

Colin Powell Goes To Kabul



providing a safe environment for the delivery of humanitarian assistance (the original ISAF mission, just in case someone wants to remember it), and then all the way back to the original goal – however being now presented in a broader AfPak context and involving a perceived risk for Pakistan’s nuclear weapons ending up in Taliban’s hands. And, not to mention the pretty perplexing notion

With any luck, that is.

In the run-up to the first Gulf War in 1990-1991, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Colin Powell reflecting on the bitter lessons of the Vietnam War formulated what came to be known as the “Powell Doctrine” – although it was not presented as such, and it never became official US government policy. The Doctrine stated that before the US (or any other civil nation for that matter) resorts to the use of military force in the pursuit of its key interests, all other political, economic, and diplomatic means should have been exhausted. In detail, some questions have to be answered on the affirmative:

- 1) Is a vital national security interest threatened?
- 2) Do we have a clear attainable objective?
- 3) Have the risks and costs been fully analysed?
- 4) Have all other non-violent policy means been fully exhausted?
- 5) Is there a plausible exit strategy to avoid endless entanglement?
- 6) Have the consequences of our action been fully considered?
- 7) Is the action supported by the American people?
- 8) Do we have broad international support?

Once the decision to use military force is taken, however, every resource and tool should be used to achieve decisive force against the enemy, minimising own casualties and ending the conflict quickly.

The Powell Doctrine was subsequently declared as “superseded” and “irrelevant” in both its first and second propositions by no less a strategic genius than Donald Rumsfeld, and we all know where such an attitude has led the US and the rest of the world. But with the political and military situation in Afghanistan rapidly approaching the proportions of a major crisis, one would certainly hope that the plain good sense approach, as embodied in Gen. Powell’s suggestions, is re-discovered and applied to an in-depth review of the very reason for our continued military presence there, a reformulation (or confirmation) of the goals we intend to achieve, and fresh definition of the means to those goals.

It is not simply a matter of sending more troops (admitting such is politically feasible), although this would certainly be a much needed step in line with the Powell Doctrine’s second

proposition. It would also not be enough to reverse seven years of neglect and nonchalance to acknowledge that Armies actually *ought* to engage in nation building, and start working in that direction. All of these measures, and other similar military or political moves that are being suggested, are certainly important in order to redress a threatening course of events, but they simply ignore the basic question of what exactly this war is all about.

Popular opposition to the Afghan war in all the European countries and in the United States is growing. And it is growing not because we are all a bunch of crybabies who cannot stand cumulative casualties still well below the results of Saturday evenings’ booze-and-drive car accidents, or because the military PR officers have been doing a crappy work. It is growing because our governments have consistently and perniciously failed to present to the public a convincing explanation of what we are doing in Afghanistan, and why. And we could only fail in such an endeavour, because the way this war has been and alas is still being fought is in direct contrast to the Doctrine’s first proposition.

At the beginning of the conflict in 2002, the US had a passably credible positive answer to questions #1 and #4, and could shout a resounding “yes!” to question #7 as well as (thanks to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty) question #8. But the Bush Administration saw it fit to simply ignore the other questions, and this is why we are now trapped in an increasingly dangerous quagmire. No matter how many more soldiers, equipment and money we throw at the Afghanistan problem, I don’t see how we could ultimately prevail unless we (re)gain our own public’s support for what we are doing there.

The various reasons and justifications that have been progressively (and sometimes simultaneously) put forward to ostensibly justify this conflict bear all the hallmarks of a spin exercise gone badly wrong. At the beginning, the stated target it was to capture or kill Osama bin-Laden and its accomplices and to prevent al-Qaeda from using Afghan territory as a staging base to plan and launch further terrorist attacks. But then, and largely dependent on the audience being addressed, it wandered to fostering the creation of a democratic Afghanistan (but see the results of the Presidential election), eradicating poppy fields, allowing girls to attend school,

according to which NATO must stay and fight in Afghanistan in order to demonstrate its cohesion and continued *raison d’être* – a notion that is alarmingly reminiscent of the “reasons” youth gang members would put forward for their turf wars. All of this, while certain key members of the Coalition still stubbornly refuse to utter the dreaded word, “war” and rather insist they are engaged in but peace-keeping.

Little wonder, then that the public has failed to be properly impressed, and is increasingly questioning the rationale for the conflict.

In an effort to redress this situation, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy have now called for a United Nations conference on Afghanistan, to be held early next year. The unstated but palpably evident goal of such a conference would be to obtain a convenient UN fig leaf for the European countries’ continued military commitment, that would hopefully make this commitment more palatable to the public. But I doubt very much whether it would be enough.

In real terms, the US is engaged in Afghanistan because of its own geostrategic reasons, and the European allies remain there because they do not want to risk a return to the US unilateralism that marked the policy of the Bush administration – even at the cost of having to contribute towards an escalation of the war. But this war, even before defeating the Taliban and winning the “hearths and minds” of the Afghan population, cannot be won unless a strong public support is being gathered for it in Western countries. In turn, winning such a support would necessarily go through the steps of a) openly declaring that this is a war, b) clearly articulating our goals in this war, in terms that the public would accept, and c) moving to ensure a “done” mark on Gen. Powell’s points #2 and #5. Otherwise....


Ezio Bonsignore

Safety Seats for enhanced Survivability

AUTOFLUG Textile Safety Seats provide enhanced survivability under the threats of mines and improvised explosive devices – in conjunction with sufficiently armoured vehicles. AUTOFLUG Safety Seats are certified and under evaluation for various international MBTs, APCs and Infantry Fighting Vehicles. www.autoflug.com

