

What 2012 has meant for Afghanistan?

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By Ahmed Rashid.

After nearly a year of tense relations between all the major players in Afghanistan, there was at the end of 2012 a flurry of diplomatic activity that once again raised expectations for peace, writes journalist and author Ahmed Rashid.

The renewed hope centred around a dramatic shift by Pakistan's military and Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which for the first time implemented measures which could prod the Taliban to open a dialogue with Kabul. The ISI had spent the year jailing up to 100 Taliban leaders and fighters for daring to talk to the Kabul regime, the Americans or the UN.

But by December the ISI had freed 19 of them and promised to free all the rest, including the Taliban No 2, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar.

The ISI now promised to urge every Talib it freed to encourage their leaders to enter into talks with Kabul that could lead to a ceasefire as early as next year, allowing the US and Nato to peacefully exit the country in 2014 and leave hope that a civil war would not automatically follow.

In the second half of the year, important meetings of the core group of countries looking for a settlement - the US, Pakistan and Afghanistan - were hosted by Turkey, Britain and in Central Asian capitals. The Taliban met Afghans from the Northern Alliance who oppose them, first in Kyoto, Japan in June and then in Paris in December.

Acute divisions

Nevertheless, the year started poorly. The hoped-for breakthrough in the secret talks between the US, Germany and the Taliban that took place in Qatar in 2011 and early 2012 failed to come about. The first confidence-building measure, intended to be the release by the US of five Taliban leaders from the Guantanamo Bay prison in exchange for the Taliban freeing US soldier Bowe Bergdahl, broke down.

In March, the Taliban suspended all contacts with the US, saying Washington had reneged on its initial agreement to free the prisoners.

Meanwhile, Afghan President Hamid Karzai had refused to accept the opening of a Taliban liaison office in Qatar, while Pakistan was piqued because it had not been part of the Qatar process.

There were also acute divisions within each player's administration. The US military opposed talks with the Taliban and undermined initiatives taken by the State Department.

The failure of the US government to act collectively and of President Obama to play a more forceful role led to the US failing to pursue any cohesive strategy. The Afghan cabinet was similarly divided over talks with the Taliban and ministers constantly leaked sensitive meetings and documents to the press to undermine peace initiatives.

Taliban divisions

However, a fierce and important debate sprang up within the Taliban - hardliners advocating war until victory while moderates understood the rationale for peace talks. Mullah Mohammed Omar still seemed to be in a powerful, determining position but he did not publicly take sides in the debate.

A US National Intelligence estimate in January, as well as a Pentagon report in December, both concluded that the Taliban had not given up hope of taking control of Afghanistan by force, and that corruption, poor governance and the continued presence of Taliban safe havens in Pakistan were contributing to the failure to stabilise Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Taliban relations with their main sponsor Pakistan also declined considerably.

The Taliban were shocked to discover in February that senior leader and former Defence Minister Mullah Obaidullah Akhund had died of a heart attack in a Pakistani prison in March 2010, and that the ISI had withheld the news.

The ISI also held the revered Mullah Baradar in jail indefinitely and anyone talking to the Afghan government was also jailed. To their many interlocutors, the Taliban openly voiced their criticism of the ISI and Pakistan's negative role towards peace.

But the Taliban were also riven with splits. In March, the Taliban high command arrested two commanders from Zabul and Ghazni provinces for indiscipline, while the following month three members of the Taliban Military Commission were arrested for corruption.

Hardline Taliban went on an assassination spree - the most prominent being the killing in Kabul on 13 May of Maulvi Arsala Rahmani, a former Taliban and now member of the High Peace Council, a body which leads efforts to make peace with the Taliban. Agha Jan Motasim, a former finance minister and another leading Taliban member who advocated peace talks, was gunned down in Karachi but survived and sought asylum in Turkey with his family.

Strategic change

Meanwhile, relations between Pakistan and the US and Afghanistan plummeted. For seven months, the strategic road between Karachi and the Afghan border was closed to Nato supplies due to several contentious issues between the two countries. Pakistan was not invited to the Chicago Nato summit in May.

The military were furious at the alleged connivance by Afghan intelligence in giving sanctuary to the militant Pashtun leader from Swat, Mullah Fazlullah who had established a base in the Afghan province of Kunar. Fazlullah, along with some 1,500 men, mounted lethal attacks on Pakistani army outposts along the border. Pakistan retaliated by shelling Afghan villages in Kunar and Nuristan.

The first hint of a breakthrough in improved relations came in July when Omar Daudzai, the Afghan ambassador to Pakistan, was taken by the ISI to briefly meet Mullah Baradar in a safe house. There was no follow-up meeting and a war of words again developed between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

As violence by the Pakistani Taliban intensified and Pakistan's economic, social and foreign policy problems mounted, the army finally accepted the need for a change in strategic direction that could also benefit Pakistan's domestic crisis.

In November, nine Taliban prisoners were released from Pakistani jails, soon followed by another group of nine. In direct contrast to the ISI's instructions in the early part of the year, the freed Taliban were made to swear an oath that they would persuade their fellow Taliban to promote reconciliation with Kabul.

In December, the UN Security Council made it easier for the Taliban to travel and there was considerable speculation as to which country would offer the best venue for talks between the Taliban and Kabul - Saudi

Arabia, Turkey or Qatar.

The US released \$688m (£425m) in military aid to Pakistan, easing its balance of payments problems and signalling that relations had now improved. The US military remained deeply sceptical, however, about Pakistan's about-turn on the Taliban.

Crucial year

There was another setback when Assadullah Khalid, the head of Afghan intelligence, was severely wounded by a suicide bomber. Hamid Karzai again blamed Pakistan and it took another summit in Istanbul to ensure that the attack would not derail co-operation between the two countries.

Time is now of the essence. Any talks will need months, possibly years, but everyone - even the Taliban - would like to see a ceasefire before 2014. Once that happens there could be more fruitful talks between the Taliban and Kabul on power-sharing that could lead to a political settlement. With Afghan presidential elections due in April 2014 - and Mr Karzai unable to stand - there is the chance for a new and invigorated Afghan leadership which the Taliban could accept as a negotiating partner.

The new US Secretary of State John Kerry knows the region well, has played a major role in calming down passions in both Kabul and Islamabad over the last four years and is trusted by regional leaders. It will be up to him to give the importance to the Afghan peace talks they warrant to make them a success.

A great deal depends on Pakistan showing maturity, generosity and a genuine desire for peace in the region. It must soon chalk out a timetable so that the Taliban are left with no other option but to go home and work out a compromise with Kabul. But ultimately it will be the Afghans who will decide upon their own future and work towards a peaceful resolution. The coming year is all important.