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 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...
But even his offer to share the technology did not sway Reagan. He could not surrender a morally superior vision. SDI had not moved much beyond the drawing board, and the offer was linked to the termination of the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). Although the United States, Russia and other states with nuclear arms are against weapon reductions, missile defence is being linked to nuclear disarmament away. As the Berlin Wall opened up, British biologists defector brought with him detailed intelligence was debriefing a senior Soviet microbiologist. The defector was a notable victim.

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.