

OPINION

Restore Reagan's Military 'Margin of Safety'

By Roger Zakheim

The U.S. faces the most daunting security landscape in 45 years. That's no coincidence. Earlier this year Russia launched the bloodiest armed conflict in Europe since World War II, and this summer China publicly displayed plans to strangle or swallow the free people of Taiwan. Leaders in both countries examined the landscape and determined they could prevail in their ultimate goals, believing that the U.S. lacks the will to win.

It isn't the first time autocrats have brazenly defied norms and threatened freedom. It also isn't the first time the U.S., stung by defeat in a "forever war," roiled by political turmoil, and fixated on inflation and

While foreign policy 'realists' urge detente with China and Russia, only strength ensures peace.

economic anxiety at home, has been judged weak by its adversaries. So how did the U.S. shift the security landscape the last time dictators were on the march? The answer is found on the campaign trail in the summer of 1980, just after Ronald Reagan won the Republican presidential nomination.

For years Reagan had consistently summed up his Cold War strategy as "We win, they lose." It was more than a slogan, it was a plan. In August 1980 he explained how he would halt the Soviet Union's advances and

drive Moscow to the negotiating table.

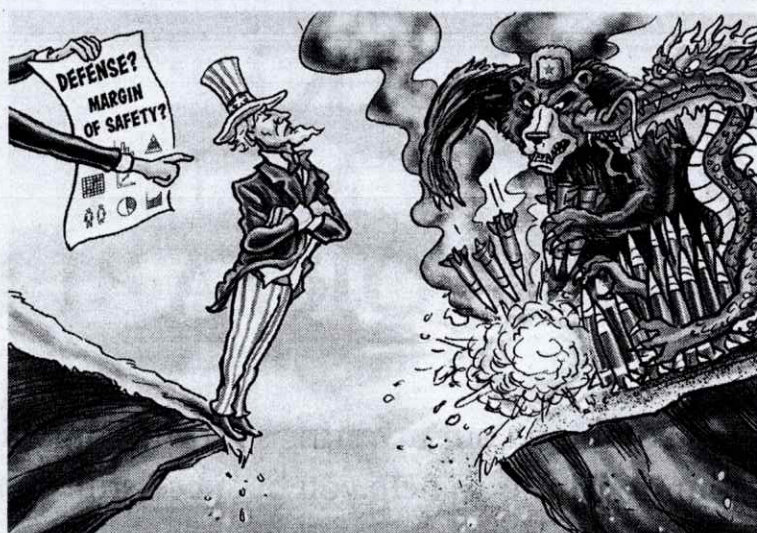
In remarks to the Veterans of Foreign Wars in Chicago, Reagan declared he would restore America's military strength through a major peacetime buildup. "Having known war," he told the veterans assembled that day, "you are in the forefront of those who know that peace is not obtained or preserved by wishing and weakness. You have consistently urged maintenance of a defense capability that provides a margin of safety for America."

Those words became known as the "margin of safety" speech, and Reagan observed that "today, that margin is disappearing." He rejected the prevailing view of the "realists" in both parties who championed a detente policy and assumed the U.S. lacked the will or the capacity to roll back the Soviet Union. He believed in a peace under which "freedom can flourish and justice prevail," and rejected detente as a "false peace" or "a peace of humiliation and gradual surrender."

It seems prescient now. It was provocative then.

Reagan insisted the two essential ingredients of U.S. security—resources and resolve—had been lacking. Invoking the "forever war" of his day, Reagan took the politically perilous position of denouncing Vietnam syndrome, which made peace a euphemism for defeat and saw winning as an unattainable goal. Instead, Reagan argued that "we must have the means and the determination to prevail or we will not have what it takes to secure the peace."

Critics dismissed Reagan's rhetoric. Defense Secretary Harold Brown rejected the approach as "unrealistic,



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simplistic, dangerous." This was the prevailing orthodoxy of the time. But now history speaks to us unambiguously. Reagan was right: Timidity often cloaks itself in foreign-policy realism. Restoring the margin of strength produced true peace.

Today's challenges are no doubt more complex, in part because China poses economic and security risks. Still, the solutions Reagan offered should be no less compelling. Yet 42 years later, leaders in both parties seem eager to make common cause with the detente-pushing realists, assuming that an aggressive Russia and a rising China are merely the facts of life in the 21st century.

Even with a bipartisan consensus that China is America's pre-eminent security challenge and that Russia is a dangerous adversary, many in both parties wonder whether the U.S. has the economic and political strength to prevail against China while sus-

taining its security leadership in Europe and the Middle East.

There is good reason to wonder. The past three administrations have failed to expand and modernize the U.S. military sufficiently, and lawmakers seem more inclined to let the status quo calcify than to change course—no matter how predictable the results. This year's security convulsions over Taiwan and Ukraine haven't prompted a Reaganesque response. Yet we know from Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea that tolerating aggression encourages more aggression.

Billions of dollars in security support to Ukraine and the strong bipartisan vote for Sweden's and Finland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization demonstrate a general U.S. belief in checking Russia and strengthening security in Europe. But the Biden administration has fallen short of committing to restore

Ukraine to the preinvasion status quo, while voices on the far right parrot Russian propaganda justifying Vladimir Putin's atrocities. In Asia, the president has made America's longstanding policy of "strategic ambiguity" seem anything but strategic.

Making matters worse, inflation effectively shrinks the defense budget, making it even more difficult for the military to sustain today's force and modernize for tomorrow. Congress and the administration need to bolster these budgets significantly. As President Reagan showed, it is far better to spend now to prevent a war than to spend later to fight one.

To meet this moment, we need defense investment along the lines of what the Reagan administration pursued: roughly 5% to 6% of gross domestic product annually. To those who say we can't afford a buildup without sacrificing our prosperity, Reagan's response from four decades ago still rings true: "Our government must stop pretending that it has a choice between promoting the general welfare and providing for the common defense. Today they are one and the same."

Refusing to provide the resolve and resources to win isn't new. The country has been here before. Then as now, the timid, complacent and self-centered will retreat to the comfort of "realism." But to achieve true deterrence, not false detente, look to the reality of history. It compels us to restore the margin of safety.

Mr. Zakheim is director of the Reagan Institute in Washington. He served as deputy staff director of the House Armed Services Committee (2009-13) and deputy assistant secretary of defense (2008-09).