

# On Reagan's Legacy: A Comparison with Trump and Biden

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ROB MAY, JAN 23 2022

American calculations of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as 'an existential national security threat that must be confronted in every sphere' have plunged the world into a new cold war paradigm. The implication that China seeks to replace the US as the preeminent superpower and project its Marxist-Leninist political system on the entire democratic world, parallels the Soviet cold war threat and could lead back to East-West conflict, even nuclear confrontation, presenting a fundamental challenge for Washington's foreign policy establishment (Atlantic Council, 2021).

In considering approaches to avert conflict, this article suggests that it may be useful to assess the legacy of President Ronald Reagan, whose administration stewarded the end of the *first* cold war. Such an assessment is a complex undertaking as between 1981 and 1985, Reagan's doctrinal attitude towards the Soviet Union shifted from hard-line Soviet restraint to rapprochement, creating two paradoxical legacies which offer a playbook of radically different strategic options. In a neoconservative rendering of cold war triumph, Reagan is a *hawk*, a recalcitrant ideologue whose military re-armament and muscular rolling-back of Soviet expansionism vanquished an 'evil empire'. An alternative explanation for cold war success recasts Reagan as a *dove*, whose commitment to nuclear abolition created the foundation for a diplomatic dialogue that sought-out common interests and averted misunderstandings in a world of enduring superpower rivalries, ending the cold war *long before* the Soviet collapse.

This paper begins by tracing the changing coordinates of Reagan's approach over the course of his administration, crystalizing the competing versions of Reagan's legacy. The essay will then evaluate the converging patterns in the Trump era and in the current Biden administration's China-facing strategies against the main aspects of Reagan's cold war performance. The discussion contends that the doctrinal impulses of both of these two administrations rely on a distortion of Reagan's legacy, over-emphasizing his use of ideological and hard power confrontation. The paper concludes that this approach squanders Reagan's most valuable legacy – which is that 'the ending of the cold war was a triumph of diplomacy and disarmament, not force and compellence' (Fischer, 2020:9).

### Are there parallels today with the Reagan era?

Just as President Biden stepped-up to lead a divided nation, lacking direction, Reagan too inherited a nation which had suffered a crisis of confidence. Vietnam had left the US bruised, doubtful, and divided domestically over its global role, and with its prestige in decline (Nye, 2020:115, Tucker, 1989:9). Political opponents of President Carter accused the administration of creating a 'hollow army' unprepared for deployment and allowing the Soviets to build a margin of strategic and nuclear superiority (Jones, 2012:5-8, Korb, 1978:7, Reagan, 2007:45/52). Carter had continued the unpopular foreign policy orthodoxies of détente and containment to manage the Soviet challenge, but in this space the Soviet Empire surged across Third World countries, which fell like dominoes, expanding an orbit of communist client states (Westad, 2017:486). Elected with a landslide to revive American self-confidence and reassert US power, Reagan grasped that the American people were hungry for a Wilsonian vision, and a renewed sense of mission and greatness, and that 'they would find their ultimate inspiration in historic ideals, not geopolitical analysis' (Kissinger, 1994:767):

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By wedding the timeless truths and values Americans have always cherished to the realities of today's world, we have forged the beginning of a new direction in American foreign policy."

Reagan, 83:270

This 'new direction' merged the President's resolute faith in Manifest Destiny with the realism of the anti-communist Committee on the Present Danger, whose members included Jeane Kirkpatrick. Reagan agreed with Kirkpatrick that 'the assumption that one can easily locate and impose democratic alternatives to incumbent autocracies' was a fallacy (Kirkpatrick, 1979:34) and maintained his conviction that 'Peace does not come from weakness or retreat, it comes from restoration of military superiority' (1976). Instinctively, he believed in the inevitable triumph of an American-led democratic order but surmised that the Soviet bloc would require conversion through coercion, rather than enlightenment through economic liberalisation, opining that 'Trade was supposed to make the Soviet's moderate, instead it has allowed them to build armaments' (2007:2). The outcome was a new *offensive* foreign policy strategy entitled 'Peace Through Strength' - a vigorous escalation of economic, military, and ideological pressure.

Reagan's 'moral clarity' enabled him to frame the cold war as a struggle of good versus evil (Tucker, 1989:13). He openly accused the USSR of being an immoral empire which would commit any crime and tell any lie to achieve a single one-world communist state, whilst mythologising America's greatness (Reagan, 83:57). The president rejected détente, which the Republican coterie equated with appeasement, refused to negotiate, and initiated an epochal shift in the international security environment, doubling the annual increase in defence spending proposed by Carter. This amounted to incremental increases of 20%, reaching 5.8% of GDP, a build-up which the Soviets perceived as the drumbeat of America preparing for war (Anderson, 1981:623, Head, 2008:84). Reagan's hawkish posture was often a step ahead of his key constituencies as he lamented in his diaries; 'the media has propagandized our people against our defence plans more than the Russians have' (2007:135), 'whenever it is us versus the Soviets, [Congress] always come down on the wrong side' (ibid:169). Reagan cut across his own advisors, for instance publicly announcing the launch of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) which could render nuclear weapons obsolete, break the dynamics of the arms race, and undermine European security even though he had been advised that the idea was a dubious concept. This presents a portrait of an isolated unilateralist, capable of tangential solo flights of presidential will, that would leave his officials and allies scrabbling.

According to a triumphalist account, Reagan's use of maximum pressure and diplomatic isolation overwhelmed the Soviet adversary, a legacy which neoconservatives have translated into an enduring justification for 'regime change by force' - the contemporary policy panacea which guided efforts in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). Viewed in the broad arc of Reagan's tenure, this is a mischaracterization of his performance. Reagan's actions were driven by a commitment to a grand vision, which was a desire for peace through the abolition of nuclear weapons. His early belligerence was propelled by a subtler logic:

Every time he intensified competition, he was making it more difficult for the Soviet Union to keep up and therefore bringing serious disarmament that much closer [...] this was not an accidental consequence of the Reagan strategy, but a deliberate objective [to] increase exponentially the burden of economic and technological rivalry for the Soviet Union."

Smith, 2005:121

Reagan abhorred the fatalism of Mutually Assured Destruction, which was underpinned by the logic of maintaining excess nuclear capability, and rejected the gradualism of arms reduction, instead seeking a radical denouement within his presidency. Arguably, Reagan saw the value of SDI as a diplomatic rather than military weapon (Kissinger, 1994:771, Fischer, 1997:155). Reagan's vision was not to *win* the cold war, but to *end* it. It was a dream which never faded over the course of his presidency and one he pursued with the zeal of a personal religious mission (Lettow, 2005:6, Leffler, 2018:80-82).

Such a dangerously offensive strategy must have a tipping-point, and for Reagan that came in October 1983. Perhaps the moment of reversal can be located to a screening of the nuclear apocalypse movie *The Day After*, which

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disturbed Reagan deeply as he confided in his diary; 'it left me greatly depressed, [we must] do all we can to see there is never a nuclear war' (2007:186). Within weeks, fiction almost became a reality. Able Archer 83 was a NATO war games exercise which simulated a nuclear strike with unprecedented levels of scale and realism. Combined with the relentless military build-up, the Kremlin interpreted the simulation as preparation for an actual attack and ordered the Soviet 4th Air Army to 'prepare for the immediate use of nuclear weapons' (Perroots, 1989:1427). Intelligence reports on the narrowly averted nuclear holocaust created 'genuine anxiety' in the President (Kaplan 2021), and within three months, as Reagan officials were still proclaiming a hard-line posture, the President began seeking a rapprochement with Moscow (Reagan, 2007:212). Reagan's learning curve and diplomatic focus shifted dramatically, differentiating from confronting 'communism' to appealing to the emotions within the Politburo, illustrated in his notes following a conversation with President Spilzak of Yugoslavia in February 1984: "[The Soviets] are insecure and genuinely frightened of us [...] if we opened up, their leading citizens would get braver about proposing change [...] I'm going to pursue this" (2007:217).

Reagan's new posture emphasized the shared responsibility for global leadership (Ibid:270), the primary threat of *accidental* war, and finding concrete ways to ensure that a nuclear war could never start, including making it explicit that America would never strike first (Westad, 2017:537, Reagan, 2007:199). Reagan learned about Russia's psychological scarring following World War II and revised his image of Soviet motivation. By the end of his tenure, he had met more frequently with Soviet leaders than any of his predecessors (Leffler, 2018:84-85, Fischer, 2020:132/152). Within this new diplomatic framework, the dynamics of cold war concepts changed rapidly. Able Archer 83 provided the catalyst for rapprochement, but also made Reagan more cognitively complex (Tetlock, 1991:32-35). His ensuing skill and assertiveness to overturn domestic political orthodoxies provides an alternative legacy of diplomatic agility. This explanation debunks the myth that ideological and military bellicosity 'won' the cold war. It reconceptualises Reagan's grand vision as disarmament and the promotion of human rights – not regime change, and demonstrates the importance of responsive learning in foreign policy leadership.

## Reagan and the Trump Doctrine

There are parallels between the Carter-Reagan, and Obama-Trump transitions. In 2016, the sense of purpose provided by the 'war on terror' was fading and America was anxious that it had ceded the strategic initiative of its unipolar moment (Rhodes, 2021:19). Obama encouraged the 'rise of China' through economic integration and incentives, believing China would become a 'responsible stakeholder', potentially converting to liberal democracy. China meanwhile pursued the largest peacetime military build-up in history and was displaying hard-power assertiveness in an expanding sphere of influence, behaviour which aligns with Kirkpatrick's determinism (McMaster, 2020:12/130). Trump's conjuring of an imagined American greatness, promises of prosperity and tax cuts, and a return to great power competition as the primary American focus 'offered supporters the glow of the Ronald Reagan experience' (Sestanovich, 2017).

On China, Trump clutched to Reagan's hard-line legacy. Just as Reagan disdained détente, Trump maintained that liberal US-China policy was bankrupt and constructed a case against 'Strategic Co-operation' which he re-oriented towards 'Strategic Competition'. Like Reagan, Trump steered a conceptual shift in strategic thought on managing America's superpower rivalry, escalating a confrontational approach which enjoyed bipartisan support (Hannah, 2019); Trump's National Security Strategy stated: 'These competitions [with China] require the US to rethink the policies of the last two decades – policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals [...] would turn them into benign actors' (2017). Inspired by Reagan's 'Peace through Strength' policy, one of the pillars within the Security Strategy, a document which Trump 'reviewed and altered in some depth' is cribbed as 'Preserve Peace through Strength'. It emphasizes rebuilding the military so that it remains preeminent and can win wars (Cordesman, 2017). Like Reagan, Trump insisted that the previous administration had 'depleted the military' and increased defence spending to \$778bn USD by 2019, well above the \$662bn spent by Obama in 2016 (Ewing, 2016, Miller and O'Hanlon, 2019).

Reagan and Trump both had little experience in foreign affairs, but both pursued realist themes which placed limits on multilateralism and drew a direct line from the national interest to great power preponderance, albeit Trump's Hobbesian definition of the national interest was much narrower. Trump's leadership style mirrored Reagan's

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disregard for detail, his unpredictability, and his rhetorical brinksmanship, as his Chief of Staff Reince Priebus describes, 'Trump is always attentive to narrative [...] he doesn't care about process, [he] starts with surprise and extreme positions' (in Nye, 2020:170). Trump embraced the version of Reaganism that situates superpower rivalry as a zero-sum competition, to be won through intimidation. But if Trump's hostility towards Beijing was part of a masterplan to force the CCP into favourable negotiations, he wasn't given a second term to complete his mission. Regardless, there are profound differences in the trajectories of Reagan and Trump.

Trump's disengagement from dialogue with China extended to the international institutions that China had 'infiltrated' and perversely to his own advisors and the security alliances buffering China's belligerence. Whereas 'President Reagan defied experts, counsellors, long-time friends, and key allies in pursuit of his vision of a more moral, more humane approach to global security' (Fischer, 2020:145), Trump's undermining of NATO and the global coalition to counterbalance China lacked any strategic 'means-and-ends'. Despite flights of unilateralism, Reagan always believed that alliances formed the bedrock of international security.

Trump's ideological vision is also difficult to locate. The Trump doctrine may be summarised as the belief that all nations must put their domestic interests first (Anton, 2019). This detaches Trump from Reagan's approach of blending traditional realism with liberal internationalism. Reagan saw in the USSR 'the evil of a system that *deprived its citizens of their human rights*' (Baer, 2017). In China, Trump saw only an economic competitor. Trump failed to embrace human rights as an issue whereas Reagan always cherished the responsibilities of being the world's pre-eminent power, and its moral duty to challenge illiberal counter-currents. He believed that 'if America fought the cold war solely on the basis of national interest, devoid of moral purpose [...] it would ignore the Eastern bloc's greatest weakness: that it operates without the consent of its people' (McCormick, 2017). Trump abandoned such responsibilities and eroded the democratic ideals that epitomised the American epic and legitimised American primacy. Both formed the thrust of Reagan's cold war policy.

Republican comparisons of Trump to Reagan (Pence, 2016) ignore the fact that Reagan's sabre-rattling did not force a Soviet surrender, roll-back the USSR in the Third World, or cause democratic reforms, but did almost trigger a nuclear calamity (Fischer, 2020:129). In fact, Reagan began a constructive dialogue with the Kremlin years before *Perestroika*. The president devoured papers on Russian history and culture, the implication being that Reagan optimistically accepted a bipolar world, as long as it was a nuclear free world (Welch, 2015:74-80). As Reagan defused military and economic tensions through talks, forging bilateral understanding, Moscow found the political space to pursue reforms. In contrast, Trump's vitriolic *othering* of China reinforced the Western dualism that frames geopolitical debates; *democracy versus dictatorship*, *capitalism versus communism*, and delegitimised Chinese ideas, identity, grievances, and greatness, emptying the relationship of any meaningful political space for cooperation or Chinese reforms. Trump was threatened by a political system that always remained opaque to him. If, following Reagan, Trump could have detected the emotional drivers in the CCP's leadership and shifted skilfully from harsh rhetoric to practical diplomacy, he could have similarly opened-up political space to avoid a *second* cold war.

## Reagan and the Biden Doctrine

In Biden's first speech to Congress, the President thundered 'We're in a competition with China to win the 21st Century!'. Biden's hostility caused Xi Jinping to retort by invoking imagery of the *iron curtain*; stating that those seeking to 'bully or oppress China [will] crack their heads and spill blood on the Great Wall of steel' (Brands, 2021, Niblett, 2021). This chilling cold war exchange rhymes with Reagan's bristling polemics, and just as Reagan initially ignored Moscow, Biden has also refused to enter strategic dialogue with Beijing (Rudd, 2021). An 'Able Archer' moment could ensue as Biden intensifies American war-gaming in the South China Sea, without making his intentions explicit (Mitchell, 2021).

Reagan's hawkish doctrine weakened the position of reformers on both sides, and the Biden doctrine also presents the foreign policy establishment with a diplomatic dead-end; 'by framing the relationship as a zero-sum contest, he is presenting a Manichean struggle between democracy and autocracy' (*The Economist*, 2021). Biden overstates the threat of Chinese ideology without fully understanding the shape and limitations of China's ambition, and the narrative loses its relevance further away from Washington; as not all free and open societies feel threatened by the

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CCP (Mahbubani, 2020:6). Reagan sensed the over-extension within the Soviet system and the natural constraints on autocracy when confronted with democratic alternatives, as first expressed in Kennan's 'Long Telegram', and knew he could place pressure on those weaknesses, whereas Biden's continued insistence that the China threat must be met with the blunt instruments of containment and linkage diplomacy is strategically counterproductive (Jentleson, 2021). This is a key area where Biden wastes the greatest lesson from Reagan's performance. Reagan was able to redirect misplaced fear, and disconnect communist dogma from leadership idiosyncrasies, allowing him to embolden reformists within the Kremlin. Reviving dialogue with Beijing would enable Biden to capitalise on 'the political reality [that] the CCP is significantly divided over Xi's leadership and vast ambitions' and manipulate the internal strains and geopolitical backfiring of China's imperial overreach (Atlantic Council, 2021). Images of enemies calcify as they are reinforced. Like Reagan, Biden must override Washington's belief-system for a meaningful change in Sino-American operations. Reagan learned that an ideological stand-off gave him little insight and led to dangerous misunderstandings. Biden has yet to learn to exploit Beijing's black box in the way that Reagan cracked the Kremlin.

There are areas where Biden's approach converges with Reagan's richer legacy. Reagan believed that a broad coalition was necessary to meet the communist challenge. Biden has stressed that NATO is critically important to US security (*France24*, 2021) and is rebuilding confidence with Japan and South Korea. Biden has also restored democracy promotion as the main thrust of US foreign policy. In July 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken cabled all US diplomats with the direction; 'Standing up for democracy and human rights everywhere is not in tension with America's national interests' – repairing the moral deficit left by Trump (Traub, 2021). Power balancing alliances are important, but above all, Reagan reconceptualised the US-Soviet relationship beyond classic power balancing, with nuclear weapons and misunderstanding becoming the enemy, not Russian strength or ideas, and he diffused dialogue across a range of common interests beyond the arms race. There are signs that Biden may yet end up following Reagan's example of channelling competition into precise forms with a China policy that is 'competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it needs to be' (Blinken, 2021).

## Reagan's Lost Legacy?

The contradictions in Reagan's foreign policy remain the subject of vigorous debate (Fischer, 2020:133). One version emphasizes predominance, the other emphasizes diplomacy and learning. Arguably, predominance has conditioned America's foreign policy responses in the main since the end of the cold war. Compelled by the logic that military superiority resolves conflicts, the US has used its power advantage to lash out at its enemies. These 'Reaganist' reflexes remained entrenched in the administration of Trump and are perceivable in the early approach of Biden, but they offer little strategic value without the envelope of a greater vision and a diplomatic exit plan.

Reagan's complex legacy is a chimera of hawk and dove. His diplomatic agility was underpinned by emotional intelligence – an ability to re-evaluate great power dynamics and ideological pre-conceptions and having the conviction to translate these changing beliefs into policy, without abandoning his utopian vision. Melvyn Leffler sums-up the qualities of Reagan's character which define his foreign policy legacy:

His emotional intelligence was more important than his military build-up; his political credibility at home was more important than his ideological offensive abroad; and his empathy, affability, and learning were more important than his suspicions."

Leffler, 2018:77

Trump squandered Reagan's lesson, and now America and China seem locked in an intractable stand-off. Through fully understanding the broad range of Reagan's diplomatic legacy, President Biden could change the political and strategic paradigm of US-China cold war relations and avert a global catastrophe.

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