[**Walking the talk**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1650223/walking-the-talk)

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The writer is a journalist.

THE government is [ready to talk](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649520) once again, says the prime minister though no one knows if the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is willing to walk the talk. But always keen to follow the newest fad in politics, the changes in Afghanistan have inspired us to settle old enmities. Hence, once the Afghan Taliban suggested the notion of resolving issues through *baat cheet*, the president and foreign minister followed suit. Now the prime minister has confirmed the ‘policy shift’ by saying the state was talking to some of the militants without explaining why this change was needed and why now.

Talks in themselves are not impossible, politically — there are examples of states which have decided to talk to militant groups once tarred as ‘terrorist’ though the success of such negotiations has been patchy at best. And in many cases, the reaction to these decisions is not much different from the outrage being witnessed at present.

The anger or sense of betrayal that a government would talk to those who have caused bloodshed among the people is understandable. And any government which takes such tough decisions has to pay the political price for them. But this aside, at the moment, the more important question is ‘why’ and ‘why now’.

Take the example of the earlier talks when militancy emerged in the mid-2000s and the state was struggling to deal with it. There was little clarity at that time about the nature and magnitude of the problem; the military was not equipped to deal with the challenge and hence it tried — in the face of much understandable criticism — to neutralise the threat through talks. If the military tried it in Fata with the likes of Nek Mohammad, the civilian leadership gave it a go in Swat and Malakand. But each opportunity was used by the militants to simply up the ante till the state reached the conclusion that a heavy (military) hand was the answer. And the result was the military operations, putting an end to the much-maligned notion of talks and treaties.

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This is not to say that negotiations cannot run parallel to the military option; they can but their timing and aim should be clear to the policymakers.

**Read:** [*Where has the govt gone wrong in its plan to hold talks with the TTP?*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649651/talking-to-the-ttp)

Talks are after all used as a means to weaken groups or exploit the fissures within them, while the military conflict is also continuing. The Pakistani state also used similar strategies; Haji Namdar’s Tanzim Amr bil Maroof wa Nehi Anil Munkir was based in Khyber and though officially banned, it was reported that he escaped the worst of the state’s hostility for some time. Along with Mangal Bagh, also a Khyber-based militant, he formed a local Tehreek-i-Taliban which resisted the Baitullah Mehsud-led TTP for a while. It was said that this ‘local’ Tehreek enjoyed some government support for a time as did Namdar and Bagh.

For example, if there were reasons to opt for negotiations, the best time for it was perhaps after the military operations were nearing an end — after all, as the American experience in Afghanistan has taught us, negotiations are best carried out from a position of strength. But a few years ago, we were busy declaring victory and waxing lyrical about the challenge we confronted and vanquished. And at that time, the notion of talks or negotiation had been banished from our conversations about militancy, especially as the militant attacks grew negligible.

But now suddenly at a time when the terrorist attacks are growing in number, there has been an announcement of talks. The signalling is terrible. It is akin to an admission that the militants are now in a position of strength forcing the state to talk to them. Is this the message the government wants to give?

If so, this is a message worse than the one that the Afghan Taliban are dictating our policies. For how else are we supposed to explain the sequence of events where public pronouncements about talks from the government came after the Afghan Taliban suggested the idea in an interview.

**Read:** [*Why forgiving the TTP sets the wrong precedent*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1650035/appeasing-butchers)

Some of the government officials have tried to argue that these overtures are for those who are willing to talk or ‘lay down arms’ as the prime minister himself has stated in a recent interview.

But considering the state efforts to run deradicalisation centres in Swat for example, which were widely cited as part of the multipronged approach to militancy, surely the policy was always to accept back into society those elements or individuals who were not high up on the militant food chain and were willing to give up the bad ol’ ways. Hence, it is hard to understand what is new about the current pronouncements. Unless of course, they are considering making these open offers to the likes of Ehsanullah Ehsan now.

Indeed, part of the problem with the recent changes in the policy is the lack of clarity more than anything else. What exactly is the government going to offer the militants or the TTP? What are the sort of parameters within which the talks can take place? In other words, are there any demands of the TTP which can be termed legitimate enough to provide some guidelines for talks? Imposition of Sharia? Or is it the release of hardcore militants? Both these issues have been highlighted in stories but with little detail. There are no clear answers, it seems.

And at the risk of repetition, if there is no change in what the militants want, what is pushing the government to change its policy from one of viewing militancy as a challenge which required a military solution as well as a more broad-based societal approach (which led to NAP) to a policy of negotiation and reconciliation?

The policy in itself can only be debated and understood once the reasons for adopting it or tweaking it are first clarified. But then transparency has never been a strength of our policymaking.

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