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TO RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

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RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0581

RUEHMIL/AMCONSUL MILAN PRIORITY 0479

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SUBJECT: SECDEF MEETING WITH ITALIAN FOREIGN MINISTER

FRANCO FRATTINI, FEBRUARY 8, 2010

ROME 00000173 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Alexander Vershbow for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)  
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¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (SecDef) met with Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs Franco Frattini during an official visit to Rome on February 8. On Afghanistan, Frattini was eager to move beyond the London Conference and work to produce practical results for the Afghan people. He proposed better civil-military coordination at senior levels in NATO, and raised the prospect of coordination on local projects across the Afghanistan-Iran border. SecDef thanked Frattini for Italy's pledge of more troops for operations in Afghanistan and explained where gaps in civil-military cooperation existed. Frattini believed the international community was lining up against Iran, and encouraged better coordination with countries outside the P5-plus-1. SecDef warned that a nuclear Iran would lead to greater proliferation in the Middle East, war, or both. SecDef agreed with Frattini that a United Nations conference highlighting security challenges in the Horn of Africa was a good idea. END SUMMARY.

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Afghanistan  
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¶2. (S/NF) Frattini opened by telling SecDef that the U.S. can count on Italy's full support on Afghanistan, Iran and fighting terror. He had recently talked with General Jones and Secretary Clinton and relayed the same message. He expressed a desire to focus on the comprehensive approach in such a way to improve the daily lives of Afghans. He asserted a need to press President Karzai on delivering improved governance or risk losing support for the mission in coalition Parliaments. Frattini wanted to get beyond "just talking" -- referencing the London conference -- and noted

concrete Italian projects to convert poppy cultivation to olive oil production and to create a national high school for public administration.

¶3. (S/NF) SecDef commended Rome's efforts to increase Italian contributions, asking whether even more Carabinieri might be available for training the Afghan security forces. He observed that General McChrystal's emphasis on protecting Afghan civilians has changed attitudes among Allied publics. SecDef said he is pushing the comprehensive approach, noting a need for all stakeholders in Afghanistan to share information effectively. He said he hoped that NATO's new Senior Civilian Representative, Ambassador Mark Sedwill, could facilitate this. SecDef recommended a focus on better governance below the level of the national government -- which would take decades to turn into a modern government ) taking advantage of traditional institutions and competent governors at the regional and sub-regional levels and leveraging them into local success stories. At the national level, however, our priority should be to develop those ministries most critical to our success, such as Defense, Interior, Finance, Agriculture, and Health. Noting Gen. McChrystal's recent statement that the situation in Afghanistan is no longer deteriorating, SecDef said that much of the challenge is psychological -- convincing Afghans that we can win and that we will not abandon them.

¶4. (S/NF) Frattini agreed that civilian-military integration is the weakest part of the Afghan strategy. He expressed frustration that NATO foreign ministers only discuss issues like agriculture and education while defense ministers only discuss security. The problem, Frattini suggested, is that they don't talk to each other. He proposed a joint meeting of foreign and defense ministers, beginning with talks at the expert level. SecDef responded that Gen. McChrystal and Ambassador Eikenberry do civilian-military collaboration at the national level on the basis of a Joint Campaign Plan, as

do local ground commanders with leaders of PRTs. What is missing is the level in between -- the regional commands -- and SecDef expressed a desire for Sedwill to appoint subordinates to address this in each RC, building on the

ROME 00000173 002.2 OF 003

example of the civ-mil cell in RC-South. The effect would be cascading civil-military coordination at the national, regional, and local levels. SecDef noted that similar efforts by UNSRSG Kai Eide had been hamstrung by resourcing and the UN's aversion to working with the military. As a NATO representative, Sedwill should not have these problems.

¶5. (S/NF) Frattini also asked about practical cooperation across the Afghan-Iranian border. Local incentives for cooperation might undermine weapons and drug trafficking and help co-opt reconcilable Taliban. SecDef noted that Iran is playing both sides of the street -- trying to be friendly with the Afghanistan government while trying to undermine ISAF efforts. He noted that intelligence indicated there was little lethal material crossing the Afghanistan-Iran border. SecDef suggested that trade route protection from Afghanistan into Eastern Iran, which is important for local economies on both sides of the border, might be a place to start. SecDef noted that any effort will need to be coordinated with Kabul. Frattini agreed this would be a good starting point.

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Iran

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¶6. (S/NF) Frattini supported recent public statements by SecDef raising the pressure on Iran. He declared that Ahmadinejad cannot be trusted, especially after contradicting recent constructive statements by his own government.

Frattini, citing a recent conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, said he believed Russia would support the sanctions track. The challenge was to bring China on board; China and India, in Frattini's view, were critical to the adoption of measures that would affect the government without hurting Iranian civil society. He also specifically proposed including Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Brazil, Venezuela and Egypt in the conversation. He expressed particular frustration with Ankara's "double game" of outreach to both Europe and Iran. Frattini proposed an informal meeting of Middle East countries, who were keen to be consulted on Iran, and noted that Secretary Clinton was in agreement.

¶7. (S/NF) SecDef emphasized that a UNSC resolution was important because it would give the European Union and nations a legal platform on which to impose even harsher sanctions against Iran. SecDef pointedly warned that urgent action is required. Without progress in the next few months, we risk nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, war prompted by an Israeli strike, or both. SecDef predicted "a different world" in 4-5 years if Iran developed nuclear weapons. SecDef stated that he recently delivered the same warning to PM Erdogan, and he agreed with Frattini's assessment on Saudi Arabia and China, noting that Saudi Arabia is more important to both Beijing and Moscow than Iran.

¶8. (S/NF) SecDef urged Frattini to reconsider a planned visit to Italy by a prominent Iranian Parliamentarian in the wake of recent executions of students in opposition to the government. At the same time, we needed to ensure we did not discredit the opposition by creating the impression that they are the tools of foreign partners.

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Horn of Africa  
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¶9. (C) Frattini expressed concern about deteriorating conditions in Somalia and Yemen. He noted a recent conversation with President Sharif of Somalia's Transitional Federal Government (TFG), in which Sharif said that he would be unable to pay his security forces by the end of February. Frattini said that Italy was encouraging the EU Presidency to focus on Somalia and Yemen, and had proposed a United Nations conference addressing Horn of Africa security issues. Italy was providing funding to the TFG's national budget. SecDef concurred that the region deserved more focus.

ROME 00000173 003.2 OF 003

¶10. (U) SecDef has cleared this cable. Drafted by OSD staff.  
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