CHAPTER II

REAGAN'S FOREIGN POLICY THRUST
Ronald Reagan came into office in 1981 promising a firm, and firmly anti-communist stance in the American government. He was elected in November 1980 amidst an uproar of accusations that sitting President Jimmy Carter had represented a failure of "US leadership" particularly in dealing with the crisis of the American hostages in Tehran. With Reagan, the emphasis that the Soviet Union represented an "evil empire" became an obsession. He had a clear, overriding preoccupation with the Soviet Union. Given his credentials, Reagan from the very beginning reoriented the American foreign policy towards a global perspective, as opposed to a regional one.¹

President Reagan’s personality had a profound impact on his foreign policy decisions. The major focus of his foreign policy was the Soviet Union. It was considered as a great source of international insecurity at that time. As Secretary of State, Alexander M. Haig stated: "Soviet promotion of violence as the instrument of change constitutes the greatest danger to world peace."² The Reagan Administration viewed Soviet Union as one which exploited aspirations for change in order to create conflict justifying the use of force and even invasion. According to US, Moscow was the supporter of


terrorism and war by proxy. Reagan stated - "As for the enemies of freedom, those who are potential adversaries, they will be reminded that the peace is the highest aspiration of the American people. We will negotiate for it, sacrifice for it; we will not surrender for it now or ever".3

Reagan saw world politics as a battle between the forces of good and evil and considered United States as the highest embodiment of the good that individuals have known. According to him, United States stood as "the only island of freedom that is left in the world".4 Regarding Soviet Union as the embodiment of evil, he said - "they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat".5 His chief foreign policy objective, according to the Republican party platform of 1980, was to restore US superiority vis-a-vis the Soviet Union in the world. The National Security Council Document 32, adopted in May 1982 after close consultation between the Pentagon, the National Security Council and the President, called for an armed force build up that would enable the United States to prevail in either a prolonged

3 "Inaugural Address by President Reagan, January 20, 1981", Ibid., p.28.


conventional war or a nuclear war, should deterrence fail.  

Reagan viewed the world as a dangerous place and emphasised that America should be the strongest in order to face it. In his Inaugural Address, he stated - "We will be seen as having greater strength throughout the world". He saw Soviet Union as snatching the freedom of all nations and promised to liberate those nations. He declared - "we will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom".

The Reagan years often produced a contradiction in foreign policy. According to a scholar, "the United States sought to project an image of strength in the world through hawkish rhetoric and a vast military buildup. But during the Reagan years, America often displaced a reality of weakness". Thus the skills of successful diplomacy were especially in short supply during the Reagan years.

However, President Reagan’s foreign policy began with a pride in the United States, its deal and in its achievements. It also supported the defence of the Government of the people

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8 Ibid.

and Security under law. Regard for individual liberty at home translated its concern for liberty abroad. It gave importance to the freedom of the countries and restoration of its leadership in the world. Secretary of State, Haig had pointed out - "The United States continues to be the natural anchor for the free societies of the Atlantic and Pacific".  

US actions were directed towards three projects - First, to enlarge its capacity to influence events and to make more effective use of the full range of its moral, political, scientific, economic and military sources in the pursuit of its interests; Second, to convince its allies, friends and adversaries - above all the Soviet Union - that America will act in a manner befitting its responsibilities as a trustee of freedom and peace; and Third, to offer hope and aid to developing countries in their aspirations for a peaceful and prosperous future.  

To gain strategic superiority over Soviet Union, in 1983, President Reagan declared an ambitious plan of "star wars". This plan was aimed at rendering the nuclear weapons obstacle. President Reagan spent billions of dollars on the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) project. The SDI visualised a kind of defence against Soviet missile attack. It was considered as crucial for the Reagan Administration's defence policy.  

10 Quoted in US, Department of State, American Foreign Policy: Current Documents, n.2.  
11 Ibid.
"SDI is a programme whose success could have major implications for western security policy".  

US defence policy covered many aspects of its security and enabled it to cope with all the significant threats. Besides the features which were already there in the defence policy like - strong conventional, theatre, nuclear and strategic forces to provide deterrence and strengthening of the US conventional forces in Europe, several new features were introduced in the defence policy. "America reasserted its belief that the nation must restore its military strength. What is new is the determination of President Reagan, and those of us who serve him, to cut back federal spending and reduce the role of government, thereby making room for a vigorous expansion in our defence effort, without causing more inflation".  

The Reagan Administration gave equal importance to the revitalisation of American economic and military strength. "The two are inseparable, without an adequate defense, we cannot meet our responsibilities and protect our interests

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around the world". The efforts to strengthen America's economic and military capabilities provided the foundation for American diplomacy and restoration of American leadership. Besides restraining the Soviet Union it also helped in reinvigorating its alliances, strengthening its friends, and developing a more effective approach to the developing countries.

Stressing the need for strengthening its alliances, the official sources stated - "Rebuilding alliance solidarity is a precondition for redressing the East-West military imbalance and for constraining Soviet international behaviour". The reinvigorating of the alliances was accompanied by the strengthening of US friends. The US conventional military improvements would further assure friends and allies in the knowledge that the US was a reliable and consistent partner.

Thus the Reagan Administration wanted to give an effective response to the violent action of the Soviet Union along with its friends. "We are determined to strengthen our friends and to work with them against the threat posed by the Soviet Union and its surrogates". A fresh approach to the

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15 Ibid., p.37.

developing countries was also considered essential. This was to be done by combining freedom and development of these countries and assuring political stability and economic progress.

President Reagan's foreign policy was structured on four pillars. First was the improvement of the military balance between the US and the Soviet Union, second the refurbishment of US traditional alliances, NATO, ANZUS, and others, third, development of a responsible relationship with the developing world and fourth, the improvement of the economic status at home without which an international role could not be achieved. Thus, interconnecting the foreign, defence and economic policies, the Reagan Administration adopted a strategic approach to the foreign policy.17

Realising that American economic weakness would cripple its efforts abroad, the President proposed a revolutionary programme to restore inflation-free economic growth. The programme recognised that America's strength was measured not only in arms but also in the spirit of individual enterprise, the soundness of the dollar, and the proper role of the government in a free society. Fundamental to economic recovery was the correction of defects in the military posture. The military strength required by the United States could be

achieved only through sacrifice and consistent purpose. The Reagan Administration proposed a heavy investment in the Armed Forces to assure safety for itself and its generations to come.

"Our concerns with military readiness reflect both the long lead time required to procure sophisticated equipment and past failures to provide adequate peacetime support for combat units... My programme will continue to bolster combat readiness by increasing training, operating rates, and equipment support. There will be increased aircraft flying hours and supply inventories".  

Justifying the enhancement of its defence system and to protect itself against Soviet Union, the Reagan Administration clarified - "it is neither reasonable nor prudent to view the Soviet military buildup as defensive in nature. It would be dangerously naive to expect the Soviet Union, if it once achieves clear military superiority, not to try to exploit their military capability... in fact, we have clear evidence of aggressive Soviet activity around the globe".  

The Reagan Administration was determined to increase its expenditure on defence. "If we are to make up for the lost ground, we have to


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get the US investment substantially above the annual growth rate that has been planned". It advised that NATO should also contribute to the common defence. This would be a major thrust of the Reagan Administration’s defense policy.

Reagan’s Middle East Policy

The Reagan Administration viewed the Middle East as part of a larger politico-strategic theatre and an entity which required a comprehensive treatment to ensure a favourable balance of power. The strategic importance of the region to the United States is well known - "It is our strong belief that improving the security of the region is intimately related to the progress in the peace process between Israel and the Arab League States". The Reagan Administration had three main objectives in the Middle East: reducing the Soviet influence in the area, guaranteeing Israel’s security and the uninterrupted flow of oil from the Persian Gulf region to the west.

Reagan regarded the Soviet military buildup as the single most dangerous threat to world peace including the Middle East. There was a strategic threat to the region posed by the Soviet Union and its surrogates. The official sources made

\[\text{20} \quad \text{Quoted in Ibid., p.30.}\]

\[\text{21} \quad \text{"Statement by the Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, Department of State (Richard R. Burt), Before a Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, March 23, 1981", Ibid., p.659.}\]
clear that "...Soviet activity, unchallenged in recent years by the United States, has led to Soviet gains and the growing perception that the Soviets and their proxies can act with impunity. This trend must be halted and then reversed". 22

According to the Reagan Administration, the Soviet Union took keen interest in the conflicts of even these regions that hardly affected Moscow's security in any manner. The Middle East was one such area. In order to keep the Soviet Union away from the area, the US wanted its presence there. Stressing its presence in the Middle East, Secretary of Defence, Weinberger, stated - "our vital interests are involved there, as are of course the vital interests of our allies and of the independent nations of that region". 23

The Reagan Administration's objective was to lay stress on the peaceful resolution of conflict and to demonstrate to the Soviet Union that violent behaviour would threaten Moscow's own interests. Reagan saw the Soviet Union as the chief source of conflict in the Middle East, hence he thought it necessary to build positions of strength against them there. This was done to keep an eye on the Soviets so that it was easy to take step against them in case they made an offensive move... "if they (Soviet Union) made a reckless move, they would be risking a confrontation with the United

23 Ibid., p.31.
Blaming the Soviet Union for all the threats in the Middle East, the US stated that Soviets exploited and created opportunities to further their interests to the determine those of the West. The Reagan Administration was resolved to meet these threats. As further added - "we and our western allies will have to assist the local states so that they can contribute to the regional stability and resist intimidation".25

The Middle East region was also important to the United States because western industrialized societies were largely dependent on the oil resources of the Middle East and a threat to access to that oil would constitute a grave threat to vital US national interest. Pointing to the realities of dependence, Secretary of Defence Weinberger admitted - "one of those realities is our dependence on foreign energy sources. The umbilical-cord of the industrialised free world runs through the strait of Hormuz into the Arabian Gulf and the nations which surround it. That areas... will be the fulcrum of contention for the foreseeable future".26

It was clear that the Reagan administration had the strategic interests in the Middle East, due to the extension of Soviet influence. These East-West concerns were more

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p.29.

important for the Reagan administration than the local dispute. It connected the global and the regional issues and it was in this context that the Middle East held importance for the US. A feeling of anti-communism that saw the USSR as the source of most of the conflicts in the world bound the administration to local political conflicts.

There were three guiding themes for Reagan’s policy - Globalism, unilateralism and Interventionism. Reagan gave more importance to globalism, the weakness and strength of the US posture in the Middle East would be assessed in the light of its global interests.

The Reagan Administration abandoned Carter’s ‘regionalism’ and sought the coherence of regional and global levels. In the same way the US believed in the policy of unilateralism. It emphasized on having a capacity to defend the Middle East alone if necessary. On the one hand, it strengthened the NATO alliance, on the other hand, it tried to live without allied support. Lastly, the Reagan Administration placed great emphasis on force. The creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), the planned expansion of the navy, the revitalization of special forces meant for counter insurgency operations - all underlined the shift towards, the coercive instruments. Thus the use of force for preventive purposes was more acceptable and was often put into practice. However, the urgency of the regional dispute i.e., Arab-Israeli dispute was not given importance over East-West
concerns but was considered equal to it.\textsuperscript{27}

The Reagan Administration did not consider the Arab-Israeli conflict, or its relationship with Israel at the centre of its foreign policy. It had no precise plan to offer nor did it spell out any policy for that region. Israel and the Arab-Israeli problem were of marginal interest. Domestic concerns had the highest priority. This trend did change, but rather slowly. In the early part of 1983, the concept of strategic consensus which focussed on the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia and the Arab-Israeli conflict had resumed its centrality in US-Middle East policy.

The hallmark of Reagan Administration's foreign policy in its early phase was a strong anti-Soviet posture, particularly in its rhetoric. It included an anti-terrorist and anti-radical component. The administration was committed to the restoration of the US power and prestige in the international system. "It also endenounced to the confidence of its allies and the respect from its adversaries through a clear, consistent, coherent and realistic foreign policy".\textsuperscript{28}

During the first year of Reagan's office, the Middle East was a scene of three armed conflicts: the warfare pitting the Soviet occupation army against the resistance forces in

\textsuperscript{27} "Transcript of an interview with the Secretary of State (Alexander M. Haig), March 5, 1981", ibid., p.654.

\textsuperscript{28} Bernard Reich, The United States and Israel Influence in the Special Relationship (New York: Praeger Press, 1984), p.87.
Afghanistan; the war between Iraq and Iran that had begun during the last year of the Carter era; and the continuing civil conflict in Lebanon, aggrieved by the cross-border raids by Palestinian guerrillas and Israeli troops. 29

The challenges to the administration were the hostages captured at the US embassy, incited terroristic actions against American citizens in Lebanon and elsewhere and sponsored subversive activities in Saudi Arabia and other pro-western Gulf states. Terrorism, in fact, was being used as a weapon not only by a variety of disaffected groups but also by some governments, with Libya figuring high on the list of suspected or actual perpetrators.

The relations with Syria also were tense as that country was alleged to have sheltered the most intransigent and violence-prone Palestinian elements while openly displaying its hostility to the more moderate forces led by the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its Chairman, Yasser Arafat. Syria's territory, the Golan Heights, was under Israeli occupation and the Camp David peace process had passed over Syria's grievances and did not even mention Syria by name. 30

The Administration would, as Reagan suggested during the campaign, eliminate perceptions of indecisiveness, and vacillation, and speak with a single and powerful voice in

30 Ibid.
foreign policy. The intention was accompanied by a dramatic increase in military spending and a search for bases or facilities. Reagan's campaign was strong and consistent in support for Israel and its perspective of the Arab-Israeli conflict. He was opposed to dealing with the PLO until that organisation dramatically changed its policies by renouncing terrorism, accepting Resolution 242, and acknowledging Israel's right to exist. He perceived Israel to be strategically significant, and an important ally and asset to the U.S. in the struggle against the Soviet Union. Israel was the only stable democracy America could rely on a spot where Armageddon could come. The greatest responsibility of the US had was to preserve peace in the region and it needed for ally in that area. America must prevent the Soviet Union from penetrating the Middle East. If Israel was not there, the US would have to be there.

Reagan supported some Israel actions that had been criticized by previous administrations such as its settlement policy and its actions with regard to Jerusalem. An undivided city of Jerusalem meant sovereignty for Israel over the city---The West Bank a decision could be worked out by Jordans and Israel. "I would never have supported dismantling of Israeli settlements on the West Bank. Reagan saw the Palestinian issue as less than the political problem identified by the Carter Administration and more as a question of refugees; Palestine was never a country, it was a
territory, an area and it was a British mandate. It was the British Government that created the kingdom of Jordan, which is 80 percent of what used to be Palestine. The Israeli's have less than 20 percent of what was Palestine. The Palestinian refugee problem it seems to that is an 80 percent - 20 percent problem of Jordan and Israel.

The foreign policy orientation of the Administration was dictated by the estimate of intense Soviet threat held by senior officials and their closest allies in Congress. In their view, the Soviet threat would be met by the restoration of American prestige in the international community. This in turn required an increased military capability so that the US could reverse the humiliation of recent years and prevent Moscow's expansion.

During the campaign, vice presidential candidate, George Bush expressed views similar to those of Reagan. "It is in the strategic interest of the US to maintain Israel's strength and security. The security and freedom of that small democracy are fundamental to American strength and Middle East stability." He also argued for the maintenance of the US position concerning the PLO and suggested the need to encourage Jordan to support the Camp David process and to

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32 Ibid.

negotiate with Israel concerning the West Bank.

Secretary of State, "Alexander Haig, advocated a more assertive foreign policy and saw himself as its "Vicar" with responsibility for the formulation, conduct and articulation of US foreign policy."

The National Security Advisor Richard A. Allen and presidential councillor Edwin Hease, contributed to Haig's assertiveness. Haig's foreign policy background was mixed with Soviet focussed global issues and the centrality of Europe. Haig described the Soviet threat as relentless, and was suspicious of detente and of Soviet intentions. His Middle East background was limited and at the Republican presidential nomination, he spoke of Israel as a "strategic - asset" whose very existence serves to deter soviet aggression.

Basically, the Reagan Administration had the following concerns in the Middle East. First, the Administrations strove to obtain the stability in the prices of oil and its steady supply from the region. Forty percent of the free world's oil came from the Persian Gulf area. Without it the interrelated economies of the West could not survive. As stated - Western industrialized societies are largely dependent on the oil resources of the Middle East region, and threat to access to that oil would constitute a grave threat to the vital national interest. That must be dealt with; and

that does not exclude the use of force if that is necessary. Second, it sought to maintain regional balance among nations in its favour, by providing arms and aid. Third, it wanted to secure agreements with many Middle East countries to use bases and military facilities.

The Arab-Israeli dispute was one of the major disputes that threatened the interests of the United States in the region. This conflict upset the cause of bilateral relationship between the US and the Arab world. Its outcome created internal threats to the pro-US regimes and its escalation produced opportunities for the Soviet Union to enter the region on behalf of its beleaguered Arab allies.

The Arab-Israeli dispute was extremely divisive. Since the Reagan Administration was anxious to secure a consensus of anti-Soviet strategic interests there, it tried to avoid issues that would force it to make a clear choice between its regional allies, i.e., Israel and Arab states over the issue of Palestine. One main aspect of the Reagan Administration's defence policy planning, was to assure the continued access to the Gulf. This required a force structure and a concept for its employment consistent with the peculiar military and geopolitical circumstances which existed in the area. The RDJTF was tailored to meet this requirement.

The importance attached to the RDJTF was reflected in the funds that were allotted to it. Two billion dollars were added to the 1982 budget amendment, an increase of 85 percent over
the fiscal year 1982 baseline. US defence planning for the region proceeded along several tracks.

- A U.S. military presence in the region largely naval, consisting of one of two carrier battle groups and an afloat marine presence part of the time, which would be coupled with frequent Army and Air Force exercises.
- Creation and development of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force as headquarters and planning organization.
- Diplomatic efforts to gain access to facilities, which together with sea and airlift capabilities, would shorten the deployment time for the forces.  

It was clear that the Reagan Administration preferred to have a presence in the region and capability to reinforce in the region. As Soviet military aggression in the region would lead to direct conflict between the United States and Soviet forces, US policy was to strength the RDF, ensure military presence in the area, secure access to facilities in the region, and to integrate the RDF into broader military options. Its strategy consisted of several dimensions for example, providing security assistance to regional states, maintaining a military presence in the region; building a reinforcement capability to deploy the necessary additional

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37 Ibid.
forces in a contingency; encouraging work for the local states; and gaining support from the European and Asian allies. 38

The Reagan Administration's foreign policy was set during the presidential campaign at the "White House" press conference. Reagan's ideological framework visualized an active aggressive. Soviet Union bent on "expansionism", which required the US to think in terms of containment and perhaps, confrontation. The enhancement of US military capability, the restoration of US decisiveness, and the mobilization of other states against the Soviet Union to establish strategic alliance under US guidance. In the Middle East the administration spoke in terms of a "strategic consensus". The strategic consensus idea was especially promoted by Reagan's First Secretary of State, General Alexander M. Haig. It was based on two assumptions: first, that one could count on mutual understanding and cooperation between Israel and these Arab states and, second, that Arab moderates shared America's view of the Soviet Union as the principal threat to their security. 39

Thus, the major theme of the Reagan Administration was the growing Soviet threat and the declining US strength. Its

38 "Statement by the Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs, Department of State (Richard R. Burt) Before a Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 23 March 1981:; ibid., p.660.

main preoccupation was therefore to recast US strategy and strengthen the military to meet this threat. To implement that President Reagan’s global and regional policies went into effect defence expenditure were stepped up; a new central command for Southwest Asia was created; strategic collaboration with regional powers was initiated, and visible US presence in and around the Persian Gulf became a routine exercise for the armed forces. These programmes were a measure of the Reagan Administration’s concern about the loss of US power and the extent to which the Middle East was crucial in recovering it.