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AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN TOWARDS 2007

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In 2006, Nato took on one of its biggest challenges in terms of its future role by extending the ISAF mission to cover the entire country. There was no shortage of difficulties ranging from the violent battles with the Talebans in the Southern provinces near Pakistan to the growing threat posed by suicide attacks and ever more sophisticated explosive traps. These terrorist tactics seem to have been “copied” from Iraq.

2007 will be a vital year to measure Nato’s success. On the purely military front, it will seek to stabilise the overall situation and to broaden the economic, infrastructural and social reconstruction projects in order to effectively win the “hearts and minds” of the Afghans.

In this context, Italy’s new approach in Afghanistan could have an important role to play. It will stress multilateralism, cooperation, development and probably the training of the Afghan security forces, rather than increase its military contingent.

On the internal front, although the “double” Jirga, the traditional assembly that should be held both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, right on the border between them, may not actually take place, if it does it will provide an important measure of the state of the always difficult relations between Kabul and Islamabad. Parliament will continue to intensify the stand-off with the executive and to attempt to increase its influence over the government. This tactic could be helped by the weakening position of the Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, who is losing the support both of internal public opinion and of his main backers from the international community, starting with the USA.

On a regional level, the danger of a possible nuclear crisis with Iran should not be underestimated. Iran might well aim to destabilise or to launch a reprisal attack in nearby Afghanistan and especially against the American bases there, should a preventive attack be launched against the Iranian atomic structure.

Nato’s real challenge in Afghanistan begins in 2007

Nato’s military expansion into the “hot” provinces to the south and east is only the first step towards a stabilisation of the Taliban-infiltrated “red” areas and, by extension, of the entire country. The last meeting of the Atlantic alliance in Riga was dominated by the Afghan question. The Americans would like the allies to send more troops, but most European countries have no intention of doing this. Furthermore, nations like Italy and Germany will maintain their “caveat”, that is, their restrictions on how their contingents can be used. These restrictions, for example, prohibit soldiers from being sent to the turbulent zones in the south, where English and Canadian soldiers have been fighting along with the Dutch.

The European allies preach caution on the strictly military front and for 2007 favour a broader approach to the problems, which would see a renewed economic and civil commitment being put in place to flank the military one. The suspicion is that the European governments, conscious of hostile public opinion at home to such long periods of military engagement, which, in the end, are slightly forgotten, are afraid that they will not be able to sustain losses over a long period, even if they are counted only in dozens of soldiers, as has happened over the past six months.

What Nato and especially the Europe countries hope to achieve in practice over the coming year is the creation of a centre of international co-ordination for Afghanistan, as has already

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been successfully done in Bosnia and Kosovo. What is needed is an organisation capable of effectively coordinating various players such as Nato itself and the European Union in the political field and in the training of Afghan security forces, and the World Bank, in order to achieve a further push in terms of investment for the economic reconstruction of the country so as to define a broader strategy and avoid the danger that it becomes a new Iraq.

“I don’t expect decisive improvements in the next two years except for a reduction in the Nato contingent and a increased involvement of other international players,” declared the Nato secretary general, Jaap De Hoop Scheffer.

The Talebans are heavily present in the six southern and three eastern provinces and they appear at night or in terrorist attacks in other areas too, including Kabul. Although the movement founded by Mullah Omar has raised its head once again, it has no real possibility of its overturning the current situation and regaining power. *At the same time, however, the central government, despite the support of 31,000 Nato soldiers, is incapable of keeping the entire country under its control and this is not only because of the Talebans and the remaining members of Al Qaida. Other destabilising factors include opium production, old tribal rivalries, disagreements, autonomous use of power by the local governors, the Afghan security force’s insufficient numbers and training, widespread corruption as well as an economic and social structure still waiting to be rebuilt.*

The network of truces and the weak Afghan security forces

In terms of the Taliban problem, an interesting experimental truce has come into effect between the British troops and the fundamentalists in the Musa Qala district in the province of Helmand. Following the bitter battles that raged throughout the summer, the local tribal elders negotiated a truce which saw the retreat of both hostile forces. The Afghan government is present, at least with its flag, and in order to achieve a lasting peace, the elders have asked for central authority to be reimposed and for local developmental projects to be established to improve the quality of people’s lives.

Detractors claim that this amounts to a defeat by the dangerous Talebans. One supporter of the initiative, however, is Abdul Ali Seraj, nephew of King Amanullah, the founder of modern Afghanistan. He is the leader of the Coalition for national dialogue between the Afghan tribes. In any case, for the moment the Musa Qala agreement is holding and next year it could become a pilot project for the “hot” zones on the Pakistani border.

While a small network of truces can block outbreaks of guerrilla war, the government must contemporaneously reinforce its presence around the country with its own security forces, starting with the police, which is in a poor state. “There is and there will not be an exit strategy from Afghanistan until the Afghan security forces are capable of guaranteeing the country’s stability”, according to De Hoop Scheffer.

Although the Americans have spent 1.1 billion dollars to refound the police corps, the results are disappointing, starting with the numbers. Of the 70,000 agents needed, nobody can say with certainty how many are in service and above all if they have been trained to a level that would allow them fulfil their role adequately. The most optimistic estimate is of just 30,395 agents worthy of the name. The availability of vehicles and arms represents another black hole. Poor equipment, low salaries, a lack of essential supplies and logistical problems are the main reasons for the new-born Afghan’s security force’s lack of initiative against the guerrillas and bandits. On the other hand, we should not forget that a Taliban fighter is paid up to 300 dollars

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per month and well supplied with arms, munitions, and supplies. A soldier in the army, although better paid than a police officer, earns just 100 dollars per month and often finds himself incorrectly kitted out for weather changes and left short of munitions. Some units have even been left without food and water.

In 2007, it is probable that European countries, among them, hopefully, Italy, will intervene more decisively in the training, above all, of the police force. Germany is already playing the leading role in the reform of this delicate sector in Afghanistan, but a recent Council of Europe mission found big gaps and encountered obstacles from the Afghan Interior minister who is blocking efforts to improve his agents' professionalism. The aim of the mission is to put together a plan that will see greater European involvement in the training and equipping of the Afghan police force. Despite the infinity of problems, the Nato soldiers are still welcomed with optimism by the Afghans who are convinced that their presence alone can prevent the Talebans from returning to power or civil war from breaking out among the diverse factions, each of which today has a political voice in parliament.

As in Iraq, however, some political forces and significant leaders are beginning to demand that a precise time limit be decided for the foreign troops in Afghanistan even though everyone knows that the most realistic hypotheses are of Nato's commitment lasting a further 10 or 20 years.

Italy's new political approach in Afghanistan

Italy is developing a new political approach to the Afghan crisis, "attributing great importance to the economic aspects and to the reconstruction of the country in the knowledge that there is no solely military solution to the country's problems", as prime minister Romano Prodi put it. The Kabul visit of foreign affairs Minister, Massimo D'Alema was a turning point. The Farnesina intends to develop the commitment and attention to cooperation and humanitarian health aid and to support women and culture. Using its position on the Security Council from January, Italy will underline the importance of multilateralism and accentuate its collaboration with the UN. This is the context for D'Alema's proposing to Afghan president Hamid Karzai an international conference to develop a new approach for Afghanistan, which would be more political than military. The conference should tackle issues such as the drugs battle, the war against terrorism, reconstruction, as well as the reinforcement of the Afghani police and armed forces in order to better coordinate the efforts of the international community with those of the Kabul government.

In concrete terms, Italy will continue to be involved in the justice area, accentuating the discontinuity that was signalled by the changing of the guard of senior officials and the Kabul embassy's assumption of a more direct role in controlling the initiatives in this area.

The Prt in Herat will probably be strengthened to allow it assume a bigger role in sustaining provincial governability and an ever smaller military involvement. The Guardia di Finanza mission, which works to train customs officials in Herat, might be expanded with the opening of a training centre in Kabul. One of the priorities that has been focused upon by the international community, starting with the USA, is a reduction in the levels of corruption and an increase in custom's earnings (roughly 80% of the country's custom's earnings come from the western region, under Italian command).

Germany, which plays the leading role in training the Afghan police in notorious contrast with American methods, has repeatedly called for an increased Italian commitment. In 2007, the

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carabinieri could be called to assume a role in helping strengthen the police. In addition, the Afghan culture minister, aware of Italy's experience in preserving its cultural patrimony, has asked, as Iraq did earlier, for help in protecting its archeological sites and in training Afghan's cultural police.

In 2007, in part to avoid internal political problems, Italy will place a greater emphasis on civil cooperation in Afghanistan. Attention will be focussed on the most disadvantaged sectors of the population, such as women and children and on a few key areas, beginning with health. In this context, it would be wise to expand the Cimic units (civil and military cooperation) although the mixing of humanitarian commitment with military missions is often resisted. It is important to complete quick, concrete projects, mostly in the areas of infrastructure, health, education (bridges, roads, small clinics, schools, etc.) that show the Afghans, disillusioned by promises, that there is a tangible change in their daily life. *This is the first step towards conquering their "minds and hearts" - an indispensable aim of the international community in the country.*

The Jirga to be held on the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan

One of the most critical political challenges of the New Year, which has already been the subject of heated debate in the closing months of 2006, is the proposal to convene an extraordinary sitting of the Loya Jirga on both sides of the delicate border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. This in practice would be a double traditional assembly that should, theoretically, attempt to sort out the instability on the southern border through which the Talebans and the remaining followers of Al Qaida filter into the country. Many parliamentarians and Afghani experts, however, are convinced that the Jirga in reality is a Pakistani ploy, even though it has been accepted in principal by President Karzai. It could worsen rather than improve the situation, they fear, because, being held on both sides of the border, it might be manipulated by Pashtun extremist elements and by the Talebans. In addition, there is a risk that this expanded Jirga would reduce the Kabul parliament's legitimacy, above all if it were to recommend offering a political opening to the Talebans. Press leaks from Pakistan, prompted by Islamabad and later denied by the Foreign Ministry, about extending the Afghan government to include "moderate" Taliban representatives, provoked furious reactions in Afghanistan. The episode was provoked by a document, supposedly written by the famous Pakistani journalist, Ahmed Rashid, an expert on the Taliban movement, which is said to have advised senior Nato officials to make a deal allowing the Taliban representatives to join the executive.

The makeup of the commission charged with organising the Great Jirga leaves doubts about the actual willingness to have it take place in 2007. The president is Said Ahmad Gailani, a noted exponent of the Mujaheddin old guard. However he is ill and cannot work more than four hours a day. The vice-presidents are the Hazara Shiite leader, Haji Mohammed Mohaqeq, and Fazli Hadi Shinwari, a man in his eighties whom parliament recently pensioned off from his position as president of the supreme court because of his age. The commission is coordinated by Farook Wardak, Karzai's chief of staff and minister in charge of relations with parliament. Despite his undoubted ability, the path to holding the Jirga on the border remains lined with obstacles.

Parliament wants greater control over the government. The federalism debate gathers pace in the background.

The Afghan parliament is one year old but most of its members are unhappy about its limited ability to check the power of the government. According to the constitution, the two-house

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assembly should offer a real balance of powers with regard to the executive which is named by the president. Although some ministers were not ratified, parliamentarians are dissatisfied because they thought they would have greater influence over the government. Not surprisingly, the recent law regulating how the ministries function, was studied with particular interest by parliamentarians who finally were able to get their hands on the “machine” of executive power.

In 2007, parliament, including the voting block faithful to Karzai, will seek to further distinguish itself from the executive branch and to influence if not direct the government. A motion to fix the date for the withdrawal of foreign troops - a battle-horse, this - of the Jihad faction, might be one of the tactics used to put the government under pressure and to force it into making dangerous commitments.

Even if it will not radically effect Afghanistan’s destiny, the controversial law regarding the media, which is still being processed, will represent one of the most controversial choices placed before the assembly in the coming year. The government wants greater control over the media and numerous journalists have been beaten up or threatened by representatives of the public authorities in various parts of the country. The representatives of religious conservatism in parliament are proposing restrictive emendments but parliamentarians realise that a further tightening of the media’s freedom would help the executive above all. The communications minister, a former member of warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb i Islami old party is said to be against any tightening.

Another difficult issue concerning parliament is the country’s stability and the ever-more-obvious distance between the population of the north and that of the rest of Afghanistan. The debate on federalism is more and more pressing and might become a key debate next year. The institutions in Kabul, accused of abandoning the north, find they are faced with two types of problem. On the one hand, there are the provocative positions being adopted by some “strong” governors, such as Mohammad Atta in Mazar i Sharif, who is threatening to distribute arms to the people in the south so they can defend themselves. What is in practice being proposed is the constitution of a tribal militia to fill the gaps left in the security field by the central government. On the other hand, peaceful provinces such as Saripol organise delegations of lobbyists in Kabul to ensure they will not be forgotten. They make the case to the government, to parliament, to the international community, that peaceful zones exist, which accept the breaking up of the militias, support the reform and democratisation plans, but are absurdly receiving very little aid or investment.

The average Afghanistan has no tangible sense of improvements from new-found freedom.

Five years after the fall of the Taleban regime, large groups of the Afghan population still have no real sense of concrete results, of improvements in their daily lives deriving from their new-found freedom. It is therefore no surprise that in the areas at risk, especially in the south and east of the country, which are overwhelmingly Pashtun, the propaganda coming from the hostile forces is having an effect.

Life has visibly changed in the larger cities but in rural areas, life for the average Afghan has not only not improved but has actually worsened because of the lack of public security, something which the Talebans had successfully maintained.

Apart from this problem, 2007 will see the average Afghan dealing with the same problems that have been ever-present in recent years. The lack of work, which in some areas affects 85% of the male population, remains the main issue. Despite some signs of economic renewal, most

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Afghans continue to live on the equivalent of 40 dollars per month. Widespread corruption also continues to obstruct renewal in the country. Karzai has launched a “war” against corruption but some of the initiatives of the Procurator General to deal with the worst cases have backfired and had an effect quite the contrary to what was hoped. In 2007 it will become clear if the anti-corruption campaign is mere window-dressing or if it will actually achieve results.

Not only. Rampant corruption and lack of public safety have provoked a rise in the number of kidnappings of Afghani entrepreneurs or their family members with the aim of having a ransom paid. This problem needs to be tackled decisively.

Despite improvements in education and health, many problems remain to be faced in 2007. The reopening of schools, also for girls, was one of the great successes of Karzai's government. Unfortunately, in the south the Talebans burnt down many educational institutions and went so far as to behead teachers and create general terror in the whole area of education. The result is that in certain areas not only do girls not go to school but boys do not go either.

The unsettled province of Zabul serves by way of example: last year from a population of eight hundred thousand, only six students were awarded diplomas there. Most worryingly, the veto on education for women is also gaining support in the north in the name of Islamic conservatism. For example, in the province of Baghlan, the council of elders of the local tribes decreed that girls could not continue their studies after elementary school because they must stay at home to take care of their original families or of the family they acquire through a marriage arranged when they are still very young.

Although the health situation has improved, Afghanistan still has the highest infant mortality rate in the world and the highest number of cases of polio. Italy is committed in this area and in 2007 its strategy change in Afghanistan will see an increase in its involvement.

Even if the average Afghan does not perceive the danger posed by opium trafficking, if poppy production continues to increase Afghanistan risks becoming a narco-State, in which the drugs warlords take control of the institutions. It should not be forgotten that drug consumption in the country is rapidly increasing and this in turn feeds criminality and places at risk the very foundations of Afghan society, which, based on Islamic puritanism close one eye with regard to poppy production but has no toleration for the consumption of opium or heroin.

The risk of an Iranian “reprisal”

In the regional picture, apart from the historical stand-off with Pakistan, the risk of an Iranian reprisal in Afghanistan in the event of the international community continuing to oppose Teheran's nuclear policy should not be dismissed. This threat could become automatic should Israel, with the more or less tacit support of the United States, launch a preventative attack against Iranian nuclear plants.

Iran's vice foreign minister, Saeid Jalili, announced that his country was ready to participate in the international conference for Afghanistan being promoted by Italy, but a few days later, the Afp press agency reported an alarming speech made by Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. "The peoples of Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Pakistan, must be helped. If we help one another we can throw out the invaders", the president said in a speech to Basij volunteers, at the grave of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini. The reference was to the foreign troops in Afghanistan. The Italian command of the PRT (Provisional reconstruction team) in Western Afghanistan is located at Herat, the provincial capital, a stone's throw away from the Iranian border.

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Herat is already heavily infiltrated by Iranian secret services. Iran's historic influence there is to be seen in various sectors ranging from the economic-commercial to the cultural. In addition, there is a big American presence in the area in the former Soviet Shindad airbase located to the south of Herat. This is a close, easy target for Iranian missiles should there be a nuclear crisis.

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In 2007, Pakistan and its strong man, President Pervez Musharraf, will find themselves faced with some crucial problems, the solutions of which will have an international impact, especially in the United States, which is so committed in nearby Afghanistan.

The most important appointment is that of the presidential elections which are due to be held between 15 September and 15 October next. They will be followed by general elections, probably in January 2008. The vote for President and parliamentary elections will inevitably cause a full-scale stand-off between Musharraf and the Radical Islamists on one side, and his exiled rivals, on the other, although the possibility of a deal being forged should not be excluded. Lurking in the background is the threat posed by Al Qaida and the Pakistani terrorist groups linked to Osama bin Laden, which, with the support of the fundamentalist military fringes, have not given up on the idea of removing the President.

The Islamabad government will also have to deal with two evolving internal problems which could worsen: the revolt in Baluchistan and the unstable situation in the autonomous frontier areas on the border with Afghanistan. Finally, on a regional level, 2007 will either provide definitive progress towards a peaceful solution of the thorny Kashmir problem with India or it will see the negotiations run into an inexorable state of paralysis.

Musharraf at the election crossroads

Musharraf wants to reduce the parliamentary influence of the Radical Islamics which today, with the alliance of six religious parties, Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), are the most insidious thorn in his side. He hopes that their share of the vote will fall from 11% to less than 5%, but this will not be easy in the light of the rising anti-American sentiments which see Musharraf denounced as a "servant" of Washington. The President does not intend to allow the return of two of the country's most important political figures, Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, who are in exile abroad and are accused, with some justification, of corruption.

Musharraf should not have too many problems in getting re-elected as the nomination is due to be made by the current parliament and the four provincial assemblies. Immediately after this, the manoeuvres to elect the new assembly will begin. Musharraf seems to want to plough straight ahead and strengthen his Pakistani Muslim league (Quaid-i-Azam), or PML-Q, known as the "party of the King". The pml-Q has attracted parliamentarians mainly from Sharif's Muslim League (Sharif is the former Prime Minister who was overthrown by Musharraf in a peaceful coup in 1999). Sometimes, however, the "party of the King" has embarrassed the president by opposing his reforms. The Americans have advised Musharraf to expand his base, perhaps by making a deal with the country's secular groups, in order to definitively pin the Radical Islamics into a corner. The paladin of the secularists is the Popular party's leader Benazir Bhutto, another former prime minister forced into exile. Bhutto and Sharif, while cordially hating each other, have reached a watertight agreement to take part in the parliamentary elections due in January 2008, with the intention of returning from exile in their

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aftermath. Musharraf, is keeping the ban on their return in place for the moment but it is possible that informal contacts will continue in 2007 between his envoys and Bhutto's.

In any case Musharraf is the only card the West can play given that Pakistan is a nuclear power. Even though he led a coup and democracy in the country risks only being a facade, Musharraf is seeking, in the name of the Islamic faith's "enlightened moderation", to lead the nation in an acceptable and non traumatic way.

Musharraf like Sadat?

The Islamic terrorists have long considered Musharraf to be a "dead man walking", because they are convinced that sooner or later they will be able to assassinate the hated father-owner of Pakistan, who began to betray them when he left the Taleban regime to its fate after 11 September 2001. Many hope he will suffer the same fate as Egyptian President Sadat who was killed by integralists because of his conciliatory policy with Israel. First among them is Ayman al Zawahiri, who was involved in the plot against Sadat. Number two in Al Qaida and effective commander of what remains of the terror network, he has repeatedly called for the elimination of Musharraf. The people involved in at least three earlier attempts on his life are part of the Pakistani terrorist underworld. The last attempt to kill the president, which took place last October, also showed, as in the past, the involvement of officers from the armed forces, often serving in delicate posts. Al Zawahiri has repeatedly called on the military to overthrow Musharraf and despite purges there are still plenty of senior officers who are close to the religious parties and are sympathetic towards the Talebans, if not Al Qaida. The risk is that as the presidential elections approach in 2007 the terror forces succeed in achieving their goals, which are not only to kill the president but to organise a state coup which would see Islamic fanatics taking control of this regional nuclear power.

The thorns in the side

In 2007, the Islamabad government will continue to grapple with two other areas of crisis – the autonomous tribal zone bordering with Afghanistan and Baluchistan.

The radical Islamics won 11% of the national vote and they also control the provincial assemblies of the North West frontier province and some of those in Baluchistan. The main Jihad newspaper, however, has a great circulation and anti-American sentiment, stoked by the crisis in nearby Afghanistan, is growing. One of the real areas of reform that Musharraf will have to attempt to implement, having always postponed it or approached it only half-heartedly, is that of education. The question of the Madrasses is particularly urgent. The idea of an acceptable public education system has failed in Pakistan and in its stead, at least ten thousand Madrasses or Koranic schools have been established. Some sources talk of forty thousand. These schools are influenced by the Jihad mentality and by the exaltation of "martyrdom" which lies at the base of Kamikaze attacks by the Islamic fanatics. The state universities are dominated by the youth movement of the largest religious party, the Jamaat e Islami. At the University of Punjab, in Lahore, the absurd decision to ban Coca-Cola was taken, because it was deemed a "Jewish drink".

It is likely that the Islamabad authorities will continue to use stick and carrot tactics in the tribal zones. On the one hand, they will reach anti-Al Qaida agreements with the tribes, while allowing, at the same time however, the neo-Talebans to continue to proselytise and make use of the area as a refuge. The danger is of the tribal area generating a new Pakistani form of the

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Taleban movement, which could expand not only into Afghanistan but also in the other direction with increased involvement of the Psthun border tribes. Islamabad will also use the stick, and will attack the centres linked to Al Qaida that openly threaten Musharraf as it has recently done in the Bajaur tribal zone. It is believed that the real target of the last raid was Al Zawahiri, but he escaped the bombing. He is believed to have ordered the recent assassination attempt made on the president in the capital.

The Baluchistan problem will persist into 2007, until free and honest elections are held that will allow that Baluchi nationalists, the source of the revolt, to win a political voice. *The governmental force's killing last August of one of the more famous guerrilla leaders, Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, worsened the situation.* The alliance between Jamaat e Islami and Musharraf's party helped the extremist Psthun fringes and caused the Baluchi moderates to lose out. The resulting situation of instability has favoured Taleban infiltration from the province into Afghanistan. *If a political solution is not found in 2007 through elections then the Baluchistan crisis could worsen and become far more dangerous than it currently is.*

The Kashmir negotiations risk stalling

Pakistan is willing to renounce its claim to Kashmir if India will agree to allow a broad degree of self-government to the Himalyan region which has been contested by the two countries for half a century. This is President Musharraf's final offer. He has suggested that a gradual withdrawal of the military currently positioned in Kashmir could begin next year.

2007 should almost certainly see agreement reached over the Siachen ice-cap, a war-zone located at an altitude of six thousand metres where soldiers from both sides are killed mainly by the terrible weather conditions in which they are forced to live.

Agreement over the ice-cap would be symbolically important but would not make any real difference except to help unblock negotiations which, although progress has been made, still seem to be stalled. To move on, half a century after the initial Kashmir hostilities, major political initiative is needed on both sides. Unfortunately every time India and Pakistan reach a moment of real movement, the Islamic terrorists who want an independent Kashmir carry out a devastating attack which achieves their desired aim of blocking the negotiations once again.