



### PAKISTAN – TTP PEACE TALKS: A COMPLEX CALCULUS

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After months of hostilities between the government of Pakistan and Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), the relationship between the two sides came to a thaw in May 2022 when both parties agreed to talk. Prior to this, the TTP, since the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, went on a spree targeting Pakistani security forces.<sup>1</sup> On April 16, 2022, Pakistan carried out aerial strikes inside Afghanistan at suspected hideouts of the TTP, which eventually ended in civilian casualties.<sup>2</sup> The TTP then agreed to a ceasefire, which now has been extended indefinitely, in order to find a middle ground to bring two-decade-long tribal militancy in the border region to an end. The two sides met in Kabul, where the Islamic

**TTP however is staunch on their two major demands – substantial reduction of Pakistan’s military from the country’s former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and reversal of the FATA merge; a constitutional amendment where tribal areas of Pakistan were merged into the mainland territory in 2018.**

Emirate of Afghanistan (IEA) mediated the process of negotiations. This is also the first time that the Afghan Taliban publicly acknowledged their role as mediators. Amidst the ongoing process, the focus has shifted to the swinging relationship between the Afghan Taliban and their Pakistani counterpart. Recent happenings have been signalling both, the ideological link and the pragmatic symbiosis between the two Talibans. The talks have remained in secrecy for long where Islamabad has not clearly stated the terms that it wants the TTP to obey. From Pakistan’s side, the talks are led by Gen Faiz Hamid, the former chief of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), who has offered a safe passage to TTP from their hiding in Afghanistan to Pakistan in exchange for a long-term cease-fire.<sup>3</sup> TTP however is staunch on their two major demands – substantial reduction of Pakistan’s

military from the country's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and reversal of the FATA merge; a constitutional amendment where tribal areas of Pakistan were merged into the mainland territory in 2018.<sup>4</sup>

### **TTP's relationship with the Afghan Taliban:**

Though the goals and tactics of both the Taliban groups differ, they always had binding links. Both came into existence to fight against the ruling regime of their host country. The TTP is different from the Afghan Taliban as they take inspiration from their struggles and victories. There have been earlier instances of negotiations between TTP and the government of Pakistan, but those were mediated by influential clerical figures in Pakistan, like Maulana Fazlur Rehman. The Afghan Taliban have previously expressed their discontent over the use of extreme violence by the TTP, but they have never publicly condemned the organization. Since the Islamic Emirates have taken centre stage now, many reasons are being floated for their increased role in the talks, the major being the Taliban's reliance on Pakistan. Though the Taliban is now projected as a group that is a non-proxy of Pakistan and capable of independent decision-making, the years of dependence on the structure created by Pakistan do not allow the Taliban an easy way out. Amidst deepening economic and humanitarian crises, Pakistan has been mounting pressure on the Afghan Taliban to push the TTP towards negotiations.<sup>5</sup> Pakistani aerial strikes<sup>6</sup> targeting TTP hideouts in Afghan territory did signal Pakistan's resolve and might have coerced the Taliban into action.

But the Taliban's ties with TTP do not seem to be disturbed, let alone reversed. Sirajuddin Haqqani, Interior Minister of Afghanistan, clearly stated after the 57-member Jirga at Kabul's Intercontinental Hotel that ended on June 3, 2022, which was attended by TTP representatives, that the Afghan Taliban would never abandon TTP because they had participated valiantly in their jihad against the United States.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, he reiterated the importance of concessions that government of Pakistan and the TTP needed to give each other.<sup>8</sup> Haqqani's statement gives an insight into their earlier relationship with the Pakistani establishment and their desire to maintain that status quo as it serves the interests of both sides. The Kandahari leaders of the Taliban, including Defence Minister Mullah Yaqoob, want to shield their regime from absolute Pakistani influence. Hence, their support for TTP is understood due to two major factors – TTP's own contribution to Afghan Jihad; and TTP's politics, which is anti-Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> ISIS-K is another threat that the IEA wants to avoid. ISIS-K's leadership is filled with disgruntled ex-TTP members, and any sidelining of TTP by the Afghan Taliban would result in more recruitment of TTP mujahids into the Islamic State's fold.

Apart from this, both the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban enjoy close ethnic ties along with inter-personal and wartime bonds.<sup>10</sup> Al-Qaeda is another binding factor as it exported suicide bombing techniques to both, TTP and the Haqqanis from the Afghan

side. It is thus clear that the Afghan Taliban see TTP not just from an ideological prism but also from a tactical angle.

### **TTP's internal calculus:**

Before the appointment of the current chief of TTP, Noor Wali Mehsud, the group went through schisms during the leadership of Mullah Fazlullah, the only non-Mehsud to lead the organization. Noor Wali reconfigured the group and bridged internal divisions for a comeback. He wanted to leverage the maximum appeal for all potential recruits by finetuning its brand image. He projected TTP as violent enough to not sideline the hardliners and moderate enough to attract youth from Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, Hizbul Tahrir, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Jamaat-e-Ulema-e-Islam.<sup>11</sup> Wali's efforts to reorient TTP tasted success as Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, Hizbul Ahrar, Amjad Farooqi group (a faction of Lashkar-e-Jhangvi), Lal Masjid's Ghazi army, Punjabi Taliban came under its fold.<sup>12</sup> However, with the ongoing round of negotiations, there are reasons for TTP to be worried about the political repercussions. The talks, if successful, will boost the morale of TTP and raise its political stature, but they are aware of the history of previous deals with the Pakistani military that ended in embarrassing failures.

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On Pakistan's front too, there is an unease below the surface.<sup>13</sup> Gen Faiz Hamid, who is leading the talks from Pakistan's side, has the support from the Army Chief General Bajwa, but it is unclear to what extent the current ISI Chief, Nadeem Anjum, will get behind the terms that Hamid could settle for.<sup>14</sup> Also, it would be interesting to see how Pakistani Parliamentary politics would shape the next round of talks in case the Pakistani military asks for a constitutional change to foster a settlement.<sup>15</sup> Since constitutional approval would be required to make the deal effective, the Parliament is likely to give its assent to the military demands. But the success of the deal depends upon the position of TTP at the negotiating table. The Afghan Taliban, the mediators of the talks, have made it clear that they are not going to abandon TTP, and the Afghan border tribal belts will continue to serve as a refuge for their fighters. As part of peace negotiations, many TTP prisoners have already been released. If they are allowed to keep arms and ammunition, the fault lines, as seen in the previous deals, would continue to exist. Hence, TTP, operating from a position of strength, would have lesser incentives to abide by the deal.

### **Prospects of a deal:**

It would be wise to look at the history of talks between the government of Pakistan and militants in Waziristan. The Shakai Agreement of 2004 was the first peace deal between the military and militants when the military realized that their force was not prepared

for the warfare that militants exhibited. According to the deal, 160 prisoners were released, which further strengthened the militants.<sup>16</sup> The deal also meant that FATA militants had to cut ties with Al-Qaeda, but differences arose regarding the clause ‘Registration of foreign militants.’<sup>17</sup> It was clear that they had no plans to abide by the deal. In 2005, the Sararogha Agreement was signed between the government of Pakistan and Baitullah Mehsud (who later went on to become the first leader of the TTP). Baitullah undertook to not harbour any foreign fighters in the area and the government would compensate for the homes razed during military operations. But there was no clause that covered cross-border infiltration. With the rising stature of Baitullah, clashes increased between the military and militants and hence the deal served no purpose.<sup>18</sup> In 2008, the government extended an offer of peace talks in Swat in the hope to resolve their disagreements through negotiations. Within days of inking a peace deal, the militants refused to surrender arms and started demanding the full withdrawal of troops from the valley. Nizam-e-Adl regulations were retrospectively implemented in 2009, establishing Sharia in the Malakand division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). This is the only example of a relatively successful peace deal signed between the KP government and militants, but the fate of these regulations hangs in uncertainty since the matter is sub judice in court<sup>19</sup>. Hence, it is rational to see the ongoing peace talks with scepticism. The deal, even if it is finalized, will not render TTP weak. On the contrary, TTP might emerge as a strong political actor that would enjoy regional autonomy via a settlement plan. If talks do not make a headway, Pakistan may pressurize TTP with more cross-border strikes, along with increased aerial surveillance in Waziristan.<sup>20</sup> Since there are different factions within TTP just like their Afghan counterparts, there will always be the possibility of one faction refusing to accept the terms of the agreement, leading to a sustained stalemate, which in this case suggests sustained violence. In a recent interview with the TTP chief Noor Wali Mehsud, he underscored the fact that they won’t back down from the FATA merger reversal demand.<sup>21</sup> He also highlighted that though some of the prisoners have been released, no major breakthrough has been achieved. There would be no dissolution of the TTP even if talks succeed.<sup>22</sup> Regarding the role of the IEA, he clarified that it is not just a facilitator of talks but a mediator, thus focusing on the centrality of the Emirate in the entire process.

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## Implication for India:

With the picture of the peace talks still not clear, India will have to keep a careful eye on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border belts. With a truce established on the western front, the jihadists might be lured to fight on the eastern border, targeting India. The Eastern provinces of Afghanistan, especially Nangarhar and Kunar have been a safe haven for not just TTP, but also the Kashmir-focused groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM).<sup>23</sup> The ongoing peace talks would be a check on the resolve of the Afghan Taliban, who have been reiterating that their soil will not be used by foreign militants to perpetrate attacks on other countries. With the Afghan Taliban now having established their regime, they are looking to move beyond Pakistan as a partner and diversify their foreign policy. On June 2, a technical team from India, led by Joint Secretary JP Singh, landed in Afghanistan to discuss core issues relating to India-Afghan relations and humanitarian assistance to be provided to the people of Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> This signals India's resolve toward maintaining ties with the current government in Afghanistan, keeping in mind India's national interest and security. On the recent visit of the Indian team, Taliban ministers gave assurance to the Indian representative that they would not allow Pakistan-based groups like JeM and LeT to target India from their soil.<sup>25</sup> India, however, should tread a cautious path and not take any statement at its face value, considering the history of attacks at Indian consular offices in Afghanistan. Also, there is a need to enhance border surveillance, both at the Line of Control (LoC) and the International Border, to thwart any attempt of infiltration to the Indian side.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “On 14 April 2022, terrorists ambushed a military convoy near Pak-Afghan border in general area Isham, North Waziristan district”, Inter Services Public Relations, Government of Pakistan, <https://ispr.gov.pk/press-release-detail.php?id=6387>. Accessed on June 28, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> “Over 40 Civilians including children killed in Pakistan airstrikes in Afghanistan”, *Hindustan Times*, April 17, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/over-40-civilians-including-children-killed-in-pak-airstrikes-in-afghanistan-101650169571084.html>. Accessed on June 25, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> “Islamabad, TTP agree on indefinite ceasefire”, *Dawn*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692383/islamabad-ttp-agree-on-indefinite-ceasefire>. Accessed on June 26, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Asfandyar Mir, “Five Things to Watch in the Islamabad-Pakistani Taliban Talks”, United States Institute of Peace, June 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/06/five-things-watch-islamabad-pakistani-taliban-talks>. Accessed on June 23, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> “I lost Everything: Pakistani Airstrikes Escalate Conflict on the Afghan Border”, *The New York Times*, June 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/30/world/asia/pakistan-airstrikes-afghanistan-taliban.html>. Accessed on June 20, 2022. .

<sup>7</sup> “No major breakthrough yet as Jirga returns from Kabul”, *Dawn*, June 4, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1693014/no-major-breakthrough-yet-as-jirga-returns-from-kabul>. Accessed on June 23, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Asfandyar Mir, n.5.

<sup>10</sup> Asfandyar Mir, “Pakistan’s Twin Taliban Problem”, *United States Institute of Peace*, May 2022, <https://www.usip.org/publications/2022/05/pakistans-twin-taliban-problem>. Accessed on June 26, 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Naveed Hussain, “TTP Talks: Lasting Peace May Still Be A Longshot”, *T-Magazine*, June 12, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2361085/ttp-talks-lasting-peace-may-still-be-a-longshot>. Accessed on June 20, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Talking to TTP”, *Dawn*, May 31, 2022, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1692402>. Accessed on June 21, 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Asfandyar Mir, n.5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Hassan Abbas, *The Taliban Revival: Violence and Extremism on the Pakistan-Afghanistan Frontier* (London: Yale University Press, 2014), p.109.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Daud Khattak, “Reviewing Pakistan’s Peace Deals with the Taliban”, *Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point*, September 2012, vol. 5, no.9, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/reviewing-pakistans-peace-deals-with-the-taliban/>. Accessed on June 27, 2022.

<sup>19</sup> “View from the courtroom: Fate of Nizam-e-Adl regulations in ex PATA hangs in balance”, *Dawn*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1517402>. Accessed on June 29, 2022.

<sup>20</sup> “Pakistani Tribal Leaders Push Back Against Increased Military Drone Use Along Afghan Border”, *Gandhara*, June 11, 2021, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-drones-tribal-leaders-afghanistan-border-privacy/31303036.html>. Accessed on June 21, 2022.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.23

<sup>23</sup> “Thousands of Pakistan nationals from Let & JeM fighting alongside Taliban in Afghanistan: UN”, *The Economic Times*, June 4, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/thousands-of-pak-nationals-from-let-jem-fighting-alongside-taliban-in-afghanistan-un/articleshow/76189061.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on July 3, 2022.

<sup>24</sup> “First official visit since Taliban takeover: Indian Diplomats meets minister in Kabul”, *The Indian Express*, June 3, 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/taliban-afghanistan-indian-team-in-kabul-7948678/>. Accessed on June 27, 2022.

<sup>25</sup> “Taliban to act against Pak LeT/JeM terrorists in Afghanistan on specific intel”, *Hindustan Times*, June 10, 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/taliban-to-act-against-pak-let-jem-terrorists-in-afghanistan-on-specific-indian-101654831818094.html>. Accessed on June 28, 2022.



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