

Reasons for Delays and Deadlocks in Peace Negotiations with Militant Groups: A Case Study of the Pakistani Taliban

Dr. M. Azam*

Abstract

Due to a variety of factors, peace talks with violent groups frequently stall and become deadlocked. It is possible that some factors are present in every peace process. Understanding the causes of delays and deadlocks and how to prevent or overcome (at least some of) those issues can be achieved by identifying and gaining insight into such factors. This study aims to clarify the four causes that caused the peace talks between the Pakistani Taliban and the government to be delayed until 2014: agenda-setting, demands, formation of negotiation committees, and violence. The inclusion of the topics of interest in the negotiation agenda was desired by both parties. Both the government and the Taliban had nearly exhausted due to the never-ending and apparently uncontrollable process of presenting conditions, preconditions, demands, and counterdemands. Another laborious procedure was the establishment of negotiation committees by the Taliban and the government. Both parties were required to substitute the individuals nominated or members of their respective committees. The peace process continued to be repeatedly derailed by acts of violence, such as drone strikes, bomb blasts, and suicide assaults.

Keywords: Peace Process, Peace Negotiations, Pakistani Taliban, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), Reasons for Delays in Peace Negotiations, Reasons for Deadlocks in Peace Negotiations

INTRODUCTION

Scholars have conducted analyses on multiple facets of peace negotiations, including the causes of their successes and failures. Intergovernmental peace negotiations are frequently marred by delays and deadlocks, and this predicament can be exacerbated when dealing with intra-state peace processes, particularly those involving non-state armed groups employing terror tactics to advance their political objectives while enjoying political backing, as eloquently phrased by Jonathan Powell (2015). While some authors have briefly remarked on why certain peace processes were deferred or deadlocked, there exists a dearth of scholarship that centres on

*Assistant Professor, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Sargodha, Sargodha, Pakistan. Email: writetoazam@hotmail.com

elucidating the underlying reasons for such delays and deadlocks. Comprehending these reasons can create novel pathways towards more frequent and efficacious peace negotiations. By understanding the fundamental reasons for delays and deadlocks, policymakers and negotiators can formulate tactics to surmount obstacles and circumvent comparable delays in future peace processes. Fathoming the rationales behind the delays and stalemates can illuminate the fundamental issues and dynamics, enabling more effective conflict resolution and reconciliation endeavours. This can help establish a sturdier groundwork for sustainable peace and act as a valuable resource for future peacebuilding initiatives.

While sporadic references to the causes of delays and impasses in peace talks surface in broader discussions of negotiation dynamics, there exists a paucity of dedicated investigations into this issue. This research endeavour aspires to illuminate the determinants impeding the advancement of peace negotiations between the government and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Furthermore, it aspires to address the conspicuous void in the scholarly discourse surrounding this specific dimension of peace processes, thereby providing insights for future negotiations with analogous militant groups. The article is segmented into distinct sections. Following the introduction, it delves into the contextual underpinnings of the peace dialogue involving the government and the TTP. Our discerning lens, in the third section, scrutinizes the various determinants that have conduced to the stagnation besetting the peace deliberations vis-à-vis the Pakistani Taliban. In the final section, the paper synthesizes the key insights.

BACKGROUND

Following the government of General Musharraf's Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) Operation in Islamabad in 2007, the TTP was formed. The Pakistani Taliban imposed a reign of terror over the nation that included bomb explosions, suicide attacks, and targeted killings. Proposals to negotiate peace with the TTP came from a variety of sources. A portion of Pakistanis opposed the talks, mostly on the grounds that no peace would result from them. In the wake of their assumption of federal authority from the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) in the year 2008, the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) exhibited a constructive disposition in response to calls from diverse sources urging dialogue with the TTP. In March 2008, Prime Minister Yousaf Gillani extended an olive branch by expressing readiness to initiate discussions with the TTP. This marked the inception of the inaugural element among the tripartite strategic framework denoted as the "three Ds"—comprising dialogue, development, and deterrence—formulated by the PPP government to address the prevailing spectre of militancy.

The PML-N leader, Nawaz Sharif, had stated during his campaign for the 2013 General Elections that he would pursue a specific agenda item—talking with the TTP—should he win the election. Peace negotiations became the main topic of discussion in the country’s political and security discourse to solve the issue of militancy when the PML-N came into power after the elections. The peace talks were viewed by the PML-N government as an integral component of their overall strategy.

FACTORS UNDERPINNING DELAYS AND DEADLOCKS IN NEGOTIATIONS

The peace negotiations between the Pakistani government and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in 2014 were characterized by a protracted series of impasses, to the extent that both parties were occasionally compelled to officially assert the absence of a deadlock (Geo TV, 2014). This study endeavours to discern and elucidate four key factors that precipitated the persistent delays and recurrent deadlocks in these negotiations. These factors encompass a) agenda setting, b) establishment of negotiating committees, c) preconditions, conditions, demands and counter-demands, and d) violence.

a) Agenda-setting

There were a lot of questions about the negotiation agenda that needed to be addressed. What was on the agenda, and how many items were on it? What kinds of issues would be given precedence? Had there been any kind of understanding between the two sides on those items and issues? At least two topics were on the agenda, according to media reports: prisoners and polio vaccination. For several years, the militants have targeted polio vaccination teams.¹ In response to US drone strikes, a militant organisation led by Gul Bahadur banned anti-polio campaigns in June 2012.² Thus, the government decided to include the polio vaccination on the negotiation agenda.

The media also revealed in February 2014 that a 15-point agenda for negotiations had been finalised by the TTP Shura. The document demanded that the government withdraw from the “War on Terror,” repair and compensate property damaged by US drone strikes, and provide employment opportunities to the relatives of victims of drone attacks. The document also demanded the abolition of interest-based banking and the introduction of an Islamic educational system. In addition, it called for the removal of all criminal charges against the Taliban and the transfer of authority over the tribal regions to “local” forces. Hakimullah demanded that the US-Pakistan relationship be ended and that the constitution be rewritten “in accordance with Islamic Shariah” (Mohmand, 2013). To make the process “result-oriented,” the government resolved at

the end of April 2014 in a high-level meeting to pursue a “specified agenda” within “well-defined parameters” (Sajjad, 2014).³ It was common for both sides to insist on particular items being included in the negotiations or left out. Neither side was able to fully satisfy these demands. Thus, disagreements over the agenda items continued to delay the negotiations.

b) Establishment of Negotiating Committees

In January 2014, the government disclosed the constitution of a four-member committee designated to engage with the TTP, comprising Irfan Siddiqi, Rahimullah Yusufzai, Amir Shah, and Rustam Shah Mohmand. This heralded the inception of the overt phase of negotiations. Reportedly, there was a “super committee” in place to oversee the negotiations, with the prime minister, the interior minister, and an adviser to the prime minister as its purported members. However, the reports of establishment of any such committee were rejected by the government.

In the nascent days of February 2014, the TTP proffered a quintet of distinguished political figures to constitute their committee: Imran Khan, Samiul Haq, Abdul Aziz, Muhammad Ibrahim, and Mufti Kifayatullah (T. Khan & Ali, 2014). The TTP held firm in their belief that these individuals possessed the acumen and efficacy required to faithfully represent their interests and adroitly negotiate on their behalf.

Refusing to take part was Imran Khan, who later became prime minister in 2018. Samiul Haq tried reaching out to Imran directly and asking Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa’s Chief Minister to get him to become a member of the committee. However, Sami’s efforts were in vain. Imran’s supporters were concerned that the result would diminish his reputation and position (“TTP Offers Security to Negotiators,” 2014). The TTP regretted Imran and Kifayatullah’s decision to leave the committee.⁴ Kifayatullah, a former member of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa Assembly, was very eager to take part, but his party chairman, Fazlur Rehman, would not allow him. Known as the Father of the Taliban, Samiul Haq led his group of the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Sami (JUI-S) and served as the chief negotiator for the TTP committee.⁵ Abdul Aziz is the chief cleric of the Lal Masjid in Islamabad. Ibrahim was the Jamaat-e-Islami Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa’s *emir* at the time. A second committee of ten people was also formed by the TTP to oversee the negotiations. The primary purpose of both committees—the Taliban and the government—was to help the two sides communicate with each other.

For about a month and a half, the first governmental committee functioned. In March 2014, a new committee consisting of four members was established. Rustam Shah Mohmand

was the only member of the previous committee to be kept on. The other three members were Fawad Hassan, an additional secretary at the Prime Minister Secretariat, Arbab Arif, the additional chief secretary of FATA, and Habibullah Khattak, the Federal Secretary for Ports and Shipping and the new committee's leader.

c) PRECONDITIONS, CONDITIONS, DEMANDS AND COUNTER-DEMANDS

The demands and counterdemands, along with the conditions and preconditions, made by both parties were tedious. The government emphasised that the discussions will take place within the bounds of the nation's constitution. Important TTP negotiating committee members Sami-ul-Haq and Ibrahim promised that the Taliban would hold negotiations inside the boundaries of the constitution. On the other hand, TTP committee member Abdul Aziz declared that the Taliban rejected the constitution and urged the government to remove the condition. In the end, he declined to take part in the negotiations since his committee was unable to bring up this issue. It is said that Aziz was sidelined for opposing that stance, reportedly with the approval of the Taliban authorities (Almeida, 2014).

The government committee, cognizant of the TTP's fervent call for the imposition of Sharia law, advocated that peace negotiations be confined to regions marred by militancy. This proposition garnered the TTP's concurrence during a meeting between the Taliban Committee and Taliban commanders in Waziristan Agency in February 2014. In September 2013, the Taliban demanded the initiation of a government troop withdrawal from tribal territories to facilitate the continuity of negotiations (AP, 2013). On April 10, 2014, following a 40-day ceasefire, the TTP proffered an additional demand for the establishment of a peace zone. The government, however, countered this proposition, contending that the establishment of such a zone would inadvertently culminate in the creation of an autonomous entity within the state. One of the TTP's central demands, consistently underscored, pertained to the release of detainees. As a goodwill gesture, the government sanctioned the release of 19 noncombatants and implored the Taliban to reciprocate by liberating civilian prisoners. While a member of the TTP dialogue committee pledged the Taliban's willingness to effectuate the release of their captive civilians, these promises remained unrealized.

Both parties remained locked in a protracted impasse, each pressing the other to initiate a ceasefire first. In February 2013, the PPP government entreated the TTP to declare a ceasefire, yet it was not until a full year later, on March 1, 2014, that the TTP officially declared a 30-day ceasefire. Subsequently, the government ceased its aerial bombardments targeting Taliban

militants.⁶ The TTP, however, extended the ceasefire for a mere ten days. Negotiations commenced in February 2014, culminating in direct talks between the government delegation and the Taliban Shura on March 26, 2014, held at a clandestine locale in the Waziristan Agency. These talks delved into the thorny issue of prisoner releases on both sides and the extension of the ceasefire. The spectacle of direct negotiations raised hopes to levels bordering on irrational exuberance. The TTP addressed some of the government demands and, as mentioned above, excluded Abdul Aziz from the Taliban negotiating committee.

The Taliban fighters were urged by the government to surrender their weapons and approach the authorities. Three well-known politicians—Nawaz Sharif, Fazlur Rehman (President Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam-Fazl, JUI-F), and Munawar Hasan (the *emir* of Jamaat-i-Islami at the time), declined the TTP's demand in February 2013 that they guarantee the negotiations. Furthermore, the TTP clarified that the things the government needs to do to establish credibility and demonstrate its power are what the Taliban have already stated, not preconditions or conditions, and that they will be presented when they convene for talks.

The release of detainees was the TTP's main demand when they were getting ready for the negotiations. The TTP sent the authorities a list of roughly 300 individuals in mid-March 2014 so they could be released. It produced a second list of 765 non-combatants, including women and children, at the start of May and sought their release. However, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) refuted reports that any women or children were being held by the army. The authorities freed nineteen (19) non-combatants as a confidence-boosting measure. Furthermore, it demanded that the Taliban free the people detained by them.

The TTP argued that the inmates were not the ones it had asked be released and that the people who were freed were members of the Maulvi Nazir faction, who had already signed a peace agreement with the government (I. A. Khan & Ghumman, 2014). The government has so far freed “not a single prisoner” of the Taliban, according to a spokesman for the Taliban negotiating committee, and those who have been freed are ordinary tribesmen. The government made it clear that it had only released non-militants and that neither the Taliban had made any demand for releasing the combatants nor the government had any intention to do so. Despite the assurances of a TTP negotiation committee member that the Taliban were willing to free the civilians under their custody and that this would happen shortly, the release did not occur. Following the 40-day cease-fire, the TTP demanded the immediate release of all non-combatant detainees and the establishment of a “peace zone”.

Although the majority of the TTP's demands remained unfulfilled, the PML-N government diligently sought to persuade the Americans to curtail drone operations—an endeavour fraught with considerable challenges. Consequently, drone strikes ceased for approximately five and a half months,⁷ resuming only after the breakdown of the negotiations with the TTP.

d) Violence

The tenuous negotiations between the government and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) were recurrently marred by the postponement engendered by drone strikes or insurgent attacks. A disconcerting development occurred when the news broke of the TTP's capture and subsequent murder of 23 Border Force officials in 2010, casting an abrupt pall over the peace process a mere three days following the second meeting of the two committees in mid-February 2014 (Masood, 2014). In the wake of this grave incident, negotiations were promptly suspended. However, the government opted to recommence the dialogue during the inaugural week of March 2014. The killing of TTP deputy leader Waliur Rehman in a U.S. drone strike in May 2013 prompted the TTP to retract its overture for negotiations. Subsequently, the assassination of a high-ranking military officer, a major general, in the Swat Valley at the hands of the TTP in September 2013 dealt a fatal blow to the ongoing peace talks (Asghar, 2013a). In mid-November of 2013, the government once again suspended negotiations, contending that their resumption was contingent upon the cessation of U.S. drone strikes (Asghar, 2013b).

However, within a matter of weeks, the government succeeded in garnering unanimous support from all parliamentary factions for the commencement of negotiations. Yet, the respite proved short-lived as the death of insurgent leader Hakimullah in a U.S.-orchestrated drone strike, transpiring six months after Wali al-Rahman's assassination, cast negotiations once again into abeyance. The targeted attack on Hakimullah was construed as a concerted U.S. endeavour to disrupt the peace process, sowing seeds of scepticism regarding the government's commitment to negotiations (Zaidan, 2013, p. 2). The beginning of the year 2014 bore witness to further discord, as Sami-ul-Haq boycotted the negotiation process following military airstrikes that resulted in the loss of 40 lives in North Waziristan (AFP, 2014). The interior minister reaffirmed the government's willingness to hold negotiations after the TTP killed 20 troops in a bombing in Bannu in January 2014, stating that using force was not a solution. Militant attacks claimed by TTP splinter groups, like Ahrar-ul-Hind, persisted despite a declaration of truce.

Mullah Fazlullah, Hakimullah's successor, vehemently opposed the notion of holding peace negotiations. On the other hand, the government adopted a lenient approach. A few days following Hakimullah's death, the prime minister acknowledged that the conversations had started, albeit informally.

CONCLUSION

The 2014 peace talks with the Pakistani Taliban were beset by protracted delays and deadlocks that persisted for years on end. The court of public opinion exhibited a recalcitrant disposition towards the idea of negotiations, necessitating the passage of several years for this concept to gain a foothold and achieve acceptance within the collective consciousness. The subjects to be covered in the negotiation agenda could not be agreed upon by the two sides. It was a really hard bargain. The formation of negotiating committees grappled with its own set of impediments, revolving around the intricate selection of representatives and the delineation of their mandates. Several individuals who were selected declined to negotiate on behalf of the Taliban during the negotiations. Thus the talks were also delayed because the Taliban leaders had to find replacements.

Following several sessions between the negotiating committees of the government and the Taliban, the government decided to reorganise its negotiation team. The governmental committee's four members saw the replacement of three of them. The committee's reorganisation caused the peace talks to stall once more. The Taliban and the government's demands and counterdemands about issues like prisoner release and ceasefire were the biggest factors contributing to the negotiations' delays and deadlocks. Moreover, delays and impasses were also caused by bomb explosions, suicide attacks, and US drone operations. Transitions in leadership, whether within the confines of a governmental entity or an insurgent faction, frequently herald a multifaceted array of intricate challenges replete with far-reaching consequences. The change of the Taliban leaders due to assassinations and the change of the government in Islamabad due to the completion of the tenure in 2013 were also among the reasons that account for the delays in the negotiations.

These insights gleaned from the setbacks serve as lessons for shaping future strategies and approaches to conflict resolution. The imperative of forging a coherent and unwavering government policy, buttressed by meaningful dialogue with international partners, takes centre stage in overcoming the challenges.

REFERENCES

- AFP. (2014, January 22). Maulana Samiul Haq distances himself from Taliban talks. *Dawn*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1081973>
- Almeida, C. (2014, March 14). Analysis: Pursuing peace through committees. *Dawn*.
- AP. (2013, September 15). Pakistani Taliban make demands ahead of peace talks. *Dawn*.
- Asghar, R. (2013a, September 20). Taliban talks efforts at standstill: Nisar. *Dawn*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1044161>
- Asghar, R. (2013b, November 12). Plan for Taliban talks shelved for now: Nisar. *Dawn*. Retrieved from https://epaper.dawn.com/DetailImage.php?StoryImage=12_11_2013_001_003
- Associated Press. (2014, June 12). Pakistan: 13 killed as US resumes drone strike campaign. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/12/pakistan-us-drone-strikes>
- Geo TV. (2014, April 13). *Nisar denies deadlock in govt-Taliban peace dialogue*. Retrieved from <https://www.geo.tv/latest/93212-nisar-denies-deadlock-in-govt-taliban-peace-dialogue>
- Govt, Taliban committees raise points for peace talks*. (2014, February 6). Geo TV. Retrieved from <https://www.geo.tv/latest/69187-govt-taliban-committees-raise-points-for-peace-talks>
- Imran, Fazl refuse to represent Taliban. (2014, February 4). *The Nation*. Retrieved from <http://nation.com.pk/national/04-Feb-2014/imran-fazl-refuse-to-represent-taliban>
- Khan, I. A., & Ghumman, K. (2014, April 4). 19 Taliban freed as ‘goodwill gesture’. *Dawn*.
- Khan, T., & Ali, Z. (2014, February 1). Peace talks: TTP lists Imran Khan, Samiul Haq in 5-member committee. *The Express Tribune*. Retrieved from <https://tribune.com.pk/story/666445/peace-talks-ttp-lists-imran-khan-samiul-haq-in-5-member-committee>
- Khan, U. A. (2010, November 30). Kurram elders hold talks with TTP, Haqqani commanders. *Dawn*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/587336/kurram-elders-hold-talks-with-ttp-haqqani-commanders>

- Masood, S. (2014, March 5). Pakistan's Talks with Taliban Resume. *New York Times*. Retrieved from www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/asia/pakistans-talks-with-taliban-resume.html?_r=0
- Mohmand, M. (2013, January 4). "Truce offer": PPP proposes jirga for talks with Taliban. *Express Tribune*. Retrieved from <http://tribune.com.pk/story/488712/truce-offer-ppp-proposes-jirga-for-talks-with-taliban/>
- Pakistan halts air strikes against Taliban: Minister*. (2014, March 2). NDTV. Retrieved from <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/pakistan-halts-air-strikes-against-taliban-minister-552531>
- Powell, J. (2015). *Talking to Terrorists: How to End Armed Conflicts*. London: The Bodley Head.
- Raza, S. I. (2014, May 3). Govt decides to resume talks with TTP. *Dawn*.
- Reuters. (2011, December 12). *Pakistani government denies talks with Taliban*. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-taliban-talks-idUSTRE7BB08A20111212>
- Sajjad, B. (2014, April 29). *Govt to pursue specified agenda in talks with TTP*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1102956>
- Sherazi, Z. S. (2013, June 25). TTP supports US-Afghan Taliban talks in Qatar. *Dawn*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1020677/ttp-supports-us-afghan-taliban-talks-in-qatar>
- Taliban form 10-member team to monitor peace talks*. (2014, February 3). Samaa TV. Retrieved from <https://www.samaa.tv/pakistan/2014/02/taliban-form-10-member-team-to-monitor-peace-talks/>
- Taliban responded positively to govt initiative, says Prof. Ibrahim*. (2014, February 10). *Dunya News*. Retrieved from <http://dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/211622-Taliban-responded-positively-to-govt-initiative-s>
- TTP offers security to negotiators. (2014, February 3). *Dawn*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1084532>
- Zaidan, A. M. (2013). *Elements of latest round of Taliban-Pakistan dialogue*. Al Jazeera Center for Studies. Retrieved from Al Jazeera Center for Studies website: <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2013/12/20131239456657404.html>

Notes

- ¹ From July 2012 to October 2013, militants launched 24 attacks on the vaccinators and killed 24 health workers and policemen protecting them and injured 14 others. *Dawn*, 25 Oct. 2013. According to another report, at least 89 people—including vaccinators and police personnel—had lost lives in such attacks from July 2012 to April 2016. “Pakistani Taliban kill seven police officers guarding polio workers,” <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/20/pakistani-taliban-kill-seven-policemen-guarding-polio-workers>, 20 Apr. 2016.
- ² In this situation, a focal person at the prime minister’s Polio Eradication Cell Secretariat, Shahnaz Wazir Ali, wrote to the then governor Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Masood Kausar to talk to the Taliban through the political agent of North Waziristan.
- ³ The decision was made in a meeting attended by then Interior Minister Nisar, Army Chief Raheel, Director General Inter-Services Intelligence Zaheerul Islam and Fawad Hassan, a member of the second governmental committee for the talks.
- ⁴ The TTP considered columnist Orya Maqbool Jan and journalist Ansar Abbasi to replace Imran and Kifayatullah but they were not included in the committee (“Imran, Fazl Refuse to Represent Taliban,” 2014).
- ⁵ Sami was known as the Father of the Taliban because many of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, including several Taliban leaders, graduated from his Darul Uloom Haqqania seminary in Akora Khattak, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa.
- ⁶ A fortnight later, Ibrahim regretted the collapse of negotiations in his capacity as a member of TTP’s negotiation management committee (*Pakistan Halts Air Strikes against Taliban: Minister*, 2014)
- ⁷ The first drone strike in 2014 in FATA was reported in the month of June (Associated Press, 2014).