

# Wildfires and quagmires

BY PIALUISA BIANCO

In only a few months several strategic gaps have opened up on the horizon for the West. The geopolitical view suggests that the international system is going through a sticky patch, with wavering policies and squabbling that could all too easily lead to disarray. But the alarming mood of the moment is less relevant than the ability to develop a pattern of actions that will allow for surviving the inevitable changes of circumstances.

Random and seemingly contradictory signals appear to herald the end of an era: the long season lived in the shadow of the Islamic terrorist threat. The war in Libya – the West’s most extreme indulgence of the Arab uprisings – is intensifying at the same time that the withdrawal from Afghanistan is about to get underway. It is certainly no coincidence that US Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned Congress not to cut funding for the Libyan War on the same day that he admitted the United States was engaged in secret peace negotiations with the Taliban. But strategic shifts that change history cannot rest merely on favorable (or unfavorable) turns of events. Every great achievement was a vision before it become a reality. Analysts frequently speak of the peace in Vietnam built by Nixon as a significant precedent for possible talks in Afghanistan. But they forget that the opening to China was a pivotal turn. “The American motive for the opening was to put before our people a vision of peace transcending the travail of the Vietnam War and the ominous vistas of the Cold War,” Henry Kissinger wrote. The death of Osama bin Laden may be reassuring, but on its own it will not open new horizons.

So far, an enthusiastic but confused approach to the revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East has resulted in an almost schizophrenic indecision. Three months into the war in Libya, accompanied by worries that the Western alliance itself is feeling the strain of a prolonged campaign, the risk of an even worse outcome remains.



The southern Mediterranean should be of vital importance to Europeans. But Europe is oscillating between irrelevance and histrionic “go-aheadism.” As a result, NATO is weakened by the lack of cohesion between the US and Europe. As Gates criticized NATO’s European members for failing to take on their fair share of the alliance’s security burden, everyone in the EU knew that he was speaking the truth. In defense and security policy, the inability of the EU countries to raise their game (or even to look as if they are playing on the same team) is tiresome. And dangerous too, should US support fade. Europeans must not take “America’s commitment for granted,” Gates said. Unless Europe does more, NATO faces “a dim and dismal future.” That would be a defeat (moral if not military). Europeans are toying with the idea of negotiations with Gaddafi. But NATO cannot afford to leave the field without having achieved its objectives – that is, to knock Colonel Gaddafi out, politically or physically – because NATO is still the most powerful military organization in the world, although at the moment it is bogged down in a stalemate between Tripoli and Benghazi.

In this context, Germany is looking eastward to maintain a privileged axis with Russia, with regard to both foreign and energy policy. The optimistic version sees how Berlin’s attention could effect better relations

between Moscow and the rest of Europe. Russia and Germany are currently negotiating a potentially new institution within the EU. The actual proposal is quite vague. But what is clear is it would introduce Russia in some fashion to the political and decision-making processes of the EU. But can Germany alone keep Russia anchored in the West? Or is there a serious risk that Germany will be conditioned by interests foreign to the West? We may see the answer shortly, if, for example, a Russian-German mediation in Libya proves decisive, or merely a tar baby.

What about Afghanistan? With a partial security handover imminent and prospects for talks with the Taliban improved, Western strategy, after a decade of occupation, is at a turning point. In a month’s time, NATO troops in Herat and six other provinces will hand security responsibility over to the Afghan National Army and police, giving them control of an area covering one quarter of the country’s population of 26 million. But in May the city of Herat was the site of a Taliban attack that killed 5 civilians and wounded 30. The Kabul police compound was attacked on June 18. But NATO Secretary General Anders Rasmussen said the Taliban is finding it “harder to launch complex attacks.” Now, however, one question dominates the discussion in Kabul: whether peace talks

between the government and the insurgents can succeed. Substantial military pressure is perhaps the only way to bring the Taliban to the bargaining table in good faith.

And Pakistan? Islamabad can and must play a crucial role. But there are several reasons to doubt Pakistan will force the insurgents to talk. What will the Pakistanis want after the serious loss of face in the wake of the US’s bin Laden raid? Their leaders might want to negotiate with the US on wider issues before they enter into a deal on Afghanistan.

As the NATO troops withdraw from Afghanistan, the many strategic risks become more manifest. What is needed is to find the space that will allow all parties involved to modulate an approach that would prevent further isolation of the country, or worse, its collapse.

Although the predominant role of the US sometimes obscures it, the outcome in Afghanistan is an international political problem. It’s a problem for Western cohesion and its ability to integrate the up-and-coming players. Any power vacuum would scare China, India, and Russia. It would whet Iran’s appetite. It could also give new impetus to jihadism, as any spillover of militancy would affect bordering countries.

The stated goal of creating a government and domestic security structure that can handle the responsibility for the defense of Afghanistan is widely recognized as unreachable by 2014, the deadline set by most NATO members.

Of course, polls show that more than 70% of Americans believe the US should withdraw this summer. Europeans feel the same. The White House promised a reassessment of strategy and objectives after the killing of Osama bin Laden. But a change in strategy will quickly generate significant repercussions, both regional and global, especially if a draw-down begins to accelerate more rapidly than originally planned. For the last ten years the international system has been defined by the two wars in Muslim countries. For Washington the imperative is to extract itself from these wars and to focus on more pressing challenges. For the rest of the world the concern is that it might succeed sooner than expected.