

What was Reagan's attitude with regards to the Soviet Union, and what might this reveal about his broader political project? How effective and impactful was the position taken by Reagan toward the Soviet Union, and what insights might this offer about how he transformed American politics?

This essay looks at Reagan policies toward the Soviet Union and what it says about his political views in general. In it, the success and effects of his policies on the Cold War are scrutinized. I'll also discuss how Reagan changed American politics. I want to show how Reagan changed the presidential institution and left a lasting legacy as a resolute leader who won the Cold War by destroying the leading communist state, the Soviet Union.

Reagan's policy toward the Soviet Union was guided by his strong anti-communist beliefs, a vision to exploit the Soviet Union's weaknesses, and a practical desire to use diplomacy when it was needed. Reagan's famous description of the Soviet Union as an "Evil Empire" was a vivid expression of his belief that Christianity and the American democracy were morally better than godless communism and that he was determined to counter Soviet power anywhere around the world.¹ Reagan's policies also showed his larger political goal of making the United States stronger again, both at home and abroad, and reclaiming the country's position as the world's leader in freedom and democracy.

Reagan had more than one plan for dealing with the Soviet Union. On one hand, he wanted to pressure the USSR economically and politically by aggressive arms building up, such as through the Strategic Defense Initiative. But his expressed willingness to work with Mikhail Gorbachev, the leader of the Soviet Union, showed the other practical side of his two-fold strategy towards Moscow. This engagement led to landmark arms control agreements like for example the

¹ David M. Glantz, *Reagan and the Soviet Union: Competing Military Strategies, 1980-1988* (Center for Military History & Strategic Analysis, Virginia Military Institute, 2014) 8.

Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. These acts, both hostile and friendly, show how Reagan was able to balance his strong ideological conviction with strategic flexibility.²

Reagan negotiated with USSR but never abandoned his deep belief that the Soviet system was inherently oppressive and morally corrupt. Reagan thought revealing communism's moral flaws was just as important as fighting its global goals.

Reagan's views were formed by the things he saw and did in the middle of the 20th century, such as the early years of the Cold War and his time as head of the Screen Actors Guild, where he saw how the communists influenced everything in Hollywood. Because of these memories, he came to believe that communism and basic freedoms cannot coexist. Reagan's clear ideas helped shape U.S. foreign policy in the 1980s, giving his government a moral reason for doing what it did.

Reagan's anti-communist rhetoric was uncompromising, and his actions toward the Soviet Union were based on the understanding of how weak the communist colossus was. Reagan thought that Soviet society and economy were fundamentally broken, contrary to human nature and couldn't compete with the efficient capitalist system that existed in the West. His government's economic and military plans were based on this view and were meant to put pressure on Soviet resources, make things worse inside the country and even change the system. For example, Reagan's military buildup, included the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), which made the USSR spend a lot of money to counter the perceived threat, despite its struggling economy. Unlike the talking heads and the *Kremlinologists* of that era, Reagan did not consider the USSR to be a permanent feature of the international political system.³

² "Soviet Union developed a strategic concept founded on the belief that largescale conventional war could indeed be fought within a nuclear context with a reasonable chance that escalation to a global nuclear exchange could be avoided...it is now clear that the dangers inherent in Ogarkov's reforms, in particular, the risk of unintentionally igniting a general nuclear war, were avoided, first, because of unexpected and ultimately catastrophic political and economic decay within the Soviet Union, and second, because of the forceful military, political, and, ultimately, diplomatic measures undertaken by President Ronald Reagan in partnership with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev." Glantz, Reagan and the Soviet Union, 2.

³ "Reagan was a heretic who rejected the Cold War orthodoxy. He came to office with a different set of assumptions about the Soviet Union. He possessed an innate optimism about the United States and a commensurate pessimism about the Soviet Union. He thus weighed the balance between the two superpowers differently than most others, including many in his own party. First, he rejected the notion that the Soviet Union was a permanent feature of the international system. Whereas for decades American policy makers had focused on how to live with communism and treat the Soviet Union as an equal, Reagan emphasized the transitory character of the communist regime. As early as 1975, he had termed communism

The SDI, which people sometimes called "Star Wars," was a symbol of Reagan's policy. Even though some people didn't think the plan would work, announcing it was a smart move. By saying that improved missile defense systems could change the balance of power, SDI put pressure on the Soviet leadership and on their military-industrial complex. This arms race made the USSR's economy weaker, which sped up its fall.

Besides the arms race, Reagan's government also put in place restrictive economic policies that made it harder for the Soviet Union to get important technologies and access to much needed credit. Some of these steps were stricter rules on exports via CoCom, sanctions, limits on energy deals, and working with allies to weaken the Soviet Union's economy. These policies were designed to take advantage of the Soviet system's fundamental flaws and weaken its ability to project power around the world.⁴ It is interesting to note that both Reagan and Thatcher independently came to the conclusion that the Soviet system is not viable in the long-run and that the West should look beyond *détente* with the Soviets. They both believed that it was actually possible to bring down the whole rotten, communist system.⁵

As I already stated, despite his uncompromising rhetoric and aggressive strategies, Reagan demonstrated a pragmatic willingness to engage with Soviet leadership, particularly during the

"a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature."⁶ Such statements, often dismissed as rhetoric, in fact reflected Reagan's deep convictions." "The Reagan administration's strategy toward the Soviet Union" in *Successful Strategies: Triumphant in War and Peace from Antiquity to the Present*, Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich (Cambridge University Press, Year: 2014) 405-406.

⁴ Tyler Esno, "Reagan's Economic War on the Soviet Union", *Diplomatic History*, Volume 42, Issue 2, April 2018, p. 291.

⁵ *The Reagan administration's strategy toward the Soviet Union*, 407 and Archie Brown, *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher, and the End of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 102.

rise of Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's reformatory plans, which included policies like *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring), created an opportunity for dialogue and Reagan despite his misgivings about the Soviet regime seized the opportunity.

Reagan-Gorbachev meetings in 1985 were turning point in US-USSR relations. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which got rid of a whole class of nuclear weapons, was the most important deal that came out of these talks. Reagan's readiness to talk with Gorbachev showed that he was realistic about the need for arms control in order to reduce global tensions and lower the very real threat of nuclear war. This pragmatism didn't mean he stopped being anti-communist; it just grew out of his view that the United States should use its power to get the Soviet Union to make real compromises.

Reagan's way of dealing with Gorbachev also showed how well he could adjust to new situations. Reagan's policies at the beginning of his presidency were more focused on challenging USSR in all fronts and all over the world, but as he became president, he exhibited more willingness to cooperative. This showed that he was able to be strategically flexible. Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union was characterized by this mix of moral resolve and practical diplomacy.⁶

Reagan's approach to the Soviet Union was not an isolated strategy; it was part of a broader political project aimed at restoring American prestige, strength, and global leadership. By the early 1980s, the United States faced challenges that included economic stagnation, the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and the Iranian hostage crisis. These events had collectively eroded national confidence and raised doubts about America's ability to lead on the global stage. Reagan sought to reverse this decline by re-asserting American exceptionalism and promoting a vision of strength and optimism.

Reviving the military was a key part of this goal. Reagan saw the military as the most important tool to keep the Free World from falling into communist hands, as a way to gain strategic edge and a symbol of America's power. The defense buildup during his presidency included more advanced weapons, more troops ready for combat, and futuristic projects like the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). It was meant to show both friends and enemies that the US was ready to

⁶ *The Human Factor: Gorbachev, Reagan, and Thatcher*, 212.

face any challenge. This military buildup was a key part of Reagan's larger plan to make the U.S. the world's strongest nation again.

Reagan also worked hard to promote democracy as a way of countering the spread and the appeal of communism around the world. The Reagan Doctrine made this promise official and United States started to provide overt and covert aid to anti-communist guerrillas and resistance movements fighting the Soviet-backed pro-communist governments all over the world. This was also another way to limit the Soviet reach, influence and power around the globe.

Reagan Doctrine is often used to explain why the U.S. backed the Mujahideen in Afghanistan. Moscow was in a lot of trouble after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and Reagan's choice to give guns and money to Afghan fighters made the Soviet occupation much more expensive. While some have critiqued these policies for their long-term consequences, such as the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan and the 9/11 attacks, at that time Reagan's administration considered this proxy war to be a good way to undermine Soviets.

The Reagan Doctrine also extended to Central America, where the U.S. supported anti-communist forces such as the Contras in Nicaragua. There were claims of human rights violations, the Iran-Contra scandal occurred and all that made these policies unpopular, but Reagan believed that the spread of communism had to be stopped at all costs. This aggressive approach was much different from earlier administrations' tactics, who were way more passive when it came to containing the spread of the communist contagion.

Reagan did more than just use the military to support freedom. He also used public diplomacy. His speeches often emphasized the moral and practical superiority of democratic governance. By framing the Cold War as a battle for the hearts and minds of people worldwide, Reagan sought to position the United States as the champion of freedom and human rights.⁷

Reagan's foreign policy plans and his domestic strategies were very closely linked. His larger vision was based on the idea that America, which was strong, and wealthy, could better project power around the world and serve as a beacon of hope to the billions of people enslaved by the communist regimes. His economic policies, which are now called "Reaganomics", focused on lowering taxes, getting rid of rules that limited free market initiative, and cutting back on

⁷ *The Reagan administration's strategy toward the Soviet Union*, 408.

government spending for social programs. Reagan thought in order to restore American power, steps needed to be taken to boost economic growth and limit the federal government's involvement in the economy. As he often said in speeches “the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help.”⁸

A big part of why people trusted Reagan's leadership, and, by extension, his foreign policy was that the economy got better. Reagan's picture of a stronger America spoke to people who were ready to move on from the problems of the 1970s.

The connection between economic recovery and military strength was a central theme of Reagan's presidency, with both elements reinforcing the image of the United States as a global superpower.

Domestically, Reagan's emphasis on strength and resolve contributed to a broader cultural shift. His administration promoted traditional values, patriotism, and individualism, themes that aligned with his foreign policy rhetoric. By presenting the United States as a force for good in the world, Reagan sought to unify the American public around a shared sense of purpose and identity. Even Hollywood, a place full of communists who hated America, jumped on the patriotic wagon with movies like *Rambo II and III* and *Rocky IV*.⁹

To sum it all up, Reagan's political project was bigger than just his policies toward the Soviet Union. His strategies, though not without controversy, reflected a consistent commitment to projecting power and confidence both at home and abroad. This comprehensive approach to governance and diplomacy transformed the US politically and ideologically, laying the groundwork for its post-Cold War role of America as the world's only superpower. Not only did Reagan's presidency change the course of the Cold War, but it also changed the course of American politics. He left behind a legacy of power, moral clarity, and hope that shapes political debate today, making him one of the most important leaders of the 20th century.

⁸ <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/presidents-news-conference-23>

⁹ Jeffords, S. *The Remasculinization of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

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