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# The TTP Negotiations

## An Examination of 2021 Peace Talks

Farhan Sheikh

**Abstract:** Negotiations between rebel groups and the government are complicated and have historically remained prone to failure. What constitutes stable peace talks, and which factors can contribute to a successful outcome? This paper examines the recent negotiation failure between the Pakistani government and the designated terrorist group Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The article develops seven hypotheses drawn from the literature available on rebel negotiations, and then tests the hypotheses with the recent TTP-government negotiations with a historical backdrop. The paper finds that rebel service provision, religious demands, and timing are the key factors in determining the peace talks' stability. In contrast, third-party mediation shows no effect on the outcome.

**Keywords:** *Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, rebel negotiations, third-party mediation*

### Introduction

On December 16, 2014, armed militants entered Army Public School in the city of Peshawar, Pakistan, and opened fire on children and school staff. It was one of the most tragic events in the country's history, with 149 people, mostly children, killed in cold blood. The perpetrators belonged to the banned insurgent group called Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), independent from the Afghan Taliban: the group that took credit for the attack and claimed that the attack was revenge against the Pakistan Army's intensive military campaign "Zarb-e-Azb" in the northwest region of Waziristan.<sup>①</sup> The TTP has remained one of the most dangerous insurgent groups responsible for much of the deadly terror attacks in Pakistan since 2004. In the coming years, the Pakistan Army significantly broke down the operational capacity of TTP through sustained military operations, consequently reducing the rate of terror attacks by over ninety percent.

Following the Afghan Taliban's ascendancy to power in August 2021, reports started pouring in that the TTP and the Pakistani government were holding secret talks, which was eventually confirmed by Prime Minister Imran Khan.<sup>②</sup> On November 8, 2021, the government and the insurgents declared a ceasefire,

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① "Pakistan Taliban: Peshawar school attack leaves 141 dead," *BBC News*, December 16, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-30491435> (accessed January 20, 2022).

② "Govt in talks with TTP groups for reconciliation process: PM Imran," *Dawn*, October 1, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1649520> (accessed January 20, 2022).

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adding that talks were underway for a reconciliatory process. The Afghan Taliban were acting as a mediator for these talks. However, just under a month after the cessation of hostilities, the TTP unilaterally announced an end to the fragile truce. They accused the government of renegeing on its promises.<sup>①</sup>

Why are negotiations between rebel groups and governments so fragile and prone to failure when theoretical and conventional wisdom suggests that peace benefits both parties? What are the conditions under which stable talks can take place? The recent TTP negotiations present these interesting questions that, in this paper, I will try to examine and scrutinize.

The article follows a systematic approach. In the first section, I review the existing literature on negotiating conditions and strategies. In the second section, I summarize the hypotheses derived from the reviewed literature. The third section explores the historical background of the origins and decline of the TTP to add depth to the case discussion. The fourth section tests the hypotheses in the light of recent TTP talks. The fifth section discusses important finding from the study.

### Literature Review

When it comes to insurgents who are labeled as terrorists, the public stance against negotiating with them by the government is relatively simple; never to give in to the terrorists and their methods.<sup>②</sup> The argument implies that talks can weaken the mainstream political status quo and undermine efforts for outlawing terrorism. In reality, governments have often engaged in negotiations with such groups. However, the primary goal for any government considering talks is not simply an end to violence but to do so in a way that diminishes the threat of setting dangerous precedents and destabilizing its political system.

Although some skeptics like Alan Dershowitz argue that negotiations with insurgents who engage in terrorism are useless,<sup>③</sup> Neumann argues that successful talks are possible only when insurgents are at a strategic juncture: questioning the utility of violence, but not on the verge of defeat.<sup>④</sup> This suggests that one of the critical factors of successful negotiations is timing. Any attempts for earlier or later talks might overwhelm the government itself, causing it to be counterproductive.

Another crucial factor for successful negotiations is the government posturing, process, and procedure. Paul Wilkinson, a British terrorism expert, argues that the government should make no concessions since it considerably undermines the existing political system,<sup>⑤</sup> others disagree. Neumann believes that involving multiple stakeholders, such as opposition parties, increases the chances of success since it exposes the rebel

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① Asad Hashim, "Pakistani Taliban ends ceasefire, future of peace talks uncertain," *Al Jazeera*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/10/pakistan-taliban-ceasefire-peace-talks-ttp> (accessed January 20, 2022).

② Peter R. Neumann, "Negotiating with Terrorists," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no.1 (2007): 128.

③ Alan M. Dershowitz, *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

④ Neumann, "Negotiating with Terrorists."

⑤ Paul Wilkinson, "International Terrorism: The Changing Threat and the EU's Response," *European Union Institute for Security Studies* No.84 (2005): 7-53.

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group to democratic practices.<sup>①</sup> Having various parties on board also helps in soothing any future unrest. A broad political process helps manage public expectations since there is always the risk of public agitation ahead of talks. This is especially true if the public were the victims of insurgent violence. Isak Svensson also emphasizes the importance of third-party mediation. His empirical research found that having a mediator in the negotiations significantly affects successful settlements.<sup>②</sup>

Another question governments face is whether the opposing group can make good negotiation partners. One way that the government can determine if a group will be a good negotiating partner is by looking at the group's stated aim and ideology. Isak Svensson finds in his research that if one of the belligerents has made explicit religious demands, the chances for a negotiated settlement are low.<sup>③</sup> That is because the subjective value of the conflicting issue increases when the demands are anchored in a religious tradition, which makes the issue at stake indivisible. The problem cannot be divided without a substantial loss of subjective value.

Another indicator of a rebel group that may enter into serious negotiations is whether they provide social services in their constituents. Such provisions can be welfare, food, medical services, education, and/or religious services. Heger and Jung conclude that service-providing rebel groups are more likely to enter into negotiations, and that the subsequent talks will be more stable.<sup>④</sup> Service-providing groups often have a large support base and a more centralized organizational structure. These features deter potential spoilers that break during negotiation processes, thus encouraging governments to engage in talks since the threat from spoilers is smaller.

Finally, in his study on the 2006 Darfur settlements, Johnston examines how governments manipulate peace processes to advance their political interests and gain an advantage in future counterinsurgency operations.<sup>⑤</sup> He argues that governments employ a divide-and-rule tactic to weaken and gain intelligence on various insurgent factions. This intelligence gathering enhances their military capabilities.

### Hypotheses Summary

Reviewing the existing literature on rebel negotiations with the government in the previous section gives a sense of understanding regarding the conditions under which such talks can succeed. Before analyzing the recent TTP negotiations, I derive seven hypotheses for testing.

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① Neumann, "Negotiating with Terrorists."

② Isak Svensson, "Fighting with Faith," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no.6 (2007): 930–49.

③ Ibid.

④ Lindsay L. Heger and Danielle F. Jung, "Negotiating with Rebels: The Effect of Rebel Service Provision on Conflict Negotiations," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61, no.6 (2017): 1203–29.

⑤ Patrick Johnston, "Negotiated Settlements and Government Strategy in Civil War: Evidence from Darfur," *Civil Wars* 9, no.4 (2007): 359–77.

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The hypotheses derived are aptly split into three aspects of negotiations: Who, When, and How. The three aspects will hopefully give a holistic view of the nature of rebel–government talks. The hypotheses are:

*Who?*

1. Governments are more likely to enter into negotiations with service-providing rebel groups.
2. Negotiations involving service-providing rebels are likely to be more stable than non-providers.
3. There is a low chance for a negotiated settlement if one party has made explicitly religious demands.

*When?*

4. For talks to succeed, the rebel group must be at a strategic juncture: contemplating the utility of violence but not on the verge of defeat.
5. When under a relatively high public pressure for peace, governments deliberately enter into failed negotiations to gain an intelligence advantage for future counterinsurgency operations.

*How?*

6. Negotiations with fewer stakeholders as part of a broad political process are less likely to succeed.
7. Third-party mediation dramatically increases the chances of successful talks.

### **The TTP: A Historical Overview**

The emergence of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan is closely linked with the fall of the Afghan Taliban regime in Afghanistan in 2001. After the US invasion, the Afghan Taliban and even al-Qaeda members crossed the extremely porous northern Pakistan–Afghanistan boundary into the tribal area of Waziristan. With shared tribal and ethnic links, the fugitive Afghan Taliban members worked to recruit more followers in their fight against the US occupation.<sup>①</sup>

The area of Waziristan and other adjoining areas, back then, was a semi-autonomous region of Pakistan called the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), where Pakistani officials relied on tribal elders for governance. Under US pressure of “either you are with us or against us,” the Pakistan Army entered FATA for the first time in history for military operations against al-Qaeda-linked operatives. The local tribes saw this as an act to subjugate them, which catalyzed the militancy. Eventually, in December 2007, TTP emerged as a loosely knit organization of various militant groups under the leadership of Baitullah Mehsud.

Even though TTP started out by framing its military intentions as a defensive war, the group—influenced by the early “Talibanization”—hoped to follow in the Afghan Taliban’s footsteps. They changed their war

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<sup>①</sup> Mona Kanwal Sheikh, *Guardians of God: Inside the Religious Mind of the Pakistani Taliban* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

goals to establish a sharia system according to their Islamic interpretation. However, unlike the Afghan Taliban, the TTP leadership tended to be poorly educated despite employing a religious vocabulary.<sup>①</sup>

The Pakistani government and military entered into multiple negotiations and peace talks with the militant groups, all of which ultimately failed.<sup>②</sup> The TTP utilized an asymmetric warfare and terror tactics against The Pakistan Army and civilians alike. This peaked in 2010 with over four hundred attacks.<sup>③</sup> A renegotiated counterterrorism pact between the CIA and the Pakistani intelligence agency Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) involving advanced Reaper and Predator drones and hi-tech surveillance systems from 2008 to 2014,<sup>④</sup> and an intensive military campaign “Zarb-e-Azb” from 2014 to 2017 eventually broke the back of TTP operational capacity. Coupled with a leadership crisis, the terror attacks dramatically reduced by over ninety percent in 2018 when compared to 2014.<sup>⑤</sup>

The past couple of years have seen a modest increase in attacks, which coincides with the 2020 Doha agreement between the Afghan Taliban and the US government. This shows signs of a resurgent TTP. Several splinter groups announced their merger with the TTP in 2020.<sup>⑥</sup> The collapse of the Ghani administration and the Afghan Taliban takeover in Kabul have raised alarms over TTP revival prospects since the latter claims to be a part of the former’s movement. Even though the Afghan Taliban deny these claims, it is widely believed that the Afghan Taliban’s ascendancy will undoubtedly serve as a morale booster for the battered insurgents.

In October 2021, Prime Minister Imran Khan confirmed that fresh talks were underway for a reconciliatory process. The TTP and government spokesmen eventually announced a month-long cessation in hostilities, with the Afghan Taliban foreign minister confirming that their group was acting as a mediator. However, in December 2021, the TTP unilaterally withdrew from the ceasefire, citing the government’s inability to follow through with its promises. This marked the end of another round of failed talks between the insurgents and the Pakistani government.<sup>⑦</sup>

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① Amira Jadoon, “The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan,” *United States Institute of Peace*, no.494, May 2021. [https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr\\_494-the\\_evolution\\_and\\_potential\\_resurgence\\_of\\_the\\_tehrik\\_i\\_taliban\\_pakistan.pdf](https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/sr_494-the_evolution_and_potential_resurgence_of_the_tehrik_i_taliban_pakistan.pdf) (accessed January 20, 2022).

② Abdul Basit, “Pakistan’s Peace Talks with Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan: Ten Times a Failure?” *Terrorism Monitor* 19, no.20 (2021): 5-7.

③ Jadoon, “The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the TTP.”

④ Asfandiyar Mir, “What Explains Counterterrorism Effectiveness? Evidence from the US Drone War in Pakistan,” *International Security* 43, no.2 (2018): 45–83.

⑤ Jadoon, “The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the TTP.”

⑥ “Splintered militants rejoin Pakistani Taliban, vow holy war,” *AP News*, August 17, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-pakistan-taliban-militant-groups-asia-pacific-76dd240f535d90957f8b44531a5fa952> (accessed January 20, 2022).

⑦ Hashim, “Pakistani Taliban ends ceasefire, future of peace talks uncertain.”

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## Findings

Negotiating with insurgents is always tricky. Although there are many models, such as the popular Bargaining Theory, real-world scenarios involve many unforeseeable factors. The TTP talks also demonstrate the effect of unseen elements, some of which are hidden behind classified documents. This is contrary to conventional and rational understanding. Nevertheless, with the help of the seven hypotheses presented in the previous section, I will hopefully try to explain the failure of the recent attempt at a peace settlement.

*Hypothesis 1: Governments are more likely to enter into negotiations with service-providing rebel groups.*

The TTP has acted as an umbrella organization for various fighting groups throughout its insurgency. Its structure is highly decentralized, so much so that its apparent lack of a robust and central hierarchy proves to be one of its significant weaknesses. Because of the lack of a central order, the TTP does not have a wing dedicated to social provisions. Hence, it cannot be recognized as a service-providing rebel group.

Recent history tells us, however, that the Pakistani government has entered into negotiations with TTP in the past. This happened once when the TTP was not fully formed but its groups were militarily active, called the Waziristan Accords.<sup>①</sup> Another time, The TTP and the government reached a ceasefire among news of fresh talks. This attempt ultimately failed.<sup>②</sup> The recent attempt at peace engagement is nothing new. Hypothesis 1 is thereby not supported by historical evidence as the government has initiated multiple talks, despite the TTP not being a service-providing rebel group.

*Hypothesis 2: Negotiations involving service-providing rebels are likely to be more stable than non-providers.*

Despite the TTP not being a service-providing rebel group, it has entered into multiple negotiations with the government. These negotiations did not yield any results and were broken at the first sight of mistrust. The talks also garnered criticism which further strained peace prospects. Considering that the TTP resumed hostilities after just a month, the recent negotiations can be said to be unstable. Thus, it can be safely said that the TTP negotiation case supports Hypothesis 2.

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① Pazeer Gul, "Waziristan accord signed," *Dawn*, September 6, 2006, <https://www.dawn.com/news/209220/waziristan-accord-signed> (accessed January 20, 2022).

② Carlotta Gall and Ismail Khan, "In Pakistan, Doubts Over the Fight in Tribal Areas," *The New York Times*, February 12, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/12/world/asia/12pakistan.html> (accessed January 20, 2022).

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*Hypothesis 3: There is a low chance for a negotiated settlement if one party has made explicitly religious demands.*

Religion can add complexity to the delicate art of negotiations, particularly when the demands are anchored on a religious tradition. The TTP started as an organization that presented a united front to the Pakistan Armed Forces. However, taking influence from the Afghan Taliban, the group quickly evolved its war goals to demanding a sharia rule in Pakistan according to their Islamic interpretation. This added a religious dimension to the rebel group.<sup>①</sup> The failure of recent talks supports this Hypothesis since there is a religious incompatibility between the interlocutors in its aims and demands.

*Hypothesis 4: For talks to succeed, the rebel group must be at a strategic juncture: contemplating the utility of violence but not on the verge of defeat.*

Arguably, the TTP was at the pinnacle of its power in 2012, with estimates putting their numbers at around twenty-five thousand members.<sup>②</sup> An intense military campaign by the Pakistan Army in the form of “Zarb-e-Azb” and “Radd-ul-Fasaad”, coupled with legislative support in the form of military courts, curbed TTP’s operational capacity to a minimum in 2018. However, there have been signs of a resurgent TTP in the past two years. There was the announcement of splinter groups joining with the TTP and an increase in the terror attack rate.<sup>③</sup>

Recognizing a strategic juncture is difficult, as it can be easily overestimated. In my opinion, the optimum strategic moment for the TTP negotiations was in 2018 (when the insurgents were at their lowest). The recent revival wave has dispelled their contemplation about throwing down their arms and accepting a peace deal. This can be one of the reasons for the failure of recent TTP talks. In conclusion, the logical evidence supports the statement presented by Hypothesis 4.

*Hypothesis 5: When under a relatively high public pressure for peace, governments deliberately enter into failed negotiations to gain an intelligence advantage for future counterinsurgency operations.*

As explained by Johnston taking the 2006 Darfur agreement as a case study, governments sometimes manipulate peace talks for future military advantages to weaken rebel groups. Such manipulation only occurs when the government is under pressure for peace, either from the international society or the local population. By engaging or excluding certain splinter groups, the government can influence defections in

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① Hassan Abbas, “A Profile of Tehrik-I-Taliban Pakistan.” *CTC Sentinel* 1, no.2 (2008): 1–4.

② Jadoon Jadoon, “The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the TTP.”

③ Madiha Afzal, “Terrorism in Pakistan has declined, but the underlying roots of extremism remain,” *Brookings*, January 15, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/01/15/terrorism-in-pakistan-has-declined-but-the-underlying-roots-of-extremism-remain/> (accessed January 20, 2022).

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the leading group. The negotiations can also serve as a front for intelligence gathering tactics, which can be helpful in further counterinsurgency operations.

Nevertheless, the recent TTP talks were mainly shrouded in confidentiality, leaving little public information. Even though the government has changed its intelligence strategy when dealing with TTP,<sup>①</sup> the ceasefire withdrawal is still relatively recent, which leaves little room to determine whether the government gained an advantage or not. Thus, Hypothesis 5 remains inconclusive.

*Hypothesis 6: Negotiations with fewer stakeholders as part of a broad political process are less likely to succeed.*

Although there was very little public information about the negotiations, it is observed that on the surface, the only stakeholders involved were the insurgents and the government officials. The Afghan Taliban acting only as mediators. The negotiations didn't include the wide spectrum of Pakistan's political parties and some tribal elders (both of whom were possibly equal stakeholders in the violent consequences of the war). The involvement of multiple parties can complicate negotiation points, both for the rebels and the government. Nevertheless, the talks failed, which reinforces and supports Hypothesis 6.

*Hypothesis 7: Third-party mediation dramatically increases the chances of successful talks.*

On November 15, nearly a week after the ceasefire, Afghan acting foreign minister Amir Khan Muttaqi confirmed that the Afghan Taliban has acted as a mediator in the recent negotiations.<sup>②</sup> The presence of a mediator is something the past talks between the groups lacked. Nevertheless, the ceasefire lasted only for about a month before the TTP withdrew. The unilateral withdrawal of the TTP from peace talks suggests that the presence of a mediator did not affect progress in negotiations. Consequently, Hypothesis 7 is not supported by the evidence.

### Summary

Table 1 hereunder summarizes the findings of the hypotheses, as observed by studying the recent TTP and government negotiations, to wit:

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① Al Jazeera, "Pakistan-Taliban: Ceasefire ends between TTP and the government," *YouTube* video, 3:33, December 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00i8TfgSqzw>.

② "Kabul Mediating between Pakistan Govt, TTP: Muttaqi," *Dawn*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1658160> (accessed January 20, 2022).



<b>Sr. No.</b>	<b>Result</b>
Hypothesis 1	Not supported
Hypothesis 2	Supported
Hypothesis 3	Supported
Hypothesis 4	Supported
Hypothesis 5	Inconclusive
Hypothesis 6	Supported
Hypothesis 7	Not supported

Table 1: Summary of hypotheses

### **Discussion**

The TTP–Government talks present an interesting perspective on the factors which affect rebel negotiations. Every rebel group is unique in its own way, through its history, ideological affinity, and organizational structure. Nevertheless, by testing the hypotheses on the TTP negotiations, four key findings can be concluded.

First, the effect of rebel service provisions plays a significant role in determining the stability of talks. Drawing on Heger and Jung (2015), the impact of spoilers in non-service provider rebels is much larger. This makes the negotiation very fragile. Since the TTP does not have a non-violent wing dedicated to public services, it cannot be classified as a service-providing group primarily (due to its decentralized hierarchy). Any prospects for peace talks are plagued by a spectrum of views, where radical elements within the TTP have enough influence to make a compromise near impossible.

Second, the explicit religious demands by the TTP played an essential part in the negotiation failure. Even though the TTP originated to present a defensive front to the Pakistani military, it quickly evolved its war goals to demand a sharia system in Pakistan according to their brutal interpretation of Islam. A religious dimension adds a “non-fungibility” element to the talks. Thus, by showing religious incompatibility, they perceive the conflicting issues to be indivisible. After all, any other government system apart from the rebel understanding of sharia would not be of equal value for the TTP. Therefore, anchoring the demands in religious traditions complicated the talks, which led to the negotiation failure.

Third, the timing of the talks is a crucial feature in rebel negotiations, and it has played its part in the TTP talks. Neumann (2007) determines that the rebels should be at a strategic juncture for talks to be successful: considering throwing arms but not yet defeated. Any attempts for earlier talks would be counterproductive, whereas late negotiation attempts are not rationally considered since a military victory

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becomes viable. The TTP were at their lowest point in 2018. However, the Afghan Taliban takeover in Afghanistan has invigorated them, including other regional militants. The negotiation failure shows that the timing for peace talks was not optimal since the insurgents had disregarded their contemplation for the utility of violence.

Finally, third-party mediation has shown no effect on negotiation success. Even though Svensson (2007) shows in his study that third-party mediation strongly influences the success rate, the TTP case study suggests that the characteristics of the third party may also play a role in successful mediation. The TTP–government talks were mediated by the Afghan Taliban, who are regarded as having the most influence over the insurgents. The influence dates back to when the Afghan Taliban were fugitives in Waziristan, resembling today's TTP insurgency. However, the Afghan Taliban mediated the TTP talks as a governmental entity, which fundamentally transforms their characteristics from their era as insurgents. This was where they had their highest influence over the TTP. The collapse of talks, therefore, suggests that the attributes of the mediator are far more important than just having a mediator.

### **Conclusion**

The TTP and the Pakistan Armed Forces have fought a long, bloody war that started at the behest of an invading superpower. Over the years, the rebel group became responsible for committing some of the most heinous and violent attacks on Pakistani soil. The scars of the violence run deep in the Pakistani population, and any prospects for a political settlement will be met with a public backlash.

Nevertheless, as long as Pakistan's political system is not disturbed, peace remains the most rational option for both parties. The recent attempt at negotiations displayed its fragility, proving that achieving a settlement is far trickier than expected. Yet, with the Afghan Taliban taking power next door, there is a renewed interest in ceasing violence. The Afghan Taliban's road to recognition will be harder to achieve if there is instability on their doorstep, which incentivizes them to use their influence on the TTP.

Even though the first attempt at negotiation failed, it would be unwise to say that it was predictable. The recent failure can be rationally broken down by testing the seven hypotheses to determine the cause and act accordingly. The TTP demands for sharia law, accurate recognition of strategic negotiation timings, and the need for involving multiple parties remain the main concerns for successful talks and any potential settlement. Although the Pakistani government can go down a military path, an agreement that does not set dangerous precedents remains a far more attractive option. In the end, there is hope that both parties can compromise to some extent to move past the path of violence.

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