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AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN AND THE TRIESTE G8

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Iran was the dominant absent guest at the Conference on Afghanistan and Pakistan that took place in the margins of the Foreign Ministers' G8 held from 25 to 27 June in Trieste.

The absence of a representative from Teheran as a result of the internal crisis which exploded there following the contested election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, scuppered any hopes of a breakthrough in the regional approach to the Afpak crisis. It should be noted that the Afghan minister for foreign Affairs, Rangin Dajdar Spanta, and his Pakistani counterpart, Makhdoom Mahmood Qureshi, were in unison in declaring that the violence in Teheran and other

Iranian cities, "are internal questions which we do not wish to interfere in" given that Iran "is a stabilizing factor in the region".

In their final declaration the G8, Afghani and Pakistani foreign ministers focused attention on the drugs problem which "remains a significant source of income for the extremists". The USA sent Richard Holbrooke, special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, to Trieste. Holbrooke definitively laid to rest the USA's aggressive strategy (Colombia style) of rooting out the fields of poppy which make Afghan opium. "It has failed", he said, "it has not damaged the Taliban in any way, if anything we have left the peasants without work and many have finished in the arms of the insurrectionists". For these reasons, funds from the uprooting program will be redirected by the US administration and put to use in blocking the trafficking of drugs and of the chemical components used for refining opium into heroine, in the repression of the Narco-traffickers and in the promotion of alternative legal cultivations. According to Holbrooke, previous American policies did not reduce by a single dollar" the profits made by the Taliban from the growth and production of opium. "Perhaps some lots of land were destroyed", observed Obama's envoy in Afghanistan, "but this only helped the Taliban". Afghanistan is the world's principal opium supplier. According to UN figures, the Taliban and the formations linked to Al Qaida, made some 50 to 70 million dollars out of this business last year. In a report published by the United Nations against Drugs and Crime (UNODC), we can see, however, that the cultivation of poppy did decline last year by 19% compared to the previous year.

Holbrooke spoke in Trieste of a "big change". Agriculture was one of the main issues discussed by delegates and it is described in the final declaration as "the key to the future of Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to the other countries in the region". The Italian minister of foreign affairs, Franco Frattini, announced that with the "Roman branch of the UN we have thought about coming up with a 'green Marshall plan'". That is, "an action plan offering incentives to those returning to once profitable crop cultivation in place of poppy farming".

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On a regional level, Iran is one of the countries most involved in the fight against drugs along its border with Afghanistan. For this reason it was no surprise that the idea of setting up a UNODC (the United Nations Agency Against Drugs) centre in Teheran to coordinate the anti-narcotraffic battle at a regional level.

In point ten of the final declaration on the Afpak crisis, the foreign ministers gathered in Trieste underlined the importance of “increasing the capacity of the Afghan National army and police (ANP)” even though the problem of a lack of training staff and mentors clearly remains.

The declaration also mentions Pakistan’s renewed commitment to fighting extremists and the problem of the “suffering of the civil population in the Western Frontier province, where there are more than two million homeless” as a result of the operations of the Pakistani armed forces in the Swat valley which will continue in Waziristan. Holbrooke underlined, however, that the real test will come when the refugees return home. “Will their safety be guaranteed? Will the army be able to stop the Taliban from returning from the mountains?” asked the US envoy. He then underlined that the costs of reconstruction “will be huge, more than a billion dollars, perhaps two”.

A strong call also emerged from Trieste in the name of the international support group for Afghanistan and Pakistan with regard to the presidential elections due to be held on 20 August. The international community appealed for “credible, inclusive and safe elections, which reflect the will of the Afghan people”. The fear is that a slim victory for outgoing president, Hamid Karzai, who is the favourite, might set off a wave of protests from opponents. A sort of “Iran effect” would be a serious blow to the country’s fragile stability.

Afghan Presidential Election campaign starts

The campaign for the presidential elections in Afghanistan on 20 August have officially begun. There are 41 candidates for head of state, including two women. There will also be elections for the provincial councils where there are more than 3 thousand candidates, with almost 300 women among them. The candidates who are real contenders for the role of president are just three: outgoing head of state, Hamid Karzai, former Finance minister, Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai and former foreign Affairs minister, the Tajiki Abdullah Abdullah. In 2004, Karzai was elected president with 55.4% of the vote and observers continue to see him as the favourite even if his presidency has left many Afghans unsatisfied.

A dozen of the candidates can be catalogued among those politicians and businessmen who have a reasonable following but will not be capable of challenging the three principal contenders. Among them we find the vice-president of the Lower House as well as some other parliamentarians and ministers without portfolio. There is also a former procurator general. Other candidates are far more controversial, such as Mullah Abdul Salaam Rocketi, former Taliban commander, and the Turkmen leader Akbar Bai, who was imprisoned for contraband activities. Many of the candidates are little known and make up the so-called “new democratic leaders” which represents civil society. Many are taking part in the election simply to put pressure on the executive in order to obtain something in return for their later withdrawal.

The two women candidates, Frizan Fana, former wife of an assassinated minister, and parliament member, Shahla Atta, have little visibility and absolutely no chance of success. On the other hand, two women were named as first vice presidents and six others as second vice president.

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Challenges and prospects facing General McChrystal, new ComIsaf

On 15 June, the four-star general, Stanley McChrystal, took over the command of the Nato mission in Afghanistan in place of David McKiernan. Much of McChrystal's biography is reserved as he held command roles in special operations both in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, his men neutralized Abu Musa al Zarqawi, the most dangerous leader of Al Qaida in Mesopotamia. The general has already begun a tour among the front-line troops bringing a very clear message: "The success level of our activities will not be based on the number of enemies killed but on the number of Afghans protected from violence".

On 6 July the Commander of Isaf has publicly released a revised tactical directive aimed at minimising the risk to the civilian population as a result of the use of force. The directive provides guidance and intent for the employment of force in support of Isaf operations and serves to communicate the commander's intent to the lowest echelons, whose tactical actions can have strategic consequences.

(See 2 pages "Tactical Directive" http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/Tactical_Directive_090706.pdf) General McChrystal has spoken of a genuine "cultural change" in the mission against the Taliban. Last month, in a bombing in the Farah province, more than 100 civilians were killed according to official Afghan sources. The Americans admitted that there had been 26 innocent victims but an internal inquiry showed that the soldiers who were involved in the raid had broken the engagement rules repeatedly. According to McChrystal, "if we win the confidence of the Afghans, we cannot lose. If we lose it, we cannot win".

This is the logic behind the large-scale Strike of the Sword operation launched at the beginning of July by four thousand marines in the southern part of the Helmand province. This area is a historic safe haven for the Taliban and the epicentre of opium cultivation. The marines, who are part of the fresh reinforcements sent to Afghanistan by president Obama, landed by helicopter in strategic villages in the area where they intend to remain. The aim is not only to force the Taliban to flee temporarily but to guarantee the local Afghan community the infrastructure that is needed (proper irrigations, medical clinics, schools).

The International troops in Afghanistan will, in any case, have to face "tough battles" in the coming months and "they will certainly continue until the end of the year", according to the Centcom commander, David Petraeus.

The first week in June saw "the highest level of incident in terms of security since the liberation of Afghanistan" in late 2001, when the Taliban were removed from power", Petraeus continued.

From January to June, the number of attacks in Afghanistan has risen by 59% compared to the same period of the previous year (there has also been a sharp rise in the Western sector where most of the Italian troops are employed).

General McChrystal will be able to call on some ninety thousand men, two thirds of whom are American. During 2009, the American forces will double from thirty-two to sixty-eight thousand men. In June seven thousand marines arrived in the 'hottest' southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar.

Despite the reinforcements promised by American president Barack Obama, the outgoing commander of the Atlantic alliance, John Craddock spoke to the BBC of his 'frustration' with the lack of International troops in Afghanistan and with the caveats imposed as to how they be

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employed, especially by the European nations.

IN PAKISTAN POPULAR REACTION AGAINST THE TALIBANS WHO REACT VIOLENTLY

Pakistan, including the tribal zones on the border with Afghanistan, is reacting to the arrogance and threat of the neo-Talibans. The revenge suicide attacks in the large cities, the shocking videos that show executions order by the Talibans, the forced recruitment of young men from the extremist ranks have provoked indignation in broad sectors of public opinion.

The Pakistani Talibans have reacted to this by killing both those former allies, who are now attempting to distance themselves from them, and the religious moderates who are supporting the government in its military offensive to root them out of the tribal areas. Baitullah Mehsud, one of the most dangerous Taliban commanders and leader of the extremist group, Tehrik-e Taleban-e Pakistan has even claimed responsibility for the killing of Qari Zainuddin. A former ally of Meshud, he is a member of the same tribe and when only thirty years of age already had some three thousand men under his control. Zainuddin formed an alliance with another 'moderate' Taliban fighter, Qari Turkestan Bhitaini, in order to wage war on Meshud. The Pakistan government was banking on this alliance for the offensive that it is launching in southern Waziristan.

A 'hot' summer lies ahead caused by the expected Pakistan offensive in the radical strongholds in Waziristan, on the border with Afghanistan. On 25 June, Mehsud narrowly escaped an attack launched from an American drone. Unfortunately the attack killed some 80 victims who were taking part in a funeral cortege to commemorate the victims of an early bombing.

Zainuddin, on the other hand, was shot by an 'infiltrator' sent by Meshud who had convinced him that he had abandoned his commander. The tribal chief whom the Pakistani government had been banking on is not the only notable victim of the hardcore Talibans who have reacted to the offensive against them.

On 12 June, a teenage suicide bomber blew Sarfraz Naeemi up in his office in Lahore. "The Talibans are a black mark on Islam. For this reason we are supporting the armed forces who have every right to destroy them. In this way they will save Pakistan", said the Sunni religious leader from the moderate Bareilvi school a few weeks before his death.

As the head of the Koranic School, Jamia Naeemia in Lahore, the cultural capital of Pakistan, he taught his students to ignore the calls of the fundamentalist sirens. Not only: Naeemi founded an alliance of 22 Islamic movements and political groups with the declared intention of opposing the Talibans. This Sunni Ittihad Council has organised protests against Taliban evils.

His son Raghbir has denounced that his father was murdered "because he declared a fatwa in which he said that suicide bomb attacks were prohibited by Islam. Naeemi was convinced that

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the “war” declared by the army against the neo-Talibans was the last chance for the country to survive. “If we are defeated we will lose Pakistan”, he said before dying. Sarfraz Naemi was close to the former premier and current opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif and to his brother.

Despite the threats, people are openly inciting the Pakistani armed forces to take out the Talibans who are hiding in the tribal areas. The newspapers continually receive letters to this effect from readers. Some reasonably influential leaders, such as Maulana Sarwat Qadri, who leads an Islamic party, has even proposed taking up arms: “We are ready to send volunteers to fight alongside our soldiers against the Talibans.”

Laskars, that is tribal militias that have been formed by clan leaders to fight against Taliban impositions, are becoming more common in the tribal areas. At the start of June, in the Upper Dir district, the ancients asked the neo-Talibans to leave. In reply, a suicide bomber carried out a massacre in a local mosque killing 39 people. Following this, the village leaders mobilized more than 1000 men into a lashkar. The tribal militia killed the commander of the local Talibans and many of his men. The survivors were forced to flee to the mountains. Other Lashkars are forming in the tribal areas which the Talibans have infiltrated (Bannu, Bajur, Swat) and they are beginning to receive help from the government. Officers in plain clothes guarantee air and artillery support if it is needed. Finance support and arms are arriving, even if there is a worry that arming the tribal militia will create a problem for the future. General Petraeus, commander of Centcom has declared that “for the first time, the people are rebelling in the tribal areas with the so-called Lashkar against the Talibans”.

Poll: the Pakistani want Sharif instead of Zardari and the military should the situation worsen.

20% of Pakistanis are in favour of military dictatorship but the percentage favouring it over democracy rises to 65% in the case of “emergency or too much government corruption”. This picture of popular sentiment emerges from a survey carried out by the International Republican Institute (Iri, an American non-profit organization, linked to the Republican Party), and published on the website of the Dawn daily newspaper. Only 25% of Pakistanis believe that the armed forces do not have the right to interfere in the political life of the country. The same survey reveals, in addition, that support for Nawaz Sharif, leader of the Lega Musulmana del Pakistan (Pml-N) opposition party, has soared, while Pakistan’s president Asif Ali Zardari is struggling against wide unpopularity. 75% of those questioned would like Sharif to take over from Zardari who has the support of only 17% of the electorate. Among the members of the government, Yousuf Raza Gillani, the current prime minister, is the only way whose popularity has increase since earlier polls, jumping from 19 to 33%. Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudry, the supreme court president who was removed by then president Pervez Musharraf and is now reinstated, is also seen as a possible by Pakistanis as a possible future head of state.