

A BRIEF FAREWELL TO ARMS

Say 'Cold War' and to many the image of arms races, the spectre of fireballs and radioactive mushroom clouds immediately come to mind. The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 raised the prospect of a world with fewer arms and of treaties that would enhance stability and bring transparency to states' intentions. The 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty took the sting out of a threat acutely felt by tens of millions of East and West Europeans during the first half of the 1980s. Its inclusion of onsite inspection provisions set a precedent that was to advance the negotiations of a strategic arms reduction treaty (START). After many decades of unbridled expansion of intercontinental missiles, strategic bombers and submarines loaded with nuclear warheads, actual reductions in both payloads and delivery systems were on the horizon. The pace of the negotiation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) accelerated considerably after the chemical industry endorsed the draft text and its verification proposals, but the core political breakthrough came when the Soviet Union and the United States mutually agreed on the verified destruction of their respective chemical weapon arsenals, thus ending one of the most controversial arms build-ups of the decade.

A vision of a global zero, star wars and Reykjavik

Ten years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, management of the Cold War conflict looked in peril. The Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan placed détente in the freezer. A large-scale outbreak of anthrax resulting in scores of fatalities near Sverdlovsk in 1979 offered the first tangible indications of a secret



The triple warhead of an SS-20 missile (photo by the author)

BW programme in violation of the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention (BTWC). The Soviets had also begun to target West Europe with RSD-10 *Pioneer* ballistic missiles (Western designation: SS-20) equipped with three nuclear warheads. What was the outcome of bureaucratic decision-making and intended as a technological upgrade became a

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major strategic blunder resulting in NATO's counter-deployment of US Pershing II and Tomahawk cruise missiles. Both weapon systems could hit the Soviet heartland from West Europe, but the Soviet leadership erroneously believed that Moscow was within reach of the Pershing II. It consequently feared decapitation: travelling at more than eight times the speed of sound it had less than six minutes to judge whether an attack alarm was false or not and decide on a retaliatory strike. The Soviet leaders were also horrified by open discussion in Washington about fighting and winning limited nuclear war and the use of chemical weapons. Bilateral negotiations on removal of the INF broke down while the numbers of deployed missiles rapidly increased. The Soviets put in place a quasi-automated, machine-driven nuclear response system. The internal political uncertainty resulting from rapid succession of ailing Soviet leaders—Brezhnev, Andropov, and Chernenko—also left little opportunity for negotiations.

Already before his election as US President in 1980, Ronald Reagan rejected the status quo of the Cold War based on containment and deterrence. He moved to let the Soviet Union collapse under the weight of its internal dysfunctions, which included accelerated arms build-up and various aspects of economic and covert warfare. However, his indignation against communism was outweighed by his love for his country: imagining the destruction of the United States by Soviet nuclear weapons was beyond bearable. Thus was rooted his deep commitment to comprehensive nuclear disarmament. It also nurtured his rock-solid belief in strategic missile defence based on futuristic technologies in space. To Reagan, missile defence was also morally far superior to the status quo offered by mutually assured destruction—a 20th century version of medieval hostage exchanges to avert war.

The Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev shared Reagan's dream for a nuclear-free world, but his motivations were different. Conscious of the far-reaching militarisation of Soviet society and acutely aware of the fact that weapon expenditure was bleeding the economy, deep arms reductions and easing international tension were means to his core goal, namely perestroika or the internal political and economic reform of the socialist system.

The October 1996 meeting between both leaders in Reykjavik almost produced a bilateral agreement on comprehensive and mutually verifiable nuclear disarmament. Gorbachev, deeply suspicious of the US missile defence plans, linked the offer to the termination of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). Although SDI had not moved much beyond the drawing board, Reagan could not surrender a morally superior vision. But even his offer to share the technology did not sway

Gorbachev, who was convinced that the idea was a technological pipe-dream. However, Gorbachev's all-encompassing approach to nuclear disarmament was also driven by the deep-rooted fear of political decapitation, and even partially successful missile defence technology might seriously affect Soviet security. Rejecting a new arms race in space-based defences, the only alternative for maintaining a credible deterrent was building-up offensive nuclear forces to overwhelm the proposed US system. This option too went against Gorbachev's basic goal of reforming the Soviet system.

It was a transformation

Although the Reykjavik meeting was judged a failure at the time in the light of what might have been, the one-on-one discussions nonetheless profoundly transformed bilateral relations in ways previously unimaginable until the breakup of the Soviet Union. It had sketched a vision for a world without nuclear weapons. A few months later, when Gorbachev accepted the option of partial agreements under pressure to demonstrate concrete results from his engagement with the United States, the road towards the INF Treaty and, soon after, START and the CWC was cleared.

Reality, however, soon blew the daydreams of disarmament away. As the Berlin Wall opened up, British intelligence was debriefing a senior Soviet microbiologist. The defector brought with him detailed evidence of massive violation with the full knowledge of the Soviet leadership of the BTWC. Iraq's brutal occupation of Kuwait in 1990 and elaborate deception game with international inspectors seeking to eliminate its non-conventional weapon programmes after its defeat dealt further blows to the credibility of verified disarmament and arms control. Abandonment of the negotiation of a protocol to equip the BTWC with verification and enforcement tools in 2001 was a notable victim.

On the 20th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, multilateral disarmament and verification are back on the political agenda. In the United States a new political leader has been elected with a vision of global zero. Articulated in Prague in April 2009, President Barack Obama realises the long road still to go: vested domestic interests in the United States, Russia and other states with nuclear arms are against weapon reductions, missile defence is being linked to nuclear weapon reductions, and some cornerstone treaties on arms control and disarmament must still enter into force or are in need of a major overhaul. The ghosts of a future past still haunt the journey two decades on.