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THE POWER AND PERSISTENCE OF RONALD REAGAN'S REMARKS ON EAST-WEST RELATIONS AT THE BRANDENBURG GATE

By H.R. McMaster

In 2021 the United States is emerging from four traumas: a pandemic; a recession associated with the pandemic; social divisions laid bare by George Floyd's killing and the protests and violence that followed; and vitriolic partisanship surrounding a presidential election in which leaders of both political parties, including the defeated candidate for reelection, disparaged democratic processes and government institutions to score political points. Recovering from those traumas and restoring confidence will require introspection, but American leaders would be mistaken to neglect foreign affairs. The pandemic catalyzed rather than arrested geostrategic competitions, especially the free world's competition with an increasingly aggressive Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While analogies between the 21st-century competition with the CCP and the 20th-century competition with the Soviet Union are imperfect, America's experience during the Cold War demonstrated that prevailing in competitions abroad requires confidence in democratic principles and institutions at home.

President Ronald Reagan's June 1987 speech delivered in the shadow of the Berlin Wall is immortalized because of the exhortation, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Those words and that speech are often credited with accelerating the collapse of the Soviet Union and the West's triumph over communist totalitarianism because they invoked confidence that freedom would triumph over tyranny. The Berlin Wall is an apt, albeit inexact analogy for the Great Firewall of China, the combination of laws and technologies designed to isolate the realm of the Chinese Communist Party from outside influences. One was meant to keep people in and the other aimed to keep ideas out, but both were ultimately intended to stifle freedom and prevent unsupervised personal interactions that might spark opposition to authoritarian regimes. To understand how to compete effectively with today's most powerful authoritarian regime, leaders across the free world might reflect on how Reagan's speech at the Brandenburg Gate clarified the nature of the competition with the Soviet Union, drew a strong contrast between democracy and autocracy, provided a positive vision for the future, and spoke directly to the people on the other side of the wall.

President Reagan's speech made clear what was at stake, not only for those living under Communist oppression, but for all peoples. "As long as this gate is closed, as long as this scar of a wall is permitted to stand, it is not the German question alone that remains open, but the question of freedom for all mankind." Today, as the CCP perfects its technologically enabled police state, much of the world turns a blind eye to egregious violations of human rights. That is because China coopts countries, international corporations, and elites through false promises of impending liberalization, insincere pledges to work on global issues such as climate change and the lure of short-term profits associated with access to Chinese consumers, investments and loans. The CCP portrays its crimes, such as the taking of hostages and political prisoners or the

forcing of millions into reeducation and labor camps, as normal practice. Cooption incentivizes elites, corporations, and countries to go along with the charade while rendering them vulnerable to coercion. The Party uses its coercive power to force acquiescence or support for efforts to extinguish human freedom internally, extend its influence internationally, and reshape the global order in a way that favors China and its authoritarian, mercantilist model. Within international organizations such as the World Health Organization and the United Nations Human Rights Council, the CCP uses cooption and coercion to turn those organizations against their purpose and provide cover for the CCP's most egregious acts. As Reagan pointed out in Berlin, the policies and actions of an aggressive authoritarian power present a challenge not only for the United States, but for all humanity.

The Berlin speech is remembered because it exposed the nature of the free world's competition with the Soviet Union with a direct challenge: "There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Today, leaders across the free world have an opportunity to clarify what is at stake in the competition with the CCP with a similar exhortation to Chairman Xi Jinping: tear down the Great Firewall and the many walls behind which the CCP interns its political prisoners, forced laborers, and oppressed minorities.

Reagan used the physical wall to illuminate the stark contrast between two systems, leaving little room for moral equivalence. He described the wall and the border complex that comprised the Iron Curtain as an "instrument to impose upon ordinary men and women the will of a totalitarian state" and observed that the "news photo and the television screen have imprinted this brutal division of a continent upon the mind of the world." He made that barrier and the oppression it represented important to all people. "Standing before the Brandenburg Gate, every man is a German, separated from his fellow men. Every man is a Berliner, forced to look upon a scar." Sadly, after Berliners tore down the wall in November 1989, man-made barriers that divide free and oppressed peoples persisted, such as the fences, minefields, and guard towers that run along the 38th parallel and separate South Korea's thriving democracy from the Kim family's destitute dictatorship.

But it is the 180-kilometer long strait that connects the East China Sea and the South China Sea that marks the most consequential political obstacle between peoples who share a common culture—much as the Berlin Wall did during the Cold War. Taiwanese appear as today's West Berliners because Taiwan's successful democracy exposes the CCP's lie that the Chinese people are culturally predisposed toward *not* wanting a say in how they are governed. Reagan expressed respect for Berliners in 1987, noting "the feeling of history in this city, more than 500 years older than our own nation." Leaders across the free world today might show respect for the Taiwanese and all Chinese people by acknowledging that China's recent history -- from the Republican Revolution of 1911 to the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989 to the Hong Kong protests of 2020 -- reveals the CCP's Leninist system as unnatural and sustainable only through oppression. Like West Berlin during the Cold War, Taiwan's vibrancy and openness can provide hope to those from Xinjiang to Hong Kong to Tibet to Beijing who might otherwise despair. The Taiwanese people need, as West Berliners did during the Cold War, the support of the free world to counter the CCP's aggression and deter conflict at a dangerous flashpoint that could lead to a devastating war.

Reagan delivered a confident, positive message. It has been largely forgotten that many in the West extolled the relative strengths of Soviet communism up to the moment that the system collapsed. Reagan, however, saw the competitive advantages of America and the free world. He declared that “there stands before the entire world one great and inescapable conclusion: Freedom leads to prosperity. Freedom replaces the ancient hatreds among the nations with comity and peace. Freedom is the victor.” In today’s season of self-doubt across the world’s democracies brought on by the aforementioned traumas, Reagan’s speech provides a reminder that self-respect is foundational to the competition with the CCP. The free world has competitive advantage in unalienable rights: freedom of expression, of assembly, and of the press; freedom of religion and freedom from persecution based on religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation; the freedom to prosper in our free-market economic system; rule of law and the protections it affords to life and liberty; and democratic governance that recognizes that government serves the people rather than the other way around. While the free world’s democratic governments and free market economic systems are imperfect and require constant nurturing, those who extol the relative strengths of China’s system and argue that the best democracies can do is to manage their relative decline may one day find themselves as surprised as Soviet advocates and apologists were in 1989.

Some today argue that leaders should forgo criticism of the CCP’s egregious human rights violations lest CCP leaders feel insulted and withdraw from collective action in areas such as climate change. But Reagan’s clear description of what was at stake in the competition between democracy and autocracy did not foreclose on cooperation with the Soviet Union. Even as he challenged Mr. Gorbachev to tear down the wall, he also called for “not merely limiting the growth of arms, but of eliminating, for the first time, an entire class of nuclear weapons from the face of the earth.” Six months later at the Washington Summit, Reagan and Gorbachev signed the unprecedented Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty which eliminated a whole class of nuclear weapons. Confidence and transparent competition might provide the best path toward cooperation on issues of mutual interest.

Reagan also spoke directly to the people of Eastern Europe: “To those listening throughout Eastern Europe, I extend my warmest greetings and the good will of the American people. To those listening in East Berlin, a special word: Although I cannot be with you, I address my remarks to you just as surely as to those standing here before me. For I join you, as I join your fellow countrymen in the West, in this firm, this unalterable belief: Es gibt nur ein Berlin. [There is only one Berlin.]” Rioting erupted in East Berlin as police began arresting young people who were listening to the speech. Reagan emphasized the importance of positive personal interactions across that artificial barrier, stating that “There is no better way to establish hope for the future than to enlighten young minds, and we would be honored to sponsor summer youth exchanges, cultural events, and other programs for young Berliners from the East. Our French and British friends, I’m certain, will do the same. And it’s my hope that an authority can be found in East Berlin to sponsor visits from young people of the Western sectors.” Just as Reagan advocated for the free movement of young people across a physical barrier, the United States and other free and open societies today should work to surmount the Great Firewall and reach the Chinese people.

Although some might consider expanded immigration from a rival authoritarian state risky, the United States and other free and open societies should issue more visas as part of an effort to maximize positive interactions with Chinese people and entities disconnected from CCP efforts to stifle freedom, conduct espionage, or export China’s authoritarian mercantilist model.

Sadly, the CCP is reducing the space and opportunities for those interactions. As the CCP intensifies the oppression of its own people the United States and other democracies should grant asylum or parole to those who are subject to the CCP's brutality. Following the Tiananmen Square massacre, President George H. W. Bush issued an executive order that granted Chinese students in the United States the right to stay and work. In the following decade, more than three quarters of the students stayed after graduation. Many became U.S. citizens and went on to make tremendous contributions to American society.

Even if leaders across the free world adopt the essential elements of President Ronald Reagan's speech at Brandenburg Gate, clarify the nature of the competition with the CCP, highlight the stark contrast between democracy and authoritarianism, communicate a positive vision of democratic governance and the rule of law, and speak directly to the Chinese people, Xi Jinping and Party leaders are likely to tighten their exclusive grip on power and promote their authoritarian, mercantilist model. That is because Xi and the CCP princelings of his generation are driven by fear and ambition: fear of the chaos that could follow their loss of control and the ambition to achieve 'national rejuvenation.' The COVID-19 pandemic convinced Party leaders that they have a fleeting window of strategic opportunity to strengthen their rule and revise the international order in their favor—before the economy sours; before the population grows old; before other nations realize that the Party is pursuing national rejuvenation at their expense. Moreover, CCP leaders learned one fundamental lesson from the collapse of the Soviet Union's communist empire just two years after Reagan's speech: never compromise or grant the Chinese people a say in how the Party governs. CCP leaders blame Michael Gorbachev, who visited Beijing amid the Tiananmen Square protests to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Soviet-Communist China relations, for losing faith in the primacy of the Soviet party elites. In his speech at Brandenburg Gate, Reagan welcomed Gorbachev's policies of "change and openness," expressing his belief that "that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace." But Xi and his cohort see Gorbachev's effort to make the Communist Party of the Soviet Union a "party of the whole people" as misguided and the principle cause of the Soviet Union's demise. For Xi and the CCP, freedom is a source of existential angst.

Perhaps the greatest lesson of Reagan's remarks on East-West relations is the importance of moral clarity and unambiguous language. Peter Robinson, then a 30-year-old speechwriter who is now a fellow at the Hoover Institution, drafted the speech. He and his colleague, Anthony Dolan, advocated for strong language generally and especially for the four words that comprised that historic and prophetic challenge: "tear down this wall." To prepare for the speech, Robinson visited Berlin where West Berlin government officials encouraged mild rhetoric. Some stated that Berliners had gotten used to the wall. Chancellor Helmut Kohl wrote a memo in which he observed that a large number of Germans believed progress in the relationship with the Soviet Union was only possible if the United States avoided direct condemnation. Secretary of State George Schultz and National Security Advisor Colin Powell believed that strong rhetoric would undermine Gorbachev's Glasnost and Perestroika efforts and set back the fragile relationship Reagan was building with Gorbachev. State Department and National Security Council Staff officials submitted seven drafts of the speech, all of which excluded the four words. But Tom Griscom, Reagan's Director of Communications, had given President Reagan the draft speech before it went out for staffing. Griscom also persuaded the new White House Chief of Staff, Howard Baker, not to intervene or try to block the speech. Ultimately, Reagan retained the tone of the speech and those four momentous words.

The Berlin speech and other Reagan speeches that addressed the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, such as the Westminster Address of June 1982 and the “Evil Empire” speech given at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida in March 1983, explained what was at stake for the United States and humanity in the competition with the Soviet Union. In the latter speech, he lamented the “historical reluctance to see totalitarian powers for what they are.” That reluctance abides, as some argue that the United States faces a binary choice in the competition with the Chinese Communist Party between accommodation and a disastrous war. Others prioritize profits over principles as they surrender to the Party’s coercive power. Some rationalize their silence over heinous human rights abuses with tortured arguments of moral equivalence. President Ronald Reagan’s Berlin Speech demonstrated that direct language is itself an essential element of effective competition. The speech retains its importance because it demonstrates the need for an unambiguous understanding of the nature of today’s competition with the CCP, reveals how that understanding can help restore confidence in and gratitude for democratic governance, and encourages a renewed international commitment to the unalienable rights to which all peoples are entitled.

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