# Gentiloni: “No Ukraine-Syria exchange. Putin must not use force” (La Stampa)

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A tragedy. The bombardment of the Médecins Sans Frontières hospital is a tragic and unjustifiable error that foregrounds the events of last week, when the Taleban took control of Kunduz, a city of 300,000. It shows how delicate the transition in Afghanistan remains, where the non-combat NATO mission Resolute Support is coming to a conclusion.  The transition rests on the capacity of Afghan forces to hold out against the Taleban after the withdrawal of NATO, which has gone from a field force of 150,000 to 13,000 troops. But all the work of recent years, and the sacrifice of so many soldiers, has been aimed at delivering the Afghan government a country partly rebuilt. “Thirteen years ago not one girl was able to go to school in Taleban-ruled Afghanistan; today hundreds of thousands are going”. Paolo Gentiloni has just returned to Rome after a long stay in New York for the UN General Assembly.

Mr. Minister, Russia has returned to the great Middle East scenario and is attempting a pragmatic route that could be defined Kissingerian: defending Assad against ISIS in order, in reality, to defend its own interests, starting with a gateway to the Mediterranean. This has not escaped the United States’ notice, but Obama does not wish to repeat the kind of mistakes Bush made in Iraq and Afghanistan. Having met in New York with the heads of diplomacy, what solution do you see to the Syrian conundrum?

«In his speech at the UN, Obama summarised the situation very well, saying: as leader of the strongest military machine in the world, I tell you that it is necessary to involve the various actors in order to resolve the crisis. The interventions in the Middle East over the last 15 years show that the use of force does not work if there is no plan for what happens next. A few air strikes are not enough for Syria; what is needed is a plan for political transition that leads to Assad’s exit but without leaving a power void that today would only be filled by terrorism. So, Russia’s involvement can be very useful for the political transition, but certainly not with the bombardment of controversial targets».

Where are Obama and Putin in their relationship, now that they met at the UN after the two-year freeze?

«I think it was precisely the question of Assad’s role and the Syrian transition that was behind the revival of contact between Obama and Putin. A point on which Italy was in the right, and which is gaining consensus in a context of massive confusion. We must not forget that up

until two years ago, the West was of a different mind: drive Assad out with bombs. Now there is much more talk of transition, and the advisability of concentrating in the meantime on limited objectives, humanitarian corridors, banning barrel bombs; in brief, the demands of UN Special Envoy Steffan De Mistura in his meetings with Assad and those fighting against him».

Is an exchange possible for the purposes of a transition? Would Putin abandon Assad to his own fate in exchange for a loosening of Western pressure regarding Ukraine?

«This was discussed in the foreign ministers meeting. The Americans were clear that the possibility of an exchange of that sort does not exist».

What is happening with the Libyan transition? UN Special Envoy León will soon be leaving. Will everything have to be redone? Would it be possible to replace him with an Italian rather than a German?

«León had a mandate, which expired in September. His successor was chosen at the end of July and, in keeping with UN praxis, an envoy to a country cannot be chosen from a country that formerly ruled it as a colonial power. If a nation's role is measured against the UN envoy's passport, we hold the key to today's principal crisis since the envoy to Syria is Italian. We are going to have to get used to the fact that there is no one or two super powers that can resolve crises with a phone call. Crises are resolved by involving all the essential actors and, first and foremost, through political solutions. Over the past 4 to 5 months, Libya has made much progress; we have to remember that, at the start, the various parties would not even enter the same room together. Last Friday I met at the UN with the Libyan parties and Ban Ki-moon, John Kerry and the various countries of the region; the discussion now concerns the names of the five members of the government council – the last mile of any negotiation is always the most complicated. We are working stubbornly, and León has a new meeting scheduled with his counterparts in Morocco for Monday [today, editor's note]».

Some analysts, beginning with Stefano Stefanini of La Stampa, consider Italy as not having enough influence in foreign policy and limited to a few dossiers only. Do you not feel excluded when Europe meets in «Normandy format»?

«Italy's role is a central one. Moreover, we are located in the Mediterranean, at the intersection of the major crises, and we play a fundamental role in other frameworks such as Afghanistan thanks to the esteem our armed forces enjoy. The fight against terrorism, Syria, Iraq, Libya and immigration are all fronts of a condition in which a world order is painstakingly being built, scenario by scenario. We have a crucial role with regard to many dossiers, even a leadership one on themes such as immigration. On this Italy is considered a country that has shown the way, as Ban Ki-moon often reiterates. As for the "Normandy format" of France and Germany, that has its roots in history».

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