

Did the Reagan Doctrine Make Sense?

Daniel Larison March 10th, 2011 [Share](#) |

Support for freedom fighters is self-defense. ~[Ronald Reagan](#)

Since we're hearing [some talk](#) about arming Libyan rebels in connection with the Reagan Doctrine, it's worth revisiting what the Reagan administration said about this policy and the flaws that this policy had. As the Reagan quote shows, Reagan argued that this policy of arming anti-communist insurgents was a form of defense against the Soviets. Whether one agrees with that "self-defense" assessment or not, Reagan articulated this policy in the context of opposing the influence of another superpower. Obviously, the Libyan case has absolutely nothing to do with American self-defense or undermining the influence of another major power.

Secretary of State George Shultz defended the policy as a response to Soviet-sponsored insurgencies and subversion:

So long as communist dictatorships feel free to aid and abet insurgencies in the name of 'socialist internationalism,'" Shultz asked, "why must the democracies, the target of this threat, be inhibited from defending their own interests and the cause of democracy itself?"

Advocates of the Reagan Doctrine portrayed the policy as a retaliatory move against Soviet support for revolutions. Of course, the U.S. would not be striking back at a rival exporter of revolution by arming Libyan rebels. On the contrary, the U.S. would be trying to facilitate a change of regime in Libya that America's actual jihadist enemies would welcome. Comparisons with Cold War-era policies are often unhelpful, because the nature of security threats and the existing international order are significantly different from what they were when the Reagan Doctrine might have made sense, but this is the precedent some of the interventionists have chosen. Even if the Reagan Doctrine was appropriate to the late Cold War period, it doesn't follow that doing something similar today makes any sense.

Did the Reagan Doctrine make sense as a policy? Back in 1986, Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute wrote a [paper](#) questioning the Reagan Doctrine's assumptions and its importance for U.S. security interests. Carpenter concluded that with the possible exception of one case, the Reagan Doctrine was not supporting causes that mattered to American security interests:

Although the degree of Soviet-bloc interference, the ideological composition of the rebel movements, the danger of a clash with the USSR, and the risk of entanglement all represent important considerations, the principal factor governing U.S. foreign policy with respect to the five rebel movements should be U.S. security. Assessed in this light, there is only one arena for which a respectable case can be made for providing material aid—Nicaragua—and even that is less than compelling. The other four conflicts are essentially irrelevant to the legitimate security concerns of the United States.

Carpenter went on to criticize the Reagan Doctrine as a basically flawed policy:

It is difficult to see how the Reagan Doctrine would bolster U.S. security; indeed, the opposite result is far more likely. Most Third World struggles take place in arenas and involve issues far removed from legitimate American security needs. U.S. involvement in such conflicts expands the republic's already overextended commitments without achieving any significant prospective gains.

He also rejected arguments for the Reagan Doctrine as a vehicle of democracy promotion:

The prospects for the Reagan Doctrine promoting democracy in the Third World are no more promising; again, an intrusive U.S. military policy is likely to produce the opposite result. The Reagan Doctrine threatens to become a corollary to America's longstanding policy of supporting "friendly" autocratic regimes. **Administration leaders exhibit a willingness to endorse and assist any insurgent movement that professes to be anti-Soviet, without reference to its attitude toward political or economic rights** [bold mine-DL]. The United States has already antagonized Third World populations by sponsoring repressive governments and may incur even more enmity as the patron of authoritarian, albeit anti-Marxist, insurgencies. Such a strategy is hardly an effective way to promote the popularity of democratic capitalism.

It seems to me that proponents of arming the Libyan rebels are blissfully unaware of the rebels' attitude toward political or economic rights, and they seem eager to take the word of rebel leaders that they are democrats. Calls for U.S. intervention in Libya or arms shipments to Libyan rebels have many of the same flaws that arguments for the Reagan Doctrine had. It isn't a model for what the U.S. should do now, but an example of what the U.S. should try to avoid, namely wasting American resources on conflicts that have nothing to do with American security.

[Share](#) |

Filed under: [foreign policy](#), [politics](#)