of Islam.

Mullah Fazlullah is completely different in this context. He is a 'Mullah'; in fact, he is referred as "Radio Mullah" for his effective use of FM to propagate his own version of Islam. As a leader of the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, (TNSM) which later became the Swat Taliban, he propagated his own version of Islam. Unlike Baitullah and Hakimullah, Fazlullah believed in a religious cause for implementing the Shariah. As a leader of the TNSM, one of his as well as his father-in-law and TNSM founder, Sufi Muhammad's, main demands has been to implement the Shariah law in Pakistan. Mullah Fazlullah has also been anti-women; he had girls' schools bulldozed and imposed a strict code on women, restricting their movements in public places in Swat. From polio vaccination to music CDs, he has had an extremely narrow interpretation of religion.

This is where one could expect the main difference in the TTP's focus under Fazlullah, as compared to that of the Mehsuds. Neither Baitullah nor Hakimullah Mehsud attempted to impose their version of Islam. In fact, it would not be wrong even to state that both the Mehsuds did not even have a version of Islam that they attempted to impose. They were ruthless more in carrying out a violent vendetta against the State of Pakistan, than attempting to change its society. The sectarian attacks were perpetrated by

the TTP franchisees rather than the main group in Waziristan.

Operationally, Mullah Fazlullah is equally ruthless as the Mehsuds have been vis-à-vis the Pakistani Establishment. In fact the military had to fight a bloody battle to recapture Swat valley from Fazlullah

Furthermore, under Fazlullah's leadership, the TTP is likely to undergo a major transformation in terms of its linkages with the Afghan Taliban and Mullah Omar. Since Fazlullah himself has been fighting in Afghanistan's Kunar Province, it is unlikely that his focus would remain focussed only against the Pakistani State.

The above suppositions need a deeper and wider analysis. More importantly, it is highly likely that Fazlullah might become a bridge between the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. What would that mean? To use Admiral Mike Mullen's phrase, "will the TTP become a veritable arm of the Afghan Taliban?" What would be the implications if that happens?

Consensus on talks with Taliban

Political parties in Pakistan, however, protect their own turf

D. Suba Chandran

Director, IPCS

EVER since the current round of negotiations with the Taliban in Pakistan began, there have been numerous committees, limited military strikes and continuing violence by militants. A cursory look at the problematique reveals two major fault lines. The first is between the multiple actors who are directly and indirectly party to the negotiations and its outcome – political parties, the military, the Taliban and civil society. Second, there is also a fault line within each of the above actors on the endgame.

There have been numerous "all-party conferences" and debates within and outside Parliament.

Though there seems to be a consensus in negotiating with the Taliban in Pakistan, there are subtle differences within the political parties in terms of the endgame. The ruling PML-N and the Punjabi leadership seems to be primarily interested in ensuring that violence does not spread into Punjab. It appears they prefer to live with an element of Taliban presence and influence in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), provided they do not attempt to infiltrate into Islamabad and the rest of Punjab.

The regional political parties, especially in KP, including the Awami National Party and Imran Khan's PTI, also seem to be pursuing a same goal, but to a limited extent. It appears that the political parties in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are also willing to live with a Taliban presence and influence in FATA, and selected settled regions in KP such as Swat, as long as the TTP and its ideology gets quarantined within these tribal belts.

The MQM and the PPP also seem to be more interested in protecting Sindh, especially the port city and economic capital of Pakistan, Karachi. Today, there are more Pashtuns living in Karachi than in Peshawar, Kabul and Kandahar. The Taliban has an influence over the Pashtuns in Karachi, which undermines the MQM, the ANP and the PPP. Since the PML-N has a smaller political constituency in Sindh, the Punjabi leadership may not be averse to an element of Taliban presence in Karachi as

long as it does not affect economic growth and the economic corridor to Lahore and Islamabad.

Given the nature and size, the Baloch parties have less or no say in what they want vis-à-vis the Taliban, though the latter's presence in Balochistan has increased sectarian violence and undermined Baloch nationalism. For the rest of Pakistan, perhaps the undermining of Baloch nationalism under the heat of a violent sectarian discourse suits their larger, but narrow interests.

If these factors drive the negotiating positions of the political parties at the national and regional levels, it appears each one of them is trying to protect its own territory and allow the Taliban to function to a limited extent outside its sphere of influence.

If the political parties have an agenda to protect their own turf, religious leaders of different parties such as JI, JUI-F and JUI-S along with self-styled maulanas and mullahs are trying to increase their political clout. Supporting the Taliban, its ideology and the need to negotiate with the militants gives them an edge, as could be seen in the composition of committees.

After becoming politically less relevant if not totally irrelevant, the maulanas and mullahs see the Taliban as an opportunity to rekindle the entire Islamic and Islamisation debate within Pakistan. For them the Taliban and the negotiation agenda open a debate which would bring them into the mainstream debate on the future of Pakistan. The Taliban offensive opens a political door for the clergy and religious parties.

What is the endgame of the military in talking to the Taliban? Though most of the TTP's demands such as the release of prisoners and stopping military actions are directly related to the military, the GHQ and the ISI seem to have succeeded in allowing the political leadership take the primary heat and blame. A section within the GHQ and the ISI still seems to believe in a role for the Pakistani Taliban in any future negotiations with Afghanistan. While a section of the TTP may be fighting the Pakistani military, a section in FATA and across the Durand Line still works for the military such as the Haqqani network and its supporters in FATA along with a few "pro-State" militants.

The military's thinking perhaps is: once the Americans leave Afghanistan, a substantial section of the Afghan Taliban and its supporters within Pakistan would move west of the Durand Line. So if the GHQ and the ISI could sit tight during this year, calibrate its military responses to the TTP's intrusions and ensure that the political leadership takes the blame for any inaction, there would be a different security environment post 2014.

What is the endgame of Pakistani Taliban and its franchisees? Even if the political and military leadership in Pakistan is willing to give FATA and select settled districts of KP in a platter to the Taliban, Mullah Fazlullah is unlikely to be contended with this. What the State is willing to give the TTP is what it already controls. It is unlikely that the Pakistani Taliban would be contended to have its influence only in FATA.

Going by what Fazlullah wanted in the Swat valley and knowing the State's weakness, the Taliban leadership should be well aware of the importance of 2014. Instead or along with accepting its own sphere of influence in the tribal belt, the TTP leadership would use the negotiations as a strategy, build its own empire, create confusion within the political leadership and ingress into the rest of Pakistan. Also in the process, it would allow its franchisees in Quetta, South Punjab and Karachi to expand their presence.

Perhaps, the TTP is also waiting for the 2014 deadline following which the Afghan Taliban have an opportunity in Kabul, and the Pakistani Taliban their own "strategic depth" across the Durand Line.

Finally, the endgame of civil society. Though the liberal civil society is opposed to negotiations with the Taliban, its voice is small and weak, perhaps limited to English newspapers and TV channels. The larger debate is being shaped by the mullahs, maulanas and their supporters along with a few political leaders such as Imran Khan (referred as Taliban Khan now). If the moderate civil society has to impose its own endgame in terms of completely negating the Taliban and its influence, it would need the support of the political leadership and the military.

It is unfortunate that the only section that does not want to provide any space for the Taliban in Pakistan is also the weakest. And there lies the strength of the Taliban and its franchisees.

The writer is the Director, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS), New Delhi.

The commentary was published in The Tribune on 29 March, 2014.





Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies

B 7/3 Lower Ground Floor, Safdarjung Enclave, New Delhi 110029, INDIA.

Tel: 91-11-4100 1900, 4165 2556, 4165 2557, 4165 2558, 4165 2559

E-mail: officemail@ipcs.org

Photo credit: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/567983/doha-diplomacy>