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IN AFGHANISTAN A DIFFICULT YEAR AHEAD FOR NATO

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It will be a difficult year for NATO in Afghanistan but the Talebans suffered heavy losses in 2006 and they are divided and reduced to carrying out suicide attacks because they are incapable of more threatening and incisive action. Although Mullah Mohammed Omar's movement has re-emerged it does not, for the moment, have any chance of turning things round and retaking power. *At the same time, however, the central government, bolstered by thirty-three thousand NATO soldiers, including two thousand Italians, is still not able to keep the entire country under control.* The Talebans and the remaining members of Al Qaeda are heavily infiltrated in the six Southern and three Eastern provinces and have carried out terrorist attacks in other areas including Kabul.

The international community is "obliged to strengthen the military presence" in Afghanistan according to the European Union's representative there, Francesco Vendrell: "If we'd had 38-40 thousand soldiers (ISAF mission, ed) in Afghanistan in 2002, we would not need that number now", Vendrell told a meeting of the Foreign Affairs committee of the Italian Camera, "but as we did not have that number in 2002 or in 2003, now, five years after the ratification of the Bonn Accords, we are obliged to increase the military presence."

The message is clear: reinforcements are needed and the caveats - the restrictions on how individual national contingents, among them the Italian, can be employed - present a problem. In reality, each of the 37 countries that makes up the international coalition has a very particular set of rules about how their troops can operate, all of which are based on the political choices of the national governments. In most cases, even if the caveats were less restrictive and allowed, for example, the use of Italian troops in the "red" zones that have been infiltrated by hostile forces in the South, an increase in the number of soldiers on the ground would still be required. The roughly 2,000 soldiers divided at present between Kabul and Herat are barely sufficient for the mission they have been asked to carry out in the Western sector and in the zone around the capital. Only a certain number of special corps could be easily used on the riskier fronts.

For months the Talebans threatened a devastating spring offensive but in reality it was NATO that took the initiative with new American commander, Dan McNeill, a veteran of the Enduring Freedom mission in Afghanistan, taking up his post in Kabul on 4 February. The Taleban proclamations create clamour but reflect more a propaganda than a military tactic. Mullah Dadullah, the head of the shura, the military council of the fundamentalists, announced that "6,000 Mujaheddin are ready for the spring campaign". Other Taleban commanders have spoken of 10,000 men, including 2,000 potential suicide bombers, which were then reduced to a more realistic 200. Although these are unreliable numbers they should not, in any case, be taken lightly.

Thanks mainly to American and English reinforcements, the international force in Afghanistan has grown to 45,000 men, the highest number since 2001, when the Taleban regime fell. Some 24,000 American soldiers are taking part in the Enduring Freedom mission and they make up almost one-third of the 33,000 soldiers engaged in the ISAF operation, led by NATO. *However, Anthony H. Cordesman, an analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, maintains in a detailed report on Afghanistan that between a troop increase of between 10% and 25% is needed for a period of five to ten years.*

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It is no surprise then that the new American commander of the ISAF mission is attempting a more aggressive approach with heavy offensives being carried out along the border with Pakistan, where the Talebans and the Al Qaeda followers filter back into the country. *In recent months, the Americans have criticised the policy of the British to reach short and long-term agreements with the tribal elders in the contested zones in order to counter Taleban influence.* The case of Musa Qala, a town in the province of Helmand, infested with Talebans, has shown the limits of this truce policy.

At the start of February the Talebans re-occupied this town, even though the elders had guaranteed, in October last, a truce that provided for the retreat of both the fundamentalists and the British soldiers that were patrolling the zone.

The problem is that the practice of compromise has been part of Afghan history over the past twenty-five years. The tribal elders in the provinces of Paktia, Khost, Paktika, on the border with Pakistan, Logar, Ghazni and Wardak, met in Kabul to propose negotiations with the principal leaders of the hostile forces, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Jalaluddin Haqqani and Mullah Omar.

Not surprisingly, NATO has launched operation Achille with 4,500 soldiers from the alliance and 1000 Afghan soldiers right in the province of Helmand, where the Talebans have their strongholds, so as to retake control of some strategic areas. The objective is not only a military one, rather it aims to create a safe territory for CIMIC operations and for the reconstruction necessary if the task of “winning the minds and hearts of the Afghans” is to be realized. The Dutch general, Ton van Loon, commander of the Southern front, declared that “Achille is achieving positive results. Our efforts are reducing the Talebans’ fighting capacities”. In addition, attempts to send reinforcements from Pakistan, including dozens of Arabs linked to Al Qaeda, appeared to have been blocked.

In any case, the Afghan challenge is not only an internal one. As the Secretary General of Nato, Jaap De Hoop Scheffer, declared during his recent visit to Kabul: “Whether we like it or not ... Afghanistan is the last line of defence in the battle against those that wish to destroy our societies”. *Standing beside Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, De Hoop Scheffer added: “If we are not successful in Afghanistan, we will pay price at home when they attack us in Holland, Belgium, the United Kingdom, just as they did in the United States”.*

Talebans are reemerging in the western zones under Italian command

In the last ten days of March, Italian soldiers employed in western Afghanistan suffered three attacks. The first two took place in the Farah province, where the soldiers are taking part in a “sealing” operation aimed at blocking Taleban infiltrations from the South. The third took place in the Shindand region, eighty kilometres from Herat.

That the first two attacks took place in the same zone shows that the Taleban are attempting to reemerge not only in the South but also in Farah, the Southernmost province of the Western sector under Italian administration, inhabited by a majority of Pashtun, from which most of Mullah Omar’s followers are traditionally drawn.

A dozen serious attacks and bombings took place in the Farah province in January and February. The bloodiest was on 12 March when a remote-controlled bomb blew up the vehicles which were carrying a local district police chief and nine agents. There were no survivors. The Taleban’s preferred targets are Afghan police or members of the Ana, the Afghan army, which is still in its early stages of formation. The fundamentalists concentrate their attacks on isolated

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road blocks or else they make use of kamikaze terrorists. The districts most at risk are Bala Buluk, Delaram and Bakwa, which was occupied two months ago for a day by three hundred heavily armed Talebans. Another target is the strategic road from Kandahar, former spiritual capital of the Talebans, to Herat, where the Italian command is located. In the second last week of March, ten incidents were reported there involving the Talebans, an increase on the previous week.

Sources on the ground claim that the fundamentalists are infiltrating the Farah province from nearby Helmand, where NATO's Achille operation is showing its first results. The Talebans are using typical guerrilla warfare tactics, doubling back into Helmand to wait for the offensive to pass and retreating into the nearby provinces, starting with Farah. The Italian mission is working to block these infiltrations and as a result the risk of attacks has increased. Sources on the ground also point out that the fleeing Talebans could also take up position in the Ghor province, which is also under Italian command, but where the presence of the Afghani security forces is much thinner.

The most recent attack took place further North in the Herat province. This is the Shindand area where a large former Soviet air base, now occupied by the Americans, is to be found, near the Iran border.

Up till a few years ago it was a battle zone for the local warlords because it is seen as a sort of border between the area under Tajik and Shiite control and that run by the Sunnis Pasthuns, the ethnic group from which the Talebans are drawn.

Recent intelligence suggests that the Talebans are gaining strength in this area but the problem is that the attack shows that there is a risk that the threat may move further North towards the provincial capital of Herat.

Peace conference with the Talebans

The Afghan government has ruled out the proposal to include "moderate" Talebans at an international conference on Afghanistan. The refusal came from foreign affairs minister, Rangin Dadfar Spanta, who explained: "In so far as they are a political and military entity, I cannot identify moderate and non-moderate Talebans", such a distinction "is an invention of those who do not know Afghanistan".

Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, did, however, admit, that contacts between government officers and members of the Talebans have been taking place for some time. He himself met with some of Mullah Omar's followers and stated that "the Talebans are sons of this land. If they repent and want to return to be part of this country they are welcome". In practice, the Talebans should give up their arms, break their links with Pakistan and with Al Qaeda if they wish to seriously negotiate with the government.

Spanta, on the other hand, gave a tough reply to German radio and television after Kurt Beck, the leader of the SPD which is part of the broad coalition governing Germany, had proposed inviting "moderate Talebans to an international conference to be held in Germany. Beck, on a visit to the German troops in Afghanistan, hypothesized a conference with the Taliban along the lines of the 2002 Bonn meeting following the collapse of Mullah Omar's regime.

"We have been looking for moderate Talebans in Afghanistan for a long time", said Spanta yesterday, "but we cannot find them. If western politicians know them, they could provide us with the address and contacts so that we can talk to them". It was no surprise that Spanta provided such a stern reply to Beck given that he had lived for many years in exile in Germany.

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The future head of Afghan diplomacy fled the country during the Soviet invasion in the eighties and did not reenter until the fall of the Taleban regime. In Germany he taught at the scientific university RWTH Aachen and was a member of the Green Party.

Beck's proposal coincided with six specially equipped German Tornados being sent to Afghanistan. They will not be used to drop bombs but to locate and take aerial photographs of Taleban hideaways. Berlin is also attempting to deal with having two German hostages in the hands of terrorists in Iraq who are calling for the withdrawal of the troops from Afghanistan. For this reason, Beck's proposal was widely criticised by Chancellor Angela Merkel's CDU party and won only tepid support from the Greens.

Spanta is a Pashtun originally from Herat and is very close to the Afghan head of State, Hamid Karzai, who, before naming him as minister in 2006, had already made him presidential advisor for international affairs. The claim that there are no moderate Talebans has long been made by the Tajik faction, heirs to the famous Commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud, killed by Al Qaeda two days before 11 September. *Yunes Qanooni, today president of the parliament, and Amrullah Saleh, powerful head of the NDS, the Afghan secret services, are utterly opposed to the idea of an international peace conference with the Talebans.* In reality, in October 2006, Karzai himself publicly invited Mullah Omar, the warlike leader of the Talebans, to give up arms and engage in talks for a settlement. *The Taleban response to Karzai came from former spokesman, Mohammed Hanif, who was later arrested. He stated: "We have already explained our position with regard to eventual negotiation. No negotiation is possible as long as invaders (the NATO troops, ed) are in the country".*

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Musharraf's removal of the president of the supreme court is a boomerang

Last March, Pakistan president, Pervez Musharraf, suffered one of his most serious political crises since taking power in a coup in 1999. *Although now blowing over, this crisis is evidence of the beginning of an extremely difficult period leading up to the presidential elections which will soon be held as Musharraf's mandate finishes in October.*

It all began on 9 March when Musharraf tried to force the resignation of Pakistan's highest ranking judge, Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry, president of the High Court and final guarantor of judicial independence. With accusations of abuse of power and nepotism, the president, dressed in his general's uniform, summoned the judge to a barracks in Rawalpindi and tried to force him into resigning. The judge refused and was taken away in a police car and later put under house arrest. The scene, which was filmed, was Musharraf's first error. Broadcast on television, it provoked renewed criticism of the arrogance of the Pakistani military.

Lawyers soon took to the streets to protest and police intervened heavy-handedly causing major damage to a television studio. The situation rapidly went out of control with the opposition strongly supporting the protests. Mass arrests and street violence shocked the country while Musharraf's claims that there was a plot to plunge the country into a worse crisis were largely ignored. *The suspicion is that the president removed the "Chief justice" because he was afraid that he would oppose his recandidacy for the presidency while also retaining his position as head of the armed forces, a position he had promised to give up in an earlier political agreement which he broke.*

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Musharraf knows well that he cannot do this because if he lost control of the army he would risk having it against him in the future, perhaps stoked up by the radical Islamic elements that still hide within its ranks.

In addition it seems that Chaudhry was about to ask the president to account for the disappearances since 2001 of at least 400 prisoners accused of terrorism, some of whom were handed over to the Americans or simply disappeared.

“His invincibility was placed in doubt”, explained Talat Masood, a former general who is critical of Musharraf. In any case, it is commonly believed among western diplomats that “Musharraf will emerge from this crisis weakened but not sufficiently to bring about the collapse of his government”.

Some analysts like Ahmed Rashid maintain that the president is already a lame duck and that he will be unable to fulfil his aim of leading Pakistan for a further five years. For this reason it would be better if he honoured the promise made, when he took power in 1999, to hand back that power to civilian authorities.

This exit strategy might also be supported by the United States which is by now convinced that Musharraf has done all he is capable of doing against the Talebans and the terrorists hidden within the tribal areas on the border with Afghanistan. The underlying strategy dilemma is that the alternatives to Musharraf are all weak at present. In addition, the obvious efforts of the religious parties to ride the tide of anti-Musharraf protest cause by the removal of the Chief Justice, are extremely dangerous.

In reality, the President finds himself faced with two options: “More democracy or greater repression”. If he were to choose, as many hope, the first option, he would have to allow the leaders of the main opposition parties, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, to return to the country. *It is no accident that secret contacts are maintained with Bhutto’s collaborators so as to reach a compromise or a future alliance with Musharraf in the name of the fight against Islamic extremism.*

Bhutto, in a recent interview, criticised the president for the Taliban renewal in Pakistan even though she was the one who originally allowed Mullah Omar’s movement take shape in the mid-nineties. In any case, these are smoke signals, mainly for the benefit of the Americans, in the light of the upcoming and crucial Pakistani presidential and parliamentary elections.

Do the Pakistani secret services support the Talebans?

At the beginning of January, the US intelligence “czar”, John Negroponte, later appointed as number two in the State Department, told a select committee of the American Senate that the leaders of Al Qaeda are well hidden in the Pakistani tribal zone on the Afghan border. Without naming Osama bin Laden or Ayman Al Zawahiri, the former head of the US secret services, underlined that “they are forging, from their safe haven in Pakistan, strong operative links and connections with similar groups throughout the Middle East, North Africa and Europe”. Following the arrests, the carefully executed air raids and the taking apart of various cells, the terror network is now attempting to regroup in the sanctuary offered by the treacherous Pakistani tribal zone.

Al Qaeda is reorganising in the tribal area between Pakistan and Afghanistan, setting up a series of small training camps and a strengthened command and operational structure. In Northern Waziristan, several new Al Qaeda bases have been identified including one which trains volunteers capable of launching attacks well beyond nearby Afghanistan. This camp is

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full of aspiring terrorists with British passports and is evidence that Al Qaeda has never given up on its policy of carrying out spectacular attacks in the heart of the West.

Negroponte's claims, along with those of a former Taleban spokesman who was captured earlier in the year by the Afghans, provoked an irate reaction from Islamabad and even the Pakistani president, Pervez Musharraf, entered the fray. The general-head of state denied that Mullah Omar, leader of the Talebans, was hiding in Quetta, provincial capital of Baluchistan and he pointed out that Pakistan is doing more than any other country in the fight against Al Qaeda, with some thirty thousand military in service in the tribal areas and six hundred victims of the battles against the "misbelievers" as the Islamabad authorities call the foreign Jihadisti.

The thorny issue of whether there is Pakistani collusion can be summarised in a single question: are the Islamabad intelligence agencies supporting the Islamic insurgents in Afghanistan? The New York Times tried to provide an answer with a detailed report from the tribal zones. Western diplomats in Pakistan and members of the opposition to Musharraf's regime are convinced that the ISI has worked in favour of the "restoration" of the Talebans in the tribal zones since 2001, not only in the name of Islamic fervour but with the intention of strengthening its hand in order to increase pressure on the West.

Quetta is without doubt one of the Talebans' main bases and there is evidence that, at the very least, local authorities, dominated by the religious Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam party, are encouraging the regrouping of the Student Warriors. At the Jamiya Islamiya Koranic School, teachers invite their students to volunteer as "martyrs" for the holy war in Afghanistan, that is, to become kamikazes. The director of the madrassa does not deny that some of his students went to Afghanistan in the name of the holy war. In the schoolyard, we find written: "Long life to Mullah Omar" and "Long life to Fazlur Rehman", the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam leader. His trusted followers regularly visit the madrassa. *Maulawi Noor Muhammad, the religious party's parliamentary representative for Baluchistan, claims that there is no longer any concrete aid offered to the Talebans, instead there is "moral support. We hope that we will be successful in throwing the foreign troops out of Afghan territory".*

The New York Times has gathered various first-hand accounts from family members of Pashtun volunteers who enlisted with the neo-Talebans. Many of them were killed in battle while others blew themselves up in suicide attacks allowing themselves be filmed before their "martyrdom".

Although the ISI may not direct assist this recruitment drive, military intelligence is still fully aware of what is going on. The Talebans and the religious parties whose main links remain in Pakistan, often employ ISI officers on leave who, for years, have worked on the Afghan dossier. The best-known is General Hamid Gul, who continues to publicly defend the support he gave the Talebans in the past when he was head of the ISI. He is also suspected of financing and recruiting volunteers for the holy war for Afghanistan.

The first local reactions against foreign militants in Waziristan

In March, South Waziristan, which is part of the tribal area between Pakistan and Afghanistan, was thrown into turmoil by violent battles between the local tribes and foreign militants linked with Al Qaeda. *The Pakistani authorities say that this is the first concrete result of a policy aimed at fomenting resistance in the Pashtun communities to to the foreigners who fled in 2001 after the fall of Taleban Afghanistan. A re-edition of the old "divide et impera" British colonial policy.*

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The stand-offs, which began on 6 March and still have not been quelled, have been intense and bloody, causing some 160 deaths. A local former Taleban commander, Mullah Nazir, who has forged close links with the Islamabad government warned the numerous Uzbek militants in the area to lay down their arms.

Their response was rapid and a brutal battle broke out which continued, on and off, throughout March. The Uzbeks are led by the wanted Tahir Yuldashev, leader of the Islamic movement faithful to Osama bin Laden and associated with Al Qaeda. The real result of this battle is still not clear but it is undoubtedly the first time, since last September's agreements between the Pashtun tribal chiefs and Islamabad, that there has been such a strong reactions against the foreign intruders who were treated as guests in 2001.

In another "hot" zone in the tribal area, the remote region of Bajaur, around 350 exponents of the Tarkani tribe gathered in a Jirga, the traditional Pashtun assembly, and agreed to stop offering refuge to the foreign militants. From Bajaur, Arab extremists come and go into the Afghani province of Kunar and launch attacks against the American troops that are part of the international coalition. The Americans launched an air raid in the same region in January aimed at eliminating the number two in Al Qaeda, Ayman al Zawahiri. He escaped unharmed but 18 people, including civilians, were killed in the attack.

Meanwhile, on 10 March, Osama bin Laden turned 50, that is, if he is still alive, and the Talebans nested in Pakistan dedicated a day of prayer to him. *Western Intelligence services are convinced that the tribal area on the border between Pakistan and Afghanistan will be "the field of battle against terrorism in the years to come"*.