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What does a victory in Afghanistan mean?

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1. Afghanistan, the victory at risk

Afghanistan – where no situation imposed authoritatively could be managed on a continuous basis – is becoming a complex problem for the West. Probably because the goal (Western-style democracy, legal system, rule of law, disarmament of the various factions, etc.) remains culturally distant from the real country. Afghanistan is not a country, but an orographic complex - which hosts different ethnic tribes – surrounded and closed by often indeterminate and indefinable borders. Furthermore, the segmentation of its territory, with mountain chains and valleys in all directions, has never fostered the mixing of its inland populations and their governance at central level.

For a while, between late XIX and early XX centuries, Great Britain had succeeded in pursuing this goal by using, however, methods that certainly cannot be considered democratic. Great Britain, which ruled in India, needed a stable Afghanistan, which could prevent the perennial "great game" played by Russia for centuries. Hence they had won the support of the Pashtun tribes, led by the "iron emir", Abdul Rehman, who cruelly imposed an extreme Coranic law on all the other tribes. Manslaughters, freeze of any modernization and undisputed domination of extreme Islamism did not cause sleepless nights to the British rulers who – having reached their goal – did not care about the fate of the populations living in those valleys.

Also the Taliban - already protected by Bhuttos' and Sharif's Pakistani governments – had somehow stabilised the country with the same methods used by the iron sheikh one century before. If everything had taken place only inside the country, apart from the protests of some associations fighting for the protection of cultural heritage and women's rights, probably nobody in the West would have decided to go there to bring democracy. Yet it did the mistake of hosting the al-Qaeda international terrorist groups and after 9/11 this unleashed a war in multiple phases which, after seven years, is still underway and shows no sign of abating.

Obviously international organisations play a prominent role in this situation. The United Nations, in particular, have been and still are particularly active. With reference to the use of force, traditionally the Security Council has always been very cryptic and lethargic. Conversely, in the case of Afghanistan, as from September 12, it drafted about thirty resolutions where Taliban, al-Qaeda, the opium trade and arms trafficking are always considered "a threat to international peace and security in the region" to be opposed in the framework of chapter VII of the U.N. Charter. Resolution no. 1368 was lapidary when it expressed the determination to fight against the terror threat "with all means" and invited member states to join, with a view to bringing to justice the instigators, organisers and sponsors of terrorist acts, by also considering guilty those who sponsor, support and host them.

The United States took the initiative immediately and staged "Operation Enduring Freedom" (OEF) with the aim of annihilating the Taliban and al-Qaeda, depriving them of control over the territory. The fighting forces were Navy and USAF flight units; about 15,000 militiamen of the Northern Alliance (Tajikis and Uzbeks); some British, French, Canadian and Australian land units; about 500 U.S. units for special operations and – as from November 2001 – also some thousands Pashtuns. These were the forces that seven years ago had defeated on the field an estimated number of 50,000 – 60,000 Taliban and, presumably, some thousands al-Qaeda "Arab" fighters.

The activities – at first exclusively "military" - can be divided into four phases. The first one was exclusively characterised by air strikes and was designed to "soften and wear down their resistance". The second phase, which developed in November 2001, led to the gradual loss of territorial control by the Taliban government and its collapse. The third wave, which took place between December 2001 and January 2002, was focused on the Tora Bora

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mountain area and was designed – though with little success – to seal borders to prevent the outflow of al-Qaeda militiamen. The fourth wave, which included an attempt to rebuild the State – in parallel with military operations – started with Hamid Karzay taking up the interim task of Prime Minister. Six years have elapsed since then and this phase is still underway. While the first three waves developed fairly quickly and effectively, for the time being it is still not possible to make reliable forecasts on the fourth phase.

According to the Brookings Institution, the expenses born by the United States alone for the first three phases (2001 – 2002) amounted to four billion dollars – a cost which is considered limited when compared to the costs born by the United States for internal security and defence, namely 2 billion and 600 million dollars. No homogeneous data and statistics were found for the other participating states. No forecasts can be made on the fourth phase, which has not finished yet.

The United Nations have always continued to monitor the situation, by mainly pronouncing themselves by means of Security Council's resolutions. For example Resolution no. 1510 of 2003 authorized the expansion of the territorial, dimensional and institutional competence of ISAF, the NATO-led military force and Resolution no. 1623 of 2005, as all the subsequent ones, while recognizing the renewed virulence of Taliban, al-Qaeda and drug traffickers, asked States to increase the ISAF forces and further cooperate with Operation Enduring Freedom. In other terms, besides helping civilians, it was recognized that fighting was necessary. In this regard, a case in point is Resolution no. 1659 of February 2006, which invited to adopt all the necessary measures "to fight against terrorists and drug traffickers", as well as Resolution no. 1707 of September 2006, which invited both forces to "take all necessary measures to fulfil their mandate". In the U.N. jargon, this was an explicit way to consider also the use of force. The subsequent resolutions – up to current times – go along the same lines. Some of them call for the action of regional partners, such as Pakistan, which, until Musharraf was in power, had taken vigorous initiatives though in the midst of many practical, ethnical, religious and environmental difficulties. Though diligent and painstaking, the U.N. action has never succeeded in bringing back order in the various spheres of competence. Indeed, the fact of having tackled all kinds of activities – ranging from security to justice, education and fight to drug trafficking – without solving at first the problem of military control over the territory has contributed to create the conditions for the current costly, ineffective and chaotic situation.

In general terms, we can deem that the expansion of ISAF tasks and the attempt to reduce Enduring Freedom's – without at first gaining a more convinced support and participation in the military action – is one of the factors which have led to the current stalemate. Moreover, the systematic use of politically correct jargon by the various institutions has complicated the reliability and understanding of the real situation, which appears more or less serious according to the different sources of information: NATO communiqués, press articles or the regular Secretary General's reports to the Security Council.

Also the London Conference of January 31- February 1 2006 – which was meant to be an important step forward since, in a five year period, together with the "Afghanistan Compact", it had to allow the transfer to the legitimate government ("assisted" by the States) of all competence over the sectors of Security, Governance, Rule of Law, Human Rights and Economic and Social Development – is suffering dangerous setbacks. After all, without control over the territory, any reconstruction activity is bound to be a never-ending-job like the web of Penelope.

Furthermore, real and full control over the territory was never achieved by the central government nor by foreign forces. Russia did not succeed in reaching this goal in spite of the massive use of soldiers and resources and the freedom of action allowed by a Command structure, which certainly had no "national caveats" to meet or fear of "collateral damage".

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As has already been said, for a while Great Britain had been successful in this regard by using the local forces of a "iron sheikh" who, however, was not accustomed to follow democratic methods. Without a different approach, which can reconcile efficacy and compliance with rules and laws, it will be hard to reach this goal also for the NATO Isaf, which employs an international force of about 53,000 soldiers, including the Afghans of the new army, to try and get control over a difficult and wide territory. Suffice to recall that the size of this force, that also fulfils civil reconstruction tasks, is the same as the force deployed in 1999 in the small state of Kosovo, which was certainly not overrun by fierce and fanatic guerrillas such as the Taliban. ISAF, which took control over the international forces in October 2006, plays a key role in the Afghanistan Compact and has to perform tasks in the whole territory, which is now no longer able to fulfil. Besides specific military activities, it leads the activities of 26 PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams), while operating in the framework of the first and widest mission ever conducted outside Europe. NATO cannot fail since its own credibility and existence are at stake; yet much depends on the levels of forces that member states intend to provide. Paradoxically also "collateral damage" could be inversely proportionate to the number of soldiers deployed. Nevertheless the States, which in political fora support the operation, in practice are reluctant to provide the necessary means and soldiers, thus perpetuating a situation of uncertainty which tends to get chronic and let us perceive no effective – or at least decent – ways out. However, if we look at the NATO website, military difficulties are never mentioned and under the heading "Reconstruction and Development" we find a long list of PRTs' successes. Let us quote some examples. In mid-2007, about 83% of Afghans had access to medical care as against 8% in 2001. In the education sector, while in 2001 only 1.2 million children attended school, in 2007 they rose to 7 millions, out of whom only two girls. In the same period 45,000 new teachers were trained. 825 kilometres of streets were opened and more than 100,000 mines destroyed. A rosy picture - yet press reports describe Kabul as partially under siege; a paralysed and terrified Kandahar and President Karzai who, after some incidents where some civilians were killed, asks to "revise" the role of international troops.

Hence, we are perplexed and it is quite natural to try and find the truth in the politically correctness of U.N. reports. There exist various reports for each sector, but stock of the main problems is taken in the two latest Council's Resolutions, namely no. 1806 (2008) of March 20 and no. 1817 (2008) of June 11, as well as the Secretary-General's report of July 3, 2008. While inviting the various actors, including the Afghan government, to make more incisive efforts to fulfil their own respective mandates, Resolution no. 1806 reaffirms concern for security in the territory. In particular, it denounces the large increase of violence and terrorist actions by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, armed groups, ordinary criminals and all those who are involved in illegal trafficking. Reference is also made to the ever closer links between terrorism and drug trafficking, with violent acts on the people, including children, and attacks to law enforcement agencies and the other international civil and military peace-keepers.

Moreover the Resolution points out the generalised corruption affecting all sectors – ranging from law enforcement agencies to the fight against drug-trafficking – and invites the Government to take resolute actions in this field and spare no efforts to reach "more effective, reliable and transparent" forms of administration. In a subsequent excerpt, there is a vigorous indictment of the use of child soldiers by Taliban forces and - for the first time - of the tactics used by Taliban and other extremist groups to "use civilians as human shields" during fighting. Also Resolution no. 1817 - which mainly focuses on drug trafficking, money laundering, arms smuggling and third countries' supply of huge quantities of chemical catalysts for producing heroin – must be viewed as a "cry of pain" and an appeal to States, urging them to increasingly commit themselves to solving a situation which is deteriorating also from this viewpoint. The Secretary-General's special report submitted to the Council on July 3, 2008 is particularly alarming. Though devoted to the term of reference of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the results of the Paris Conference

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held on June 12, 2008 – where a request was submitted to allocate further 20 billion dollars for reconstruction – in this special report the issues of security and the deterioration of the situation are described in an almost tragic tone. According to the Secretary General, as from his last report dated March 6, 2008, “.... The level of insurgent and terrorist activity in Afghanistan has increased, particularly in the south and east of the country. This increase can be attributed partly to the onset of summer. Nonetheless, it is of great concern that the highest number of security incidents in the country since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 was recorded in May 2008. The insurgents continue to rely on asymmetric attacks, resulting in high levels of civilian casualties. Their operations are becoming increasingly complex and coordinated, as demonstrated by the attack during a military parade in Kabul in April 2008 and the operation to free prisoners from Kandahar Prison in June 2008. The evolving security situation throughout the country will require a considerable increase in security-related mission resources...”

The Secretary General describes the situation until June 2008, but we know that over the last few months the situation has even worsened, with an increasing number of coalition soldiers dead or injured. This happens in spite of reinforcements (always insufficient), greater financial resources (always stultified) and civilian assistance, which are only a drop in an ocean of inefficiency and corruption. This is clearly stated by the UN, not by us or NATO. We wonder whether – after seven years - time has come to change our approach to the problem.

2. What is at stake

It was initially the Bonn Conference – which ended on December 5, 2001 with the signature of the Bonn Agreement – to start actions designed to recreate the Afghan State after the U.S. intervention and the conquest of Kabul. While recognising that time was needed to create an Afghan security force, the Agreement asked the U.N. Security Council to authorise the creation of an International Security Force to be deployed in Afghanistan, with a view to maintaining security in Kabul and the surrounding areas at first and gradually extending it to the other urban centres and areas.

Indeed, this Agreement, known as document S/2001/1154 of the U.N. Security Council, led to Resolution 1386/2001, with which the Security Council – following the British and Northern Irish offer to organise and lead this force – authorised the creation for six months of an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) designed to assist the Afghan Interim Authority and invited member states to contribute to this force with staff, means and other resources. Over the last few years, this authorization has been regularly renewed by the U.N. Security Council by means of Resolutions 1413/2002, 1444/2003, 1510/2003 (after NATO taking up ISAF command and coordination tasks, this Resolution authorised ISAF expansion throughout Afghanistan), 1563/2004, 1623/2005, 1707/2006, until the last one of September 19, 2007, which has extended ISAF mandate for a further year with 14 favourable votes out of 15 members. Only Russia did abstain itself, which – though having veto power – recognised what underlined by the Resolution in terms of “increased violent and terrorist activities by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, illegal armed groups and those involved in drug trafficking”, but could not vote in favour because of what it called the unexpected inclusion in the document of a sentence expressing “appreciation for the leadership provided by NATO and for the contributions of many nations to ISAF and to the OEF coalition, including its maritime interdiction component”).

This historic premises is meant to recall and demonstrate that whatever is carried out by the international Force in Afghanistan (where the Italian contingent operates) – though considering all reservations and criticism which may be levelled at the modus operandi of some members of this Force - was decided and supported by the international community with a clear Security Council mandate in the framework of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. We can-

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not deny that serious problems are faced when answering questions on the required number of troops and ways to deploy them for these operations; the rules of engagement; the issues related to border control and transit, as well as drug-trafficking; and, last but not least, the challenge linked to the relationships between the mission military and civilian components and the feasibility of State reconstruction. Nevertheless, it must be recognised that the challenge we are facing in Afghanistan is of fundamental importance not only for NATO – which is in the frontline in these operations – but also for the credibility and reliability of the whole international community, since it is a test for this community's ability to help a democratic government calling for support to fight against international terror and organised crime.

Not only Afghanistan's security is at stake, but also Europe's and the Western world's. At a time when internal and external security are closely interwoven and interdependent, the Afghanistan mission is ever more based on "need" rather than on "choice". Only seven years ago that country was the core of international terrorism. Should this mission fail, Afghanistan could once again pose a clear threat to itself, its region and, in more general terms, to the whole international community.

Yet, there exist also other issues for which stakes in Afghanistan are high. In this regard we can certainly recall the evolution of relations with Asia. Afghanistan has always been a fragmented and fragile country in a highly dangerous geographical context. It borders the Muslim Republics of the former Soviet Union, as well as Iran, Pakistan and China, three countries whose development will certainly have global implications. Each of these three countries – and it is not appropriate to rule out India, although it is not a neighbouring country – will be affected by the situation prevailing in Afghanistan. Pakistan is probably the most glaring example. Greater stability in Afghanistan means greater stability in Pakistan, but also the other way round. The probable result of an unstable Afghanistan would be more instability in Pakistan. And the fact that Pakistan is a nuclear power lead us not to underestimate the dangerousness of the Taliban-nuclear weapons mix.

Few considerations are now appropriate on the relationship between the West and Islam. The international community's failure to foster the development of a moderate Islam would again plunge Afghanistan into Islamic radicalism and – hence – recreate the conditions which led to the 9/11 attack. Nonetheless, far from conveying the message that we want to impose Western values on Afghanistan, our commitment should be really global and designed to demonstrate that the international community not only supports those who want to struggle free of radicalism and extremism deadly grip, but also assist them in the process needed to pursue and stabilise this goal. Some more general considerations are now in order, with reference to the need for pursuing the political objective of the international community's intervention.

Although technological superiority has definitely changed the shape and design of an armed intervention (namely a "war"), the very harsh realities of Iraq and Afghanistan are evidencing some critical aspects of the military tool – that is to what extent a solution to the crisis can rely only on this tool and to what extent it is based only on technological progress and the concept of superiority. The complex crises which have broken out after the fall of the Berlin Wall and particularly after 9/11 are showing the importance and decisiveness of the ability to include the use of the military tool into a deep strategic, political, historic, economic and social understanding of the people. Indeed, the crises underway evidence that the technological and tactical superiority of the military tool is not enough to overcome a weak situation from the strategic viewpoint. Basically, the traditional success on the field does not always coincide with the success in crisis situations as the current ones, unless it is matched by an appropriate and integrated action of stabilization, reconstruction and development in the crisis-stricken region.

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Along these lines, we shall recall what reaffirmed during the NATO Summit held in Bucharest in April 2008 "Experiences in Afghanistan and the Balkans demonstrate that the international community needs to work more closely together and take a comprehensive approach. To this end, it is essential for all major international actors to act in a coordinated way and to apply a wide spectrum of civil and military instruments in a concerted effort that takes into account their respective strengths and mandates".

After all the NATO Comprehensive Political Guidance clearly states that "while NATO has no requirement to develop capabilities strictly for civilian purposes, it needs to improve its practical cooperation, taking into account existing arrangements with partners, relevant international organisations and, as appropriate, non governmental organisations".

Hence, as the Belgian Foreign Affairs Minister stated on the occasion of the workshop on "Security and Development: the case of Afghanistan", the international community "will be able to make a decisive difference when we manage to make progress together and on all fronts, in a substantial and simultaneous way: create security and stability, build law and order...address the people's urgent needs by reconstruction and development programs... That is our common task, our common challenge" . Basically a joint and coordinated approach is needed to create the conditions for sustainable peace, reconstruction and development.

In this connection, undoubtedly the international community's intervention in Afghanistan is now extremely multifaceted. Besides its major component, the UN-mandated ISAF/NATO mission – which includes also non-NATO member states' contingents – we must also recall the OEF (Operation Enduring Freedom, initially led by the United States and led by NATO as from October 5, 2006, also including non-NATO member states); the active presence of many NGOs and especially the contribution of the European Union . In this regard we must mention the strengthening of the EUPOL mandate, aimed at pursuing a balanced and sustainable approach to the reform of the security sector. There is widespread belief that the Provincial Reconstruction Teams are important tools to focus on specific goals linked to security, training and cooperation with Afghan military and police forces, also with a view to encouraging and supporting European investors who wish to be involved in the reconstruction and targeted development of some projects in an appropriate security framework. Moreover, any action designed to curb the ever more widespread opium poppy growing and drug trafficking activities is promoted. These activities have serious political and national implications in Afghanistan and its neighbouring countries since the opium-based economy is still a source of corruption, which undermines public institutions and hence – directly or indirectly – turns into a real breeding ground for terrorism and radicalism.

Therefore many institutions are involved and many activities are underway to implement this new model for crisis management. Cooperation and contributions should be substantive and coordinated, rather than divided and fragmented since, as Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, the NATO Secretary-General has recently underlined, places such as Afghanistan should not be divided into separate spheres of responsibility for peacekeeping, combat operation and reconstruction. As the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, stated "the country would be won or lost in its entirety".

In conclusion, the intervention in Afghanistan is decisive for the international community to test its operational coordination ability in the new post-9/11 model for crisis management. Hence, any option other than the pursuit of "success" – be it withdrawal or even defeat in an intervention legitimised by the United Nations and operationally supported by institutions such as NATO and the European Union – would show not only the international community's inability to manage the XXI century crises, but also its loss of credibility in enforcing the values enshrined in the UN Charter.

3. The great problems

3.1. *The great neighbour - Pakistan*

Today the Afghan situation is uncertain and the short and medium term prospects are hard to foresee. The reason lies mainly in the multifaceted factors which affect the situation in that country, thus creating an interplay of interdependences, constraints and relations so closely interwoven as to make it hard to define a course of action capable of starting a solution process.

The attempts made so far and the counterguerrilla warfare in the framework of the Operation Enduring Freedom and subsequently within ISAF – though recording repeated successes – have not been decisive to defeat and eliminate the Taliban in Afghanistan. In fact, any possible solution involves also its great neighbour, namely Pakistan.

The Taliban are quartered in a strip along the south-eastern border with Pakistan in inaccessible highlands. In Afghan, Pakistani and also Western circles rumours are even rife that the Taliban historic leader, mullah Omar, has his base in Quetta, the capital of the province of Balocistan, from where a 10-member Great Council guides and directs the whole movement. At the same time, North-African, Arab and Uzbek Islamic militants are rebuilding al-Qaeda structure in this same strip. Reliable sources speak of about 2,000 foreign militants trained over the last three years in local camps, including converted Europeans, Germans in particular.

The Taliban spread eastwards in the Afghan territory, which they control with sudden raids, up to threaten the whole area around Kandahar (never definitively controlled by the United States and NATO) and even the province of Ghazni, near the capital city Kabul. On the Pakistani side they ended up by controlling wide border areas by forcedly imposing their harsh interpretation of the Islamic law on local peoples. They have created a reign of terror over which so far the central State and the provincial government have not succeeded in prevailing. In many districts the Taliban took security officers as hostages to force people to meet their demands and adopt a strict Islamic code. Many officers were killed when this was not the case. Furthermore, over the last two years, over 2,000 Pakistanis were killed during terrorist attacks by Taliban militiamen or al-Qaeda followers. Today they control tribes in the area known as FATA (Federal Administred Tribal Areas) where opium poppies are grown; heroin is produced and new recruits are hired thanks to the proceeds from the local production of opium and heroin.

In such a situation it is very hard for the counterguerrilla operations conducted by NATO and Afghan government forces to succeed since opponents can easily take refuge beyond the country borders into Pakistan, in an area over which they have gained control. Hence the fundamental role that Pakistan can play to finally defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda and restore peace in Afghanistan - not to further mention the operational and logistical aspects, considering that 80% of materials and 40% of fuels are trafficked through Pakistan.

Continuing U.S. or NATO-led operations up to Pakistan - as threatened by the U.S. Chief-of-Staff, Mike Mullen - to make "surgical" attacks against Taliban and al-Qaeda networks, which operate in border areas, would be a very serious mistake with very little chances for success for the following reasons: the region imperviousness; the lack of a "barrier" to stop fugitives; the great difficulties in ensuring appropriate logistical support; the certainty of causing a violent backlash by the local people, thus definitively wasting what still remains of the friendship and sympathy felt for Westeners.

While examining the history of fight against terrorism, significant examples can be found of the problem of sealing borders. From 1942 to 1949, the two Communist revolutionary movements in Greece - gathered in the DSE and KKE ranks - faced the counterterrorism opera-

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tions conducted against them by the legitimate government supported by the Allies until the sealing of borders with Yugoslavia decided by Tito – who was their sponsor - deprived them of the essential hinterland to continue their fight. Unlike South Vietnam, the failed sealing of borders with North Vietnam, prevented the annihilation of the Vietcong and was the reason for their success, in spite of the great superiority of the United States which were defeated and humiliated. Finally, many years ago, during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Russian failure to control borders and the support provided by the Pakistani government of the time, enabled Afghan patriots to survive and operate in their fight against invaders, thanks to a sort of logistical base located inside Pakistan. As we can see, the situation was very similar to the current one.

Everybody know that the first fundamental rule to defeat guerrillas and terrorists is isolate them. Therefore a radical change of the Pakistani government policy and attitude vis-à-vis the Taliban and al-Qaeda militiamen in Afghanistan is essential to succeed in the operations designed to eradicate them. Hence, a new effective doctrine to combat these forces must be defined and be designed to get rid of them in the internal strip along the border with Afghanistan. Well-equipped and well-trained forces must be deployed to fight against guerrillas; unlike what has happened so far – when the task of repelling al-Qaeda and Taliban militiamen has always been entrusted to the ill-equipped and ill-trained border troops with negative results - the best forces now deployed along the borders with India must be moved there to drive them back. This new doctrine shall envisage strong defensive structures - real strongholds - deployed along the border strategic points, combined with the great ability of movement and concentration of helicopter-borne mobile units, matched by an ongoing reconnaissance activity and the strong support of helicopter-borne air fire power, which can be certainly provided also by NATO.

As a prerequisite, an effective and loyal intelligence activity must be ensured. Emphasis must be laid on the term loyal since there exist widespread suspicions of connivance between some Afghan secret services units and Taliban and al-Qaeda opponents. Therefore, according to some reliable U.S. sources, these secret services should be "cleaned up".

Operations shall be planned and conducted in close coordination with the NATO operations on the other side of the border to bring about a combined strategic manoeuvre, which leaves no way out or escape. The meeting held on August 20 between the Pakistani Chief-of-Staff, General Ayani, and the ISAF and Afghan National Army (ANA) commanders seems to show that the Pakistani army intends to keep on cooperating with the United States and NATO to combat terrorism and restore peace in Afghanistan.

Concurrently, a strong action must be pursued to persuade and win the support of the local tribe leaders without whom no control can be gained over the territory. In this regard, the Pakistani initiative to create tribal militias in the FATA region to combat the Taliban, jointly with the Pakistani army, is of great interest. This support can be gained not only by implementing a force-based policy capable of offsetting the pressures exerted by the Taliban and al-Qaeda, as previously outlined, but also thanks to targeted substantial economic aid. This bears witness to the fact that economic aid can go hand in hand with military operations and, in this regard, we must stress the role that the U.S., European and Arab policies can and must play.

Over the last 6 years the United States have granted to Pakistan about 7 billion dollars worth of aid – military aid in particular – to support the activity designed to combat the Taliban and al-Qaeda penetration into the area bordering Afghanistan. Unfortunately, only a small share of this aid was really used to control borders. Now the United States seems to be decided to change their strategy on the basis of the following courses of action:

1. to persuade the new Pakistani government and the Pakistani people of the fact that the Taliban presence is a serious damage to Pakistan's cohesion and development.

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The threat posed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban is a threat also to the Pakistanis themselves.

2. To find a better balance between military aid and civilian aid.
3. To ensure that military aid be employed at the border where we can deploy highly-skilled units to fight against guerrillas and terrorists, with great operational ability to support the border units that have proved to be limited and scarcely effective to counter the threat posed by the Taliban and al-Qaeda.
4. d) To envisage – thanks to a law being adopted – 15 billion dollars worth of civilian aid over ten years to be employed in the sectors of economic development, health and education. A substantial part of this aid shall be employed in areas close to Afghan borders, with a view to supporting local leaders' commitment with targeted aid.

During their long electoral campaign both candidates to the U.S. Presidency have insisted on asking the Pakistani leadership to act vigorously against the Taliban and al-Qaeda affiliated groups operating in the Western province at the border with Afghanistan. In the future this ensures a strong policy of pressures on the Pakistani government.

So far the European Union does not seem to have taken decisions regarding the provision of economic aid to Pakistan to strengthen its action against the Taliban. Over time, the European Union has sent economic aid on the occasion of natural disasters, but never to support military operations. In the framework of the E.U. security strategy outlined by Solana - which envisages concrete actions to ensure stability in the areas close to Europe - we can deem that the Afghan-Pakistani area is particularly sensitive and, as such, it must fall within the initiatives designed to stabilise the European Union. After all, substantial military forces from different E.U. partners have already been deployed in the Afghan conflict: this is the reason why it is appropriate for a military presence in Afghanistan to be also matched by a political/strategic presence in Pakistan, with a view to supporting the action to combat the Taliban and terrorists along the borders and also reaffirming a European and not only an American presence. At strategic and operational levels, it is pointless to take part in military operations which entail a heavy toll in terms of loss of human lives and high economic costs, without fostering a context which can ensure good chances of success.

Bearing this in mind, the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Franco Frattini, while paying an official visit to Islamabad last October submitted an aid package to Pakistan which envisages:

- cancellation of a Pakistani 100 million dollar debt;
- definition of cooperation agreements in various sectors;
- drafting of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in the defense and security fields;
- cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

A further significant contribution can come from the moderate Arab countries of the region, which should follow the example set by Saudi Arabia which has granted to Pakistan the possibility of postponing the payment of oil supplies to the tune of about 6 billion dollars. In fact, the Taliban success in Pakistan would pose a serious threat to all Sunni Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, for which the security of a Sunni state such as Pakistan is of fundamental importance to offset the Shia presence in the region with Iran and Iraq. Finally the United States – also following the agreement recently ratified with India for nuclear cooperation – shall stand guarantor for Pakistan's territorial integrity so as to enable it to free forces at the Indo-Pakistan border, with a view to employing them against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Also President Karzai is strongly committed to involving Pakistan in the fight against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. On the occasion of the swearing in ceremony of the new

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Pakistani President Ali Zardari in Islamabad, he stated: "Pakistan and Afghanistan shall work together since we fight against one single enemy".

3.2 The regional framework – The other actors

In spite of its apparent marginalization, Afghanistan is a border and transit country, the core of instability in the geopolitical macroregion stretching from the Gulf to Sinkiang and from Central to Southern Asia. Although internal conflicts depend on the Pashtun will to dominate the whole country and the other ethnic groups' will to oppose them, relevant interferences are recorded from external powers, namely Pakistan, Iran, India, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These are compounded by the territorial tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which had led both countries on the verge of conflict in the 1960s and 1970s. These tensions still persist, as demonstrated by the tensions recorded between Presidents Karzai and Musharraf, in which Turkey had in vain attempted to mediate. The Kabul government – always Pashtun-dominated in the past – has always challenged the legitimacy of the "Durand line" cut through the areas and villages where this ethnic group has settled. This has led to contrasts with Pakistan and has pushed this government to seek the support of Pakistan's traditional enemies, namely India and Iran. Obviously "games" are complex and influenced by many factors. First and foremost, the links between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which strengthened during the resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, also upon a U.S. request. Secondly, India's will to involve the United States in Southern Asia to contain both China's influence in Pakistan and Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. Thirdly, the clear interest of oil majors and Central-Asian countries – real continental enclaves, without access to oceans and international markets – in using the Afghan territory to put an end to their isolation, without depending on transit through Russia and China. The project of Afghan oil and gas pipelines stems from the difficulties posed by the United States to transport infrastructure following the most natural way, namely through Iran.

India

India is particularly interested in Afghanistan to counter the Pakistani influence, for the additional reason that Afghan jihadism increases tensions in Kashmir. India fears a spreading of the fundamentalist contagion to its 160 million Muslims and the outbreak of riots and violence similar to those which often occur in Pakistan between the Sunnis – following the strict rules of Wahabite Islam – and the Shias, already mobilised during Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution (after Iran, India is the country with the highest number of Shias). India's interest in Afghanistan is demonstrated by the fact that, except for the United States, India is the largest international contributor to the stabilisation fund for Afghanistan. It has sent paramilitary units of the Corps on Engineers and Infrastructure to the country. In spite of Pakistani concerns and suspicions, these units are building roads which are supposed to contribute to maintain unity in the country, but are considered "strategic" by Islamabad. It is by no mere coincidence that the blame for the Taliban attack against the Indian Embassy to Kabul was laid on the Pakistani secret services. Other attacks had been attempted against the consulates India opened in Kandahar and Kunduz. India keeps on supporting the ethnic groups composing the Northern Alliance, especially the Tajiki one. It also proposes itself as an alternative to Pakistan for supporting the U.S. "war against terror". Though continuing to cooperate with Moscow in the arms sector, it has also stepped up its cooperation with the United States – as demonstrated by nuclear agreements and the agreements reached for the U.S. transfer of strategic technologies, as well as India's support for the U.S. antimissile system. Basically we can say that in Afghanistan there exists a sort of outsourcing of the Indo-Pakistani conflict. India's relevance can increase should Pakistan suffer a period of instability.

Iran's interests in Afghanistan are manifold, apart from its traditional ambitions to take control over the Herat region, repeatedly thwarted by the British Empire in the XIX century. Today, Iran's goals are different. They stem from the ideological-religious contrast between Shiaism – which in Iran takes up modern and more tolerant connotations – and the grim and bloody Taliban Sunnism. This "gut" and deep-down contrast was evidenced by the massacre perpetrated by the Taliban in 1998 in the Iranian Consulate of Mazar-i-Sharif, which hit Iranian diplomats and journalists who had taken refuge there. We must also consider the violence perpetrated by the Taliban against the Hazaras, who are Shias, though being "Turkish" ethnic groups descendants of the Mogol race. Iran's prevailing interest is both nationalist and religious. It regards the protection of the Hazaras and the strengthening of the power of the Tajikis, who are Sunnis of Persian origin. We must recall that, on the occasion of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting held in August 2008, Tajikistan proposed Iran's admission as full member to the organization, in which it has taken part for a couple of years as observer. Iran is seriously worried about Saudi influence in Pakistan and its possible spreading in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It feels at risk of encirclement and fears that Khomeini's revolutionary message may be played down. It fears that Saudi Arabia may bring Shias back under Sunni domination. It supported the Northern Alliance and in 2001 it cooperated – at least indirectly – with the U.S action in Afghanistan, which drove back what remained of Taliban and al-Qaeda terrorists south of the "Durand line". The rumours spread by American and Arab sources about Iran's support to the Taliban return to Afghanistan and the transit towards Pakistan/Afghanistan of the al-Qaeda terrorists who are flowing out of Iraq, appear unlikely. Iran's interests are different. Iran would benefit from a stabilisation of Afghanistan. It would allow the outflow of thousands of Afghans, who took refuge in Iran, and would increase trade. It would mark the end of Pashtun – and indirectly – Baluchi nationalism and would especially allow to counter the drugs inflow and spreading into Iran, which is a great source of concern for the Iranian authorities.

3. 3 The incomplete State

Afghanistan finds itself in the real predicament of being an extremely poor country, ravaged by a very long war and lacking in natural resources. This situation is deteriorated by its complex morphology and geography and its division into small tribal administrative units, subjected to the international conflicts and attrition of neighbouring powers. Basic social and economic statistics on Afghanistan are discouraging also for the most optimists and corroborate the opinions of those who visited the country. Average life expectancy is 44 years and the infant mortality rate is very high. Literacy hardly reaches 30% and is even lower for women. Arable land slightly exceeds 10% of the total surface, whereas agriculture is means of subsistence for 80% of population, mainly young people half of whom are unemployed. Over 50% of population lives below the poverty line and about 9 million people have not enough food. There exist slightly more than 8,000 Kilometres of paved roads in a country which is twice as large as Italy and crossed by a semi-impervious mountain range. There are no energy sources and no exports except for drugs. Only considering these statistics from a historic perspective – and recalling that before the Western intervention in 2001 the country had experienced more than 20 years of war and ravages – can we perceive a glimmer of hope by thinking that the nadir has already been reached down a slope from which the country can only get back on top.

In fact, compared to 2001, the situation has improved in some areas of the country – particularly in the North and the West – and in some sectors such as education, basic services and communications, even though the dozens million dollars of international aid spent so far have not often been used for the right targets (at least one third of aid does not reach the expected results and is "wasted"), due to a deteriorating security situation, the local inability to use them and endemic corruption.

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The NATO military mission does not reach the desired effects because the wider international reconstruction mission is not effective and the other way round. It is an inevitable cycle which can become virtuous, but runs the risk of spiralling out of control if the various elements of the overall strategy do not contribute to reach a common goal.

The only thriving sectors are opium poppy growing and drug trafficking, the real engines of a rural economy undermined by drought, infrastructure shortcomings, illiteracy, tribal divisions, corruption and failure to enforce the rule of law. This is the reason why Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world, weakened by decades of war – at first against the bloody Soviet invasion in 1979 and subsequently as a result of the fights between local chieftains, Taliban, mujahidins and Islamic terrorists of Saudi origin. It is reckoned that over 3 million people – out of a population equal to 23 millions – depend directly on the opium sector which is up to 10 times more profitable than potential alternative crops such as wheat. While the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is estimated at less than 8 billion dollars, the opium export is worth about 4 billion dollars and in some southern and eastern provinces (Helmand in particular, where more than 50% of Afghan opium is produced) is by far the largest source of wealth (for Taliban and dignitaries) and means of subsistence (for the population).

In fact, the main concern of those who operate on the field is linked to the upsurge of armed clashes and the resumption of opium poppy growing, which breeds the vicious cycle linking the illegal economy to the increasing power of Taliban guerrillas and local “warlords”. The army, police forces and the local legal system – which is currently undergoing a very slow evolution supported from outside – are not enough to counter this scourge. International efforts lack real coordination and funds appear to be insufficient, especially if compared to the costs born for state-building operations in less beleaguered areas.

So far the United States have implemented a strategy based on two pillars:

- the support to the central government, by basically relying on President Karzai who, though elected, does not really control the country and must continuously reach compromises with the local leaders, who really hold power;
- the eradication of opium poppy crops, which so far has proved to be doomed to failure, also due to the scarce people's support and the lack of a real territorial control over whole regions in the country.

In the lack of a shared strategy having some chances for success, the coordination of civilian and military reconstruction activities gets even harder.

Nonetheless, the attempt to gain control over the territory with few means, faced with fierce guerrilla warfare – an understandable choice to keep the operations costs comparatively low and continue to enjoy Western citizens' support - leads to an increase of the rate of Afghan people direct and indirect death rate, thus reducing the local support for the Western presence.

The decision taken to hold the Afghan central government ultimately responsible for the reconstruction process – though understandable in view of involving local authorities – entails serious constraints linked to its limited ability and ambiguity.

Kabul central power is very weak and probably it is bound to be so considering that we are faced with an extremely fragmented tribal society with few communications between the “centre” and the “periphery”: in fact, in at least half of the country we cannot speak of the presence of the State. The differences existing among the NATO Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) could be a positive factor if intelligently channelled into an overall strategy for territorial control and reconstruction which cannot avoid tackling the “opium” scourge, as

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well as the wider international problems of relations with Pakistan - a further factor of chronic destabilisation.

Hence, we should shift from an approach based on central government to a more "federal" approach, more in line with the country's history and reality and better suited to comply with the different paces followed by the various provinces – some of which have been controlled by the West since 2002, whereas others are still a bone of contention.

Among the various institutions operating in the country, the European Union could act as a catalyst for reconstruction only provided that a sound transatlantic agreement is reached for effectively coordinating security military operations, activities to combat drug trafficking and civilian missions. For the time being, however, the E.U. performance is limited and does not allow the take off of one of the key sectors for stabilisation, especially in less troubled areas: the creation of a reliable and capable local police force. The European Union is directly responsible for this important step of the slow state-building process. Faced with the creation of a huge crime cartel devoted to gain control over the territory and the lucrative drug-trafficking, only a strong presence recognised by the people – certainly not composed of "foreigners", as the needed military allies are viewed - can bring the situation back under control. The European Union shall give absolute priority to the training and wages of Afghan police forces – too often ill-equipped and with corrupt upper echelons.

Stability and reconstruction are closely interwoven. International aid can and must be increased, but this would not make the difference without a different management model, which should be less personalistic and more coordinated between the civilian and military spheres, the central and local levels and the various entities operating on the field. Hence, the new "European-style" Afghan state building model should be based on:

- close coordination between the NATO-led Western military presence and reconstruction activities;
- an increase of funds for infrastructure and education schemes, designed to rebuild human capital and upgrade youth skills;
- the responsabilisation of local leaders and not only of the central government;
- the creation of a well-trained and well-paid local police force;
- the introduction of agricultural subsidies to make opium poppy growing less attractive.

3.4 The military patchwork

There is much talk about a "new approach" to try and get out of the Afghan quagmire, but there is no doubt that whatever solution – though balanced, multidisciplinary, etc. – must be based on the essential element of security. Local peoples themselves call for security – even before water, electricity and education – since it is understandable that, after years of conflicts, outrages and violence, the prerequisite to believe in a government or central institution (in normal conditions, albeit measured by peculiar standards) is precisely security. In Afghanistan reaching a "military victory" - in the "Iraqi" sense of stabilisation and transfer of security responsibilities to local forces – is getting ever more complex and difficult, in particular due to Pakistan's disintegration. Certainly the Taliban have not the military force to drive the coalition forces out and topple Karzai's government, but they can impose ongoing attrition and wear and tear in spite of the hundreds and thousands of casualties they suffer. It is not sure whether Western governments have the necessary strength to endure a military "long haul" and a heavy toll in terms of casualties (in September 2008 the United States were very close to 120 dead, thus exceeding the total number recorded in 2007 – which was already an all-time high – as well as the number of casualties in Iraq; this bears witness to the greater dangerousness of Afghanistan than Iraq, considering the number of soldiers deployed in Baghdad and its environs).

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After all, the Taliban forces – that intelligence services find it hard to quantify – are estimated at 10,000- 15,000 combatants divided into the various “tiers”, to which we must add an indefinite number of supporters. Yet recruits do no lack, for the additional reason that wages are good. Certainly the Taliban have shown an increasing sophistication and refinement in terms of tactics, procedures, weapons and strategies to gain people’s support or at least not unleash their hostility. From the military viewpoint, in the past they were forced to conduct small scale operations, by employing limited contingents (squads or platoons) and choosing “soft” military targets, such as the Afghan security forces, or directly civilian targets, and also resorting to suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Today they are again capable of organizing complex, and sometimes sensational, operations by amassing – where appropriate – battalions that do not only launch the usual small scale attacks, but also conduct protracted fighting actions, by directly opposing NATO/U.S. contingents. Suffice to recall the attack against a French patrolling contingent and the conquest and destruction of a small U.S. stronghold. Hence, the Taliban attacks and military operations are increasing both at quantitative (+ 30% as against 2007) and qualitative levels. What is even more alarming is that in various parts of the country they are capable of taking and maintaining the initiative. NATO wished to prevent such an evolution with a series of preventive operations – including large scale ones - but in vain.

Hence the situation is sensitive. Moreover - although U.S. and NATO troops have been stationing in the country for many years - they have preferred not to tackle a series of strategic, operational and tactical issues, whose solution would have certainly benefitted the “cause”, by probably avoiding the Taliban guerrilla warfare enhancing their ability, size and credibility. The fact of not taking decisions has led to waste favourable “windows of opportunities” which may also not occur again. Finally it seems that they have decided to reverse this trend with a series of measures (starting from “convergence” of the ISAF and Enduring Freedom (OEF) missions, as well as the launch of a massive plan to enhance local security forces, police in particular, even though it may too little and/or too late. The Afghan forces issue is one of the crucial matters; its willful underestimation – for reasons of costs and political-strategic short-sightedness – has forced us to pay a heavy toll and bear the brunt of prolonging for years the international military presence in the country to avoid its collapse. Suffice to recall that until few months ago the ANA target force was set at 80,000 units, compared to a theoretical size of 65,000 units early 2008. Obviously it was impossible for ANA to play a real large scale role in conducting operations against the Taliban and gaining control over the country and its borders with so scarce troops.

Today the gear has been changed and the United States have forced the decision to double the current army size, by raising it to 134,000. The plan envisages to add 10,000 units every year as from 2010. It is an ambitious plan which will cost 4 billion dollars for training only – an amount which will rise to 20 billion dollars considering equipment, infrastructure, etc. Even though potential staff is not lacking and is of good quality, we cannot cherish the illusion of reaching immediate results: it will take time to train them, in particular cadres, the units created, amalgamated and tested on the field with a series of ever more complex operations. We cannot be too hasty, if we do not want to repeat the Iraqi catastrophes. Over and above land forces, the idea is create a strong army air force with transport capacity (both aircraft and helicopters) for surveillance and fire support tasks. Needless to say that four years might not be enough, even if the International community were ready to provide funds. The United States have clearly stated that they are not ready to pay the full bill alone, all the more so considering that they are already shouldering the burden and the costs of the counterguerrilla operations. It would be logical for all the countries which pay lip service to the need for the mission in Afghanistan, but do not intend to contribute with weapons and soldiers, to bear at least the costs, as was the case with Germany and Japan during the 1991 Gulf War.

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It is equally important to enable ANA to grow and become ever more effective. This is the reason why instructors are needed and – at a later stage - liaison/mentoring teams that can assist units both during training and operations, especially if air and fire support must continue to be largely provided by the coalition forces for years. Note must be taken that with the previous target of 80,000 soldiers and 13 light brigades 3,000 instructors were still lacking. Bridging this gap and supporting the immediate enhancing of the international training/mentoring system is an even more serious problem than finding the above stated 20 billion dollars. The OMLTs, namely the mentors/liason teams, are absolutely vital since without them the Afghan commanders are not able to command troops, receive intelligence, logistical support, close air support (CAS) and artillery fire support. In spring 2008 these teams were only 30. This a further field where the willing could provide a valuable contribution without running excessive risks. Yet neither NATO nor the United States can find volunteers. Moreover, speaking of ANA is restrictive. Indeed, ANA is performing better than expected in spite of the usual rate of desertions and AWOLs (Absent Without Official Leave). And it is appropriate to clarify that, for ANA, goals are commensurate with the opponents it has to face, that is not what they would like us to believe. As in Iraq, the Afghan police forces (ANP) find themselves in a far worse situation than ANA. In the old Afghanistan the ANP did not exist, at least in the meaning attributed to it by the West. In theory a national police currently exists, as well as other more or less specialized internal security forces, but their size and effectiveness is extremely limited and the corruption rate is very high. With a counterguerrilla warfare underway, logically attention was focused on ANA, but at a later stage the "police" problem should have been tackled vigorously. This has not been the case. And the National Police credibility vis-à-vis the local population is at a low ebb, even though its ranks number almost 76,000 units out of 82,000 authorized ones. The additional reason for this lack of credibility is that those who had to take care of them acted with different aims, target models and processes, thus creating confusion and causing a huge waste of time and resources. Nevertheless in a country where brigandage, organized crime and violence are the rule, police forces are essential. These police forces must be paid the same attention as ANA. This would be the sector of choice for a basically civilian organization such as the European Union, whose member states can boast top quality police forces both at military and civilian levels. Likewise, trained units should be assisted by Police Mentor Teams (PMTs), but once again they are not enough.

The "Afghanisation" of military and internal security is of crucial importance both for gradually reducing the international military commitment in Afghanistan, but also to blunt one of the most effective weapons of the valuable Taliban "communication", which consists in describing the foreign military forces as occupation forces supporting a puppet government.

Also the international military forces have to be blamed for the failure in Afghanistan. However, neither the United States nor NATO have ever aimed at "gaining control" over a country of almost 650,000 square kilometres with a population of about 32 million inhabitants, particularly considering its orography and the conditions of its infrastructure and road system. Probably the political decision to proceed to a limited intervention was wrong, but the basic idea was give Afghanistan back to the Afghans, by confining ourselves to combating al-Qaeda and the Taliban and then assisting the new local authorities, hopefully for a limited period of time. Conversely, according to the classic formula, 20 soldiers per 1,000 inhabitants – namely 640,000 soldiers/policemen - would be needed to keep Afghanistan under control and defeat guerrillas.

In 2002, however, the goals were completely different. In particular, OEF had to pursue the first goal, whereas ISAF – which initially had to operate only in Kabul and its environs – soon had to take care of the second goal, by extending both the geographical area under its responsibility and the scope of the mission entrusted to it. This dichotomy was bound to be harmful from the operational efficiency viewpoint, especially when the differentiation between the missions carried out by ISAF and OEF increasingly watered down. The virtues of

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the single command concept have been known for centuries. For many countries it was politically practical to distinguish between the ISAF "good" mission and the OEF "bad" mission (conducted very aggressively by special forces and light infantry that were more interested in dislodging and destroying enemies than in reconstruction); indeed, absurd situations occurred with a country participating in both missions with units depending on a different command structure that did not even share intelligence, logistics and operational coordination. Italy, too – though for a short period of time – experienced such a situation during the Nibbio operations included in the OEF mission. Clearly also within the Pentagon there were those who preferred to wage a "real" war without all the limits and constraints typical of NATO operations (and also in NATO operations, as in the Balkans, the United States have always kept some activities under their own control with a separate U.S. command line).

Attempts have been made to "merge" both missions, but so far they have failed for political reasons. Now this incredible situation seems to be about to change at last and the U.S. General, David McKiernan, the current ISAF commander, will be probably the first officer to reunite both operations under one single command structure. It will take time to reach greater integration between ISAF and OEF, but we must take advantage of the winter "pause" to achieve a new operational phase in spring 2009 after making remarkable steps forward from all viewpoints: command structure, operational planning, intelligence, logistics, etc.

It is too early to say whether and when this "merger" will come true, but certainly this change will have positive operational repercussions. It will allow to employ the forces available in a better and more effective way and eliminate a series of senseless duplications.

Obviously the duplication of commands (and of mission statements) is not the only outstanding issue. For years operational commands have been insisting on a substantial enhancement of the assigned forces – a permanent enhancement and not only a "surge" – as well as greater flexibility in their employment. Today the trend of increasing the size of national contingents and concentrating them on well-defined geographical areas – has been gradually reinforcing, as happened also in case of SFOR and KFOR during the hot "phases" or in the two Gulf wars. This concentration/enhancement should also allow to solve the "command and control" problems emerged over the last few years to which it was hard to find a solution. Even the British troops incurred difficulties with the ISAF command structures and the U.S. and Canadian ones (problems were less serious with the Dutch ones), not to mention the links with ANA forces.

Another outstanding problem regards the connotation of contingents: we started with very light forces for the additional reason that in Afghanistan logistics is really sensitive and costly. At a later stage almost all contingents had to be strengthened, especially those who shifted to combat operations. For political reasons Italy is one of the countries which prefers to keep a low profile, by sending heavier means and increasing fire power and response capacity only "after" – and never before – possible incidents and losses, thus also forgoing a valuable deterrence effect. Account must also be taken that, considering geographical distance, sending reinforcements to Afghanistan – especially heavy means – is neither a quick nor an easy process. Currently the land contingent in the Lebanon is still more "combat-oriented" than the one in Afghanistan.

Today, however, ISAF is ever more turning into a combat force, even though serious unresolved issues still persist in some key sectors ranging from intelligence to surveillance, fire support and intra-theatre air transport. Tactical transport aircraft, and helicopters in particular, are lacking. It is really outrageous that a country such as the United States is forced to resort to external companies to hire 22 medium and heavy transport helicopters; the same holds true for NATO. Helicopters lack everywhere, also in Darfur. Yet, in theory, NATO helicopter fleets are more than substantial. And it is ridiculous to purchase highly sophisticated helicopters and then resort to Mi-17 – on the best possible assumptions – or Mi-8 for

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rather complex logistic tasks. It is also ridiculous that countries such as Great Britain, Canada or the Netherlands are forced to urgent emergency solutions with a view to meeting needs for the transport/support of contingents in Afghanistan. This shows to what extent we shall also work on the operational abilities of the rotating wing, ranging from the availability of crews and technicians to spare parts.

In Afghanistan the Air Power can play an even more relevant role, thus enhancing both Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) and tactical transport and support systems. The current forerunners of UCAVs (unmanned combat air vehicles) could be enough, considering that persistence and the ability to intervene under all conditions outweigh the total payload. It is a pity that the Armed Forces have few UCAVs, UAVs (unmanned air vehicles) and few non-sophisticated CAS aircraft (and the case of the U.S. A-10 would deserve in-depth studies). It is also a pity that some NATO countries have many fighting and transport aircrafts which are not offered to be employed in Afghanistan for political and economic reasons, even though sending airplanes exposes a limited number of people to risks far lower than the risks run by an infantry contingent.

The use of precision weapons is essential when civilian victims are one of the best means of propaganda for the Taliban. It is true that the Taliban keep on slaughtering Afghan civilians without scruple, but it is unacceptable that almost 45% of the 1,500 Afghan civilians killed in the first 8 months of 2008 were killed by U.S. and ISAF forces.

ISAF, however, is growing: late September it had far exceeded 47,000 soldiers (including 13,000 Americans), to whom further 20,000 G.I. operating in the OEF mission must be added. Even though the requests made by operational command structures have not been met yet, slowly soldiers and additional forces are coming. The United States plan to add to the 33,000 soldiers already stationed in the theatre a Marine Air Ground Task Force of the Marines at battalion level in November and the 3rd Brigade of the 10th mountain Division in January, for a total of about 4,500 soldiers. In the original planning both units had to be sent to Iraq, whereas they have now been redirected to Afghanistan. General McKiernan would like to have three other brigades, with related transport troops; if no disasters are recorded in Iraq, these troops will be made available by the new Administration – irrespective of its political complexion – whereas the Pentagon is studying an overall revision of the current Allied military structure in the country. Obviously, this U.S. supercommitment also puts increasing pressure to bear on the Allies. For example, Great Britain, which will halve its contingent in Iraq to 4,000 units, should not incur problems in pursuing its efforts in Afghanistan at current levels and rumours are rife of a further strengthening that the British generals on the field have been long asking.

It will become politically difficult also for others to deny support to the "common cause" – for example by adopting a slower pace of "rotation" between contingents and command structures, as is appropriate when a war is fought, without recording, however, the "tour de force" paces to which they were subjected in the past, with destructive effects on morale, families and conscription rates.

Also the burden of "caveat" and "remarque" by Allies should be at least mitigated, if not overcome. It is unlikely for Germany to follow the Italian example (even though soldiers of the German special force are discreetly conducting full combat operations), but finally the trend is positive. The situation can change if we are patient; if technical problems are solved and additional resources are made available. We cannot doubt of the fact that a greater Allied military presence, with more homogeneous, better equipped, supported and commanded units, matched by a gradual growth of ANA, will finally have positive effects.

4. The great choices

In the poker game played in the globalized world there is no longer time to beat about the bush since we are faced by players who are calling bets by saying: "I'll see you". What bet can Europe – or better European countries – lay on the gambling table, since Europe as such – namely the European Union – has not yet sat around this table? The challenges posed by the conflicts of the XXI century cannot be met and not even faced by one single power, even though it is absolutely dominant from the merely military viewpoint. The reason lies in the fact that winning the war is not enough since, in the current strategic and cultural context, we must also gain and restore peace in the post-war period.

As in the Balkans, after Dayton and Milosevic' surrender in Kosovo – as in Iraq after the "blitzkrieg" which enabled the U.S. troops to occupy Bagdad in about two weeks – also in Afghanistan the stabilisation and reconstruction phase is proving far longer, more dangerous and costly than politicians would desire. Indeed, the Afghan case has proved to be far more difficult and problematic for the simple reason that Afghanistan is little more than a geographic expression, where the very concept of central national government is alien to the history and culture of peoples who live on a territory as large as Germany and extremely fragmented, with weak internal intercultural contacts - if any - and with substantial and somehow irreconcilable ethnic and language differences.

In such a framework, the only idea of favouring – not to say imposing – a national authority according to the criteria of a Western-style centralized state is at least risky, if not even wishful. Hence what strategy shall be followed? We can take for granted that whoever wins the U.S. elections will consider victory in the Afghan war one of the foreign policy priority goals and we should also consider that Western solidarity is an irrenounceable issue. Hence, if we really want that in the future Europe as such – and the European countries in particular – can play a role, at least as co-protagonists, the possible options shall hinge around a complex strategy on which a sound and substantive agreement shall be reached.

Firstly, tangible content shall be given to what is known as "comprehensive approach", by creating effective coordination between the various components that each country can provide, of which the military one is only a dimension and, paradoxically, not even the most important. "Comprehensive approach" means tackle the problems of the Afghan civil society decisively, by considering its specific features and its potential. With a view to reaching this goal, all the necessary financial and operational means shall be used in all sectors (health, infrastructure, judicial system, productive and, more in general, economic system).

Therefore we must underline that further involving civilian walks of society is more essential than ever before: the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that should be the major tool for taking actions along these lines basically remain military bodies. For them, ensuring security is still a priority in an approach which, paradoxically, is centralized though trying to meet local needs. It is also clear that each PRT is a reality in itself, according to the country involved in it, both in terms of approach – which basically follows national logics and behaviours – and in terms of funds available, which are far from being the same for all of them. Hence, it is advisable to reach strong coordination of the various PRTs' action – that for the time being is virtually non-existent – with resources which ideally should be pooled and distributed according to shared and not arbitrary criteria.

In this context we must view the debate under way in which the UN Special Envoy, Eide, is in favour of a full – not to say exclusive – involvement of the central government, with undisputed support to President Karzai (and obviously to the possible successor who may result from the future forthcoming elections). A careful analysis must be made on this aspect, by starting from the sociological structure of Afghanistan. Taking for granted the long term goal of a progressive strengthening of Kabul's central power - at least to ensure a single

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and reliable counterpart for the international community – it would be an unforgivable mistake to ignore local realities and forcedly impose a non gradual erosion of autonomies and individual ethnic groups – not to mention individual tribal realities.

Moreover, the PRTs' efforts - appropriately civilized and as consistent and convergent as possible - are bound to be agreed upon with the most influential representatives of the individual provincial communities. In their turn, these communities will realize that specific attention is paid to them, but in the framework of a centralized logic and this will have a dual effect: on the one hand, they will be inclined to have a more proactive and cooperative attitude and, on the other, they cannot ignore the wider framework in which the central authority can become a point of reference and not an alien and basically hostile element. From the strictly military viewpoint, European countries shall firstly try to pursue a common political approach. Certainly it is a demanding task faced with an Atlantic Alliance with different – and sometimes irreconcilable – souls.

It should be possible to coalesce at least the E.U. founding members, plus Spain, around a common political approach, in a perspective considering military presence as a stability-producing factor and decisively fighting against the ISAF/Enduring Freedom dualism: only a firm common position of the above stated countries can lead the United States to reflect on goals and rules of engagement so as to focus military action more on protection than on proactive fight against the Taliban guerrillas. We shall not forget that unfortunately every offensive military action can cause the so-called "collateral damage" for the peoples who are involved in armed clashes and conflicts. The worst and most ruinous collateral damage is to create a feeling of hostility vis-à-vis Western forces and, conversely, sympathy for the "insurgents". We shall not forget that guerrillas can be defeated only by "drying up their breeding ground", which means gaining support from the people, thus depriving terrorists of it.

These concepts should also be the core of the strategy to fight against drug trafficking: a direct commitment by the Western countries' troops to eradicate poppy crops would be a strategic disaster since NATO and its allies would be viewed as starvers who deprive farmers of their only real source of income. A similar result would be recorded also if - as proposed by some countries – the military actions were targeted on the local processing laboratories which, obviously, employ manpower, who cannot be equated/assimilated to armed terrorists. Drug-trafficking can be fought in two ways at the same time: education to equally attractive alternative crops for farmers and the "decapitation" of traffickers; this implies a careful analysis and a decisive intervention by the international community vis-à-vis circles very close to Kabul's political leadership. Any other option would have counterproductive effects, which would foster growing popularity of the so-called "Opposing Military Forces".

A final - though fundamental - consideration regards the concept and strategy of "Afghanisation" of the conflict. Certainly without a full and direct taking of responsibility – also from the military viewpoint – by the Afghani people, it will never be possible to conceive an exit strategy which is not an inglorious and politically disastrous escape. In this regard, we must continue and deepen our efforts for a gradual, and possibly quick, growth of ANA operational abilities and structures. The results achieved so far in this sector are encouraging: day after day ANA units are proving to grow in terms of cohesion, sense of belonging and national pride, which are the essential factors to be effective and fully operational. The training levels reached are acceptable and improve on a steady basis also thanks to "mentoring" techniques, which are proving particularly effective.

Also in this sector, however, the resources provided by European countries are far from being sufficient: every Afghan unit needs a team of experts to assist it in its daily activities, including the operational ones. Reference is made to the Operational Mentoring Liaison Teams (OMLTs) composed of expert and specifically-trained staff to be included in the ANA

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Kandak (units equivalent to regiments). This European "lukewarm attitude" is slowing down the organic and systematic capacity growth of Afghan forces. In conclusion, what choice can be made by Europe – or rather European countries – to provide a decisive contribution to the success of operations in Afghanistan? Certainly more resources shall be made available, not so much in terms of soldiers on the field (though needed), but rather in terms of a synergic and systematic use of all components, particularly the civilian ones.

Basic political agreement and coordination are needed on modus operandi and political goals, by taking into account the particular structure of the Afghan society. Once again intelligence is needed, as well as a common approach to structural problems such as drug-trafficking, also by means of a vigorous action vis-à-vis Kabul's political leadership, where necessary. Finally, paying lip service to these principles is not enough. A consistent action and a substantive commitment must be undertaken to help the Afghan society to rely on its forces: we do not need another protectorate under the aegis of the United Nations or the European Union. We need a credible and reliable counterpart which shall no longer provide safe haven to international terror masterminds.

5. Italy put to the test

The United Nations, NATO and the European Union, the key organisations of the International system, are all directly committed to Afghanistan: hence a failure would have very serious consequences on the credibility of our institutions and all Western countries, in particular. Since the post-war period, Italy has constantly and consistently aimed at becoming at first a member and subsequently a leading entity of this complex multilateral reality, thus obtaining in exchange stability, security, development and particularly the recognition of its rightful role and status within the mainstream of developed and democratic nations. Therefore, apart from the specific reasons which would push us to commit ourselves to Afghanistan anyway (fight against terrorism and drug trafficking; solidarity with our allies; enforcement of human rights), there is also the need not to relinquish status and positions acquired laboriously and the will to keep on pursuing a strategy of greater international governance.

Nonetheless we must be aware of the obligations and costs arising therefrom. This report does not provide quick fixes. In Afghanistan the coalition is neither winning nor losing; yet this uncertainty is already a success for our opponents. Pessimism is setting in: perhaps also to react to an information policy which had exaggerated with excessive optimism, some senior officers and the United Nations themselves have published far more realistic reports on the situation, even assuming the possibility of defeat looming large (probably also to better motivate their demands for reinforcements and/or strategic approach changes). And, indeed, the situation is not encouraging. Civil society finds it hard to take off and the Afghan central government is far from effectively control most of the national territory. Crime is thriving, especially thanks to the illegal opium poppy growing and opioid processing and export which contribute to fund terrorists and insurgents. The attempt to export to Afghanistan "Western style" methods and legislations has proved to be doomed to failure, particularly in the sector of justice administration in which Italy is directly involved. We are faced with serious risks of failure, first and foremost the increased "tribalisation" and fragmentation of the country and the definitive collapse of Kabul's government.

This does not mean, however, that we are on the verge of collapse. The international coalition is not winning, but the same holds true for the Taliban and "Arab" terrorists. At the cost of serious human and financial sacrifices, the coalition is keeping a limited – though substantial – territorial and strategic superiority, which enables Kabul's government to survive and thwart guerrillas' attempt to regain control over the country or at least its southern provinces. Unlike the Soviet-Afghan conflict, the local population cannot be considered generally hostile, nor openly taking sides with insurgents, even though this people cannot even

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be considered fully cooperative and there are many clear signs of impatience towards "foreign" interference and interventions. In other words, the conflict in Afghanistan seems to have reached a sensitive turning point. The will expressed by NATO and the United States to increase the number and quality of forces fighting on the field will contribute to further reduce opponents' military options, but will not be sufficient to decisively change the overall strategic framework. As is the case with all guerrilla warfare, success or failure depends more on the overall political framework and the ability to win sufficiently large and stable support from the local population than on the use of military force - though needed.

Italy must operate in this difficult situation. The guidelines followed are basically two: the reaffirmation and possible strengthening of military contribution and an overall revision of the political strategy to make it more effective. They are closely interwoven even though NATO (and especially the United States) tend to give priority to the former over the latter. The military contribution is of great importance. Italy has already decided to substantially strengthen the operational abilities of the Italian contingent by sending fighting helicopters and Tornado firefighters, though devoted to reconnaissance tasks. In the future other qualitative reinforcements may be needed, particularly in the field of Intelligence and quick alert and reaction, as well as self-protection. After all, it is hard to imagine a more active participation by Italian soldiers to direct fighting against insurgents, especially in the southern regions of the country, without a clarification of the overall strategic approach. Moreover, we cannot rule out the possibility of further increasing Italy's commitment to the training and operations of police and border control forces. This entails the deployment of new specialized military police contingents, particularly Carabinieri and Guardia di Finanza. At strategic level, a series of political and diplomatic initiatives shall be clearly defined with a view to increasing the effectiveness of the international presence in Afghanistan. The more convinced approach expressed by the Pakistani government to regain control over the regions of the country, which are currently in the hands of local tribal chieftains, is an encouraging sign, which must not be hindered by inappropriate or provocative behaviours of the international coalition in Afghanistan. Pakistan is one of the mainstays of Asian stability: the policy towards this country cannot be defined as a variable depending on the Afghan conflict, in spite of its token and political significance.

The same holds true for international terrorism. Surely it is essential to prevent Afghanistan from turning again into an operational base for the jihadist movements, but today the real cultural and political breeding ground for these movements is in Pakistan. Therefore it is important to implement a more intense Italian – and particularly European - policy towards it to support its new "civilian" government and the political stance expressed by the new President.

The most sensitive issue, however, is that – even though it is necessary to give priority to Pakistan – we cannot forget the other neighbouring countries and India, in spite of the tensions existing among them also in relation to the Afghan policy. From the Italian side, in particular, it is particularly relevant to improve relations with Iran – which keeps a strong presence and has important links, particularly with the region of Herat, where most of our forces are deployed. Therefore the idea of a permanent conference of neighbouring countries, together with Kabul's government and the international coalition representatives (at least from UN, NATO and E.U.) must be proposed once again and firmly supported.

Equal importance must be attached to the relationship with the various forces at local and regional levels, both those who support the government and those who have a more discreet, restrained or conflicting attitude towards it. In particular, it is now clear that under the label of the Taliban movement there is a multifarious galaxy of political and tribal realities, with different attitudes not only towards the conflict but also towards al-Qaeda and international terror. In many cases, the dialogue with these components is made more difficult as a result of misunderstandings or hostilities on cultural and religious choices rather than on great strategic options. In other cases the problem lies in personal and/or tribal ri-

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valries and competitions. This multifarious reality, however, must be examined and disrupted, where possible – so as to avoid the creation of a guerrilla common front vis-à-vis the international coalition or Kabul's government.

The counterproductive aspect of this strategy is that it could further weaken the central government credibility and fuel the country fragmentations. Hence it must be pursued carefully and cautiously, but cannot be simply ruled out due to its intrinsic ambiguity.

In this context we cannot ignore the problem of the production and marketing of opium poppy and its by-products. The close link existing between scarcely governed areas and poppy producing areas appears ever more clearly, and the same holds true for the relationship between guerrilla warfare, terrorism and organized crime. The strategies pursued so far have really had a very limited impact (as in other difficult realities such as Colombia or Bolivia). The mere destruction of poppy fields has proved to be unable to eradicate or significantly reduce this production, and the fight against illegal trade has not succeeded in putting an end either to trade or to the huge proceeds stemming therefrom.

An alternative strategy, proposed by some analysts, is legalise this production, by creating an opium poppy public monopoly which buys most of the production, thus withdrawing it from the illegal market. The greatest difficulty which may be incurred in implementing this strategy lies in the scarce control that the central government and the coalition forces have over the territory, which is essential for the optimal functioning of a monopoly system. Nevertheless, this vicious cycle (no control over the territory – illegal crops and trade – strengthening of crime and guerrilla warfare – less control over the territory) cannot be broken only by increasing the intensity and effectiveness of military and repressive operations, since the economic incentive ensured by these illegal activities is too large and disproportionate.

This problem shall also be tackled from the incentives and credible alternatives viewpoint, such as massive public purchases of crude drugs and support to alternative crops. In so doing we could try to break the link between farmers (the largest and most vulnerable link of this chain, also particularly linked to control over territory) and organized crime committed to processing, exporting and marketing finished products (that is also less physically linked to the Afghan territory and more willing to reach alliances with terrorists and guerrillas). In other words, also the fight against drug trafficking must be seen in the general strategy to regain confidence and support within the country and control over the territory with the most appropriate and realistically effective methods available.

In general terms, the coalition policy must not appear as an attempt to "convert" the Afghan people to Western political and social values, customs and habits: it is not and shall not be perceived as a "crusade" (an image freely used and abused by terrorists themselves), but rather as a limited and localized intervention designed to eradicate a threat, which is equally dangerous both for the Islamic and the non Islamic world. Obviously the rest will depend on the Afghan people's free will and preferences.

This process will take time and hence remarkable human and financial resources. From the Italian side such commitment must be planned in the long term and realistically. While it is advisable for Italy to explain its choices more clearly and increase its ability to put forward proposals within the coalition, its effectiveness will be greater if its commitment is perceived as realistic and long term, as well as adequately supported in terms of soldiers and means.