

Afghanistan and Pakistan

AFGHANISTAN 2008 / PAKISTAN 2008

Fausto Biloslavo

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The majority of Afghans are still optimistic about the country's future but it is fundamental to understand that in order to achieve success planning must now begin for an adequately financed military and civil campaign that could last up to 15 years.

2008 will inevitably bring a greater integration of roles among the NATO allies. It should be remembered that the American, British and Canadian forces have borne the weight and responsibility for the more important activities carried out against the hostile forces. To achieve a meaningful victory it is vital to reinforce and render operative the Afghan army which in 2008 could reach the original target of 70 thousand soldiers.

In today's conflicts, however, bullets are not enough. Innovative approaches are needed but above all Afghan stomachs must be filled through the creation of new jobs and opportunities. The probable nomination of a "super envoy" from the international community will serve not only to coordinate the efforts in the fields of reconstruction, aid and governance at national and provincial level but could also, in 2008, help towards an acceleration in the already existing negotiations with the Talebans and some of their allies who agreed to lay down arms.

A hopeful future according to the Afghans

The majority of Afghans are still optimistic about the country's future and only 5% support the Talebans according to a poll commissioned by the BBC and other international TV networks in the light of the challenges to be faced in 2008. Not everything is going wrong in Afghanistan, although there is greater frustration than in 2006 with the overly slow progress towards pacification and the rebuilding of the country. According to the poll, 54% of Afghans think things are heading in the right direction, just one point lower than in 2006. 70%, however, described their living conditions as "good" or very "good". Although three-quarters of Afghans complain about unemployment, 46% about the lack of drinking water and 84% about the poor electricity supply, the economy is actually improving. The gross domestic product is increasing at an annual rate of 8-10% while earnings per head have reached 350 dollars. Three mobile telephone companies are present in Afghanistan with a million and a half clients.

1,377 people drawn from the 34 Afghan provinces were interviewed for the poll between the end of October and the start of November 2007. On the sixth anniversary of the fall of the Talebans only 5% openly support the followers of Mullah Omar. Of these, just 14% support the foreign volunteers taking part in the international holy war linked to al-Qaeda, who are fighting in Afghanistan. On the other hand, 71% of interviewees said they approved of the presence of American troops in Afghanistan while 67% approve the NATO mission. Not only: those interviewed say the forces of the international coalition must stay in Afghanistan for at least two years. These figures, down slightly on 2006, show the failure of the Talebans to manipulate Afghan public opinion. According to Portuguese general, Carlos Branco, spokesman for the NATO mission in Kabul: "The Talebans have failed as an insurrectionist movement. After six years they control small pockets of land. They are not capable of taking us on." Perhaps the spokesman of the ISAF mission is too optimistic if remember that at least all of the "Pasthun belt" running from western to eastern Afghanistan along the border with Pakistan is considered a red zone at medium or high risk.

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69% of Afghans accuse Pakistan of helping the Talebans while 60% would like the Afghan government to negotiate a peace deal with the armed fundamentalists. The most negative statistic relates to the low level of support for the members of the government and for President Hamid Karzai himself. 60% of Afghans are convinced that there will be a government crisis but there is an interesting and unusual parity of opinion with regard to the future of the conflict. 40% believe that Karzai, with the support of the international troops will win out, while another 40% believe it is too early to call. 19% remain convinced that the Talebans will return to power as soon as the foreign troops leave the country.

A new NATO “integrated plan”

"The overall level of violence (in Afghanistan) has increased over the past two or three years", according to the American defense secretary, Robert Gates. In 2007 there was a 30% rise in the number of attacks carried out by terrorists and insurgents even if they have no hope of success against NATO in open battle. The number of suicide attacks up to last autumn rose to 140 compared with 123 in 2006. 76% of the kamikaze attacks are directed against the international troops while the majority of victims are civilians. In addition, for the second consecutive year, the number of air raids in Afghanistan, not including armed interventions with helicopters, was far higher than in Iraq.

The number of Taliban fighters and their allies (Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's former Hezb i islami, the group linked to Jalaluddin Haqqani and al-Qaeda) ranges from 6 to 20 thousand depending on the periods of mobilisation and on the number of part-time militia. At least 6,000 were killed in 2005 but there is no shortage of new recruits from the Pakistani tribal areas on the border.

It would not be realistic to expect a decrease in the level of violence in 2008 especially if NATO's ISAF mission fails to find a more cohesive common strategy among the various allied countries present in Afghanistan. A long-term strategy which is not only military. As in 2007, it is probable that there will be a further asymmetric development of the conflict with terrorist attacks rather than larger scale armed warfare.

The NATO has some forty thousand troops in Afghanistan and the Americans have a further fourteen thousand soldiers taking part in the parallel Enduring Freedom mission. Obviously, the United States – the country with the highest number of troops – is asking its allies to do more. Defence Secretary Robert Gates has criticised his NATO allies for failing to provide the means, especially the military instructors, helicopters and infantry battalions that are urgently needed in Afghanistan. While not naming individual countries, he pointed out that the English, US, and Canadian troops deployed in the “hot” zones of Southern and Eastern Afghanistan were the only ones to have honoured their commitments, especially with regard to attempting to actively combat the hostile forces.

The head of the joint chiefs of staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, told Congress of his worries about the restrictions that are “afflicting the ISAF command, “constrained by a host of caveats that limits its ability” British premier, Gordon Brown told parliament that “we are winning the battle” in Afghanistan. The opposition leader, David Cameron, used words from other times in recalling that the 7,800 British soldiers had shown “the same spirit as those who stormed the beaches in Normandy, who held the line at Inchon in the Korean war, or who re-took the Falkland Islands”.

A show of pride, this, that is not only rhetorical but which reflects Britain's determined commitment in Afghanistan in 2008, made possible also by the withdrawal from Iraq. Brown

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even stated that British forces would remain in Afghanistan for a further ten years and announced reinforcements, especially new helicopters and patrol vehicles. In addition to the military commitment, he also announced plans to spend 650 million euro for “development and stabilisation assistance” between 2009 and 2012.

The Italians are also in the frontline even if they are in charge in Kabul and the Western provinces considered at “medium risk”. Despite being subject to suicide attacks, outbreaks of armed violence, explosive traps, our involvement continues to be seen exclusively as a peace mission and the idea that it can involve war actions is refused. American, Canadian and British troops continue to hunt Taleban forces and their allies out of their nests while the Italians disengage from military contact against the enemy and at most support the local security forces in their territorial patrols. Despite this, the number of Italian soldiers has risen to about 2,600 and we will maintain command of operations in the Kabul sector until July 2008.

The United States managed to get a commitment from the allies for an “integrated plan” for Afghanistan not only in 2008 but also beyond this date. The plan should be ready for the meeting of the NATO Heads of State to be held in Bucharest next Spring.

From a military point of view there will be calls for a greater rotation of the allied troops in the “hot” zones as well as increased commitment in terms of men and means. According to Herman Schaper, Dutch ambassador to NATO, special forces will be given an enhanced role in anti-guerrilla operations which will necessarily be in the Pashtun zone as well as on the Pakistani side of the border where the Talebans and al-Qaeda enjoy safe refuge.

In 2008 the United States will push to tackle the opium production problem (Afghanistan is now the world’s largest producer) and the narco-traffic business which is financing the insurgency.

The Americans are determined to intervene with a series of precise moves designed to contrast the opium plantations and the contraband movement of drugs and to oppose the narco-traffickers. This task is not currently part of the NATO mission’s role in Afghanistan.

Political strategy and civil intervention

The new “integrated plan” will also include reconstruction, economic development and the consolidation of the Afghan institutions to which the military are committed along with the PRT, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams.

This will mean a greater long-term commitment which will also be financial. In Bosnia the international community supported the military initiative by spending 1,400 dollars per inhabitant on civil interventions. In Kosovo the figure was around 800 dollars but in Afghanistan only 50 dollars per inhabitant has been spent.

In addition, a consensus is emerging among NATO members with regard to the idea of appointing a strong civilian coordinator for Afghanistan. Another hypothesis, strongly supported by Italy, is that of a conference in the mid-term to evaluate overall strategy.

The most widely supported name for the role of “super envoy” is that of Paddy Ashdown, the British politician and former soldier who has already represented the international community in Bosnia. He could become the new UN representative in Afghanistan with increased powers to include responsibility for coordinating civilian interventions connected with NATO. Another hypothesis is that a joint NATO and European representative could be nominated. In this case, he would be a “super envoy” with wide coordinating powers, a figure that would not be particularly welcomed by President Karzai who is afraid of being put under the tutelage of the new Western representative.

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In addition, 2008 must see a decisive acceleration in the negotiations with those Talebans ready to give up armed conflict. At least five thousand soldiers, who were paid 5 dollars per day, have accepted the national reconciliation plan by giving up their arms. A challenge that remains is to convince an important representative of the insurgents, who are more divided than ever, to do the same. This would favour a further break-up in the armed fundamentalist movement. Various plans exist such as the concession of local government positions in southern Pashtun and an integration of those groups that agree to talks into militia to be used against more extremist elements, linked to al-Qaeda. More or less a photocopy of the tactics used in Iraq in the Al Anbar province and in with the Sunnis in Baghdad. The same plan is also to be used in the tribal areas in Pakistan which serve as a refuge for militia and terrorists.

There was nothing occasional in British premier Gordon Brown's declaration: "there is space for political reconciliation and as Karzai has said, whoever abandons the rebellion can have a space in Afghan society and in its economy".

The Afghan army

A decisive victory will come when the Afghans are capable of guaranteeing their own security. The army (Afghan National Army – ANA) today is made up of fifty seven thousand men, but last October only twenty-two thousand were actually operative. In 2008, the aim is to reach the target of seventy thousand soldiers fixed in 2001.

The Afghans hope to almost triple this number. A spokesman for the Defence minister, General Zahir Azimi declared: "Two hundred thousand men will be capable of guaranteeing security throughout the country and will cost the international community less than it would to keep their own troops in Afghanistan". According to the Afghan general, who is sometimes prone to exaggeration, the cost of one NATO soldier would pay for 70 Afghans officers.

The problem is that today only 20% of Afghan troops are capable of leading combat operations with the support of the coalition forces. 60% of the absences among the ranks of the new recruits are not authorised. Often it is not a question of real desertion but comes about because soldiers must return home to help their families living in areas a long way from where they are employed by the army.

The real black hole is in the police force, which has grown from 62,000 to 83,000 men but has only one unit capable of operating independently. It is calculated that one in every 72 units is able to carry out an operation but only with western support.

A further issue is the endemic corruption among officers and the lack of means and equipment. In 2008, NATO will attempt to build support for the mission in Afghanistan among some Muslim countries with the aim of significantly increasing the training levels of the Afghan army.

The key points in "nation building"

"The Afghan-Pakistan War: A Status Report" by the analysts from the Centre for Strategic & International Studies in Washington, Anthony H. Cordesman and Arleigh A. Burke, published on 3 December, identifies the following problems in the rebuilding of the Afghan state.

Key problems in national *governance*:

- The anti-corruption measures have not brought significant results and the future is uncertain;

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- Creating effective ministries and a civil service is making slow progress, is blocked by favoritism often dictated by ethnic interests;
- Needed legislative reforms for the the 2009 and 2010 elections are proceeding slowly and uncertainly;
- Efforts to create effective provincial governments are still strongly influenced by ethnic and tribal factors rather than merit and on the ground ability;
- Many provincial governments are still weakened and are threatened by the lack of security in the southern and south eastern high risk areas.
- Key problems in local governance:
 - Many high threat areas have no civil government presence at local level;
 - 78 districts are inaccessible to UN agencies and to most humanitarian organisations;
 - The judicial system (for which Italy is deeply involved in pursuing a radical reform), is understaffed and those who work in it are underpaid. It is not able to enforce law throughout the country. The police, when present, are often corrupt, passive and ineffective;
 - The number of children in school has increased and the number of attacks on schools is down but 340 of the 721 schools in the provinces of Kandahar, Uruzgan, Helmand and Zabul had to close because of safety fears.

Basic services seem to have improved, however. According to Karzai forty thousand more children survive each year. Mortality rates for mothers and infants were until recently the highest in the world after Sierra Leone The health minister claims that 80% of the population can avail of medical assistance (though this figure whould be treated with caution).

In the area of *governance* the most interesting initiative is the recent creation of an independent body for local government of the provinces. The new institution will work with the Programme for national solidarity, a sort of decentralised cooperation entity which achieving fairly good results. The local communities, based on the traditional local tribal assemblies, can decide, thanks to this programme, where and what to build, whether it be a bridge, a medical facility or a road.

In 2008 attention will have to be focalized not only on the military intervention but on the integration of the armed mission with the economic and social rebuilding of the country. Bullets matter but so do the jobs and infrastructure which can improve the lives of Afghans. Above all, however, it is vital to realise that if the operations in Afghanistan can have any hope of success, they must develop over a period which some analysts put at 15 years. For this reason, military and civil plans must be drawn up and the finance need for their realisation must be guaranteed.

PAKISTAN 2008

In 2008, Pakistan risks remaining stuck in an unprecedented political crisis with little hope of moving towards greater stability.

The assassination of former premier and opposition leader Benazir Bhutto is a sign of just how unstable the situation is. The impression is that control of the country is slipping out of the hands of Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf. The parliamentary elections of 8 January have been postponed to 18 February because of the violence that exploded followed Bhutto's death. Although the Pakistani Popular Party should edge a victory in the elections their coming to power will not solve the problems but make them even more evident. Only a government of

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national unity which avoids a constant standoff with the president, or an unlikely resignation by Musharraf, could open the way to a new way forward.

In the background the threat posed by al-Qaeda and the Pakistani terrorist groups linked to Osama bin Laden's network remains. These groups continue to work to destabilise the country. In addition, the Islamabad government must be more decisive in finding new strategies for tackling the Taleban "rebirth" in the tribal areas which risks spreading beyond the border zone with Afghanistan. The risk is that the Afghan conflict spills over into Pakistani territory moving the centre of the regional crisis towards Islamabad.

The elections alone will not solve the crisis

The political crisis in Pakistan greatly worsened with the murder of Benazir Bhutto on 27 December. She was killed at an electoral meeting in Rawalpindi, the garrison town not far from the capital.

Despite the denials, the tactics used suggest a link with the network of al-Qaeda and its local allies in the galaxy of Sunni terrorist groups connected to the neo-Talebans in the tribal border zone. The Islamabad authorities have asked Scotland Yard for help on the case but it is also clear that the authorities were able to get close to Bhutto thanks to help from the security forces that were supposed to protect her. Many Pakistanis blame Musharraf at least for the insufficient protection given to the country's most exposed political leader.

All the limits of Pakistani democracy were brought to light with the dynastic choice over who was to succeed her. Power was passed from the assassinated mother to her young son, Bilawal, whose name means "without equals". In reality, Bhutto's political testament indicated her controversial husband Asif Ali Zardari as her successor as leader of the Pakistani popular party. He is nicknamed "Mister 10 per cent", because of the old stories of bribery and corruption which continue to weigh against him. For this reason, Zardari formally allowed himself to be declassified to co-President of the party, making way for his son Bilawal as number one. In reality Bilawal is already back in England where he will continue his studies while his father remains the real leader. The wave of emotional support in the Popular party following Bhutto's death for the nomination of her son to the presidency, even if he does not actually hold the reins of power, was an excellent operation in political marketing for the forthcoming parliamentary election.

The vote has been postponed to 18 February because of the violence which followed Bhutto's assassination. The Popular party is expected to win and their real political Machiavelli, Makhdoom Amin Fahim, Bhutto's number two, who led the party during her long exile, is candidate for the post of prime minister. The party will remain united until the election but Zardari's leadership will soon be challenged and thus another element of uncertainty will be added to the Pakistan crisis.

Outside the Popular Party, former premier Nawaz Sharif is trying to ride the wave that followed Bhutto's death. Having repeatedly appealed for a boycott, he has now changed his mind and hopes for a result that will be as good as recent polls have suggested and which will allow him aim for a place in an anti-Musharraf coalition government. The role of the religious parties, split over whether or not to take part in the elections, and with a core support of 10%, is another unknown.

The President has promised "fair and correct elections" but even if his popularity is at an all-time low he is not giving up. The Muslim League (PML-Q), which supports Musharraf, will suffer in these elections which risk bringing the crisis to a head. If we exclude the resignation of

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the head of state there is little doubt that there will be a constant stand-off with the anti-Musharraf executive. Because of this, one possible solution, which the Americans had attempted to bring about with the return of Bhutto, would be a national unity government. Such a government, strong both in parliament and in the country, with Musharraf's support, is what is needed to lift Pakistan out of the terrible crisis into which it is plunging. This hypothesis, however, given the personalised nature of Pakistani politics and the elimination of Bhutto is unlikely to become a reality.

The situation risks remaining explosive and stability will be a mirage in 2008. Trouble-makers from al-Qaeda or the neo-Talebans may well continue to attack high profile targets, in order to create chaos both before and after the elections.

Can Musharraf still count on the armed forces?

Pervez Musharraf wore the army uniform from when he was 18 years old but in 2008 he will no longer have direct control over the armed forces, although he still has considerable influence among the officers that count.

Musharraf has passed the stick of command to General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. By formation a liberal, he is considered to be close to the Americans with whom he has collaborated in the hunt for terrorists from al-Qaeda, beginning with the capture of Abu Faraj al Libbi, that organization's number three. The only downside was his decision to call for a truce with the pro-Taleban militia in the tribal areas. In the late eighties, Kayani served as Bhutto's military vice-secretary, when she first served as head of the Pakistani government. He is determined to keep the armed forces out of politics, eight years after Musharraf's coup deposed then premier Sharif. The United States consider him one of the most important players on the Pakistan scene. If the situation should deteriorate on the political front with new outbreaks of disorder, there is no guarantee that Kayani will side with a president who is unpopular with his people and increasingly disliked by the armed forces.

Musharraf knows he can count on his successor only up to a certain point and for this reason, before resigning from the army, he nominated General Nadeem Taj as head of the ISI, the powerful military secret service. Taj, former military secretary to the president and mentioned in his recent autobiography, is Musharraf's most trusted ally in the armed forces. The opposition has accused splinter groups in the ISI of having allowed assassins carry out the murder of Bhutto. Other generals Musharraf will be able to count on in 2008 include Tariq Majeed, the key figure after Kayani and Mohsin Kamal, named as head of the Command at Rawalpindi, the country's most important, just a few miles from the capital.

The imposition of a state of emergency last november led to a public protest by 20 retired officers who wrote an open letter calling on Musharraf to retire. This was a further sign of how difficult it will be for Musharraf, having given up his position in the army, to maintain his influence over the armed forces.

The threat posed by the neo-Talebans and al-Qaeda

In 2007, Musharraf, distracted by the ongoing political difficulties, failed to find a successful strategy to counter the growth of the neo-Taleban phenomenon in Pakistan. The problems is spreading beyond the tribal zones on the border with Afghanistan. The most extreme Mullahs continue to make themselves heard in Karachi, Peshawar and in other big cities. Events such as the revolt in the Red Mosque in Islamabad could be repeated in 2008.

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The doctrine preached by Musharraf's successor, General Kayani, is bearing fruit but the stand-off with the neo-Taliban group which is expanding in Pakistan will not be won in the short term. The Swat valley was, until recently, only a natural oasis not far from Islamabad. In the final two months of 2007 it became the epicentre of bitter battles between the army and Maulana Fazlullah's Pakistani Taliban. The soldiers are winning back the valley but at a high price. At least 290 armed integralists have been killed in just a few weeks.

The challenge in the tribal areas will be decisive if stability is to be achieved in the country in 2008. The American command of special operations in Tampa has drawn up an intervention plan which is based on dozens of instructors of anti-guerilla tactics and a pile of money. The plan is similar to that used to good effect against the Sunni tribes in the Iraqi province of Al Anbar and in Baghdad to isolate al-Qaeda. Although it has not as yet been approved but in addition to a strong contingent of special corps instructors for the units on the Pakistani border (85,000 men recruited from the local tribes) it provides for a 350 million dollar financing for several years of training and for new equipment. In addition, the State Department's agency for international development has already allocated 750 million dollars, over five years, to fund interventions in the employment, health, and education sectors in the tribal zones.

In 2008, al-Qaeda and its associated groups will try again to assassinate important public figures including Musharraf. The last attempt was foiled in December but there is a risk that the wave of kamikaze attacks, which started with the Red Mosque turmoil last summer, will continue, on and off, throughout 2008.

For the first time, one of December's suicide attacks, was against the entrance to the Kamra air base. This is the complex where the F16s are prepared to carry nuclear arms.

Washington has drawn up intervention plans to guarantee the safety of Pakistan's nuclear sites should a serious crisis break out. There was not occasion about the fact that Musharraf, shortly after taking power, took formal control of the NCA, the National Command Authority, which controls the nuclear arsenal. The NCA was created in 2002 but its role and command structure were defined and legally structured by presidential decree.

Last July, Abu Yahya al Libi, spokesman of the terrorist network, appealed to those fundamentalists hidden in the army forces to take part "in an uprising against Musharraf's regime". This call was reiterated by the leaders of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri. The integralist forces' scarcely hidden aim is to gain control of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal.