

ISAF, Afghanistan and the Pakistan Dimension:

Towards an Acceptable Transition

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Abstract

The article explores the domestic and regional implications of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan after 2014. In domestic politics, the withdrawal will intersect with political transition: the presidential elections. According to the author, the results of the elections will represent either the failure or success of the ambitious program of assistance and stabilization launched by the international community twelve years ago. It also represents the need to avoid the disastrous results of the 2009 presidential elections, marked by massive fraud and manipulation. However, as the paper suggests, the current political scenario in Kabul is not very promising: personal rivalries, tribal feuds, ethno-tribal sectarianism, disinclining mode vis-à-vis international requests of transparency and clear voting mechanisms. In this sense, the future of Afghanistan as a united and stable country seems to be the less important goal for the Afghan political elites. In such a fragile situation, the regional dimension of the conflict acquires even greater importance. This is because if Pakistan does not effectively deal with Taliban in both political and militaristic terms, if Iran continues to act as a “lone wolf” in the post-ISAF scenario regarding the civil war in Afghanistan, and if the Arab oil monarchies maintain their polarizing support to religious dogmatism in the area, Afghanistan will not be able to achieve sustainable and credible stability. Nonetheless, the paper concludes that in post-ISAF Afghanistan, stability will depend more on the shifts within the political scenario than the security one, in the sense that without a credible political transition, and without a non-contested electoral process in 2014, all the previous costly and bloody efforts will have been in vain. In order to secure a successful political transition, two factors will be decisive: i) a strong focus on traditional domestic patterns of policy, rather than formal democracy procedures, ii) the involvement of regional actors, especially Pakistan, in order to reach a suitable, long-term political compromise with the insurgents.

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As is widely known, two key events will coincide in 2014: firstly, the security transition with the end of ISAF (and its transformation into the mission *Resolute Support*, which should guarantee NATO's support to Afghanistan, although the Alliance rejects any reference to a possible ISAF 2.0); secondly, the political transition, with the presidential elections to replace Hamid Karzai. The results of these two transitions will represent either failure, or a new beginning for the ambitious program of assistance and stabilization launched by the international community twelve years ago.

Both events will take place in 2014. However, in the murky and confusing Afghan situation, it appears that in fact 2013 is the crucial year of transition. A NATO defeat in the current fighting season or an implosion of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will wash away any residual hope of stabilizing the security scenario, and will end up in a difficult scenario, wherein the need for peace negotiations with the Taliban will be much more pressing. At a political level, it is crucial this year to create a framework that will prevent the disastrous outcome of the 2009 presidential elections, which were marred by massive fraud and manipulation. It should also be noted that the current political scenario in Kabul is not very promising, given the personal rivalries, tribal feuds, ethno-tribal sectarianism, and the fact that President Karzai still acting in an ambiguous,

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difficult mode *vis-à-vis* international requests for transparency and clear voting mechanisms. The future of Afghanistan as a united stable country does not seem to be the priority for the Afghan political elites.

In this fragile situation, the regional dimension of the conflict will become even more important. If Afghanistan is to have any possibility of sustainable and credible stability, it must ensure the following: a significant change in Pakistan's traditional strategy towards Afghanistan; engagement with Iran to prevent Tehran from acting as a "lone wolf" in the post-ISAF scenario; and avoiding polarizing support to religious fundamentalism in the area from the Arab oil monarchies (through their networks of supported centers and *madrasah*).

In any case, it is crucial to understand that "victory" for NATO will be defined by the political transition. Gone are the days of the 2001 Bonn conference, with all the unrealistic dreams of a global transformation for

Afghanistan; we have acquired a better knowledge of the various ethnic, tribal, clan-based and core-periphery shatter belts which divide and shape Afghan society. A focus on state stability coupled with respect for those particular features is required to help Afghanistan find credible stability (which means something more than the current ‘unstable dynamic stalemate’).

Confidence is the center of gravity?

From a pessimistic perspective, it seems very unlikely that ISAF and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) will be able to defeat the Taliban in all its various forms, and stabilize the country before the 2014 transition, given that they have failed to achieve those results over the past decade. However, there is cautious optimism amongst NATO commanders, based on a number of positive signals from Afghanistan. NATO is trying to give the Afghans confidence that the transition will not entail a collapse, and that ISAF will not simply disappear (‘redeployment, not withdrawal’). ANSF shows better performance and increased confidence in their capacity; Taliban commanders on the ground appear less aggressive in their tactics, notwithstanding the “blockbuster-style” attacks in Kabul (which are mainly aimed at gaining the attention of the international community) and the local population – it is evident – will not accept a return to a pre-2001 Afghanistan. Thus even in the case of military success, the Tali-

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ban will be forced to adapt their ideology, as demonstrated by their change of attitude towards rural schools in some districts.¹

ISAF commanders are insisting on three principle: the first is that the deadline for ISAF redeployment (they refuse to call it a withdrawal) has positive implications for both NATO and

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the government of Afghanistan, since it compels them to be more focused on results and to increase their commitment (it is the last chance to stabilize the country). The second concept focuses on the idea that “confidence is the center of gravity” of their action. In other words, ANSF and the Afghan government need to have increased confidence in their capacity to stand up against the insurgents. From this point of view, the current fighting season is going to be decisive: if ANSF can demonstrate its capacity on the ground; if Afghan officers increase

¹ *The Ongoing Battle for Education. Uprisings, Negotiations and Taleban Tactics, Afghanistan Analyst network Policy Briefings, 10 June 2013.*

their ability to command their men “under fire”; if the administration becomes more efficient and less corrupt, then Afghanistan might survive the redeployment. The third concept deals with the fact that victory will be defined by political transition, not by a direct military intervention, as implemented in the last decade without the anticipated success.

These goals are realistic, but the only way Afghans can avoid renewed political fragmentation and military anarchy is to have confidence in themselves. However, there is a risk that ISAF is over-estimating ANSF capacity in order to create a “public justification” for the withdrawal of the majority of its military units. This is a perception that many Afghans share: “NATO wants to leave Afghanistan, but cannot admit its failure in stabilizing it, so they have created an optimistic but unlikely narrative of the security scenario.” If this is true, it would be not only dangerous, but extremely cynical.

The political conundrum and the peculiarities of the Afghan state

In any case, it is clear that the measure of our success in Afghanistan is not linked to an impossible military victory, but to the positive evolution of the current political scenario. In 2014, Afghanistan has to choose a new president, as the incumbent, Hamid Karzai, will be ineligible. These elections represent a challenge for the country on several levels, and the

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results will determine the future possibilities for a credible long-term stabilization strategy, although there is a widespread pessimism about this.²

The primary goal of the 2014 elections is to avoid the shame and the organizational shambles of the previous presidential election in 2009, which was marred by fraud, mismanagement and manipulation on a massive scale. The second goal relies on the success of the Afghan government to create and support a credible electoral process, with independent observation missions. Apart from that, it is crucial to enlarge the political frame, focusing on the inclusion of actors who are currently excluded from or against the system, especially within the Pashtun ethnic group. The inclusion of such groups, however, should not reverse all of the social and cultural achievements of post-Taliban Afghanistan. Importantly, the Taliban do not seem prepared to launch a political party: ‘Despite recent announcements to the contrary from ex-Taliban figures and the successful entry of another armed

2 ‘In the current environment, prospects for clean elections and a smooth transition are slim’ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Afghanistan: the Long, Hard Road to the 2014 Transition*, Asia Report N.236, 8 October 2012.

The current problems of governance echo the long, seemingly never-ending series of failures to establish a stable, workable government in Afghanistan – from the Muhammadzai dynasty to the Da’ud period, from the Soviet invasion to Najibullah, to the period of civil war amongst different mujaheddin to the Taliban period, to the current government.

opposition group, *Hizb-e Islami*, into mainstream politics the insurgents’ primary mode of political expression in the near future will remain fighting, not party politics’.³

It is clear that “any profound disruption in Kabul politics would leave an opening for the armed insurgency. Failure to see an understanding emerge between the Palace, parliament, political parties and civil society on remaining electoral reform issues or another veto of the reform law approved by parliament would undermine hopes for a stable transition and play even more directly into the hands of the insurgency”.⁴

In any case, we must concede that most of the analyses and considerations in the West are the result of an underestimation of the particularities

of Afghanistan as a state, and the fact that nowadays, difficulties are echoing many of the country’s traditional problems. The current problems of governance echo the long, seemingly never-ending series of failures to establish a stable, workable government in Afghanistan – from the Muhammadzai dynasty to the Da’ud period, from the Soviet invasion to Najibullah, to the period of civil war amongst different *mujaheddin* to the Taliban period, to the current government.

It scarcely needs to be pointed out just how difficult it is to discuss ethnicity, history and political dynamics. More than difficult, it is hazardous, since we always face dangers of over-simplification, if we speak in general terms. This is particularly true when we try to analyze a fragmented and plural society such as Afghanistan, which is a society with wide and deep-rooted cultural, historical and social differences amongst the different ethnic communities (e.g. between Tajiks and Pashtuns) and even within the same communities at different levels (Ghalzay-Durrani, inside each group, etc.). In this society, fragmentation is so strong that some scholars have suggested that in the Afghan context, sectarian distinctions are more important than ethnic distinctions. According to Canfield: ‘Except in the case of the smallest ethnolinguistic types [...] in which the boundaries of the type coincide with some other social unit, the real units of cooperation are normally based on other grounds of loyalty than common ethnic identity. The

³ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Afghanistan’s Parties in Transition, Policy Brief Political*, n.141, June 2013, pp.1-2.

⁴ *Idem*.

categories of ethnic ascription are not in fact the categories of sociopolitical action'.⁵ Rather, other kinds of sociopolitical units (patron-client relations, coalitions under religious authorities, etc.) are more relevant – *madhab* (sectarian affiliation) to be the prior basis of identity in Afghanistan. However, this is an interpretation which has been considered too radical by other scholars. Whatever our personal views, it is still true that we still do not know a lot about Afghan cultural categories of identity and inter-group relations, as emphasized by Anderson.⁶

These difficulties derive from the adoption of an alien concept and pattern of polity structure, namely the 'European national modern state', and the attempt to map that onto different historical and cultural realities. This is a well-known problem in many Asian and African countries: 'Autonomous forms of imagination of the community were, and continue to be, overwhelmed and swamped by the history of the post-colonial state. Here lies the root of our post-colonial misery: not in our inability to think our new forms of the modern community but in our surrender to the old forms of the modern state'.⁷

5 R.L. Canfield, *Ethnic, Regional, and Sectarian Alignments in Afghanistan*, in A. Banuazizi and M. Weiner (Eds.), *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics. Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan*, Lahore, Vanguard Books, 1987, p.76.

6 J. W. Anderson, *Introduction and overview*, in J.W. Anderson et R.F. Strand (Eds.), *Ethnic Processes and Intergroup Relations in Contemporary Afghanistan*, New York, pp.1-8.

7 P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton, 1993, p.11.

Recognizing the role of factionalism, patronage-client relations and tribalism, instead of denying their value, as well as plurality, does entail accepting the disintegration of Afghanistan.

In other words, in Afghanistan – beyond the numerous, well-publicized problems – we are dealing with a structural problem: how to balance and adjust the constitutional shape of a “national state” with the peculiarity of its traditional structures, where center-periphery relations are constantly tense and unstable and where traditional (local) community structures have historically played an important role. Moreover, there is also a theoretical dilemma: the definition of “democratization” in a plural, fractured society. While in the model of the Western democracy this is essentially a way to allow citizens to control their leaders (following Popper’s definition of democracy in contrast to dictatorship⁸) through upward control – and where the majority decides – in fractured societies, such as Afghanistan, the crucial point for the creation of a credible and accepted democratic system lies in the balance of power relations among competing and often hostile ethno-cultural communities.

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8 Cfr. I.C. Jarvie, I. C. – K. Milford, *Karl Popper: life and time, and values in a word of facts*, London, 2006, especially vol.1.

the disintegration of Afghanistan. On the contrary, these concepts represent the first step to modernize the country and to support its evolution through engagement and education. After all, '[i]n spite of the proverbial unpredictability of tribal leadership, the tribal system is an element of stability and resilience in times of turmoil and when state authority has disappeared. It provides safety, legal security and social orientation in an otherwise chaotic and anarchic world'.⁹

From this perspective, the constitution drafted after the collapse of Taliban does not help: Washington, worried by the centrifugal tendency of the Afghan system, pushed for a presidential system, with a strong, powerful President in charge of the government; a system which does not help the political *côte* deal with the above mentioned characteristics of Afghan representation.

The regional dimension and the role of Pakistan

In any case, it would be unrealistic to identify a solution for Afghanistan from within its borders. This has been a Western mistake: for years, ISAF has thought it could stabilize this Country without properly engaging its neighbors.

Obviously, after 2014, the regional dimension will acquire even greater importance: without a significant

⁹ B. Glazer, *Is Afghanistan on the brink of ethnic and tribal disintegration?*, in W. Maley (Ed.), *Fundamentalism reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, Lahore, 1998, p.177.

change in Pakistan's traditional strategy towards Afghanistan, engagement of Iran in order to convince Tehran not to act as a "lone wolf" in the post-ISAF scenario, and less polarizing support for religious fundamentalism in the area by the Arab oil monarchies (through their networks of supported centers and *madrasah*), Afghanistan will have no prospect of sustainable and credible stability.

There is little doubts that Pakistan is the key regional actor. Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has looked upon Afghanistan – and to the Pash-tun areas – with a mix of fear and desire. The Soviet occupation in 1979 offered Islamabad the opportunity to realize two main goals: to achieve a much-desired strategic depth against India (jeopardizing at the same time the dangerous relations between Kabul and New Delhi) and to control Pashtunistan (till then a worrying concept for Pakistan's territorial integrity). In the 1980s, Pakistan was the base for the Saudi-American alliance behind the *mujaheddin* and, since 1993, Pakistan has been a safe haven of the Taliban insurgency and its logistical supply line.

Afghanistan has been the greatest strategic gamble of Islamabad since that time. It has hardly paid dividends: Pakistan support for the *mujaheddin* and then for the Taliban backfired: instead of the "Pakistanization" of Afghanistan, what happened was the "Talibanization" of Pakistan, giving rise to religious extremism, sectarian

violence, illicit trafficking, violence and instability. Pakistani state structures have been eroded by the Afghan syndrome, to the point that Islamabad has often lost, over this decade, *de facto* control over some areas of its territory. Thus, ‘Pakistan has inadequate capacity to clear and hold areas and to win and sustain the support of locals. This is likely to have stemmed from Islamabad’s hesitance to embrace counter-insurgency doctrinally and operationally’.¹⁰

Still, the Taliban appears to be a useful tool for most of the fractured political and military elite of Pakistan, which prefers to retain its traditional, conventional position against India. Moreover, the majority of the population seems to prefer a ‘peace deal’ with Islamic extremists, rather than fighting them.¹¹ Taliban also serves as a political card against India – which is trying to enforce its influence over Afghanistan¹² - as well as the U.S.: the Islamist warriors render Islamabad a crucial regional actor for dealing with and for providing law enforcement officers, officials and politicians with money and illicit products from their

¹⁰ C. C. Fair – S. G. Jones, *Pakistan’s War Within*, “Survival”, 2009, 51:6, p.162.

¹¹ C. C. Fair – C. Ramsay and S. Kull, *Pakistani Public Opinion on Democracy, Islamist Militancy, and Relations with the U.S.*, USIP/PIPA, Washington DC, 7 January 2008.

¹² ‘Delhi has striven to bolster the government in Kabul and integrate Afghanistan into wider regional political and economic structures. This has not been done out of any sense of altruism. By strengthening Afghanistan, India advances its own national security objectives [...] and gaining access to Central Asian trade and energy resources’. L. Hanauer – P. Chalck, *India’s and Pakistan’s strategies in Afghanistan: implications for the United States and the region*, RAND Occasional Paper, S. Monica (CA), 2012, p.ix.

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trafficking (especially opium). Moreover, as it has been noted: ‘Pakistan’s passive support of the Taliban is thus a useful hedge against the day when NATO decides to start pulling out and gives up the struggle. Pakistan will then have a relationship with the Pashtun future of southern and eastern Afghanistan and will have an asset in the struggle for post-NATO Afghanistan. Thus it is crucial that the alliance makes it clear to Islamabad that the Taliban are not going to succeed on the battlefield and that Pakistan must aggressively weaken both the Afghan and the Pakistani Taliban’.¹³

However, this policy is easier to suggest than to implement, for the following reasons:

1. The Pakistani army still has a “schizophrenic” position on the U.S. withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. Although some elements of the powerful and autonomous military services (ISI) remain distrustful of U.S. intentions in the region, others fear the reduction of Washington’s military aid, since today’s Pakistan is characterized by greater insecurity and economic fragility than the Pakistan of the 1980s and 1990s. The

¹³ B. Riedel, *Pakistan’s Role in the Afghan War Outcome*, “The Economist”, 20 May 2010.

result is the well-known, and frustrating, Pakistani stop-and-go policy in their fight against violent Islamic radicalism. In other words, the ‘major nuisance to Islamabad’s foreign policy is the inescapable dilemma stemming from the need to reconcile bilateral and regional objectives with the need to preserve Pakistan’s global standing and strategic value to the United States’.¹⁴ Moreover, the Army maintains a traditional strategy, which does not focus on counter-insurgency. From a doctrinal point of view, it still considers its fights against the Taliban in the Swat valley and in North-West Frontier Province as low-intensity conflicts, and it does not claim to conduct population-centric counterinsurgency operations.¹⁵

2. Islamabad fears the Indian connection with Kabul (the well-known strategic encirclement doctrine); therefore, it maintains a ‘contrastive’ posture in order to keep India ‘at bay’, once NATO and Washington have abandoned the “Af-Pak” arena. However, one can hardly concur with the vision of Pakistan’s policy towards Afghanistan as being completely “India centric”, functioning only to counter India’s moves.¹⁶ This

¹⁴ Q. Siddiqui, *Pakistan’s Future Policy Towards Afghanistan. A Look at Strategic depth, militant Movements, and the Role of India and the US, DISS (Danish Institute for International Studies)* n. 8, 2011, p. 9.

¹⁵ C.C. Fair – S.G. Jones, *Pakistan’s War Within* cit, p. 162.

¹⁶ Although ‘mainly India centric’, Pakistan has other important priorities which shape its Afghan policies, such as the undermining of Afghan Pashtunistan claims, and to build economic links toward Central Asian Republics. Cf: L. Hanauer – P. Chalck, *India’s and Pakistan’s strategies in Afghanistan* cit, pp. 25 on.

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is a very reductive vision of a much more complex and multifarious strategy. Indeed, for Islamabad Afghanistan plays an important role from an economic as well as political status perspective. From the economic standpoint, a stabilized Afghanistan can become a relevant hub for an already proposed inland Eurasian corridor; Pakistan is also worried about the possibility of alternative transport routes to Central Asia involving Indian and Iranian cooperation, for that will reduce Pakistan’s centrality in the Afghan conflict, as well as affecting its regional status. From a political point of view, the role of peace broker in the Afghan conflict helps Islamabad to raise its declining status *vis-à-vis* India and in the region.

3. In Pakistan, any policy which allows the U.S. and Kabul governments to reach a truce or a compromise with Taliban without its direct involvement is perceived as a political defeat and a direct blow to its international status and its regional role. This is why during these years, the Pakistani government has undermined all peace attempts which do not give emphasis

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to its role. It also sought to manipulate the so-called Doha peace process. As a matter of fact, too many generals and politicians think that it is useful ‘to save the Taliban for a rainy day’.¹⁷ It would be foolish to give them away without huge and clear compensation. As has been noted: ‘Pakistan struggles to retain its status as a frontline state. Frail in stature compared to India, Pakistan needs to constantly secure U.S. support, which has historically been granted only intermittently based on strategic priorities of the time – for instance, previously during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and currently as a major U.S. ally in the war on terror’.¹⁸

4. Talibanization is a disease which has already affected Pakistan: to go against them risks provoking a new wave of violence and instability in the Country, although it is crystal clear that as long as Islamabad maintains these links, Pakistan will remain vulnerable to increased infection. As

¹⁷ As a former Pakistani official confessed, quoted in “Right at the Edge”, *New York Times*, 15 September 2008.

¹⁸ Q. Siddiqui, *Pakistan’s Future Policy Towards Afghanistan* cit, p. 52.

a matter of fact, Islamabad’s policy of sustaining the ‘good jihadists’ has strained Pakistan’s political and social fabric. To make matters worse, it has also endangered the state when its former proxies have turned on it. What to do about the (Afghan and Pakistani) Taliban is a security dilemma with no clear answer.

5. Islamabad believes that Pashtunistan will remain an issue amongst the Pashtun. Thus, they prefer to have the upper hand with Afghanistan by supporting the Taliban, in an attempt to fend off Pashtun claims over the Pashtun territory divided by the British-designed border, the famous Durand Line of 1893. But, as Ahmed Rashid notes, Pakistan wrongly calculated that its extensive assistance would lead the Taliban to recognize the Durand Line, curbing Pashtun nationalism. In fact, the opposite occurred: not only did the Taliban refuse to recognize the Durand Line, renouncing to Pashtun’s claims over the Pakistan’s North West Frontier Province; they also supported Pashtun nationalism in Pakistan, adding a ‘religious flavor’, which made it more attractive.¹⁹ At the same time, a strong unified Afghanistan is more a danger than a resource for Islamabad, especially in the current situation, with a government in Kabul where Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek have key ministries in their hands. Beyond that, its grip over Afghanistan (or at least, part of it) represents a tremendously

¹⁹ A. Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, *New Haven (Conn)*, 2010, p. 187.

valuable card that Islamabad can use with Washington at political, military and economic level. 'Islamabad has no reason to facilitate an Afghan reconciliation process that advances U.S. objectives at the expense of its own'.²⁰ However, it is a card which may produce counterproductive results: although it does not necessarily make Pakistan an adversary for

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Washington, it has consolidated the feeling that Pakistan has not been – and never will be – a reliable partner for the U.S., with all the consequences in terms of economic, political and military support.

In conclusion, it appears clear – in terms of both the regional and domestic scenarios – that in Afghanistan we are dealing with a dangerously unstable situation. We are still on the brink of such a situation, but with some positive signals coming from the security sector (less so from the political one). And this is worrying, since in post-ISAF Afghanistan, stability will depend more on the political transition than the security one, in the sense that without a credible political transition, and without a non-contested electoral process in 2014,

²⁰ L. Hanauer – P. Chalck, *India's and Pakistan's strategies cit*, p. 46.

the costly and bloody war will have been in vain.

In order to achieve a successful transition at the political level, two factors will prove decisive: i) increased focus on traditional domestic policy patterns, rather than formal democracy procedures, without depriving the Afghan population of an acceptable form of representation and political rights²¹; ii) the involvement of regional actors, namely Pakistan, in order to reach a suitable, long-term political compromise with the insurgents. Unfortunately, the current position of Islamabad still appears to be a far cry from what Afghanistan needs.

²¹ As remarked by Elisa Giunchi: 'Clearly, the assumption that the introduction of formal democracy will foster per se internal cohesion and peace, irrespective of how power is distributed and of how national memory is constructed, is flawed'. E. Giunchi, *State-building and Sub-national tensions in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, ISPI Analysis n. 171, Milano, May 2013, p. 10.