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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## Islamabad-Pakistan Taliban Peace Talks: Shifting Focus to Afghanistan

By Halimullah Kousary

### **Synopsis**

*Islamabad has been in peace talks with Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) over last couple of months while the Afghan peace process remains derailed for years. A campaign is underway for a concerted insurgency in Afghanistan.*

### **Commentary**

THE HOLDING of a largely peaceful presidential election in Afghanistan on 5 April 2014 and the taking over of security responsibility by Afghan forces from NATO in 2013, are acclaimed as significant milestones in Afghanistan's security and political progress. However, the Taliban militancy remains a serious challenge for Afghanistan to tackle in seeking to shape the country's long-term stability.

The US-NATO drawdown did not convince the Taliban to forego violence and enter into negotiation with the government. Just last month, they launched a bloody armed campaign targeting election rallies in a bid to disrupt the election and vowed to continue fighting the new government. Meanwhile the same Taliban pushed the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), an umbrella organisation of the anti-Pakistan militant groups, to negotiate peace with Islamabad. This indicates that a joint campaign is underway for waging a concerted insurgency in Afghanistan in the coming years.

### **Islamabad-TTP peace talks**

Links between the Afghan Taliban and their Pakistani counterparts can be traced back to the 1996-2001 period when the former was in power in Kabul. After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the Pakistani group split into two - one continuing fighting in Afghanistan and the other (TTP) targeting Pakistan in reaction to its alliance with the US in the war on terror. TTP was also involved in Afghanistan but its main area of operation remained Pakistan.

Secular forces in Pakistan perceive TTP as irreconcilable, an avatar of the Taliban against Afghanistan, and advocate decisive military measures as the only practical way forward. However, the government and the religio-political parties in Pakistan assume that TTP might come to negotiation - if the government dissociates itself from the US war on terror and remains neutral.

The current Islamabad government believes it has an advantage over previous governments through which it can play the card of disassociation from the war. Muslim League Nawaz, a conservative right-wing party, is leading the government. The party was out of power before war began in 2001 and remained out of power until May 2013 election - the year when the US-NATO drawdown was almost halfway through. The drawdown will be completed later this year and Pakistan will no longer be the frontline transit state for NATO and the U.S in Afghanistan.

The government also started with a strong campaign against the US drone strikes in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which was TTP's one demand for negotiation. The drone strikes already derailed peace talks a number of times in the previous years while this time around the government seems to have urged the US to halt them at least during the peace process. Though it denies it, the US did not conduct drone strikes in FATA over the last couple of months. This unprecedented hiatus factored in bringing Islamabad and TTP to the negotiation table and holding face-to-face meeting for the first time since 2007.

TTP even agreed to negotiation within the parameters of Pakistan's Constitution, making an unanticipated compromise on its declared goal of instituting Islamic Shariah across Pakistan. Such compromise leads to the possible conclusion that Shariah has not really been the reason for TTP militancy in Pakistan, but rather it was the latter's axis with the US against the Afghan Taliban.

### **Afghan peace process hijacked**

Afghanistan for years sought Pakistan's assistance in facilitating peace talks with the Afghan Taliban. However, there have been no practical measures undertaken by Pakistan. What further complicated the peace process has been the assassinations and arrests of some Afghan Taliban leaders who are pro-peace talks. Neutralising these leaders has allowed the Afghan peace process to be hijacked and rendered the belligerent elements of the Afghan Taliban relevant in Afghanistan.

Another complication in the peace process is the Afghan Taliban's willingness to hold talks with the US only, reasoning that the Afghan government has no legitimacy. Raising the question of legitimacy shows the significance of re-establishing an "Islamic Emirate" in Afghanistan in the thinking of the Taliban and its patrons.

The religio-political parties and even certain elements within government in Pakistan have openly predicted the possibility of the return of "the Islamic Emirate" to power in Afghanistan arguing that it was a regime "popular among Afghans". However, the unprecedented voter turnout across Afghanistan on the 5 April presidential election has shown general defiance against the "Islamic Emirate" and the growing image of the Taliban as a proxy force.

### **Concerted insurgency in Afghanistan**

Addressing the menace of Taliban militancy in the broader Afghanistan-Pakistan region requires a holistic approach – military or political, which should involve true cooperation from both Afghanistan and Pakistan. However, the Islamabad-TTP peace talks and the Afghan Taliban's constructive role in this regard indicate that a campaign is underway to address militancy in Pakistan and create a united Afghan-Pakistani Taliban front against the government in Afghanistan.

The peace talks with TTP has also overshadowed Pakistan's claim of "no interference and no favourites" in Afghanistan. It appears mere rhetoric and the peace process carries a worrying prospect of intensity in violence in the coming years. The ongoing ceasefire between Islamabad and TTP has already led to an unprecedented spike in attacks in the Afghan provinces along the Durand Line and the trend could continue through the upcoming fighting season.

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