The Reagan Doctrine: No De Facto Effect on America’s Intervention in Afghanistan

Julian Viret

On Ronald Reagan’s inauguration day in January of 1980, the annual American budget for aid to the Afghan mujahideen was nearly $30 million. By the mid 1980s, this same budget had surged to $650 million per year. This significant increase in anti-communist aid can be attributed to several causes. One possible explanation for this rise in aid is that the Reagan Doctrine—Reagan’s policy of offering open military assistance to anti-communist rebels in the attempt to roll back communism—was at the center of Reagan’s foreign policy towards Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Reagan’s assertion to the American public that the U.S. was offering open military assistance to the mujahideen suggests that Reagan formulated a doctrine regarding the Soviet war in Afghanistan and then implemented it, instead of having an assortment of different policies. Therefore, the Reagan Doctrine was the de jure reason for American military aid to the Afghan anti-communist rebels.

However, the Reagan Doctrine was not responsible for Reagan’s de facto actions in Afghanistan, because American aid was too inconsistent to constitute a doctrine and too similar to Jimmy Carter’s anti-communist aid to be considered a change in foreign policy. Firstly, evidence shows that U.S. aid to the mujahideen fluctuated as a function of America’s relationship with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, suggesting that the Reagan Doctrine was only one of Reagan’s several motives for arming the mujahideen. In addition, Reagan’s covert and inconsistent aid to the Afghan rebels was far more complex than the term “Reagan Doctrine” implies. Secondly, because American arms shipments to the mujahideen began under President Carter, the Reagan Doctrine did not represent a change in foreign policy; therefore, it was not entirely responsible for Reagan’s decision to arm the mujahideen.

This paper was written for Dr. Charles Hanson’s Advanced Placement U.S. History class in the spring of 2012.
De Jure Policy in Afghanistan

When Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, his focus on the rollback of communism through aid to anti-communist rebel groups came to be known by foreign policy experts and the American people alike as the Reagan Doctrine. While in actuality he may have followed an assortment of inconsistent foreign policies caused by several motives, the Reagan Doctrine was the de jure cause of American aid to the mujahideen.

On April 1, 1985, *Time* magazine journalist Charles Krauthammer published an essay entitled “The Reagan Doctrine,” in which he proclaimed that Reagan had embedded his doctrine regarding U.S. involvement in Afghanistan within his State of the Union address the previous January.¹ In his essay, Krauthammer defined the Reagan Doctrine as “overt and unashamed” support for the mujahideen on the grounds of “justice, necessity and democratic tradition.”² As a result of Krauthammer’s influential essay, the term “Reagan Doctrine” became popular with both the press and the American public, since it simplified American involvement in Afghanistan. The fact that the term was first coined by Krauthammer and then frequently used thereafter suggests that U.S. involvement in Afghanistan was perceived by the American public as being part of a unified and coherent foreign policy known as the Reagan Doctrine. Although in fact Reagan’s actions in Afghanistan may have strayed from the just, necessary, and traditional motives Krauthammer described, his essay establishes the Reagan Doctrine as the superficial reason for Reagan’s decision to arm the Afghan mujahideen.

Years before Krauthammer first coined the term “Reagan Doctrine,” Reagan had already taken legal steps towards making overt aid to the Afghan rebels the priority of American intervention in Afghanistan. For example, in 1983, Reagan legally established and identified American aid to the mujahideen as a central element of American attempts to roll back the spread of communism. A presidential directive signed by Reagan that year ordered that the U.S. both continue “effective opposition to Moscow’s efforts to consolidate its position in Afghanistan”
and “convey clearly to Moscow that unacceptable behavior [would] incur costs that would outweigh any gains.” Consequently, Reagan defined American policy towards Soviet influence in Afghanistan on a legal level as arming the mujahideen in order to make Soviet intervention in Afghanistan no longer cost-effective. Although this document makes no reference to the term “Reagan Doctrine,” the practical and overt nature of American aid to the mujahideen described fits Krauthammer’s later definition of the Reagan Doctrine as “unashamed” support to a country at risk of getting “lost behind an iron curtain of Soviet domination.” This document reveals that Reagan’s de jure policy towards Afghanistan was congruent with later descriptions of the Reagan Doctrine, suggesting that the doctrine was responsible for Reagan’s legal actions towards the mujahideen.

When addressing the American public, Reagan cited the Reagan Doctrine as his reason for sending arms to anti-communist rebels. For example, in a 1988 speech Reagan proclaimed that overt aid to “freedom fighters” revolting against communism was “at the core of what some have called the Reagan Doctrine.” Although this evidence may seem late in the day considering Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan ended in 1989, Reagan’s idealistic rhetoric suggests that the term “Reagan Doctrine” was simply used in order to satisfy the American public. With this speech, Reagan led the American people to believe that American policy regarding Soviet occupation in Afghanistan was focused on giving anti-communist revolutionaries the tools necessary to fight back against Soviet oppression. The fact that Reagan repeatedly describes the anti-communist groups as “freedom fighters” throughout his speech suggests that he wanted the public to consider the Reagan Doctrine as a term depicting America’s fight for freedom abroad. Reagan’s ability to convey an idealistic message to the American public in spite of his complex entanglement with the mujahideen is a result of his deceptively optimistic rhetoric. In his essay on the Reagan Doctrine, historian Andrew Hartman depicted the effect of Reagan’s speeches on American belief in his doctrine:

*Reagan’s rhetoric translated into a policy that became known as the Reagan Doctrine, a coherent policy of support for, as he stated, “those
who are risking their lives on every continent from Afghanistan to Nicaragua to defy Soviet-supported aggression.” The mujihadin became the centrepiece of the Reagan Doctrine—to increase the cost of Soviet support of Third World socialist governments.6

Hartman’s essay suggests that the term “Reagan Doctrine” was frequently used because it reduced all of Reagan’s different motives into a single, righteous cause for American support of the mujahideen. It also supports the claim that, de jure, the Reagan Doctrine was the cause of Reagan’s reason to arming the anti-communist rebels.

De Facto Policy in Afghanistan

Evidence suggests that Reagan’s involvement in Afghanistan was in fact considerably more complex than the straightforward aid denoted by the term “Reagan Doctrine.” Because American aid was at times covert and inconsistent, contrary to the open aid Reagan described to the American public, the Reagan Doctrine was not in fact responsible for Reagan’s decision to arm the mujahideen. In addition, the fact that arms shipments to the Afghan anti-communist group varied along with changes in American relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia suggests that the Reagan Doctrine was only one of Reagan’s many interests in arming the Afghan rebels.

A month before the first Soviet troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan, the mujahideen experienced a sudden decrease in American arms shipments. This inexplicable weakening of American aid suggests that the Reagan Doctrine alone was not enough to persuade Reagan to aid the Afghan anti-communists. A columnist from the Trenton Evening Times wrote an article on this incident, stating that shipments of American stinger missiles had decreased “at a time when the Soviets [appeared] to be rushing military supplies to the Afghan government.”7 As a result of this unanticipated reduction, which many mujahideen feared would give the Soviets an advantage in the war, Reagan jeopardized all previous American efforts to force the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan.8 The fact that Reagan stopped shipping weapons to the mujahideen contradicts his very own doctrine, which was centered around the
idea of using sophisticated American weapons in order to put pressure on Soviet withdrawal. Reagan’s willingness to sell out his doctrine in pursuit of some other goal suggests that the Reagan Doctrine was not the unique de facto cause of American assistance of the mujahideen.

Because arms shipments to the Afghan anti-communists changed as a function of American relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, the Reagan Doctrine was only one of Reagan’s many interests in arming the mujahideen. For example, journalist Jack Anderson wrote in *The Progress* that “profits from the Iran arms sales were commingled with secret funds earmarked for the Afghan mujaheddin.” As a result of trade between the United States and Iran, Reagan was able to use Iranian money to fund the mujahideen; this suggests that Reagan was motivated to support the Afghan guerrillas because of the money received from trade with Iran, and not the Reagan Doctrine. Additionally, American funds for the mujahideen were raised as a consequence of a deal between America and Saudi Arabia. An agreement between the two countries stated that the Saudi government would contribute $1.5 billion to the Afghan resistance efforts only if “the CIA arms [went] to...hard-shell fundamentalist factions [wanting] to establish an Iranian-style Islamic state in Afghanistan.” The fact that American aid to the mujahideen relied on Saudi Arabian and Iranian funds reveals that preserving relationships with other Middle-Eastern countries was another incentive for Reagan to arm the mujahideen.

The Reagan Doctrine was a foreign policy centered on overt military assistance. And yet the CIA attempted covert aid to the mujahideen, revealing that the Reagan Doctrine was not the actual cause of American involvement in Afghanistan. For example, the CIA “purposely made it difficult to trace its secret arms shipments,” emphasizing its “obsession for secrecy and deniability.” As a result of the CIA’s secret intervention, American involvement in Afghanistan became focused on clandestine aid to the mujahideen; this method of assistance contradicts the proud, unashamed aid described in Reagan’s speeches. The CIA’s desire for plausible deniability is expressed further in a 1983 Pakistani letter to the editor of the *New York Times*. In his letter, Pakistani Minister of Information M. Butt claimed that “Pakistan [had] contin-
ued to resist all efforts that would make it a conduit of arms for the mujahideen.” CIA attempts to use Pakistan as a middleman between America and the Afghan guerrillas indicate that aid to the mujahideen did not necessarily stem from the Reagan Doctrine.

The Reagan Doctrine: Not a Change in Foreign Policy

When the Soviet Union first invaded Afghanistan in the winter of 1979, President Jimmy Carter identified the “strategic importance of Afghanistan to stability and peace,” and as a result began providing the mujahideen with American weapons. While Reagan amplified this aid over his presidency, the foundations of the Reagan Doctrine lie in the foreign policy of Reagan’s predecessor. Simply put, the Reagan Doctrine was not in fact Reagan’s doctrine: the fact that arms shipments to the mujahideen began during Carter’s presidency suggests there was no particular “Reagan Doctrine” at all.

In his essay on the Reagan Doctrine, historian Chester Pach argues that Reagan’s involvement in Afghanistan was simply an extension of the Carter administration’s previous aid to the Afghan guerrillas. CIA estimates of the mujahideen’s capability during the Reagan administration were similar to those by the Carter administration: that the mujahideen “could do no more than harass the invaders.” As a result of Carter’s decision to aid the mujahideen, Reagan chose to maintain annual aid between thirty and forty million, only slightly higher than the level Carter had provided during his final year as president. Furthermore, aid to the Afghan rebels under Reagan was handled “as if [the CIA] were using a condom”; this metaphoric description of plausible deniability resembles the covert aid provided during Carter’s presidency. By maintaining the same type of aid at the same price during his first year as president, Reagan was in fact adhering to the doctrines of President Carter, not any new one.

When the Soviet Union eventually withdrew all of its troops from Afghanistan, Reagan and his advisors claimed that the Reagan Doctrine was the cause of American victory. In reality, as Pach notes, “the policy of supporting Afghan resistance preceded both the Reagan Doctrine and the Reagan administration.” Since there was no change between
Reagan and Carter’s methods of dealing with Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, there was no such thing as the Reagan Doctrine in the first place. Therefore, it could not have been the cause of Reagan’s decision to arm the mujahideen, because his so-called “doctrine” was simply a continuation of foreign policy under Carter.

Reagan’s involvement in Afghanistan can be compared to his intervention in Nicaragua, a country where Reagan claimed to implement the Reagan Doctrine, but in fact merely followed the policy previously set forth by Carter. American assistance to the Nicaraguan contras provides an interesting point of comparison to American aid to the mujahideen, because both cases misleadingly exemplify the Reagan Doctrine. In July of 1979, Nicaraguan president Anastasio Somoza Debayle was replaced by a communist government known as the Sandinista National Liberation Front. As a result, in September of 1980, the Carter administration decided to provide $75 million in aid to the Nicaraguan, anti-communist contras. Carter cited his reason for this aid as not wanting “to abandon the vital Central American region to Cuba and its radical Marxist allies,” just as Reagan promised aid to the mujahideen in order to prevent the Afghan government from succumbing to the Soviet Union’s communist influence. The fact that covert aid to both Nicaragua and Afghanistan began well before Reagan was elected president shows that the Reagan Doctrine was just Reagan’s term for the continuation of Carter’s foreign policy. Therefore, the Reagan Doctrine was not the cause of Reagan’s decision to arm the mujahideen.

Proximate and Ultimate Effects of U.S. Involvement in Afghanistan

What caused Reagan to provide so much aid to the mujahideen? There are several possible answers to this question, but the Reagan Doctrine only played a de jure role in shaping American foreign policy regarding Soviet involvement in Afghanistan. While there is debate over the cause of American aid to the mujahideen, the effects of this aid have sparked even further disagreement.

Controversy lies in comparing the proximate and ultimate effects of American involvement in Afghanistan. In the short term, Reagan's decision to supply the mujahideen with massive amounts of sophis-
ticated weapons was a success: our aid contributed to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan, and therefore the rollback of communism. However, the long-term effects of American support of the mujahideen were self-destructive. Reagan’s aid to the mujahideen ultimately led to the creation of the Taliban, the September 11 attacks, and the spark of the War on Terror. This is due in part to Reagan’s compromises with Saudi Arabia and Iran, who offered financial support under the condition that America only arm fundamentalist Afghan rebels. The fact that Reagan was willing to provide radical, anti-American Muslims with sophisticated American weapons helps illustrate the extent to which many Americans feared the growing influence of communism. Reagan’s assistance of the mujahideen also suggests that, in future cases of U.S. involvement in Third World countries, the government should weigh the potential proximate and ultimate effects of its actions before diving in unprepared for the outcome.

Notes


2. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 83.


20. Ibid.
Bibliography

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