

Powell's exit: implications

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27/11/04

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USA

WITH the departure of US secretary of state Colin Powell, the leading voice for restraint and moderation in the Bush administration, the neo-conservatives and hawks have consolidated their hold on American foreign policy.

Though in public, Powell continued to defend the Iraq war, in private — according to people who know him — he had never been fully comfortable with the manner in which the war was initiated and followed up. As a soldier-statesman, he was particularly frustrated by his eventual exclusion from Iraq war planning. He was the architect, as chairman of US Joint Chiefs of Staff, of American strategy in the Gulf war in 1991 to oust Iraq from Kuwait. His plan, known as the Powell doctrine, stressed the need for overwhelming force and a clear exit strategy.

On November 12, Powell described as “my two burdens” the continuing turmoil in Iraq and the unending violence between Israel and the Palestinians. One of the reasons for his eventual departure from the state department is believed to be his advocacy of a tougher line with Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon.

Many Democrats and Europeans fear that the departure of Colin Powell from the US state department may mark the expansion of American arrogance in world affairs. The Bush administration in the second term may like to stress, in the words of the *Economist*, the “hard-edged ideological hawkishness” even more.

The appointment of National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice to replace Colin Powell is expected to achieve a number of objectives. It will establish Bush's political control over the state department which, during the Powell days, was seen by the hawks as resisting the president's more aggressive policies. The choice of Rice to run the state department seems to have been made as much for her personal loyalty to Bush as for her hawkish foreign policy views. She is not an ideologue but a hard-boiled realist, a firm believer in the use of American power. It was Ms Rice who declared, when three important European nations refused to support the Iraq invasion, that the United States should “punish France, ignore Germany and forgive Russia.”

As national security adviser, Rice was the moving spirit behind the National Security Strategy (NSS) in September 2002 which later on came to be known as the Bush Doctrine. The NSS envisions a world in which the United States enjoys permanent military dominance over all countries, friends and foes alike. It also brazenly declares that the US “has no intention of allowing any foreign power to catch up with the huge lead the United States has acquired since the fall of the Soviet Union.”

The NSS, in a way, espouses the Monroe Doctrine on a global scale. It asserts Washington's right to intervene wherever and whenever it perceives a threat of terrorism or mass destruction to exist. With imperialist overtones, the NSS gives the United States not only the right to judge who is a terrorist and which state is supporting terrorism but also to launch pre-emptive strikes without waiting for the go-ahead from the UN Security Council.

Rice's appointment is likely to tilt the balance in the Bush cabinet towards the neo-conservative and hawkish elements. Her critics argue that while Rice was national security adviser, she used to be the “swing vote” between Colin Powell on the one side and Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld on the other. On most occasions, her support for the latter decided the issue and that support has now paid dividend where she is concerned.

Some indication of Rice's thinking about US foreign policy will be available when she chooses her deputy in place of Richard Armitage who has also resigned. If her choice falls on the “punchy” under-secretary for arms control, John Bolton, it will mean that she has her own foreign policy agenda to pursue and intends to mould the state department according to it.

Some optimists, however, believe that the appointment of Rice may actually provide an opportunity for renewed diplomacy. They argue that a change in foreign policy will be brought about more by ground realities than by any change in the thinking of policymakers in Washington. Both President Bush and his new secretary of state want to improve America's dismal image in the world and repair damaged relations with former allies. Bush has also said that he will do all he can to create a Palestinian state.

President Bush will be travelling to Europe after his inauguration and may utilize that opportunity to mend fences with “old Europe”. The three big issues are at the moment and the bone of contention between Europe and the United States are problems linked to these countries Israel, Iraq and Iran. The problems linked to these countries are hard to solve and easy to disagree with. Therefore the future of trans-Atlantic alliance continues to be enigmatic.

But there are strong reasons for scepticism. If the intention is to restore the trans-Atlantic alliance and solve the Palestinian question, then Colin Powell would have been a far more suitable person because of his credibility and known moderation. According to a report in *The Guardian*, Powell had wanted to stay on for the first six months of Bush's second term to help shepherd a new Middle East peace process, but his wish was not granted.

Alternatively, Bush could have nominated a more Powellite figure to the post than hard-liner Rice.

Rice's nomination tends to confirm the view that the US foreign policy will now be run by a group of like-minded conservatives (or hawks?) without being distracted by Powell's voice of restraint and moderation. Some analysts fear that in the next four years there may be more shows of brute force for “saving” the world from terrorism.

Some observers believe that Powell's departure and Rice's promotion may also be a prelude to some sort of purge in the CIA and the state department. The CIA has not been forgiven by the Bush administration for failing to support Vice-President Cheney's attempt to link Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda. The September release of National Intelligence Estimate, laying out dark scenarios for Iraq, was considered an act of insubordination by the CIA intended to damage Bush in the election.

The new CIA director, Porter Goss, has installed partisan aids at the top and some senior officials have been fired. He has issued a diktat that the CIA's mission is to “support the administration and its policies.” At the state department, key posts are likely to be filled with neo-conservatives and fellow travellers, while officers close to Powell may find their leads on the chopping block.

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During Bush's second term, Pakistan may miss the genial, unoffensive approach of Colin Powell. Being himself a soldier-statesman, he seems to have developed a good equation with President General Pervez Musharraf. Pakistan foreign office spokesman has described Powell's association with South Asia as “a productive experience for both Pakistan and the United States.” Also, he has described him as “a good friend of Pakistan” who paid special attention to South Asia, Afghanistan and war against terrorism.

It may be recalled that India was rattled by Powell's announcement bestowing the status of a major non-Nato ally on Pakistan. India expressed its disappointment at the US failure to have informed it about the plan though Mr Powell had held discussions with Indian leaders before leaving for Pakistan where he made the announcement. India is likely to feel more comfortable with Condoleezza Rice who has described the strategic partnership between Washington and New Delhi as going beyond “security, proliferation or regional issues.”

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