[**Will talks work?**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1694737/will-talks-work)

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NEWS from Kabul regarding peace talks facilitated by the Afghan Taliban between the outlawed Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and a state-backed jirga is of ‘positive developments’. The perception that we may be moving towards the restoration of peace has been reinforced by the announcement of an ‘indefinite’ ceasefire by the TTP. The question is whether these talks will bear fruit in the form of a permanent cessation of terror attacks on Pakistani citizens, interests and installations.

Aside from the debate on how this jirga was formed, talks are always significant for implementing the classical paradigm of disarmament, reintegration and remobilisation of armed, non-state fighters. In addition, counter-extremism (CE) and counterterrorism (CT) strategies require a holistic approach based on narrative building, dialogue, blocking of recruitment and financial resources, and kinetic force.

After the Afghan Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021 and formed the ‘Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’, they released several thousand fighters of the TTP and other terror outfits. As a result, against all expectations of the Pakistani government, which had been making every effort to facilitate the ‘friendly’ government in Kabul, attacks on military checkposts, police personnel, activists and polio workers increased in Pakistan in general, and in the different districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in particular.

This happened despite the large-scale fencing of the Durand Line. Some 40 attacks were recorded in the last six months, in which around 80, including security personnel, lost their lives. There was also an increase in extortion.

The history of deals with militants is not a positive one.

The worsening security situation prompted the powers that be to make another attempt at integrating the TTP into mainstream society. The dialogue was to be led by a jirga that consisted of parliamentarians and elders belonging to the newly merged districts. Though the jirga has no legal or constitutional approval and has allegedly been constituted under pressure, it has visited Kabul several times over the past months for confidence-building measures. Formal talks started during its most recent visit to Kabul.

It should be kept in mind the history of talks with religious extremist armed private militias is as old as terrorism. The last major attempt was made in 2014. Several agreements — like Shakai, Sararogha, Miranshah, Swat and Khyber — come to mind. The TTP emerged more potent after each, and after each deal broke, military operations were carried out. The National Action Plan was agreed to after the APS attack; later, Zarb-i-Azb and Raddul Fasaad were launched.

Some agreements resulted in the formation of armed ‘aman (peace) committees’, which exacerbated the situation as this was perceived as the formal handing over of state authority, including law and order, to private militias. Several hundred TTP ‘commanders’ and foot soldiers even surrendered after receiving handsome incentives, but many of them could not be integrated into mainstream society.

Major problems seem to remain in the way of the success of the ongoing talks. As parliament has not yet been taken into confidence, the issue of who will take responsibility on behalf of the state for any agreement with the TTP as a result of this dialogue will pose a significant challenge. Secondly, the issue of who the guarantor of the talks will be might always hang in the balance. Who will compel the TTP to act upon its agreement, as it has usually been tempted to violate terms on the basis of its own interpretation of what the agreement is? How will splinter groups be dealt with, which typically emerge after any such deal?

Some of the reported conditions laid down by the TTP would also need constitutional amendments, for which the entire process of negotiating with the TTP will first need to be brought to parliament. One of the conditions said to have been put forward is the reversal of the merger of ex-Fata. The merger was concluded after the passage of the 25th Amendment. If true, this condition will be perceived as handing over the newly merged districts to the TTP, which may be seen as a recipe for regional disaster, especially after the installation of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul.

Another reported conditionality concerns blanket amnesty to TTP commanders, which will create unrest, especially among the heirs of victims of attacks owned by the TTP. Also, how can the Nizam-i-Adl Regulation be implemented in the presence of the 25th Amendment?

The narrative of CE and CT is yet to permeate the sociocultural veins of Pakistan fully. From the little work on the issue by the inactive National Counter Terrorism Authority to Paigham-i-Pakistan, and till the National Security Policy of 2022 — the CT and CE narrative has yet to be fully interwoven into textbooks, media, laws and policies; the same way extremism was once woven into these structures.

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