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THE POWELL DOCTRINE AND THE US-LED TRANSFORMATION OF WAR

RESURRECTION OR OBSOLESCENCE?

General Colin Powell's passing has renewed debate on the doctrine he formulated to prevent further US military failures after Vietnam. This debate resonates with current policy problems as the US rethinks its grand strategy beyond "forever wars" and its disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan – the very scenarios that the Powell Doctrine was designed to avoid.

Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump diverge in many ways, but the intervention preferences of both have concluded the US-led era of liberal state-building. This changing tide prompts questions on whether counterterrorism powered by “contactless” military technologies now makes the Powell Doctrine obsolete. With “quagmire anxiety” a continuous concern for US strategists after Vietnam, Professor Walter LaFeber summarized the Powell Doctrine as a set of principles to ensure that the US military “must no longer be placed in killing fields when there seemed to be no overriding

national interest at stake and no intention of fighting to win a complete victory”.

For Professor Robert Gilpin, the Doctrine's three most important principles stress that the US should only undertake military intervention when there is a “clear and present threat” to its national security; that this threat must be destroyed with “overwhelming force” to deliver complete victory as a platform for lasting peace in the area of operations; and that a credible “exit strategy” must be devised to avoid an imbroglio if full stabilization is not achieved. Defining Powell's rise up the military

ladder from a soldier in Vietnam during the 1960s to his tenure as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff between 1989 and 1993, these principles were credited as a critical influence in the swift US-led victory in the 1990s Gulf War.

The principle of destroying threats with “overwhelming force” elevates conventional ground forces as the primary operational instrument. US leaders have long been reluctant to commit to this principle. In Afghanistan, when Kabul fell to the Northern Alliance in November 2001, the US launched Operation Anaconda and the Battle of Tora Bora with “evasive warfare”

focused on airpower and a light Special Operations Force (SOF) footprint to coordinate Afghan proxies in raids for Al-Qaeda and Taliban commanders.

According to a 2009 US Senate report, both political and military leaders saw this deviation from the Powell Doctrine as necessary to avoid “an anti-American backlash” to “fuel a widespread insurgency”. However, evasive warfare was soon blamed for some critical errors; the same report argues that overwhelming force with a larger US Marine or conventional force footprint could have curtailed the Taliban revival and the escape of some Al-Qaeda leaders. Apprehensive US policymakers did not utilize military units in the region for a “sweep-and-block maneuver” that could have captured Osama bin Laden and other militants.

Dr Andrew Peek argues that the Powell Doctrine was ahead of its time because it narrowly refocuses the US back towards clear and present threats and clear exit strategies, as Washington seeks to move on from long-term state-building in Afghanistan and Iraq. A recent publication from the libertarian CATO Institute, the leading voice for greater “restraint” in US foreign policy, calls for the Powell Doctrine to be “resurrected” for

the current era. Nevertheless, as military technology has advanced dramatically since the Doctrine’s first formulation, it needs to be questioned whether this is possible.

As liberal regime change has faded, a more utilitarian and contactless intervention paradigm has taken shape. The Powell Doctrine’s supporters omit that its overwhelming force principle relies on high-contact conventional ground forces, which US leaders now perceive as prohibitively risky and only to be used sparingly. With a narrower counterterrorism focus, the US has recently intervened with risk-efficient, targeted drone strikes against adversaries in Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. Military technology that is contactless for the user – not for the adversary – can jeopardize the Powell Doctrine’s clear and present threat principle because it eases the intervention risk that worries Western leaders the most: large soldier fatality numbers, thus renewing the temptation to use force for less important risks before exhausting diplomatic options.

US interventions now emphasize very flexible and short-term partnerships. Washington has repeatedly been reluctant to intervene with conventional ground forces since the Syrian War began in 2011. However, this war has highlighted

further utilitarian variation as the US combined conventional airpower with drone strikes and surveillance to confront ISIS and Assad. While SOF teams and contractors supported favoured proxies at war on the ground, this approach has parallels with later US actions in Afghanistan. Trump’s swift abandonment of Kurdish forces in Syria in 2019 and Biden’s disorderly withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 both highlight that if direct US interests are no longer served, partners must fend for themselves. Showing clear distance from regime-change strategies, this gives the US low-cost exit opportunities, but contradicts the complete victory logic stressed as crucial in the Powell Doctrine.

Washington is less likely to prioritize broad legitimacy-based coalitions for future interventions; its focus will instead narrow to partners that supply ad hoc assistance. While profound for US military action in the Middle East and other civil-war-torn regions, this is still unlikely to affect territorial security in Europe, where Washington’s non-guarantee-based partnerships – such as those with Finland and Sweden – crucially remain utilizable for NATO’s broader deterrence posture. /