

Peace Talks with Taliban: Expectations, Realities and Way Forward

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Abstract

The prodigious campaign of Taliban has emerged as the gravest threat to political stability, social harmony, and economic growth of Pakistan while weakening the contemporary political, social and economic structure of the country. In this way, the combination of religious orthodox and Islamic militancy has emerged as one of the potential challenges for Islamabad. The growing Islamic vigilance in the form of Taliban has forced the Nawaz administration of Pakistan to overcome the threatening Taliban campaign which has reached into its zenith, and caused social, political, religious and sectarian intolerance in the country. Therefore, the leading decision makers of Islamabad decided to arrange a peace talk with Taliban. The optimistic behaviour of Nawaz government prefers to adopt an irrational policy instead of calculating the hard-core realities associated to the Taliban, which is an ideological phenomenon rather than a force of clerically devoted combatants. In order to accelerate a dialogue based peace process with Taliban, it is essential to comprehend the combination of cleric and political creeds inherited in Talibanization. Abandoned fighting force of Taliban is seeking adequate and persistently dispassionate approach rather than a counterfeit talk policy. Therefore, the central theme of the research tries to define the level of incompatibility between estimated expectations and ground realities while forecasting the applicable and implementable way forward.

Key Words: Taliban, Peace Talk, Extremism, Economic Decline, Political Instability, Degrading Security, Drones Attacks.

Introduction

The regional dynamics of South Asia are in transition due to the expected withdrawal of NATO from Afghanistan. The extrication of US forces along with NATO will have serious implication on the regional security of South Asia. Therefore, the fluctuating regional crescendos inflected the idea of peace talk with Taliban in Pakistan's strategic thinking, and the leading decision makers from Islamabad preferred the policy of negotiations with Taliban. The combination of internal struggle and external stress forces the Nawaz government to settle Taliban issue, which will ultimately fade the threats of terrorism,

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extremism and sectarianism from Pakistan. Unfortunately, the peace talks with Taliban for the establishment of peaceful environment in the country has become a serious question for the government of Pakistan, especially after the Hakimullah Mehsud's killing as a result of drone strike. The chances of success in the peace talks are too low after the carnage of Taliban's leadership. The drone raid on Taliban's leaders has hampered the efforts of talks. The major political breakthrough from the peace talk has lost its scope as the result of continued drone attacks. In this way, the impact of ongoing drone strikes once again has become an answered question for Islamabad.

In the light of contemporary security situation, it is hard to advocate the idea of Government – Taliban Talks, even it is difficult to define the level of success in peace talks because the optimistic values inherited in government behavior is oblivious to the ground realities. The estimated level of expectation is great and extraordinary, because the policy of peace talks is the only viable option for the government. Unlike its theoretical foundations, the notion of peace talks has evolved as an official policy without addressing the root causes and the responsible factor of Taliban's campaign in the country.

Gradually, the peace talk with Taliban is becoming a great challenge instead of a great opportunity because the appraised level of expectations and the hardcore ground realities have become two incompatible forces for the Islamabad. No doubt, the death of Taliban's leader has pushed the Nawaz government into critical situations, but still the implementation of a rational strategy can cure the deteriorating security situation in Pakistan. In order to achieve the desirable outcomes from peace talks with Taliban, the government needs to comprehend few ground realities coupled with root causes of the Talibanization. The achievement of peace talks is utterly dependent on the government policy. In the presence of existing, an indistinct, strategy for peace talks, the optimistic values, and lack of rationality, inherited in government behavior are the potential challenging variables.

Therefore, it is essential for the advocates of peace talks to wisely operationalize the plan for peace dialogues. In this way, the primary aim of this work is to astutely recognize essence of peace talks between government and Taliban while identifying the core concerns of the peace talks. The central theme of this work tries to present the main driving forces behind the initiative of Pakistan's government to invite the Taliban for talks. Moreover, the study tries to provide an account of hardcore realities, expected results and the indisputable challenges in the light of ongoing process of Government – Taliban dialogues.

Estimated Expectations

In the existing precarious situation, the government decided to arrange a talk to Taliban which will inaugurate a new age of political stability, economic prosperity and foolproof security in Pakistan. The Nawaz regime decided to arrange dialogues with Taliban as a quick measure for the betterment of worsening political, economic and social condition of Pakistan. Hence, the chief representatives of present government finalized a dialogue policy for the attainment of subsequent goals.

Political Stability

The prominent politicians of Nawaz administration prefer to implement a strategy of talks with Taliban in order to secure the political future of the country. The plan of peace talks primarily represented the wishful imagination of the government. The invitation to Taliban for dialogues visualized by the government as an opportunity which will provide sufficient chances to the Nawaz regime to overcome the growing terrorist threats, and to eradicate the overwhelming wave of militancy in the country, because the combination of sectarian and religious violence has ranked Pakistan second, after Iraq, in the list of Global Terrorism Index (GTI) (amir, 2013). In this way, talking to Taliban will bring peace in the country, which will ultimately be an opportunity for the government for the cultivation of its reputation in the country. As Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stated “We formally announced our intentions, as a consensus was reached at the All Parties Conference but there have been setbacks due to the continuing terrorism incidents. We want to speed up this (peace) process” (Shah, 2013).

Such behaviour of government showed its readiness for the development of the environment of safety and security for its citizens. The protection of the nation will not only support the Nawaz government’s status in the country but it will also minimize the growing levels of dissatisfaction and frustration in the society. So, the growing antipathy to government will be prudently countered by the Nawaz regime through settling the Taliban issue. In the present situation, the increasing number of suicide attacks, firing incidents and threats to the political authorities started diminishing the reputation and performance of the government (Cohen, 2011). In addition, the Talibanization has emerged as a challenging force for the government. The hardliner ideologues of Taliban are the fundamental cause of political instability in Pakistan by denying the current legal system of the state.

In response to such contrast ideology against the state system, Islamabad preferred to chalk out an aspiring plan for negotiations and dialogues with Taliban. The advocates of the talks heavily rely on their political efforts which can successfully improve the diminishing law and order situation in the country. Moreover, the idea of talks will change the unbending stance of Taliban – the enforcement of their own austere version of Sharia, according to Nawaz government. So, the enactment plan for peace talk is designed to reform the political structure of Pakistan, which is trying to cure the intricate topic of Taliban. In this regard, the sanguine approach of Nawaz administration is primarily a tentative initiative for the political settlement with Taliban, which will secure the political future of ruling party, PML-N. Besides the political stability, the attempt of a national-level reconciliation policy through talks with Taliban is a shift in government behaviour which will support the declining economy of the country, and will be helpful in bringing the prosperity in the society.

Economic Progress

To fix the declining economy due to deteriorating security situation is one of the foremost priorities of the government. Prime Minister along with his likeminded team showed the commitment for the maintaining of peace and stability in the country which will ultimately

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boost the worsening economic situation. The settlement of Taliban problem will ultimately create an economic environment in the country. So, the promotion of economic climate will urge the international investors to enthusiastically participate in Islamabad's economy.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif while introducing his vision for the peace talks stated;

“Pakistan needs to end violence, extremism and feuds. Several Muslim and non-Muslim countries of the world want to invest in Pakistan but we must have a safe and secure environment in the country. Overseas Pakistanis are very keen to invest in Pakistan too, so are many Islamic countries and investors from elsewhere. Pakistan's progress is linked with the improvement of law and order” (Cohen, 2011).

By planning the scheme for peace dialogues, the government sought to bring more business, investment, trade, commerce in the country by refurbishing economic cooperation with international community. The economically prosperous Pakistan will be ready to take advantage from international markets while energetically participating in global economic activities. According to the Economic Survey of Pakistan, the Talibanization in the South Asia adversely effected security and economic conditions of Islamabad (Cohen, 2011). It reduced the country's main export, prevented the opportunities for foreign investors and caused an unthinkable economic drop. Additionally, the degrading security situation hampered the privatization programmes and slowed down the economic activities of

Islamabad (War on Terror Cost Pakistan \$67.9 Billion, 2013).

The militancy within the country further abridged the demands of imports, tax collection and increased the defence spending of Pakistan (War on Terror Cost Pakistan \$67.9 Billion, 2013). Moreover, the tourism industry of Pakistan has badly affected by the destruction of civilian and military infrastructure. The Economic Survey of Pakistan stated in a report “Pakistan has never witnessed such a devastating social and economic upheaval in its industry, even after dismemberment of the country by a direct war” (War on Terror Cost Pakistan \$67.9 Billion, 2013). In order to boost the diminishing economic situation in the country, the government decided to arrange a talk with Taliban. It is widely believed in the government circles that the idea of talk will stabilize the deteriorating security situation parallel to the economic stability and political strength.

Security Situation

The decision to participate actively in the US-led war on terror has been caused serious damages to Pakistan. The degrading security situation has not only sabotaged the national image of Islamabad, but it also has resulted in serious damages of the state structure. In 2011, according to the survey of GTI, Pakistan is the most effected state of terrorism (amir, 2013). Islamabad has experienced a massive increase in the number of terrorist attacks and civilian fatalities. The terrorist raids on education institutions, government infrastructure, clerical centers, and social gathering has pushed the whole nation into serious circumstance in which the only viable option to arrange dialogues with Taliban.

Logically, it is the primary duty of the state to protect its citizen while maintaining the peace and stability in the society. Since the tragic incident of 9/11, the threats of mass killings, suicide bombing and hostage situations have encircled Islamabad. The bomb blasts and firing in the public gathering have become the incidents of daily occurrence (Markey, 2013). An environment of panic and terror has overshadowed the society. A survey of last decade has presented a horrifying picture of security situation of Pakistan in which the country has faced massive level of fatalities in terrorist violence, which has tarnished the role of prime law enforcement agencies. The calculations of survey showed 17954 civilian, 5428 security forces personals and 26732 terrorists/ insurgents have been killed in Pakistan (Fatalities in Terrorist Violence in Pakistan 2003-2013, 2013). Another report highlighted the astonishing death rate in its analysis. The report calculated the loss of 49,000 lives during the period between 2001 and 2008 (Raja, 2013). Hence, for the controlling of devastating effects of anti-state militancy and its growing role in the society, the government authorities initiated their efforts of peace talks with the hope of restoration of law and order situation in Pakistan. As the Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar Ali Khan mentioned in his statement during a press conference in Quetta “The government would take all stakeholders into confidence in face of terrorism. Our enemy is unseen. It is war of our survival” (War On Terror was Imposed on Pakistan: Nisar, 2013).

Thus, an apparently applicable policy for peace talk lacks its theoretical foundations while ignoring the hardcore ground facts. No doubt, the decision of joining the US – oriented war on terror has caused a politically instable, economically weakened and socially an insecure Pakistan, but still the chances of restoration of peace and stability are tangible and concrete for the government. Therefore, the government of Pakistan has decided to shift its policy from combating to Taliban to talking to Taliban, without calculating the various realities which can potentially affect the efforts of Nawaz government.

Hardcore Realities

There are several factors which actually hamper the wishful thinking and aspirant intentions of the government regarding the peace dialogues with Taliban. The present plan for peace talks formulated by the prominent political circles of Nawaz government cannot be instigated without taking into account the connotation of following factors. The formulation of a nontraditional approach can counter the combination of religious militancy and non-state actor. Otherwise, the troubled internal security situation will become nightmare for the government.

Drone Attacks

The swelling nature of drone strike is demanding a serious and proactive response from Pakistan government. The prevention of drone strike has become a fundamental requirement for the peace dialogues. In the light of ongoing drone attacks, it is hard to advocate the idea of major breakthrough from the Government – Taliban Talks. The overwhelming assaults of drones have not only resulted in high civilian casualties, but such

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strikes have posed serious question on the sovereign values of the country. Moreover, the drone violence has provided sufficient opportunities to the Pakistan's rivals to criticize Islamabad's sovereignty. As a result of a recent drone raids, the death of Taliban's leader Mehsud and its replacement with a new hardcore leader has undisputedly cleared that the Taliban is an ideology rather than a force. Therefore, the appropriate policies of Islamabad can provide an applicable and relevant solution of Taliban issue instead of addition in drone strike.

Ideological Basis

The rapidly expanding and covertly working Taliban's ideology has reached into its zenith. Historically, the advancement of Taliban campaign was a state sponsored idea at the end of Cold War. In order to dismantle the communist forces of Soviet Union, the geopolitical pundits of US promoted the Taliban campaign by providing economic and strategic assistance to Taliban (Rashid, 2002). Consequently, the cleric values attached to Taliban's ideology produced a force of divine command which started its operations under a stateless faith. In this way, the religiously motivated combatants gradually became a challenging force to the states authorities of international system. In the contemporary scenarios, the ideology of Taliban is the actual and serious issue, then its fighters. The proliferation of Taliban's ideology is the genuine issue which needs to be addressed by the government of Pakistan. So, before architecting any decisive move for peace talks, the government should root out the Taliban's economic and strategic links besides their ideological connection (Crews & Tarzi, 2008).

Covert Supplies

The clandestine economic and artillery sources of Taliban are the major issue for the government. The covert supplies of money and weapons needed to be addressed by the government before taking any decision for the peace talks, because an effective policy for the prevention of Taliban's supplies would be more effective than arranging the dialogues. Apart from all problems, the willingness from both sides is equally significant with the aforesaid factors. Unlike Nawaz government, the frontrunners of Taliban are deliberately denying the table talks after the death of their leader Hakimullah Mehsud. The death of Mehsud not only hampered the government's efforts, but it also underestimated the role of advocates of talks. Moreover, the application of a cost – benefit analysis of the previous efforts for the peace talks with Taliban is also necessary for the government. In this way, the leading policymakers of Pakistan government can identify the responsible factors behind the failure of previous efforts to Taliban Talks.

Recruiting and Trainings

The religious seminaries or the ideological recruiting centers of Taliban should be the real point of worry for the government. The stigma attached to Islamic pedagogy under the Madrasa education system is difficult to ignore in the age of war on terror. In the post 9/11 world, the combination of religious extremism and fundamentalism, promoted by the religious seminaries of Pakistan, has hindered the ideological foundations of Pakistan, and pushed the society into serious crisis. It is essential for Islamabad to comprehend theoretically the fundamental role of religious education and its significance in the contemporary global world.

In short, the peace talk to Taliban has become a one of the major challenges to the government of Pakistan. The penetrated ideology of Taliban in the society is a fundamental obstacle for the peace talk. The widespread sympathizers of the Taliban will be the main supporters of Taliban ideology in case of any critical situation developed by the government. Hence, the desired outcomes are hard to even visualize in the presence of above mentioned hurdles, which could potentially impend the government's move for the settlement of Taliban issue. The appropriate understanding of aforesaid arguments has become the prerequisites for the peace talks with Taliban. Without addressing the prerequisite core issues, the chances of success of peace talk are impossible to imagine.

Way Forward

Government needs to adopt a vibrant policy for talks because the implementation of a systematical and an unambiguous strategy can be more effective. No doubt, the lack of usage of historical lessons learned from previous efforts for the peace talks with Taliban is essential for formulating an appropriate strategy according to the demands of time, but still the consideration of succeeding factors can be helpful in acquiring the desired objectives.

1. In order to restore the waning situation of peace and stability in the society, the government should overhaul the national security strategy of Pakistan. An updated national security strategy should be according to the contemporary security demands of the country. While preparing a national security mechanism of Islamabad, the leading decision makers should determine the growing level of anti-state militancy and its challenging role in the society.
2. The application of a logically theoretical, systematically structured and clear – minded policy can be helpful in achieving the expected results. The formulation of such policy demands the government authorities to categorize the dynamics of various factors involved in Taliban's issue before chalking out the peace plan. Therefore, the role and significance of different variables in Taliban issue should be considered by the advocates of peace talks in the government.
3. The lessons learned from the previous efforts for the peace talks with Taliban needs to be considered before concluding any policy, because the idea of talking to Taliban is easy to imagine but a challenging and crucial task at practical level. So, the logical evaluation of the former attempts of peace dialogues should be more effective and helpful for the government.

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4. The enactment of a peace plan for the prevention of high level of mistrust should be prevented in the idea of talk with Taliban. The elimination of the prevalent trust deficit environment due to the continued drone raids is essential for the Nawaz government before designing the peace plan.
5. On the basis of ideology, repeatedly denying the essence of rule of law in the country by Taliban required the serious attentions of the government. The Prime Minister has included the talks with Taliban in his priorities without focusing the nature of claim of the Taliban. The core concerns of the Taliban should be addressed by government through formulating the adequate measures.

Conclusion

Therefore, in contemporary scenario, it is hard to forecast the scope of peace talks between Taliban and Nawaz government because the chances of success are too low and slim in the presence of aforementioned realities which are incompatible with the expected results. Hence, a compromising situation is difficult to imagine between two parties due to the inflexible standing of the Taliban and an abstruse planning of the government. Logically, the idea of talks with Taliban is a political agenda because the strategy, government has designed, is purely ambiguous and unclear. So, the idea of talks lacks a systematic approach, and shows mismanaged characteristics. The formulation of an adequate antidote policy can cure the dying chances of success in the peace talks.

Apart from policy, the government needs to develop an inclusive plan for dealing with the Taliban movement rather than dealing with force. The Taliban campaign has made their ideology a formidable fighting force in the country. The rapidly emerging and covertly functioning Taliban dogma should be the actual concern of the government. In order to catalyse the peace process with Taliban in the presence of continuing combating operation, the idea of talk is hard to materialise. The parallel contending and negotiating compromising policies of contrast values are essentials to consider for the attainment of concrete results. A non – military and non-traditional solution can support the government in managing the process of peace talks.

Additionally, the present government of Pakistan is not the first to try to settle the issue of Taliban. There have been number of attempts of talks to Taliban have been taken place. The evaluation of such attempts of settlement is necessary for the government finalizing any decisive move toward Taliban. The prospects of satisfactory settlement are heavily relying on the government's motivation and the perception of the leading decision makers develop from the rapidly growing circumstances in the country. Therefore, the notion of objecting the talks with Taliban needs a comprehensive and applicable policy which should be more practical than theoretical. In this way, a policy according to the demands of the critical circumstance could help government to overcome the revisionist foundations of Taliban ideology. Otherwise, the question of legitimacy of sociocultural, political and economic order will be challenging for the government.

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