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Prime Minister Imran Khan's announcement that his government was engaged in reconciliation talks with Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has stunned many in the country where the memories of the violence and crimes committed by the terrorist group remain fresh.

This confirmation followed earlier statements by President Arif Alvi and Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi who hinted at amnesty being offered to the terrorist group, which has been directly responsible for the killing of thousands of Pakistani civilians, soldiers and innocent children.

While the President and Foreign Minister mused about offering amnesty to the members of the terrorist group, the Prime Minister has talked about reconciliation talks with the unspecified components of the group, with an eye on giving amnesty and integrating them in society after they lay down their arms. On the contrary, the outlawed TTP has intensified its attacks in recent months, particularly, targeting military personnel and convoys in erstwhile FATA and Chinese citizens in Baluchistan. It showcases an emboldened militant group operating from safe sanctuaries across the border.

Political leadership made these statements and acknowledged the backchannel negotiations, being facilitated by the Afghan Taliban, weeks after an important meeting of the apex committee of National Action Plan, held on September 9. During that meeting, political and military leadership, along with law-enforcement heads had vowed to enhance response efforts to deal with increasing terrorist threats.

For over a month, it has been evident that the ascendancy of the Afghan Taliban in Kabul has acted as a stepping stone for TTP to reorganize its cadre, enhance recruitment, training and undertake new operations inside Pakistan. Though, Taliban earlier assured Pakistan that they will not allow any attacks on Pakistan from Afghan soil, their ability to interdict and restrict space for TTP to maneuver inside Afghanistan remains limited. Moreover, TTP ranks have been working in support of the new regime in Afghanistan making it even difficult for it to act against them. Pakistan, which was earlier confident that the Taliban control of Afghanistan will be a strategic bulwark against activities of TTP, is learning that not to be the case. A Taliban representative, meanwhile, advised Pakistan to make peace with the TTP through talks.

Meanwhile, TTP has not given any indications of renouncing violence. On the contrary, TTP has vowed to expand its operations inside Pakistan and has called on its members to intensify their attacks. In recent months, TTP has gained strength through the induction of new members. Islamabad now believes that TTP comprises over 5000 militants, operating from across the Durand Line. The majority of these militants crossed over into Afghanistan after major operations by the Pakistan Army in North and South Waziristan. Later, TTP disintegrated as its leadership was decapitated in American drone strikes and a string of assassinations in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, some members went on to join Islamic State, which has been active in eastern Afghanistan.

Resultantly, TTP was significantly weakened and its activities inside Pakistan drastically came down.

A change occurred towards the end of 2019 and early 2020. Several splinter groups were brought together by the current TTP leaders. The August 2021 takeover of Kabul also resulted in release of TTP's deputy commander Faqir Mohammad from Kabul prison, who once led TTP in the Bajaur agency of erstwhile FATA. His reunion with TTP enabled the organization to step up its presence and activities in North and South Waziristan, mainly targeting army personnel. A number of TTP attacks have also been reported from other parts of the country as well. Significantly, TTP has been held responsible for the July 14 bomb attack on a bus ferrying Chinese workers engaged in the construction of the Dasu hydropower project in the Kohistan region.

Earlier Pakistani security apparatus pointed towards active covert support of India's external intelligence agency, Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW) and Afghanistan's National Directorate of Security (NDS) to activities of TTP inside Pakistan. Now apparently the enabling environment for TTP has evaporated with the collapse of Ghani government and its security apparatus. Worryingly TTP's revival and expansion of its activities inside Pakistan have coincided with the ascendancy of the Taliban across the Durand Line.

It is, however, no coincidence. Both groups retain ideological affinity and have fought together against the US and NATO forces. An indication of their close relationship is the fact that at the time of the formation of TTP in 2007, then TTP commanders had pledged allegiance to the late Mullah Omar, the founder and then leader of the Afghan Taliban. The allegiance to Taliban leadership was renewed by the current TTP leader Noor Wali Mehsud on August 17, 2021.

Pakistani military is cognizant of these intimate linkages between the Afghan Taliban and the TTP. Reportedly, during a national security briefing to parliamentary leaders held in July 2021, Army Chief Gen Qamar Bajwa termed the Afghan Taliban and TTP as two sides of the same coin. That connection has not been severed, and it is unlikely that the Afghan Taliban will act against TTP rank and file.

In this context, statements by top political leadership alluding to the possibility of amnesty and exploring reconciliation will be viewed by TTP as a sign of weakening political resolve. This will further compound the policy confusion about the counter-terrorism strategy. It is not the first time that the Pakistan government is talking to TTP. Talks were held previously in 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009, and 2013-14. Peace agreements were also signed with TTP committing to not undertake attacks against the civilian population and across Pakistan, and also not giving sanctuary to foreign militants. However, TTP used those talks as a pretext to reorganize and then retaliate with much more vengeance, leading to intensified violence.

The talks with TTP, at this moment, are tantamount to extending political legitimacy to an outlawed group. TTP has already warned Pakistani media to refrain from terming it as a terrorist outfit. With political leaders acknowledging that the government is negotiating with TTP, the

group is gaining political space. TTP members and commanders have not indicated any remorse on targeting unarmed civilians and soldiers fighting for the Pakistani state.

In this background, political leadership's peace offer to the militant group is incomprehensible. If the PTI government and its top leadership seek to adopt a new approach to dealing with the TTP, it needs to debate this strategy in the parliament, take into confidence the opposition parties, media and civil society. PTI leadership, particularly, PM Khan has a history of soft-pedaling TTP, as he has advocated for a political solution to the challenge posed by the terrorist group. Not to be forgotten is his advocacy for allowing TTP to open political offices in the country. This suggestion was made at a time when TTP was undertaking deadly violence across the country.

Even while the Pakistani government is involved in talks with them, the attacks continue on security personnel especially in the north-western regions of Pakistan where the TTP was based prior to the counter-terrorism operation. Considering the recent trends among the Taliban as an ideological entity and TTP particularly, which has continued its onslaught, it seems that negotiations would turn out to be futile.

It remains to be seen if the present amnesty offer and reconciliation talks are a continuation of the previous thinking. The consequences of pardoning terrorists responsible for killing thousands of Pakistani citizens (soldiers and civilians alike) without prosecuting them through the justice system could be disastrous. It has direct implications on national security as it signals that Pakistan as a state will end up pardoning those who attacked its unarmed citizens and security personnel.

The government needs to draw redlines as this process moves forward. It is responsibility of the government and opposition and all stakeholders to ensure government does not appease the TTP during the process. This process needs to follow a step-by-step approach:

1. A national dialogue should be opened on the question of engaging TTP. Relatives of those civilians and soldiers who lost their lives should be heard.
2. PTI should engage the parliament, particularly the opposition parties represented there, and religious stakeholders in this process. Their buy-in is crucial going forward. TTP as a group should be engaged through a representative delegation of political parties being represented in the Parliament.
3. It needs to be conditions based process i.e. TTP should publicly announce renunciation of violence and take actions to demonstrate its commitment to talks.
4. Militants of TTP, who are willing to lay down arms, should publicly repent for their actions and also affirm allegiance to the Constitution of Pakistan.
5. It should be made clear that behaviour of those who lay down arms will be monitored closely, and they will be prosecuted swiftly, if found violating the law.
6. This way, process will have democratic legitimacy and also TTP would realise it is dealing with Pakistani people rather than just representatives of the PTI government.

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