

Marcellus

POLICY ANALYSIS

Fall 2020 - Marcellus Policy Analysis No. 6

Why America Should Return to the Powell Doctrine

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Powell Doctrine offers a series of criteria that can guide the U.S. to a more restrained foreign policy that will yield better results in future conflicts. Historically, when the criteria have been considered – regardless of whether policymakers knew that they were part of the Powell Doctrine – the U.S. was able to avoid quagmires and achieve its objectives.

The invasion of Panama (1989) and the First Gulf War (1990-1991) show how the doctrine has had success when it called for armed intervention. The wars in the Balkans and Somalia show how the Powell Doctrine limits American involvement in conflicts when all criteria are not met. Similarly, the successful U.S. diplomatic intervention in Haiti (1994) shows how crucial it is to exhaust all non-military options before commencing military activity, a key element of the Powell Doctrine. In contrast, the wars in Afghanistan (2001-) and Iraq (2003-) are evidence of the disastrous results that can occur if the doctrine's criteria are not applied.

Contrary to criticism, the doctrine can be applied quickly. However, prioritizing the views of Pentagon officials over those of elected policymakers remains a serious obstacle to its implementation. To be practicable, the doctrine needs to be advocated for by Congress. When the application of the doctrine calls for armed intervention, its other criteria must be utilized to craft a narrow Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF). If Congress were to adopt this approach, it would combine a historically successful conceptual framework (the Powell Doctrine) with concrete policies (narrower AUMFs) to guide the difficult foreign policy decisions of the future.

Introduction

One of the major issues with American foreign policy in the 21st century has been the lack of a consistent, underlying doctrine. Across presidential administrations, some international disputes and conflicts have been handled with ample resources and broad governmental, public, and international support. Others have been pursued unilaterally and with limited means and support. Decisions regarding the use of military force, however, have suffered from a top-down incoherence that has led to avoidable interventions and threatened the success of necessary ones. The failures of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq reflect not only the flaws of specific intervention policies, but also the tendency of many policymakers to craft their vision of successful intervention along the way. While every conflict requires a unique response, the underlying element that hampers the success of America's recent missions is the absence of a clear, concise, values-based doctrine.

Why do these countries warrant American military intervention? What is the plan after the initial use of force? How does the rest of the world see this conflict? All too often, these crucial questions have been asked after the fact and largely by scholars. Years of spur-of-the-moment policies have made the "forever wars" slogan increasingly valid, creating distrust of the establishment, and contributing to the rising strength of those advocating for military restraint in U.S. foreign policy. The many quagmires around the world, often created or exacerbated by U.S. military presence, make it increasingly difficult to advocate for America's current grand strategy of deep engagement. New, dyadic approaches often appear when a presidential administration turns its attention to a conflict, but what America needs now is a framework to guide policymaking that works irrespective of specific circumstances. In reintroducing and abiding by the Powell Doctrine, which came from Colin Powell's advice on armed intervention during the Bush 41 presidency, the United States can once again have a cohesive and successful foreign intervention policy.

What is the Powell Doctrine?

The Powell Doctrine is not a new idea. First advocated for in the 1990s, it has since been abandoned in the 21st century. A historical review of the instances in which it was adopted, or its elements were considered – in whole or in part – suggests that it holds the key to the responsible, values-driven approach to foreign intervention that the U.S. desperately needs right now.

First, we must clearly define what it is. The Powell Doctrine is a framework to guide U.S. policymakers considering armed intervention. Devised by U.S. Army General, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and later Secretary of State Colin Powell during the First Gulf War, the doctrine was inspired by a similar framework propounded by Powell's mentor and one-time boss, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger. In short, the doctrine calls for an affirmative answer on the following six questions before the use of military force can be implemented:

- 1. Does the situation threaten a key national security issue?**
- 2. Have all possible non-military means been attempted?**
- 3. Is the planned force size decisive/overwhelming?**
- 4. Is there a clear exit strategy?**
- 5. Does the mission have broad domestic and international support?**
- 6. Are the objectives well-defined and achievable?¹**

Each of these questions is likely to be interpreted in vastly different ways by policymakers. What qualifies as a "key national security issue," for instance, is a matter of hot debate across the political spectrum. The imprecise nature of the six criteria, however, is actually a benefit of the framework. It encourages an iterative, comprehensive approach to conflict resolution. All too often, policy debates regarding U.S. interventionism are limited to establishment, status quo perspectives that advocate for the use of force without answering the questions posed by the doctrine. As Patrick Porter has noted: "Prior beliefs about the United States' place in the international order mostly set the agenda and impose tight param-

ters within which bureaucratic politics play out.”² By promoting careful evaluation of the particular conflict facing the nation, our own capabilities, and our willingness to intervene, the Powell Doctrine will expand the range of options to include more responsible and tailored policy choices.

In regard to the doctrine’s first tenet, policymakers who abide by the criteria of the doctrine will have to reach a consensus about what qualifies as a “key national security issue” before evaluating if a particular development abroad poses a legitimate threat to that issue. Similar agreement will have to be reached on the doctrine’s other criteria: the exhaustion of all non-military means, a willingness to commit decisive force, clearly defined and achievable objectives, an unambiguous exit strategy, and the consent of the domestic and international community. If policymakers are strongly divided about whether the criteria has been met, the public and other countries will be unlikely to support intervention, thereby eliminating the possibility of broad, armed intervention (assuming the doctrine is followed). Even if the criteria debate is skewed due to cultural trends or recent events – the post-9/11 period saw the development of a more hawkish public, for example – robust, public discussion of these criteria will produce sounder policies by broadening the scope of options available to address pressing foreign policy issues. In fact, the historical record indicates that when policymakers have – knowingly or unknowingly – considered the elements of the Powell Doctrine, the U.S. has more successfully addressed foreign policy challenges that involved military intervention.

The Successful Use of the Powell Doctrine

When the Powell Doctrine’s elements have been applied, the U.S. managed to achieve its national security objectives with relatively less death and violence, and without any quagmires. The invasion of Panama (1989) and the First Gulf War (1990-1991) show the doctrine’s success when it calls for broad intervention, while the limited involvement in the Balkans wars show the framework’s ability to parse out conflicts that do not require a U.S. troop presence on the ground.

Panama

In 1989, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Powell oversaw the ousting of Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega. The mission was executed after Noriega refused to step down and a U.S. service member was killed at the hands of Noriega’s forces. The U.S. invaded with a relatively large contingent of 28,000 troops, swiftly detained Noriega, and installed a friendly government. Guided by the Powell Doctrine, the mission achieved all of its objectives within two weeks.³ To go down the list of the Doctrine’s criteria: Intervention was needed to protect the lives of U.S. troops and maintain access to the vital Panama Canal, non-military means were attempted, the U.S. was willing to commit a decisive force for the operation, there was a clear exit strategy, the mission had widespread domestic and international support, and the objectives were well-defined and achievable.

Iraq I

Likewise, application of the Powell Doctrine’s criteria in the First Gulf War led to similarly positive results. While Powell was unable to convince President Bush to first attempt economic coercion to force Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait (thereby exhausting all non-military options), he managed to implement the doctrine’s other features; There was a plan for withdrawal, the objectives were clearly stated at the outset of the war, the U.S. had domestic and international support, and the invasion utilized a decisive force of 550,000 soldiers. The swift victory is widely considered one of the United States’ most successful post-WWII military campaigns. When viewed alongside the effective intervention in Panama, the First Gulf War provides ample support for a reintroduction of the Powell Doctrine. Yet, perhaps the best pieces of evidence in support of the doctrine are not the few instances in which it led to military intervention, but the many times that its criteria narrowed the scope of interventions by preventing troops being sent abroad. While the following section will present several more recent conflict responses that met the criteria of the Powell Doctrine, it is important to note the existence of some Cold-War-era “almost-interventions” that would likely have had disastrous results, were they not ultimately prevented by thinking that was in line with the doctrine.⁴

The Powell Doctrine Prevents Unnecessary Wars

When applied to the plethora of unique circumstances in conflicts around the world, the criteria set out in the Powell Doctrine tend to correctly limit the scope of intervention in wars. Evidence for this view can be found in the crisis in the Balkans, where the doctrine kept American soldiers out of the conflict zone, in the war in Somalia, where U.S. troops did not take sides in the conflict and were withdrawn when it escalated, and in Haiti, where U.S. diplomacy proved effective before a military option was enacted.

Bosnia

During Powell's time as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Balkans were embroiled in conflict as religious and ethnic differences between the Serbs, Muslims, and Croats led to the outbreak of war. Despite pressure from others within the Bush and Clinton Administrations, General Powell was adamant that U.S. forces should not be directly involved in the fighting. In terms of the doctrine's criteria, the conflict did not lend itself to clear military objectives. Likewise, there was not enough political support for devoting the necessary overwhelming force size to the effort.⁵ Due to the Powell Doctrine's rejection of a broad armed intervention, the United States and its allies had to take a different, lower-stakes approach. Rather than sending U.S. troops in, the U.S. engaged in a campaign of targeted airstrikes and negotiations with leaders from all warring parties. This method was ultimately successful in preventing a quagmire and ending the violence, and it led to the signing of the Dayton Accords – a comprehensive treaty that has kept the peace to this day.



President Slobodan Milosevic of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, President Alija Izetbegovic of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and President Franjo Tudjman of the Republic of Croatia initial the Dayton Peace Accords.

Somalia

The U.S. intervention in Somalia in 1992 stopped short of becoming a full-fledged military operation because it did not meet the tenets of the Powell Doctrine. After the collapse of the Barre regime in 1991, Somalia had descended into chaos as warring factions fought for control. The fighting precipitated a humanitarian crisis, and U.N. attempts to give out food and assistance were unsuccessful because of gang warfare.⁶ The U.S. intervened to assist aid distribution, but while it engaged in some military operations to ensure the humanitarian support did not fall into the hands of warlords, it avoided becoming a party in the nation's civil war.⁷ Recognizing the lack of clear and achievable objectives that could yield stability in the war-torn country, the U.S. limited itself to leading an enhanced international peacekeeping mission. When the U.S. was ultimately drawn into intense fighting – most perceptibly during the Battle of Mogadishu – the Clinton Administration made the decision to leave the country. While Clinton was likely unknowingly applying the criteria of the Powell Doctrine, by choosing to not become involved in Somalia's political strife and limiting America's mission to securing humanitarian aid, the U.S. followed the doctrine's criteria and avoided becoming embroiled in a tragic quagmire.⁸ A decline in support for the mission, paired with a recognition of Somalia's "strategic insignificance" – two other aspects of the doctrine – were key contributing factors to President Clinton's decision to withdraw. By doing so the U.S. avoided the mission creep that has defined conflicts that did not follow the rules of the doctrine.⁹

Haiti

The U.S. diplomatic intervention in Haiti in 1994 shows the success of one crucial element of the Powell Doctrine: the need to exhaust all non-military options before using force. After a 1991 coup d'état left Haiti with an illegitimate and despised ruler, the U.S. intervened to uphold Haitian democracy and reinstall the democratically elected government. However, instead of immediately using force, the Clinton administration sent a delegation – which included former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Colin Powell – to successfully negotiate the resignation of Raoul Cédras. Ultimately, some U.S. troops ended up

engaging supporters of the junta, but the deployment of diplomats prevented a war from breaking out and helped the U.S. peacefully achieve its objectives.

Forever-Wars Do Not Follow the Powell Doctrine

Afghanistan

The need for the Powell Doctrine becomes more apparent when one considers the interventions that did not abide by the framework's principles: the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While the war in Afghanistan (2001-) met the doctrine's pre-invasion tenets (national security was at stake, non-military methods were attempted, there was broad domestic and international support), it failed to follow the guidelines concerning how the war should be waged. Instead of utilizing a decisive force size to secure the country after ousting the Taliban – as Powell, then the Secretary of State, advocated for – the U.S. and its allies incrementally increased the troop presence in response to a growing insurgency. In 2002, as the Taliban were recruiting and regrouping, there were a mere 9,000 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan.¹⁰

Furthermore, the Afghanistan Papers released by the *Washington Post* showed multiple generations of policymakers failing to evaluate both the military objectives and the exit strategy. Drawn from a series of interviews with government officials conducted by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the Papers provided ample evidence of a war effort at odds with the Powell Doctrine. Journalist Craig Whitlock offers a summary of what the interviews revealed:

“At the outset... the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had a clear, stated objective – to retaliate against al-Qaeda and prevent a repeat of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Yet the interviews show that as the war dragged on, the goal and mission kept changing... Fundamental disagreements went unresolved. Some U.S. officials wanted to use the war to turn Afghanistan into a democracy. Others wanted to transform Afghan culture and elevate women's rights. Still others wanted to reshape the regional balance of power among Pakistan, India, Iran and Russia.”¹¹

In one interview, Nicholas Burns, the former U.S. Ambassador to NATO, said, “After '03-04, once we were fully engaged in both wars [Iraq and Afghanistan], I can't remember us ever saying, “Should we be there? Are we being useful? Are we succeeding?””¹² The Powell Doctrine – the most concrete alternative to the actual intervention that occurred – would have likely resulted in better outcomes. Yet, prior to and throughout the war, the doctrine was not given sufficient attention.¹³

Iraq II

The war in Iraq (2003-) represents an even greater abandonment of the Powell Doctrine. While Powell's own support for the invasion was a “blot” on his record – as he has admitted – it is not grounds for dismissal of his doctrine.¹⁴ In fact, since the decision to intervene deviated greatly from the doctrine's framework, the blunder lends even more credibility to it. Prior to intervention, there was domestic support for the war, but the international support criterion was at best only partially satisfied, with the U.S. lacking the support of the UN and a number of key allies (France, Germany, Saudi Arabia, Turkey). Also, once the invasion began, some of the many flawed decisions were in direct opposition to the doctrine's requirements: the troop presence was not sufficient to secure the country, the objectives for stabilizing Iraq were not well defined, and the mission lacked any serious discussion of an exit plan. Powell aptly summed up the intervention in a 2016 interview: “It wasn't the Powell Doctrine.”¹⁵ Although it is easier said than done, the approach laid out in the doctrine, which implies a thorough review of the facts on the ground and all available options, provides safeguards against unwarranted interventions and decades-long conflicts, such as the war in Iraq.

Challenges to Reimplementing the Powell Doctrine

Despite the framework's wisdom and record of success, there are obstacles to its reimplementation. Some have argued that the doctrine's call for an exit strategy at the outset of intervention is unrealistic.¹⁶ However, a closer reading of the doctrine suggests that it does not call for a singular, time-sensitive departure plan. Instead, it advocates for the develop-

ment of a method to discuss a responsible conclusion to military intervention. The numerous trajectories of wars are undecipherable but establishing the elements of an exit plan and revisiting it at every stage of war can lead policymakers to a more clear-eyed assessment of events on the ground.

Time Constraints

Similarly, the deliberative approach of the doctrine suggests that during moments of national crisis – when every minute counts – there simply may not be enough time to carefully weigh the questions posed by the Powell Doctrine. Although the criteria require intensive evaluation and debate amongst decision makers, there is no requirement for this to take an extended period of time. If a threat is incredibly urgent, it will likely easily meet all of the doctrine’s criteria. In contrast, if a threat is less immediately severe, there is both more time to consider the doctrine, and a greater need to ensure that military intervention is truly necessary. Additionally, the historical record for past interventions shows that policymakers often spend many days considering their options. The issue for more recent crises, however, is that decisions have been made without the safety rails of the Powell Doctrine’s criteria. The 2001 AUMF was signed by President Bush just one week after 9/11, but Congress carefully crafted the wording of the Authorization after receiving a first draft from President Bush’s legal team.¹⁷ The end result – which ceded far too much power to the executive branch and allowed the AUMF to justify decades of intervention – occurred because the document was written incorrectly, not because lawmakers were short on time. In contrast, if the Powell Doctrine’s framework is adopted, it can be applied as quickly as a situation requires.

Prioritizing Interests

Inherent in the tenets of the doctrine is a general prioritization of the views of military leaders and DoD staff over those of elected politicians. Evaluating if a contingent of troops represents a “decisive” force, or analyzing whether the objectives of a mission are clear and achievable are tasks best left to senior Pentagon officials. Naturally, this can cause friction between politicians and non-elected public servants. But overcoming this obstacle is a necessary step to

genuinely implementing the Powell Doctrine. Specialists need to take the lead on the aspects of the doctrine that require military expertise. Unlike the decisions of elected officials, the doctrine does not shift and bend in relation to campaign promises, or how soon the next election is. This characteristic, as well as its realism-based approach to military intervention, makes the doctrine the model policy choice for the challenges of the future. Experts outside of government have applied the Powell Doctrine to U.S. interventions in the 21st century.¹⁸ While their applications are debatable, they outline the thorough, deliberative approach that policymakers should embark upon before sending U.S. forces abroad. The Powell Doctrine can set our leaders on the right course and then leave them to soberly assess the circumstances posed by each conflict.

Conclusion

In the years since Colin Powell laid out the terms of his doctrine, policymakers have gone from a nominal consideration of its criteria to a complete abandonment of them.¹⁹ This has harmed America’s reputation and led to a tragic record of foreign policy blunders in the Middle East. The Powell Doctrine acknowledges both America’s vast capabilities and its undeniable limitations. Now, more than ever, we need new direction in our foreign policy. Truly and completely adopting the Powell Doctrine would allow America to regain and responsibly use its position as the leader of the free world.

Nevertheless, the Powell Doctrine merely offers a framework that history has shown can lead to a more restrained foreign policy. The executive branch is unlikely to enforce restraint upon itself, so it is up to Congress to advocate for a measured approach to crises beyond our border. The Powell Doctrine can be convincing if policymakers and the public are aware of its purpose and record. In the event that the application of the doctrine calls for military intervention, Congress must follow the doctrine to devise Authorizations to Use Military Force that are in line with its criteria. Whereas the 2001 and 2003 AUMFs were written to provide the President with a blank check nearly as large as the one produced by the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, Congress has precedent for force authorizations that adhere to the Powell Doctrine. Passed in 1983, the Multinational Force in

Lebanon Resolution gave President Reagan the necessary bandwidth to execute a military intervention, but limited his authority temporally and geographically. Furthermore, it permitted the use of a decisive force size, established clear objectives for the force authorization, and imposed reporting requirements so that Congress could remain informed and influence the exit strategy. Were future force authorizations designed with the applicable elements of the Powell Doctrine in mind, Congress would restore the vital interplay between the executive and legislative branches that is necessary for responsible governance.

Endnotes

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