

Logics of Support and Opposition to Peace Negotiations with Militant Groups: A Case Study of Negotiations (2014) with Pakistani Taliban



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Abstract: *The support-opposition aspect of peace negotiations with militant groups that use terror and enjoy political support is significant in several ways. It determines, at least partly, whether the concerned government will hold negotiations with the militants or not and, if held, whether the negotiations will be overt or covert. This article attempts to explain the phenomenon with the help of a case study of the negotiations that took place between the Pakistani government and the Pakistani Taliban in 2014. Those who debated the desirability and undesirability of the negotiations employed at least eleven different pivotal points in their respective arguments. These pivotal points of the arguments or logics behind support or opposition to the negotiations comprise two sets: (a) logics employed both in support and opposition to the negotiations—ideology, national interest, constitutionalism, pragmatism-workability, and victimhood and (b) logics put forward in opposition to the negotiations—legitimacy, patriotism, weakness, tactic, timing, and violence.*

Keywords: Militant groups, Political goals, Violent struggle, Negotiations, Pakistani Taliban (TTP), Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Pakistan government, 2014 negotiations

Introduction

In any society where militants are engaged in a violent struggle for their political goals, the support-opposition dimension of negotiations is a decisive factor in determining the concerned government's willingness to engage the militant group in negotiations. Secondly, this aspect is also important in determining whether the negotiations, if held at all, will be publicly owned or not. That is to say if they will be overt or covert. For instance, in the cases of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and ETA, the abbreviation of Basque Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty), the respective governments kept on denying for a long period that any kind of negotiation was underway. Although the reality was otherwise; covert talks had been going on.

While attempting to negotiate with militant

groups, the level of support or opposition to negotiations by the concerned government, the public, and the militant groups involved is critical. Factors that play their part in support or opposition to negotiations need to be comprehended. Presumably, profound insight and thorough understanding of the levels of support and opposition and the factors involved may foster negotiated settlements. Although widespread support for holding negotiations does not, ipso facto, guarantee their success, it is important to decipher the reasons behind people's support and opposition to negotiations with the groups that engage in armed struggle to achieve their political goals. This article examines factors that convince people to support or oppose negotiations with the armed groups who use terror in pursuit of political aims and enjoy political support. It is a case study of the negotiations held between the Pakistani

government and the Pakistani Taliban in 2014. However, this article is focused on the local and national actors. Support or opposition to the negotiations by foreign actors is beyond its scope.

As Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) resumed its violent activities in the wake of the Afghan Taliban's victory in August 2021, the federal government resumed behind-the-scene talks with the group. The talks once again led to the division of political leaders, policymakers, and analysts into supporters and opponents. Some leaders and analysts vehemently support talks with militant organizations, whereas others forcefully oppose them.

Back in 2014, the federal government had held negotiations with the TTP bearing no fruit. This study is an attempt to comprehend the phenomenon by analyzing various dimensions of the discourse (arguments and counterarguments from both sides of the divide) generated on the issue of holding the negotiations. Repertoires of the proponents and the critics of the negotiations are taken into account. An effort is made to address the questions: Why the supporters do support and why the opponents do oppose the negotiations with the non-state armed groups? What the arguments are hinged on, in other words, what the points of reference are in arguments emanating from both sides of the divide. Factors responsible for support and opposition to negotiations with the TTP are identified and explained, which may be taken as pivotal points of the arguments (i.e. argumentational pivots).

II Background

Though militant Jihadi organizations and groups existed and carried out their activities long before, the TTP, with Baitullah Mehsud as its first chief (2007–2009), was formed in the wake of the Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) episode in 2007. It emerged as a conglomeration of various groups. By some counts, at a point in time, it consisted of around 60 factions (Bokhari 2014). Pakistani Taliban (i.e. the TTP fighters) were engaged in a militant struggle for the “enforcement of Sharia” in the country (Jahangir 2014). The state responded both politically and

militarily, but the problem of militancy could not be resolved for years. The militant campaign and the military operations caused heavy losses of life (more than 55,000 deaths) (Amir 2014) and property. Calls for holding negotiations with the TTP were made leading to a long-winded debate at the national level. Practitioners, as well as experts, took part in the debate. Seasoned politicians reasoned the matter.

III Literature Review

Research on the subject of negotiations with “non-state armed groups who use terror in pursuit of political aims and enjoy political support,” using Powell's phrase, witnessed considerable growth with the onset of the “war on terror”. Though not sufficiently, several aspects of the peace processes and peace negotiations have been explored. Among these addressed dimensions, which have drawn considerable attention, are: the desirability of holding peace negotiations; women's presentation in peace processes; mediation; reasons for failure and success; participation of civil society; and the spoiler problem. Not all but many experts agree that talking to militants, in general, is desirable (Brannan, Esler, and NT Anders 2001; Byman 2009, 125; Post and Berko 2009; Powell 2015; Reiss 2010, 18).

To some extent, attention has been paid to “social context” and societal perspectives on peacebuilding (see, for example, Martin, Bojicic-Dzelilovic, and Benraïs 2018), the construction of civil society (see, for instance, Cubitt 2013), and the role of local peace committees (e.g. van Tongeren 2013). These studies have some relevance for the topic under discussion, but distantly. This area remains largely unaddressed.

In order to make it more difficult for the opponent to withdraw, Planta and the co-authors (2014, 5), for instance, urge the negotiation parties to build up strong support for the process. Pressure *towards* negotiations may be exerted by allies whereas pressure *against* them mostly originates from concerns like the possibility of failure and fear of hawks (Pruitt 2006, 380–81). In 2010, Mitchell Reiss made a mention of various factors affecting the outcome of

negotiations, including timing and (political) context (2010, 18). Reasons for denouncing adversaries before engaging in negotiations and its impact on the outcome of the negotiations have also been explored (Brownel and Dickson 2010, 379). The likelihood of opposition or skepticism among people who may (mis)interpret negotiations as “a reward for violence” has been examined by scholars (e.g. Quinney and Coyne 2011, 82). “Revolutionary absolutes” are held nonnegotiable by William Zartman. He views their acts as “non-instrumentalist,” “self-contained,” and not a vehicle to achieve any other purpose (Zartman and Alfredson 2019, 442–443). Jones and Libicki found that 43% of the militant groups since 1968 ended in a “transition to the political process” (Jones and Martin C 2008, xiii). Zaidan (2013) is among the few who analyzed the negotiations with the Pakistani Taliban.

IV Logics Employed in Support and Opposition to the Negotiations

There are at least eleven distinct reference points that have been emphasised by the argumentators in favour of and against negotiations with the TTP: ideology, national interest, constitutionality, legitimacy, patriotism, pragmatism-workability, weakness, tactic, timing, victimhood, and violence. The first five factors—ideology, national interest, constitutionalism, pragmatism-workability, and victimhood—form a distinct set, as they were emphasized in arguments by the supporters as well as the opponents of the talks

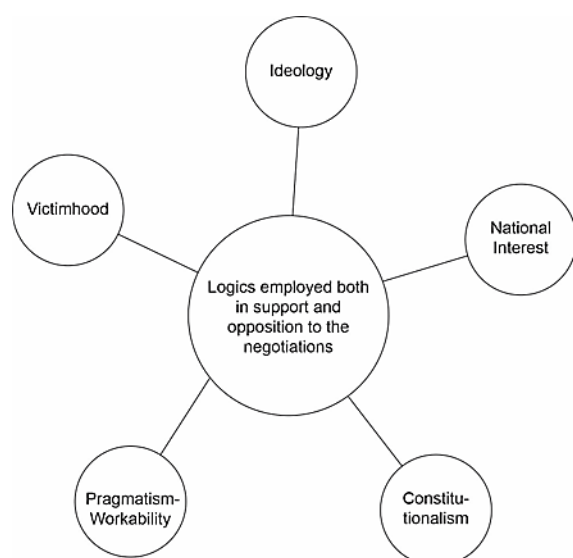


Figure 1: Logics employed both in support and opposition to the negotiations with Pakistani Taliban

a) *Ideological Affinity versus Ideological Rivalry*

The TTP’s worldview, which has been criticised for being intolerant (Dawn 2014e) and denying contemporary constitutional rights (Yusuf 2014), is similar to that of the Afghan Taliban. According to many who oppose the Taliban, the latter fancies using force to impose Pakistani society with their warped and retrograde worldview, which is completely at odds with Islamic ideals (Dawn 2014a). On the other hand, the TTP regards the country’s constitution as “un-Islamic” (Sayed 2021) and considers all democratic as well as military governments as subservient to Western powers. Among the dialogue advocates were also those who are generally imagined being Taliban sympathizers and those who are considered having an ideological affinity with the Taliban. Jamaat-i-Islami and (Fazl and Sami factions of) Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam fervently championed the cause of the negotiations. None of the problems could be resolved by mere use of force, asserted JUI-F chief Fazlur Rehman (Bacha 2014).

There were many persuasive arguments presented on religious, ideological, and sectarian grounds. Though some Sunni and Shia leaders used the TTP’s acts of violence as justification, it is generally believed that their resistance to the negotiations was largely motivated by their opposing sectarian affiliation. Among them are Shahid Ghauri, a Sunni Tehreek leader, and Nasir Abbas Jaffery, a leader of Majlis-i-Wahdat ul Muslimeen (MWM). Jaffery, for example, opposed the talks because the Taliban wanted to enforce their own interpretation of Islamic Sharia in the country (Dawn 2014d). But, exceptions were there and some of the anti-Taliban sectarian leaders, like Fazl Karim (leader of the Sunni Ittehad Council), supported the government’s negotiations with them.

b) *National Interest*

Some of the argumentators emphasized the point

that the talks would compromise Pakistan's national interest. The insistence on talks with the Taliban was motivated by fear of its retribution or political affiliation with its Punjabi components, argued former ambassador Munir Akram. Both are inadequate causes to compromise national interest, he emphasized (Akram 2014a). Similarly, the Sunni Ittehad Council (SIC) and Majlis-i-Wahdat-i-Muslimeen (MWM) deemed the Government-Taliban negotiations to be harmful to the interests of the country. The SIC and the MWM leaders charged that the Nawaz Sharif government was attempting to carry out the policies of the military dictator Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) (Kasi 2014). The government, however, reckoned the negotiations as in the best interest of the nation. Several federal ministers, like Interior Minister Chaudhry Nisar and Information Minister Pervaiz Rashid of the PML-N government, contended that talking to the Taliban for establishing peace is in the national interest (APP 2013a; 2013b).

c) *Constitutionalism*

Nigel Quinney and Heather Coyne maintain that parties that observe constitutional regulations are likely to oppose the negotiations with groups that resort to unconstitutional means (2011, 82). But it was not so in the case of Islamabad's negotiations with the TTP. All major political parties, as mentioned above, were in favor of the negotiations. Much of the debate on the (un)desirability, however, revolved around the aspect of constitutionality. The supporters viewed the talks as compliant with the country's constitution, whereas the critics saw the negotiations as unconstitutional. The federal information minister, Pervaiz Rashid (2013–2016), maintained that talking to the Taliban is constitutional as it was a way of bringing unlawful activities to an end (The Nation 2014).

On the other side, the dialogue was viewed as going against the constitution. Because they were attempting to use force to establish a state within a state, many political leaders and observers claimed that the Taliban were violating the country's constitution. They do not merit to be involved in negotiations, therefore. Calling attention to Article 256 of the

Constitution which unconditionally states that building up private armies and militias in the state territory is illegal, a *Dawn* editor stressed that such groups must be broken up and dismantled and the state must eliminate them through a course of military operations. It was highlighted that the peace process was in contravention of the constitution because its provisions restrict the governments to hold negotiations with any such organization that disparages the parliament as un-Islamic (Ayaz 2014).

d) *Pragmatism and Workability*

The supporting arguments also hinted at the negotiations as a pragmatic measure. Soon after winning the General Elections in 2013, Nawaz Sharif took steps toward holding talks with the militants. Sharif stated that pursuing peace negotiations was the best course of action to combat militancy, acknowledging that it is the country's biggest problem. He asserted that there are alternative possibilities to examine in addition to using guns and ammunition (Ayaz 2013). In his argument, PML-N Finance Minister Ishaq Dar (2013–2018) proffered the dialogue as a means to exhaust the peaceful options for resolving the violent conflict. If the talks would not deliver and other options had to be exercised, it would lead the nation toward a consensus on supporting such an action, maintained Rehman Malik, the former PPP federal interior minister (2008–2013). If by holding negotiations the problem is solved, it is the best option, he stressed (Brulliard and Nawaz 2011). The government-TTP dialogue was essential because potentially it could have brought the Taliban into the mainstream political process, anticipated Director FATA Research Centre, Islamabad, Ashraf Ali (Sheikh and Greenwood 2013, 30). Imran Khan asserted that if the United States could hold dialogue with the Afghan Taliban, why Pakistan could not go for talks with the Pakistani Taliban (APP 2013a; Yusufzai 2013)?

The point to be noticed here is that the Afghan Taliban were fighting a war against foreign forces which had deposed them in the wake of 9/11, whereas the Pakistani Taliban have been fighting against their own state. But Imran Khan

is not alone in making this argument. Others, like Abdul Quddus, a spokesperson for Wafaqul Madaris, put forward an identical argument. Faqir Mohammad, a TTP commander in the tribal agency of Bajaur, expressed his support for the dialogue in March 2012 on a similar line of reasoning. Another argument, which may be seen by some as somewhat misplaced, was put forward by Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-i-Azam (PML-Q) leader Mushahid Hussain. If dialogue could be held with India, then why not with the Taliban, contended Mushahid. If the government can negotiate with hijackers, then why not with the Taliban, Jamaat-i-Islami leader Munawar Hassan emphasized. Hassan stressed that negotiations are preferable to operations, even if they fail 100 times. In some of the instances, pragmatic considerations prevailed over ideological rivalry. Fazl Karim, the head of the Sunni Ittehad Council, was opposed to talking to militants but had to support it for the purpose of maintaining national harmony (Khan 2011).

Arguments in opposition to talks were also made concerning their “unworkability”. State hierarchies facilitate and make the job easier when it comes to negotiations between Pakistan and India, former chief secretary of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Khalid Aziz, made his point (Ahmad 2013). Both parties adhere to the decisions made; on the contrary, it is not the case while dealing with the TTP. It was a network of groups, Aziz elaborated, and that made negotiations tricky (Ahmad 2013). The negotiations could not be expected to lead to any breakthrough or to yield any new information about TTP’s demands, location, or weaknesses, elaborated Moazzam Hussain. And, even if they would have succeeded, there were no effective mechanisms available to ensure the implementation of the agreement, contended Zahid Hussain (2014a).

e) Victimhood

Many of the sufferers—individuals, households, neighborhoods, and political parties which suffered due to death and destruction caused by the Taliban militancy and counterinsurgency operations—raised their demand for holding negotiations with the Taliban. ANP’s backing

for the talks by convening an all-parties conference was perceived by some as a response to the assassination of its senior leader and provincial minister Bashir Bilour (2008–2012) by the Taliban in December 2012 (Jillani 2012). Malala Yusufzai, herself a victim of the Taliban assassination attempt and who later became a Nobel Laureate, supported the idea of holding talks with the Taliban. But victimhood does not always lead to support for talks. Sometimes the case is otherwise. Not all of those who had been targeted in the TTP attacks favored the talks. Most of the Shia leaders vehemently opposed the negotiations, even though Shias had been frequently targeted by the TTP fighters and suicide bombers.

Thus far, we have discussed the factors which are used as points of reference in arguments in supporting as well as opposing the Government-TTP negotiations. Now we turn to the factors employed only in the opposition.

V Logics Employed in Opposition to the Negotiations

Arguments working in opposition to the talks were more varied than the supporting ones. However, the higher number of opposing logics does not imply that the number of opponents of the talks was essentially larger than the number of supporters. Rather, the reality may be otherwise because all of the major political parties, including conservative as well as progressive, supported the negotiations, as mentioned earlier. In addition to the above-discussed, the opposing factors were based on the dimensions like legitimacy, patriotism, weakness, tactic, timing, and violence.

a) (II)legitimacy

Some of the experts and analysts alleged that by holding negotiations the government showed its willingness to consider militant groups as legitimate actors. Negotiating with the Taliban was a major step towards legitimizing a proscribed group, a security analyst stressed (Gul 2014). This line of argumentation simply meant that the government-TTP negotiations were not legitimate because they “legitimized” an “illegitimate group”. Munir Akram, a former ambassador, perceived the TTP as a tool of

Pakistan's adversaries, (2014c). Hence, in his view, it was not legitimate to engage them in negotiations. The government's readiness to deal with the TTP as a legitimate party was a cardinal problem, observed an analyst (*Dawn* 2014b). It was also brought to the fore that a heavy number of TTP fighters comprised non-Pakistanis, including Arabs, Uzbeks, and Afghans and the organization enjoyed the cooperation of al Qaeda and the Afghan intelligence agency, apart from penetration by Indian intelligence operatives (Akram 2014c). Senator Rehman Malik (2015–2021) asked the government to ascertain the identity of the Taliban whom it was talking to or desired to talk to. He cast doubt on the nationality of some of the Pakistani Taliban leaders. In his view, some of the TTP leaders might not be Pakistanis and he adjured the authorities to demand their original identity cards to clarify their nationality. If their Pakistani identity was corroborated, only then they had a legitimate right to be part of the negotiations process, affirmed the senator (The Senate of Pakistan Debates 2014, 50–51). The military emphasised that only Pakistani citizens and not outside parties may participate in the dialogue (Ghumman 2013).

b) Patriotism

Some of the critics of the Government-Taliban negotiations spoke in patriotic terms, deeming the negotiations a betrayal. The Government-Taliban negotiations were interpreted as an unpatriotic act and disloyalty to the nation and its heroes and founding fathers and mothers. A notable example is Faisal Raza Abidi, a PPP leader, who regretted that the PML-N government was holding talks with “the killers” of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto (1988–1990, 1993–1996). His party chairperson, Bilawal, presently foreign minister, struck even a higher patriotic tone by criticizing the PML-N government for holding talks with those who called the founder of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, as Kafir-i-Azam (the greatest infidel) (Kalhoro 2014).

c) Fear, Weakness, and Appeasement

To some, the talks seemed to be driven by the desperate fear of retribution. Furthermore, the

talks process was also seen as a policy of appeasement. Though the parliament passed resolutions favoring the dialogue, some of its members not only from the opposition but also from the treasury benches, as discussed above, criticized the policy of dialogue as a sign of weakness of the state. A member of the ruling PML-N (2013–2018), Muhammad Hamza, for example, called into question the logic of carrying on with the talks in such circumstances and interpreted the government's inclination toward holding negotiations as inadequacy (Wasim 2014). Drawing on the experiences of Germany and Japan, where violent groups Baader-Meinhof and the Red Guards respectively unleashed a reign of terror, former ambassador Birjis Khan concluded that “peace comes with strength.” Both countries' governments used all the means to neutralize these groups. Any policy of seeking an accommodation with them would prove to be a tacit acceptance of defeat. Islamabad, in Birjis' view, had been engaged in a pointless search for peace (Hasan 2014). Afrasiab Khattak of the Awami National Party complained that the dialogue was being held while our security forces were being targeted by the TTP.

d) Tactic

Governments and militants, according to Zartman and Alfredson, keep the tactical issue in mind while engaging in discussions; the former attempt to provoke breaks in the militant cadres, and the latter seeks, among other goals, to have a reasonable amount of time (2019, 199). The TTP and the government both were disparaged for engaging in negotiations as a tactic. TTP stepped forward and offered negotiations whenever some breathing space was required, observed security analyst Ayesha Siddiq. The TTP was attracted toward a ceasefire whenever its leaders were in distress, discerned Senator Aitzaz Ahsan (2012–2018) (Wasim 2014). Taking advantage of the government's ceasefire, the TTP shifted much of its ammunition and fighters from the North Waziristan Agency (NWA) (Hussain 2014b). The Taliban coveted to trap the government through dialogue and they succeeded, a Punjabi newspaper, *Lokaai*, remarked. It was pointed out that the Taliban

benefited from the talks by relocating or regrouping and by mainstreaming their message, whereas the successive governments benefitted from political point-scoring (Ashraf 2014).

e) Timing

Campbell's "ripeness theory" holds that ripeness is one of the fundamental elements of diplomacy (1976, 73). Likewise, Neumann maintains that the advisability of holding negotiations with a militant group has to do with the timing. The group necessarily be at a "strategic juncture" if negotiations have to be successful, Neumann (2007, 132) elaborates. Quinney and Coyne differentiate between objective and subjective indicators of ripeness. The first category includes events and developments that indicate the existence of a stalemate. The second relates to remarks and statements made by parties that show scepticism over the chances of success and concern over the impasse (Quinney and Coyne 2011, 29).

In the case of the Government-TTP talks, the timing was also questioned by the critics. The right time for holding the dialogue would be once the TTP was militarily and politically on the defensive, remarked Munir Akram. In his view, the government made a mistake by reversing this order (Akram 2014c). In this writer's view, however, a "mutually hurting stalemate" (MHS), using Zartman's (2001) terminology, existed when talks with the TTP commenced overtly in 2014. Reports that talks were underway covertly had surfaced in November 2010 and several National Assembly members from FATA had held talks with the Taliban representatives. To the end of 2013, the year preceding the year of negotiations, a federal minister for defense production, Rana Tanvir (2013–2017), underscored that the government was looking forward to "an appropriate time" (i.e. a ripe moment) to initiate the process.

f) Violence

PPP leader Naveed Chaudhry raised the objection that how the government could think of negotiating with the militants who were not ready to put down their arms (*Dawn* 2013). TTP deserved no leniency or concession after having caused the death of sixty to seventy thousand

innocent citizens, stressed Shahid Ghauri, a Sunni Tehreek leader. Furthermore, Nasir Abbas Jaffery criticized the Sharif government for holding talks with the Taliban while they were assaulting national security forces (*Dawn* 2014c). The government cannot hold negotiations with terrorists, Hasil Bazenjo (an NP leader), expressed his disapproval (Wasim 2014). The TTP, according to analyst Intikhab Amir (2014), slaughtered 55,000 unarmed Pakistanis in addition to thousands of soldiers, and Pakistan suffered losses amounting to 80 billion US dollars as a result of TTP violence. It practically made the population hostages in their own cities and towns by unleashing a campaign of fear and mayhem, continued Amir. To take away their ability to worship and preach, it bombed their mosques. He went on to explain that as a result, the sectarian division in the country widened. Negotiations with TTP should not have been conducted at the expense of the relatives of the victims' right to justice, Amir demanded. Some Shia and Sunni intellectuals opposed the negotiations, arguing that the action amounted to supporting and encouraging the militants who had been killing civilians as well as members of the security forces and destroying hospitals, schools, and places of worship (Kasi 2014).

VI Conclusion

The support-opposition aspect of peace negotiations with nonstate armed groups that use terror and enjoy political support is significant in several ways. It determines, at least partly, whether the concerned government will hold negotiations with the militants or not and, if held, whether the negotiations will be overt or covert. A deeper insight into the question of why governments and citizens oppose or support peace negotiations will go a long way in (a) preventing destructive conflicts in future and (b) charting the strategy for bringing bloody militant struggles to an end. This article sought to understand the phenomenon with the help of a case study of the negotiations between the Pakistani government and the TTP in 2014. Those who debated the desirability and undesirability of the negotiations employed at least eleven different pivotal points in their

diverse arguments. These pivotal points of the arguments or logics behind support or opposition to the negotiations comprise two sets: (a) logics employed both in support and opposition to the negotiations—ideology, national interest, constitutionalism, pragmatism-workability, and victimhood (Figure 1) and (b) logics cited in opposition to the negotiations—legitimacy, patriotism, weakness, tactic, timing, and violence. Further research may be carried out to examine the reasons and reference points that generated arguments in support and opposition of negotiations with militant groups in other parts of the world, in cases like IRA, ETA, Afghan Taliban, etcetera.

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