

Don't negotiate with TTP
by
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Pull Quote: Talking to hardcore killers who understand only the use of force needlessly gifts them political stature.

A parliamentary committee [has authorised](#) the military leadership to hold talks with the newly energized Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, a group that has mercilessly butchered tens of thousands of Pakistani civilians and soldiers. This cowardly and shameful abdication of responsibility suggests a rubberstamp parliament that is good for naught but seeking perks and privileges for its members.

Direct negotiation between the Army and terrorist groups is nothing new but has never produced results. In May 2004 an agreement was signed in Shakai with tribal militant leader Nek Mohammed of South Waziristan. This called for stopping attacks on Pakistani security forces and government property. In return the state would pay compensation and release prisoners. De-weaponization was not mentioned.

The Shakai agreement lasted 50 days. Only days after signing, in a radio interview Nek Muhammad declared that no treaty could stop him from hosting the Chechen jihadists and Al-Qaida then at war against Pakistani forces. Terrorist activities resumed. Nek was killed by a US Predator drone on 18 June 2004, the very first missile attack on Pakistani soil.

Listing the failed agreements of the last 20 years – including one with Swat's Sufi Muhammad – needs too much space. But that of September 2006, signed inside the Taliban stronghold of Miramshah, stands out in my memory. Photos showed army officers hugging those they had fought for 4 years as heavily armed, bearded militants watched grimly.

The-then military governor of NWFP, Lt. Gen. Ali Mohammad Aurakzai, hailed the agreement as “unprecedented in tribal history”. However the Taliban were not asked to surrender their heavy weapons. The sole gain was soldiers being allowed safe passage out. In retrospect the accord strengthened militancy and ensured that 40,000 more lives would be lost in the years ahead.

Today we all know what ultimately weakened terrorism and gave us a longish stretch of quasi peace. Operation Zarb-e-Azb (2014) was a frontal assault against TTP and its jihadist guests. Artillery and air power finally dislodged them from inside captured Waziristani villages. The widespread devastation forced over 90,000 families into becoming refugees. Had force been used earlier the collateral damage would have been far smaller.

Still, success was only partial and so operation Radd-ul-Fasaad (2017) followed. The choice of name was deliberate – *radd* means elimination and *fasaad* suggests internal fights rather than external foes. The delusory bubble within which Pakistanis had lived after 9/11 finally burst. General Hamid Gul and his protégé Imran Khan had convinced many that terrorists were operated by some “foreign hand”. No Muslim, they said, could kill another Muslim.

There could not have been a bigger lie; no captured Hindu or Jew was ever paraded as a failed suicide bomber. This lie was [followed](#) up with Khan's astonishing act of deference to terrorists. Directly after the 2013 suicide attack on the All Saints Church in Peshawar, he urged that TTP be permitted to open offices inside Pakistan for holding peace talks. A year later TTP massacred 148 persons inside the Army Public School in Peshawar.

As events proved again and again, TTP killers understand only the language of force. But today that lesson seems lost and the gains of Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad – achieved at great cost by soldiers and officers – are being undone. A new generation of officers is again chasing fruitless appeasement. The history of how terrorism was subdued appears forgotten.

I have just received an anguished letter from a terrified ex-student who has fled his village Eidak in North Waziristan. Every single member of the village peace committee, including the village mosque's imam, Qari Samiuddin, and his son, Qari Nouman, was first threatened and then murdered by shadowy elements. The most

recent assassination was ten days ago on July 13 of businessman Murtaza. To commiserate, the only politician who has visited Eidak is parliamentarian Mohsin Dawar. His PTM colleague Ali Wazir remains on bail.

The horrific events of Eidak resemble those across FATA 10-15 years ago. Using terror tactics TTP wants to destroy all local authority in villages. However this time around, reversing terrorist gains through dedicated military action may be much more difficult.

First, Pakistan's wise men worked hard to achieve strategic depth and install an Afghan government of their choosing. They succeeded but one year later that depth belongs to TTP. Recent Pakistani [airstrikes](#) aimed at eliminating TTP hideouts across the Durand Line have drawn loud growls from Kabul's Taliban leaders. These are far more menacing than the squeaky complaints of Ashraf Ghani's wishy-washy defunct government.

Second, a decade ago Pakistan's economy was propped up by coalition support funds and other Western aid. After America's exit from Afghanistan these have run dry and the CPEC "game changer" is still a faraway dream. Runaway inflation coupled with political chaos is rapidly creating an enabling environment for terrorism.

The third problem is ideological and the most intractable. TTP is demanding that ex-FATA must not only be returned to its pre-June 2018 semi-governable status but, this time around, must be run by sharia law. After 75 years Pakistan's own ideological narrative on sharia remains muddled and confused. For example Riyasat-e-Medina – a popular idea with many – is impossible in a state without sharia. Without clarity Pakistan is deeply vulnerable.

Imagine the predicament of a Hasan Abdal cadet who dutifully imbibed the standard Pakistan Studies narrative during his studies. Over time he became a colonel or brigadier tasked with confronting sharia-seekers somewhere in Waziristan or Swat. Will he be able to argue them down logically? Fight them with the full force of his guns and helicopters? Clearly much rethinking needs to be done on what should be taught in our schools and cadet colleges.

To accept the demands of TTP terrorists is poison for Pakistan. If they win in ex-FATA, how long before militancy spreads from areas as far south as D.I Khan and Tank to the upper reaches of Dir and Swat? Like wildfire, radicalism will consume other parts of Pakistan. This is no time for dawdling. Parliamentarians: wake up before you become irrelevant. Military: do your duty and protect the physical borders of this country. We shall salute you.

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