

Powell Points Different U.S. Policy for SE Asia

by Michael O. Billington

As U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell returned from a trip to South Asia and Southeast Asia on Aug. 4, the open factional battle within the administration has become front-page news. The major focus of that division is the proposed war on Iraq, and support for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's fascist assault on the Palestinian people—policies set to unleash religious warfare internationally, as desired by the utopian ideologues within the Bush Administration and Congress. Leading elements of the U.S. military oppose this insanity, not only in regard to Iraq and the Middle East, but also the recent attempt to provoke a confrontation with China. These military forces look more to Secretary of State Powell, a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Armed Services, for leadership, than to the civilian leadership at the Defense Department itself.

Powell, in his July tour of six of the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and his appearance at the meeting of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Brunei, showed his relatively sensible view of the current crisis, compared with the war-mongering coming from the likes of Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and the John McCain/Joseph Lieberman duo in Congress. It is instructive to compare Powell's diplomacy in Southeast Asia with that of Wolfowitz, who visited just two months earlier. The Secretary of State made an effort to re-shape the "war on terrorism concept" away from the unilateralist, neo-imperialist vision of the utopians.

Three 'Negatives'

While Powell spoke at every stop of the importance of President George Bush's war on terrorism, there were three "negatives" which he emphasized in every case: he, and America, were *not* recruiting support in Asia for a war on Iraq; America would *not* pursue the war on terrorism at the expense of the civil and human rights of the people in the region, nor of the sovereignty of nations; and, America was *not* interested in extending U.S. military presence in Asia, nor in establishing bases or other permanent facilities in the region. These issues, he insisted, are fundamental to the character of the United States. All three, despite Powell's

negations, are being vigorously pursued by the "Wolfowitz cabal."

On Iraq, Powell told the *Far Eastern Economic Review* in an interview: "The President does not have any war plans sitting on his desk, so it is not my intention to solicit support for a war plan that the President does not yet have on his desk." He told Japanese officials on the sidelines of the ARF meeting in Brunei that the President "has made absolutely no decision on what to do with Iraq, and will definitely consult other countries."

On the Middle East, Powell reported his plans to meet Palestinian Authority leaders in Washington immediately upon his return, despite wholesale denunciations of the Palestinian Authority by, most notably, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. In Malaysia, where Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohammad has strongly condemned the U.S. support for Sharon's atrocities, Powell met Dr. Mahathir for 40 minutes, and separately with the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, telling the press afterwards that he had discussed the Middle East in all three meetings. "I wanted to make sure they knew that the United States intended to remain fully engaged until the President's goal, and the goal of all the people in the region, for these two nations to live side by side in peace, comes to a reality."

The *Far Eastern Economic Review* reported that Powell "paints a picture of an American foreign policy that is a far cry from the roughshod unilateralism that has provoked so much international criticism of President George W. Bush. No doubt, many observers in Asia hope Powell truly speaks for the Bush Administration."

Indonesia and the Philippines

Powell and his entourage did step on some toes in Malaysia. When Dr. Mahathir travelled to the United States in May, the issue of the dismissal and prosecution of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim (the darling of the International Monetary Fund and the human rights non-governmental organizations funded by mega-speculator George Soros), was politely dropped from the agenda. Powell, however, did bring it up, while James Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, visited Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Anwar's wife and the leader of the opposition Keadilan, or Justice Party. Powell said that he also directly discussed the issue of the Internal Security Act, the law left over from British colonial days providing for detention without warrant or trial, with the Prime Minister.

Although this is precisely what is being implemented by the Ashcroft Justice Department, with hundreds of Americans and foreign residents being held in the United States without even their names being released, Powell said: "In the context of our counter-terrorism efforts, I made the point to all my interlocutors that we still believe strongly in human rights, and that in everything we do we have to be consistent with

the universal standards of human rights.” He said that the war on terrorism would be carried out “in a way that respects human dignity.”

The importance of Powell taking this stand became clear during his trip to Indonesia. Indonesia has become the target for those who wish to portray Southeast Asia as the new center for al-Qaeda, with terrorists supposedly running loose throughout. Indonesia is described as the “weak link” in Southeast Asia, unwilling either to arrest large numbers of radical Muslims without proof of illegal acts, or to allow a U.S. military presence to assist in “hunting terrorists,” as has been done in the Philippines.

Wolfowitz, as early as January, in the *New York Times*, described Indonesia as a nation with large areas “virtually outside of government control,” lumping it with Yemen and Somalia as providing a haven for “Muslim extremists and Muslim terrorists,” implying the need for U.S. intervention. Singapore’s godfather Lee Kuan Yew has complained of Indonesia’s indifference towards terrorism, and came close to accusing it of supporting terrorists.

But Indonesia has been very clear that it will not return to the military-style rule of the Suharto era, solving problems of stability by going backwards.

In this environment, Powell did an extraordinary thing—he held a meeting with the leaders of the two largest Muslim organizations, the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and the Muhammadiyah, representing 70 million Indonesian Muslims between them, together with a number of prominent Muslim scholars. He heard from the NU leader, Hasyim Muzadi, that support for the mainstream Muslim organizations would be far more effective in dealing with the radicals, than any military means. Hasyim attributed the rise of radicalism to “social tensions that followed the 1998 economic and political crisis. . . . Don’t internationalize it, unless the U.S. has evidence these domestic conflicts have become international and are threatening it.” Even in the case of Laskar Jihad—portrayed in some Western media as on a par with al-Qaeda—Hasyim said that they are “still open to dialogue. So don’t commit violence against them, because if we do, they will strengthen their resistance.”

Islamic scholar Nurcholish Madjid, following the meeting with the U.S. Secretary of State, said “Pak Powell [a familiar title of respect] expressed a sincere understanding of our problems and appreciation that Indonesia is the largest Muslim country, yet at the same time a diverse and democratic nation.”

War in the Philippines

Powell’s last stop, the Philippines, also surprised those who expected a repeat of Wolfowitz’s trip in June. Wolfowitz had visited the U.S. troops in the South, and let it be known that he wanted the U.S. Special Forces to stop wasting their time inside military training camps, and get out and join the



Secretary of State Colin Powell in India on July 28, during his tour of ASEAN and other Asian nations, which included surprising initiatives. Here, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee welcomes Powell.

search-and-destroy missions to kill bad guys. Visions of another quagmire in Asia were hard to ignore. Wolfowitz couldn’t fully sell the idea back in Washington, however, and such combat operations are against the Philippine Constitution.

Powell did not reverse the continuing U.S. deployment in the Philippines, but did provide a guidepost for U.S. policy which was at odds with the permanent U.S. military presence sought by the utopian faction. First, he praised the Philippine people for throwing the U.S. military out of their country in 1992! He said that even though he had been head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time, he recognized now that it had been a “bold decision on the part of the Filipino people, that they wished to have their sovereignty intact without foreign bases.”

Powell continued: “The fact of the matter is that the U.S. is not interested in returning to the Philippines with bases or a permanent presence. There is no attempt to roll the clock back. It is not in our interest, or in the interest of the Philippine government.”

In the weeks preceding, there had been an attempt by certain American interests, including U.S. Ambassador Francis Ricciardone, to rush the Filipinos into agreement on a Mutual Logistics Support Arrangement (MLSA), in time for

Powell to sign it in Manila. It was this proposal that had heightened concerns in the Philippine Senate that the government would sign an agreement giving the United States the equivalent of basing rights, now unconstitutional. Here, too, Powell lowered the pressure, and the entire issue was removed from the agenda of his meetings with President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Even the Ambassador, once Powell had arrived, said that "if the MLSA doesn't make sense under your laws, then don't sign it."

ASEAN Regional Forum vs. Wolfowitz and IISS

The main stop on Powell's trip was the ASEAN Regional Forum in Brunei. ARF is the only institution focussed on security issues in Asia, and, as intended by the ASEAN nations who created it, it is only a place for discussion and consultation, without the power to intervene in the sovereign affairs of its member nations.

In June, Wolfowitz, together with the preeminent British strategic think-tank, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), established a new annual conference on strategic issues in Singapore. Its purpose was ultimately to replace the ARF altogether, as being too committed to national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs of fellow nations, concepts most unfitting to the new imperial mode of the "war on terrorism." Wolfowitz's conference was dubbed the "Asian Wehrkunde," after the military/strategic affair held every year in Munich. Wolfowitz, and Senators John McCain and Joseph Lieberman, had used the last Wehrkunde meeting to promote a U.S. unilateral approach to waging war around the world, with or without NATO or its allies.

But ARF managed to survive without giving up the historically vital idea of national sovereignty. While several important regional development programs were adopted, the primary focus was on an anti-terror pact. As Powell said after signing the agreement: "I don't anticipate that this declaration is a basis for any increased military presence in the region, or any stationing decisions or training decisions that might be made. Those are usually handled on a bilateral basis."

As the decisions are based on consensus, the concerns raised by the Indonesians and the Vietnamese, that the principle of non-interference in internal affairs be clearly stated, were incorporated in the agreement, as was the call from Indonesia that the UN play the major role in the war on terrorism. The agreement did establish improved intelligence sharing on counter-terrorist measures, and measures to root out terrorist financing in the regional banking structure. Guarding against the misuse of the banking system can have other benefits, as well, as the Asian nations remember well from the speculative assault of 1997-98, which created an economic collapse from which these nations have yet to recover, even as the global financial collapse is now unfolding.

The danger of the Clash of Civilizations promoters provoking regional wars in Asia, is hardly eliminated by Powell's trip; but opposition to the sponsors of war is strengthened.