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BRIEFING PAPER:

PAKISTAN/The All Parties Conference – a repeat of the same old errors

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On 29th September around sixty leaders of an array of Pakistani political parties gathered at the prime minister's residence in Islamabad. Aside from the host - Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gillani (PPP) - among those present were Nawaz Sharif (LMP-N), Chaudhry Shujaat (LMP-Q), Asfandiyar Wali Khan (ANP), Imran Khan (PTI), Qazi Hussain Ahmad (JI) and Fazal-ur-Rehman (JUI-F). The conference was triggered by the declarations of Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the United States Joint Chiefs of Staff, in which he accused Pakistan of attacking U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan through the Haqqani Network, which he deemed an armed branch of the Pakistani military intelligence service (Inter-Services Intelligence, ISI). The deterioration of bilateral relations between Pakistan and the United States is increasingly evident, with mutual accusations like these a reflection of this mistrust.

In response, Pakistan's politicians decided to organise a gathering, not so much to deliberate, discuss or look for solutions to the strained relations with their ally, as to carry out a public relations coup. The resulting All Parties Conference (APC) was as unnecessary as it was ineffective. Its resolution not only came up with nothing to improve the festering relationship, but it also failed to provide solutions to the problem of terrorist sanctuaries in the tribal areas or the military policy of "strategic depth". Pakistan did commit itself to "*initiate a dialogue with a view to negotiate peace with our own people in the tribal area*" and put in place a proper mechanism to do so. The most astonishing aspect is the use of the term "*our own people*". It is unclear whether they are referring to the Pakistani Taliban (Tehrik-i-Taliban, TTP), to the Haqqani Network, to Al Qaeda and foreign insurgents, to terrorist and sectarian groups based in the Punjab or to the Pashtun tribes. The show of unity among Pakistani politicians is just a facade, since political instability (splits in the ruling alliance, confrontation between coalition members, a return to more aggressive opposition tactics) is on the rise as the date of the next elections - due to be held in early 2013 - looms.

Several precedents have already established that negotiations and appeasement of the Taliban and insurgents lead nowhere and proven that what is needed is ideas and courage to confront those that are hindering peace in the country. But none of the politicians in Islamabad seem to have learned anything from either these precedents of blind-negotiations or from policies of appeasement broken only by terrorist violence. From the Sararoga agreement signed with Baitullah Mehsud in February 2003, to the Shakai Accord signed with Nek Mohammad in March 2004, to Miranshah in September 2006 or Khyber in June 2008, to the catastrophic application of the Nizam-e-Adl regulation in Swat in April 2009 as a sign of appeasement toward the TTP and the followers of Sufi Muhammad, all of these cases have demonstrated that negotiation and dialogue with terrorists does not work. And not only does it not work, but it also strengthens them.

On the table now are negotiations with the Haqqani network. But in these negotiations, Pakistani politicians plainly have little to contribute - it is the military who are taking the lead. This is the reason why the Pakistani Army General Pervez Kayani and the Director-General of the ISI, Shuja Pasha, were both present at the meeting. Their presence is proof of another of the Pakistani politicians' mistakes: backing the military and the intelligence agencies are suicidal strategies. Traditionally the more popular the politicians are, the more unpopular the military and vice versa. At present, neither one of the two are popular. After the capture and death of Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistani politicians had an opportunity to strike a blow against the military - their eternal rivals - whose evident incompetence had humiliated Pakistan on the world stage.

But the most incredible of all, is the fact that the politicians backed the military for all their incompetence, and in spite of the fact that they were suspected of knowing the hiding place of Bin Laden. Ultimately, national humiliation - or what General Kiyani likes to call "honour" - was of greater import than the will to resolve the problems that threaten Pakistan's stability. Only Nawaz Sharif raised his voice - in vain - to call for a commission of enquiry into the military's involvement regarding Bin Laden.

What the Pakistani political parties are concerned about right now is not losing any more popularity. The best way to go about that is exploiting anti-American sentiment to the maximum. Since the Raymond Davis incident, the death of Bin Laden and Admiral Mullen's declarations, the feeling of humiliation and subjugation by the Americans has snowballed among Pakistanis, fuelled by the politicians and their kindred news media. What the APC has labelled "our own people" are in fact responsible for the deaths of more than 30,000 Pakistanis.

One of the biggest contradictions of the APC was to emphasise collaboration between the politicians and the military on the one hand, and negotiation and dialogue with the insurgency on the other. The ISI and the Pakistani army continue to look on the Taliban (to which the much-publicised Haqqani network belongs) as tools to carry out their political strategy in Afghanistan. Their obsession with controlling the government in Kabul, which now has a solid component of former Northern Alliance members and cordial relations with India, leads them to keep believing in the policy of "strategic depth" pursued by Zia ul-Haq in the eighties. This was however, the selfsame policy that filled the country with weapons, drugs, insurgents, sectarianism and terrorist attacks. And if it is the military and the ISI who are using the Taliban at their convenience (or who are trying to, with increasingly poor results) shouldn't it be necessary to negotiate with both of them or draw up a new military strategy? If indeed the same people who are pretending to treat the illness are the ones who are sustaining it, then the APC was nothing more than a pantomime.

What is most worrying is the decision to call "*our own people*" all those who have - with the connivance of Rawalpindi - invaded the different tribal areas. Although the recent widening of the Political Party Law to include the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) is a step forward, it does not seem to signal a significant change. Even if the candidates in the FATA ran as independents, the majority of them made no attempt to hide the political party that backed them or to which they belonged. Until now, it was the *mullahs* who made the most of the mosques to campaign for politico-religious parties, while the rest of the parties could not campaign. The impunity with which the radicals operate will only make it easier for the religious to preach their messages, whereas the members of the Awami National Party (ANP), Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the Pakhtunkhwa Milli Awami Party (PMAP) will have to continue risking their lives to denounce and oppose the radicals, or simply to exercise their democratic right to campaign.