

US should lead way to reasonable militaries

by Chibli Mallat

Ever since Vietnam, a blurred line between “war” and “peacekeeping” has been the name of the war game, with single air raids inflicting more casualties than months of classical war. “War” against the United States in Beirut (1983) and in Nairobi (1998) claimed far more American lives than the three-month “war” in Kosovo last year. This follows the topsy-turvy pattern of war and peace since the end of the Cold War: more Americans died in the bombing of Oklahoma City in 1995 than at the hands of the Iraqi Army during the Gulf War. And since Oklahoma and the bombing of New York City’s World Trade Center in February 1993, the continental insularity of the United States seems to have lost part of its edge. For the last nation-state with significant margin for maneuver within the international grid, war is anything but what it used to be.

To make sense of war requires a new Clausewitz. Until then, the blurring of international and domestic security in the United States comes amid a debate about defense which can be portrayed in the words of its two most central proponents in the past decade: General Colin Powell and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. The Powell Doctrine can be summarized in one simple formulation: American military engagement abroad must never be open-ended; it must be massive and decisive. The problem is that this vision is too simplistic for the persistent twilight of war and peace at the end of the century. Whatever one may think of the motivations and dynamics of the Gulf War, the fact is that, 10 years later, US and British warplanes are still bombing Iraq on a daily basis. War was not over in the Gulf when the president of the United Nations Security Council officially declared the cease-fire on April 11, 1991.

Hence the need for an alternative doctrine to deal with latent and protracted conflicts, a doctrine which is associated with Albright, although the secretary of state does not seem to have articulated her vision in any comprehensive manner, save in a few anti-Powell remarks when she was at the United Nations. Arguably a symbolic shift away from the male-gendered nuance-less macho military headquarters doctrine, Albright’s inclination is surely more appropriate to the complexities of the global world than her predecessor’s.

In strict military terms, two central proposals may be suggested for the projection of US power abroad:

The first proposal entails reshuffling security agencies by making them subordinate to both the Pentagon and the State Department. This is not quite the right place to reassess the role of intelligence, but the move toward maximum transparency of shadowy groups such as the Central Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency, Echelon (global spying ring) and other Cold War remnants of “dirty” operations should be a top priority in the remaking of America’s foreign policy image. While the Clinton administration made some progress by making the huge CIA budget public (\$27 billion), it has since recoiled into the protection of unnecessary shadows.

Applying Woodrow Wilson’s call for foreign-policy transparency to the intelligence agencies is needed both as a matter of practicality and of principle. On the practical side, the intelligent reader of sources, pace Noam Chomsky, will easily uncover the

most elaborate secretive operations. As a matter of principle, there is no need for Contra/Iran-gate-like fuzzy operations, which always undermine official policy and always backfire.

This first proposal is therefore to rethink “intelligence” and make it as openly accountable as the Pentagon’s operations. It has always been a principle of American democracy to make the military responsible to civilians, not the opposite.

“Intelligence” does not deserve a more secretive treatment than men and women who openly put their life on the line in non-intelligence operations.

This brings up a more important element in the definition of the future of the world in the age of unchallenged American global military supremacy: the role of the military in other countries. Recent military coups such as that in Pakistan offer illustrations of military officers taking it upon themselves to correct what they rightly or wrongly consider to be civilians’ errors. Notwithstanding the latter’s possible mischief and mediocrity, it should be a principled axiom for US policy abroad to ensure that there is no military intervention in civilian affairs.

Hence our second proposal to make this principle compelling in the rest of the world. This is easier said than done, and it will naturally be progressive. Some ratios and examples may be useful.

According to a study at the Brookings Institute in Washington, the quality of the US Army (“combat-readiness” to use the jargon) has been maintained, even though the “US military is about one-third smaller and one-third less expensive than it was at the end of the Cold War.” The military comprised some 1.5 million “active duty military personnel” as of Dec. 31, 1999. For a population of 270 million, this is less than 0.5 percent, and the decade-long downward trend should be encouraged elsewhere, as should military spending as a percentage of GDP ; the US figure is 3.4 percent.

As long as nation-states remain the main name of the international game, we are not about to see armies vanish altogether. But an American president would be well advised to bring their numbers down to levels currently accepted in the United States. Proposal two is therefore a US-conducted policy to reduce armies and military expenditures around the globe. US pressure could be brought to bear on everywhere, starting with its closest allies, so that the ratios come down. History bears the usefulness of this proposal: Costa Rica has the most stable history and most remarkable economic performance of all 20 Latin American countries since World War II. It has also harbored the smallest army and the smallest outlay of expenditures per inhabitant across the continent.

Together with stricter ratios, the US attitude toward the military of foreign countries should also change. While governments will retain armies for the foreseeable future, America should seek to help more supporters of the rule of law in foreign countries achieve security with stronger judiciaries and better economies.

Costa Rica and Spain can be used as paradigmatic ways forward for the world. The Costa Rican example is self-explanatory. This approach is based on the premise that the less people’s lives are dedicated to military purposes, the more stable a society. Transition from military rule to a more balanced US-style democracy is not an easy task, but the example of Spain in the 1970s is important. By rigorously framing the Spanish military into NATO, the US and Europe have in fact rendered a unique service to democracy. This bore fruit in the last years of Franco’s reign. During the delicate interregnum to the democracy presently in place, the army has proved uniquely respectful of the need for democratic institutions to take over from the Franco dictatorship. The history of that development is yet to be written, but the

Spanish example should be the paragon to follow in countries with delicate transitions such as Russia. This is important for NATO vis-a-vis the future stability of Russia, and we shall have an occasion to come back to that issue when dealing with the big blocs.

For now, let us keep in mind downsized armies across the world and their effective shaping in what is euphemistically known in the Pentagon as “military-civil relationship training.” But contrary to the timidity in which this is phrased, a full doctrine of military subservience to civilian decision-making should be developed as a central concern of US foreign policy. Such understanding of the supportive, secondary role of the military in daily life is also the way America’s democracy flourished.

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