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REYKJAVIK AND BEYOND

The late summer and autumn of 1986 were a busy, confusing and dramatic period in Soviet-American relations. Within four months, the tone and substance of communications between Washington and Moscow oscillated sharply between conciliation and acrimony. At issue was whether there would be a second meeting between Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev. If summitry futures had been traded like commodities, fortunes would have been made and lost. The two leaders themselves engaged in a kind of arbitrage, trying to make quick political profits from the swings of the market.

In July and August Reagan and Gorbachev exchanged letters, and each dispatched delegations of arms control experts to the other's capital. Momentum seemed to be building toward a summit in Washington at the end of the year. Then an American journalist was arrested in Moscow. Suddenly the mood soured, and the momentum slowed. But in the midst of what turned out to be a minor crisis, Reagan and Gorbachev made clear first to each other and then to the world that they were determined to proceed with the business between them. They agreed to hold a meeting, which quickly became one of the most extraordinary encounters in the history of relations between their countries, perhaps in the annals of high-level diplomacy.

The two-day meeting in Reykjavik, Iceland, on October 11–12, 1986, broke with virtually all the precedents of U.S.-Soviet relations. There were scarcely any preparations. The meeting that took place was entirely different from the one the Americans had expected. They had anticipated not a full-fledged summit but, in President Reagan's words, "the last base camp"

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on the way to a Washington summit. Yet the agenda turned out to be much broader, and the issues discussed far more consequential, than even those the Americans had envisioned for the anticipated full summit itself.

In some obvious ways the Reykjavik meeting was a failure. At least in the short term, it derailed the summit process and dramatized the fragility of the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Not since Khrushchev had refused to meet with President Eisenhower in Paris in 1960 and argued with President Kennedy in Vienna the following year had an encounter between the American and Soviet leaders ended so badly. In Iceland, when Reagan emerged from his final session with Gorbachev, his usual jaunty manner was missing; his mood was grim.

In reporting to the press immediately afterward, Secretary of State George Shultz appeared exhausted, dejected and defeated. He had to fight to control his emotions. He repeatedly used the word "disappointment" to describe the weekend. White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, at an impromptu press conference at Keflavik Airport, lashed out at the Soviets, saying that "they finally showed their hand; it showed them up for what they are." He said that "there will not be another summit in the near future as far as I can see."

Despite the spectacular collapse of the meeting and the ensuing acrimony, there was also significant, if tentative, progress on arms control. In his press conference, Shultz spoke of "potential agreements" that were "breathtaking." The two sides moved closer to accommodation on a number of issues than their top officials had considered possible beforehand.

In violation of all conventional wisdom about sound negotiating tactics and prudent diplomacy, Reagan and Gorbachev engaged each other on the biggest, most difficult issue dividing them—how to structure and limit their huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons—and then proceeded to improvise. Working groups of experts with no clear instructions toiled through the night to hammer out compromises on matters that years of negotiation had failed to resolve. The two leaders themselves spontaneously tabled variations on one of the oldest, most implausible and least productive themes of the nuclear age—general and complete nuclear disarmament. But they also spent considerable time adjusting their proposals for more practical measures that could become part of achievable, verifiable agreements.

They failed at the last minute to overcome the principal

obstacle to a treaty that might significantly reduce the levels of offensive weaponry on both sides. They could not resolve the question of how, if at all, to constrain President Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative. SDI was then, as it had been for several years and promises to be for some time, the most contentious issue in Soviet-American relations. Gorbachev insisted that the program would give the United States military-technical superiority and a first-strike capability against the U.S.S.R. President Reagan insisted just as forcefully that SDI would produce a purely defensive shield against all offensive nuclear forces and was, therefore, the moral alternative to traditional deterrence based on mutual assured destruction. Neither leader would accept the other's reasoning.

But the meeting did offer a glimmer of hope of a world in which the United States and its allies would be less threatened by Soviet ballistic missiles. It also demonstrated that SDI gives the United States considerable leverage in the effort to achieve such a world through arms control.

II

The Reykjavik encounter was, in a sense, Gorbachev's revenge for the Geneva summit of the previous year. The earlier meeting, in November 1985, had taken place on Reagan's terms. The atmosphere had been civil, even cordial. It left a lingering image in the eyes of the world of the two men seated comfortably before a crackling fire in a pool house on the shore of the lake. They were photographed shaking hands, smiling, chatting earnestly but amiably. Before going home they made a joint public appearance at which they signed a communiqué. Perhaps inevitably, the press proclaimed a "new spirit of Geneva."

The most important feature of the Geneva meeting for Gorbachev was what had *not* happened: Reagan had come to the summit and gone home without yielding even the slightest concession on SDI, the American policy that most concerned the Soviet leaders. Because he had succeeded in "protecting" SDI at the summit, Reagan was hailed by the American right just as enthusiastically as he was praised by the center and the left for resuming high-level Soviet-American diplomacy.

The general secretary may have run into trouble when he arrived home in Moscow empty-handed. His comrades among the Kremlin old guard and the military could not have been pleased that the summit had failed to stop or even slow down

SDI. As a result of whatever displeasure he encountered in the Politburo, Gorbachev may have decided never again to let himself be lured to a summit at which SDI would be finessed.

Throughout much of 1986, the two leaders engaged in a slow-motion fencing match over whether they would hold a second meeting. In the atmosphere of good feeling that had enveloped them in Geneva, they had agreed to meet again the following year in the United States, and the year after that in the Soviet Union. The White House wanted the second meeting in June 1986 and in any case no later than September, before the November congressional elections. The Kremlin made clear that it was not interested in another meeting without concrete progress in arms control. Soviet spokesmen indicated that June was much too soon for the necessary preparations and suggested that their leader would renege altogether on his promise to attend a second summit rather than participate in what would be little more than another photo opportunity.

Even as they seemed to be stalling on a second summit, the Soviets stepped up their propaganda on behalf of a moratorium on all nuclear testing and a phased reduction of nuclear weapons that would lead to the elimination of both sides' arsenals by the end of the century. These proposals were designed for maximum appeal to international public opinion. Each was also a way of attacking SDI. A comprehensive test ban would prevent the development of the nuclear-driven X-ray laser, which some scientists think is the most promising technology for space-based defenses; the elimination of offensive nuclear weapons within 15 years would seem to make strategic defense all but superfluous. At the same time, the Soviets were making some concrete concessions at the ongoing arms control negotiations in Geneva. For example, they dropped their insistence on counting as "strategic" the American forward-based systems, most of them located in Europe, that could reach Soviet territory.

By appearing to insist on progress in arms control as a condition for holding the summit conference, the Soviets were trying to exert political and psychological pressure on Reagan, whose interest in another meeting and in an arms control accord was evident from his statements during the spring and summer. Time was running out for him. By 1987, even if his personal popularity remained high, the United States would be deep into the next presidential campaign. It would be more

difficult than usual to conduct foreign policy. Policy toward the Soviet Union would be especially vulnerable to the partisan and ideological passions of the election season. Moreover, growing public and congressional concerns over the federal budget deficit threatened a backlash against military spending, including on SDI.

For Ronald Reagan to leave the presidency in a blaze of superpower statesmanship, he might need a second summit in late 1986 and another before leaving office. Moscow was attempting to get American arms control concessions in exchange for keeping to the agreed schedule. In early September Gorbachev complained in an interview with the Czechoslovak Communist Party newspaper *Rudé Právo*, "We have not moved an inch closer to an arms reduction agreement, despite all the efforts made by the U.S.S.R."

Even as they set conditions for another Reagan-Gorbachev meeting, however, the Soviets were evidently looking for a way to justify one. For a while they seemed to abandon, or at least loosen, the connection that they had made earlier among the various arms control negotiations. In January 1985, in a meeting in Geneva with George Shultz, then Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko had insisted that the three issues of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), strategic arms, and space and defensive systems had to be resolved "in their interrelationship." Yet starting with the Reagan-Gorbachev summit of November 1985, Soviet officials began saying they would be willing to settle for an interim INF agreement, progress toward a nuclear test ban or perhaps even so-called confidence-building measures such as strengthened procedures for avoiding the accidental start of a war in Europe.

In short, the Soviets seemed ambivalent about a summit. They did not want to allow Reagan's supporters to claim, as they had after the Geneva meeting, that standing tall and holding firm had paid off and that Gorbachev had knuckled under to the President. At the same time they were worried about the consequences of yet another breakdown in Soviet-American diplomacy. Despite their professed fidelity to a great revolutionary tradition, the men in the Kremlin are extremely conservative. They are deeply uncomfortable with discontinuity, uncertainty, unpredictability. The failure to hold a follow-up summit would represent all three. And they were genuinely worried about the future of the nuclear competition. A respite from—or perhaps a long-term arrangement for the regulation

of—that competition was important if Gorbachev were to have the *peredyskha*, or breathing space, that he seemed to need in order to carry out his domestic program.¹

The Soviets had to calculate the likely impact of American politics on their interests. As the end of his presidency approached, Reagan would become a lame duck. Some Soviet officials said that their leaders were tempted simply to wait out what they called “this impossible Administration” and hope for someone more “reasonable.” But given their penchant for worst-case analysis, Soviet officials had to consider at least the possibility that the next American president would be even more strident in criticizing their political system, more vigorous in attacking their empire on its flanks, perhaps even more committed to strategic defense. As they surveyed the American political landscape they could see a number of potential presidential candidates who seemed to fit that description. In discussions with Americans, Soviet specialists on the United States showed deep curiosity about the presidential prospects of Representative Jack Kemp (R-N.Y.) and Senator Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.).

Moreover, the difficulties that the Soviets had experienced with Reagan gave the President a certain political advantage in managing the domestic politics of an agreement if one were achieved. He would have little difficulty getting a treaty ratified by the Senate. Thus, both Reagan and Gorbachev had incentives to meet again.

III

The two leaders seemed to be moving in the direction of a second summit when they were jolted by one of the unforeseen events that have made the conduct of Soviet-American relations so accident-prone over the years. The episode started with a scene out of a grade-B film about the FBI, which was followed by one from an equally hackneyed thriller about the KGB. On August 23 Gennadi Zakharov, a Soviet physicist on the staff of the United Nations, was arrested while attempting to purchase intelligence secrets from an agent who had been working for the FBI. While he was the victim of entrapment, Zakharov was clearly engaged in espionage. The KGB retaliated

¹ See Arnold Horelick, “U.S.-Soviet Relations: The Return of Arms Control,” *Foreign Affairs*, America and the World 1984; and Seweryn Bialer and Joan Afferica, “The Genesis of Gorbachev’s World,” *Foreign Affairs*, America and the World 1985.

by setting a superficially similar trap in Moscow for Nicholas Daniloff, the correspondent for *U.S. News & World Report*; one of his Soviet contacts arranged for a meeting on August 30, at which he gave Daniloff a sealed envelope. Secret policemen then suddenly appeared, arrested Daniloff and claimed that the envelope contained state secrets. Unlike Zakharov, Daniloff did not know what he was receiving and had no thought of buying the information. He was the victim of a primitive frame-up. The Soviets then tried to arrange a trade of Daniloff for their own man.

As some Soviets admitted privately, their government seriously underestimated the outrage that the Daniloff affair would provoke in the United States. The Reagan Administration's initial reaction was mild compared to that of the American media. This was not surprising, since one of their own was being held hostage. Congress, too, took a harder line than the White House, with some members insisting that all business with Moscow stop until Daniloff was set free.

In late September Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze came to the United States to take part in the opening session of the U.N. General Assembly and met with President Reagan and Secretary of State Shultz. Both sides had hoped the meetings would lay the groundwork for a summit. But Daniloff's imprisonment poisoned the atmosphere and complicated the agenda of the meetings. The potential effects of the whole affair seemed absurdly out of proportion to the cause.

Because of the depth of hostility and mistrust between the superpowers, Soviet-American relations often appear to exemplify Murphy's Law: whatever can go wrong, does go wrong—and at the worst possible time. Over the years much has gone wrong, often scuttling the best-laid plans of statesmen on both sides. The U-2 incident of May 1960 led Khrushchev to storm out of the Paris summit; the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 delayed agreement to hold the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT); the invasion of Afghanistan virtually guaranteed that the U.S. Senate would not ratify the SALT II treaty; and the downing of a Korean airliner in September 1983 impeded Shultz's effort to reengage the U.S.S.R. in quiet diplomacy on a variety of bilateral and regional issues.

For all the differences among them, these incidents had three important features in common, which they shared with the Daniloff affair. First, the Kremlin's concern with security

almost always takes precedence over propaganda and diplomacy. Moscow was determined to keep loyal Communists in power in Prague and Kabul no matter what the price in international opprobrium, just as it was determined to get its agent out of an American jail by any means necessary. Second, if what the Soviets do leads to a crisis in their relations with the United States they are quick to blame Washington. And third, the disruption in relations has always proved temporary. On September 29 Daniloff was released as part of a compromise whereby Zakharov, too, was to be returned home, but not in a direct exchange.

The Daniloff affair was all too characteristic of both the Soviet Union itself and the Soviet challenge to American policy. It illustrated anew the nature of the Soviet system: the institutionalization of paranoia and xenophobia that find expression in a deep animosity toward foreign journalists; the corruption of the law; the obsession with exposing enemies and, in the absence of real enemies, with finding and framing scapegoats instead. The Soviet system performs these tasks so well that it does other things badly. A state that defines internal security almost exclusively in terms of the power of the police finds it all too easy to give short shrift, not to mention inadequate resources, to other forms of security, such as economic well-being. The "competent organs" is the stock Soviet euphemism for the KGB. The unintended implication of the phrase is that all other organs are incompetent, an implication that is not altogether wrong.

Thus the Daniloff incident served to remind many Americans that the basis of their objections to the other superpower lies deeper than opposition to the U.S.S.R.'s expansionism and its threatening military programs. Soviet foreign policy is objectionable largely because the Soviet army and its baggage train of commissars, diplomats and propagandists have treated the people of Afghanistan, Poland and Czechoslovakia in much the same way that the KGB treated Nicholas Daniloff—and, for that matter, Andrei Sakharov, Yuri Orlov (the dissident who was released from a labor camp and allowed to emigrate as part of the resolution of the Daniloff affair), and so many others.

During the episode Reagan received considerable criticism from the right for allowing the Shultz-Shevardnadze meeting to proceed, for trying to keep plans for a summit on track, and generally for continuing "business as usual" with a regime that

was holding captive an innocent American. But business as usual with the Soviet Union was, by definition, limited business, driven by the superpowers' mutual interest in the avoidance of war and by very little else. It was the kind of business that had historically proceeded, albeit with delays and distractions, even in the face of episodes far bloodier than the Daniloff affair. If the United States refused to do business with the Soviet Union until Moscow began to treat its people decently, to say nothing of foreign journalists and the citizens of neighboring countries, no superpower business would ever get done. In truth, episodes like the Daniloff affair are not simply bumps in the road to summits, they are the pavement itself.

IV

The Daniloff affair seemed to redouble the two leaders' determination to meet face to face. Each was confident of his own ability to project an appealing but also commanding and persuasive personality. The two shared the belief that, as individuals, they could and should exert direct control over the relationship between their countries, rather than leave it to the giant bureaucracies over which they presided. The incident served as a reminder to both men of how relatively minor events can spin out of their control.

In a series of communications with the White House before Daniloff was allowed to leave the U.S.S.R., Gorbachev expressed irritation over the uproar in the United States that the journalist's detention had provoked, but also frustration and impatience that the U.S.-Soviet relationship should so often seem to defy deliberate, coherent management from the top. In a letter that Shevardnadze delivered to Reagan on September 19, Gorbachev wrote of the need for the two leaders to involve themselves personally, so as to impart an "impulse" to the stalled diplomatic process. He proposed the Reykjavik meeting as a way of accelerating preparations for a Washington summit.

Reagan, according to his aides, was immediately inclined to accept. He was attracted to the symbolism of meeting the other leader in a city halfway between their two capitals. He was encouraged by Donald Regan, who felt that the President had proved in Geneva the year before that he could deftly handle his Soviet counterpart. Some of Regan's associates said that the chief of staff also had his eye on the calendar: a mid-October meeting in Reykjavik would come a few weeks before the

congressional elections of November 4, in which the President's party would be fighting—in vain, as it turned out—to keep control of the Senate. The meeting would remind the electorate that the Republican flag was still firmly planted on diplomatic high ground.

Gorbachev's proposal was kept secret until September 30, when Daniloff was safely out of the Soviet Union. Then the President stunned the world by announcing that he would go to Iceland ten days later.

The Soviets had led American officials to expect that INF would be the focal point of the meeting. Since the Geneva summit the year before, the Soviets had been hinting, and occasionally flatly stating, that Gorbachev was prepared to sign a separate INF agreement unlinked from other arms control issues. Of the three sets of talks in Geneva—Strategic Arms Reductions Talks (START), space and defense, and INF—the third had always been the most political. The weapons under the rubric of INF were destructive enough in their own right, although they were all but incidental in terms of military firepower when compared to the numbers and capabilities in the strategic category. But INF was vitally important in the politics of NATO; the so-called Euromissiles symbolized America's commitment to use its own nuclear weapons to protect Western Europe. Conversely, the Soviet campaign to block the American deployments was part of a broader effort to encourage the “decoupling” of the United States from Europe.

When it came time to make a deal that would be the centerpiece of a summit, Shultz and Shevardnadze were drawn toward INF. That negotiation lent itself to the immediate diplomatic need to achieve concrete agreement far more easily than did START and the space and defense talks, where there were thorny and vitally important military questions at stake, such as whether the United States should spend billions on developing exotic antiballistic missile systems and whether the Soviet Union would have to spend comparable sums on countermeasures.

But when Reagan arrived for the first session in Reykjavik, he found that INF was neither the main item on the agenda nor was it detached from the other, more difficult, strategic issues. Gorbachev had brought with him a briefcase full of papers outlining nothing less than a comprehensive arms control agreement dealing with INF, START and SDI, as well as other issues such as nuclear weapons testing. In the words of one of

the President's aides, the Soviet leader was "going for the big casino."

From the beginning it was clear to Reagan that while Gorbachev had come prepared to make some unexpectedly forthcoming concessions, they might all be contingent on some sort of reciprocal American flexibility on SDI, although exactly what that flexibility would have to involve was not at first apparent. Emerging from his first session with Gorbachev to meet with his advisers, President Reagan said, "He's brought a whole lot of proposals, but I'm afraid he's going after SDI."

Gorbachev was proposing a version of what many arms control specialists inside and outside the Administration had long anticipated—and what some had advocated. For many months they had speculated about the possibility of a "grand compromise" in which the United States would accept significant constraints on SDI in exchange for equally significant reductions in Soviet offensive forces. The Soviet incentive for such a compromise was plain. An American defensive system, even if it were not particularly effective, would force the Kremlin into an expensive and potentially disruptive round of the arms race. Moreover, SDI represented a new kind of competition in exotic technology, where the advantage, at least initially, would be with the United States. Those who pondered the possibilities for such a compromise had never been certain about how far the Soviets would go in offering to reduce their most threatening offensive weapons in order to obtain restraints on American defenses.

In Reykjavik Gorbachev and his colleagues moved toward answering that question, although the response that emerged was not conclusive, precise or binding. The exact terms of the tentative accord reached during the weekend were the subject of considerable confusion. There were subsequent disagreements about exactly what had been decided, what conditions had been attached and what timetable had been stipulated. Some reductions were slated to take place over five years, others over the course of ten. Some of the provisions for the second phase seemed more like utopian reveries or pure propaganda than real arms control. In the week after the summit, senior Administration officials launched an intense public relations campaign to reverse the impression that Reykjavik had ended in failure. They engaged in a surreal debate with the Soviets, and sometimes with each other, over whether by 1996 the world was to be free of all nuclear weapons, as the Soviets

contended, or only of all ballistic missiles. Neither the President nor Donald Regan was at first quite clear on that point.

During a climactic Sunday session in Reykjavik, President Reagan proposed the elimination of ballistic missiles within ten years. This would have deprived the Soviet Union of its most formidable weapons while leaving the United States with an advantage in nuclear-armed bombers and cruise missiles. Gorbachev countered with a variation of a proposal he had been making since January for the elimination of all nuclear weapons, which would have left the Soviet Union with numerical advantages in conventional forces. Reagan replied, "That suits me fine."

The President subsequently maintained that he had not intended to endorse Gorbachev's call for total nuclear disarmament within ten years; rather, Reagan explained, he had merely meant to reiterate his long-standing hope that a nuclear-free world would be achieved some day.

In the week after Reykjavik, the Administration adopted a unified public stance; it was committed to the goal of eliminating all ballistic missiles within ten years. However, even that objective proved controversial. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were upset that they had not been given a chance to study the military implications of what would be a drastic change in the basis for deterrence. Military and congressional leaders argued that a ten-year timetable for the abolition of ballistic missiles would undercut support for the new generation of American ballistic missiles—the MX, the Midgetman and the Trident II or D-5 submarine-launched missile. By promoting the elimination of ballistic missiles within ten years, the Administration was unintentionally undermining its own much-vaunted "strategic modernization" program.

Experts on both sides of the Atlantic reminded the Administration that ballistic missiles were crucial to the credibility of the American nuclear umbrella over Western Europe; the doctrine of extended deterrence depended on the American capacity to retaliate quickly and effectively with a nuclear strike if the Soviet Union ever attacked NATO; ballistic missiles were the principal means of carrying out that retaliation.²

² Senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.), an authority on defense issues, contended that without nuclear weapons the West would find itself at a disadvantage in facing the superior non-nuclear forces of the Eastern bloc and said that he was "relieved that the superpowers did not reach an agreement along these lines." Former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger made the same point in an essay in *Time* magazine on Oct. 27, 1986, entitled "The Dangers of a

During their long and tiring sessions in Iceland, Reagan and Gorbachev had apparently been caught up in a make-or-break atmosphere. At the end they had engaged in a bout of feverish one-upmanship, with each trying to outdo the other in demonstrating his devotion to the dream of a nuclear-free world. Each had reverted to his grandiose disarmament appeals of earlier in the year. That part of the documentary record of the weekend appeared destined to recede into the footnotes of history. However, the terms that had been envisioned for the first five-year period were more specific, more modest, and more in line with agreements that the two sides had signed and observed in the past. They were therefore likely to have more staying power.

Detailed negotiations would be necessary to turn the terms to which the two leaders had agreed into a treaty. In the process of conducting such negotiations, the stated goal of a 50-percent across-the-board reduction in strategic weapons might have to be compromised. But an accord along the lines of the Reykjavik agreement would almost certainly compel the Soviets to retire a significant portion of their large, multiple-warhead intercontinental ballistic missiles, including some of their notorious "heavy" SS-18s, which worry the United States because their accuracy, speed and destructive capability make them the potential instruments of a surprise attack. These missiles have been the principal cause of American concerns about a "window of vulnerability," the driving obsession of the American strategic debate for nearly two decades. At Reykjavik, Gorbachev also agreed to consider provisions that would induce both sides to rely more on bombers, cruise missiles and small, single-warhead mobile ICBMs—weapons that are better suited to retaliation and therefore less likely to pose the threat of a first strike.

While the Americans wanted reductions of offensive forces, the chief Soviet goal was restraints on defensive systems—specifically the American SDI. Gorbachev had proposed different kinds of restrictions at different times.

When he assumed power in early 1985, Gorbachev wanted a complete ban on "space-strike arms," including all research. Then, in an interview published in *Time* magazine in September 1985, he said that "fundamental" research might be allowed. Over the following months, he proposed an extension of the

Nuclear-Free World," in which he also asserted that abolishing nuclear weapons forever was simply not possible because the knowledge of how to make them would always remain.

1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty for 15–20 years, then for “up to 15 years.”

Meanwhile, in a letter to Gorbachev in July 1986, Reagan had proposed continuing the ABM treaty for seven and a half years. Neither side would be able to withdraw during that period. The question of duration was obviously amenable to compromise: the two could split the difference and arrive at a figure of ten years. So they did at Reykjavik. But that did not resolve the difficult question of what the ABM treaty actually permitted in the way of research, development and testing of high-technology space-based defensive systems. It was over this issue that the Reykjavik meeting collapsed.

Early in the weekend Gorbachev indicated that he was interested in “strengthening” the treaty. However, not until the final unscheduled session on Sunday afternoon did he make clear that by this he meant that research during the ten-year period would have to be confined to the “laboratory.” Reagan balked at that formulation. As he told Gorbachev and said repeatedly afterward, he considered this definition of permissible research an attempt to “kill” SDI. When Gorbachev would not budge, the President gathered up his papers and the meeting ended on a note of failure and recrimination.

It was perhaps the most bizarre moment in what was already a peculiar event; the President had not been prepared to deal conclusively or in detail with the vital and immensely complicated question of the future relationship between SDI and the ABM treaty; he had little opportunity to take counsel from his own advisers, not to mention from technical experts and European and congressional leaders, on a subject that had implications spanning both oceans and stretching far into the future. Yet he not only made a critical decision on the spot, he publicized it in a way that froze the two leaders into incompatible positions. Why did he not simply say to Gorbachev, in effect, “This is very interesting, a lot is on the table; we’ll have to study it carefully, and we’ll get back to you”?

That question was not answered in the immediate post-Reykjavik flurry of official explanation and justification. One conjecture was that Reagan felt under some pressure from the right. If he had appeared even to entertain Gorbachev’s proposal, he would have been vulnerable to charges of doing at Reykjavik what he had avoided doing at Geneva the year before: compromising on SDI. Conservative congressmen and columnists had warned him before the meeting not to make

any such compromise; they congratulated him afterward for not doing so. Even more important to the President was his deep commitment to the dream of a space shield that would protect the American people from nuclear attack. He sensed that the Soviet leader was trying to get him to give up that dream; he responded by walking away.

From the Soviet point of view, Reagan's position meant that the United States was not willing to pay any appreciable price in defensive restraints to get offensive reductions—at least not yet. Reagan's agreement to delay SDI deployment for ten years and adhere to the ABM treaty depended on the complete elimination of all ballistic missiles within that same ten-year period, something that virtually nobody outside the room in Hofdi House, where the two leaders met, considered even remotely feasible. In any event, the delay hardly represented a concession because SDI would not be ready for full deployment for at least ten years anyway. Moreover, Reagan's understanding of the ABM treaty differed sharply not only from that of the Soviets but from the interpretation of a number of key members of Congress and even of the Americans who negotiated the treaty in the early 1970s.³

After the meeting, Administration spokesmen maintained that the treaty gave the United States the right not only to conduct research but also to develop and test an SDI system and its components. So when the ten-year moratorium ended, the United States might have some sort of defensive system ready to put in place. Faced with that prospect, the Soviets would have no incentive to reduce their offensive forces. Quite the contrary, they would have every reason to *increase* their arsenal of offensive weapons; for in order to deter the United States, the Soviets believe, they must be able to penetrate and overwhelm whatever defenses the United States eventually deploys. Thus Reagan's position on the defensive half of the grand compromise at Reykjavik came down to a refusal to accept any of the restraints on SDI that the Soviets sought.

In his attempt to confine the program to "laboratory" re-

³ The ABM treaty had long been understood to permit research but not development or testing of space-based defensive systems utilizing "exotic" technologies. In 1985 some members of the Reagan Administration challenged this traditional, "restrictive" interpretation of the treaty. They advanced a "permissive" interpretation, according to which everything short of actual deployment of SDI could proceed. On this subject see Abram Chayes and Antonia Handler Chayes, "Testing and Development of 'Exotic' Systems under the ABM Treaty: The Great Reinterpretation Caper"; and Abraham D. Sofaer, "The ABM Treaty and the Strategic Defense Initiative," both in *Harvard Law Review*, June 1986.

search, Gorbachev seemed to be insisting on a new, more restrictive interpretation of the ABM treaty, just as Reagan was advancing a more permissive one. Each side had room to maneuver. Reagan's principal concern seemed to be protecting SDI from Soviet efforts to "kill" it. Even many who were skeptical of his vision of the program as a way to defend American cities from nuclear attack believed that the United States needed to conduct a research program as a hedge against the possibility that the Soviets, who also had a strategic defense research effort under way, would make a breakthrough of their own in that area.

The research program that even many skeptics supported, however, might well go forward under the traditional interpretation of the treaty. According to Gerard Smith, its chief American negotiator, who spoke in an interview published in *Time* shortly after the summit:

There could be testing, outside the laboratory, of some new technologies and devices, as long as they were not components of a deployable system. Defining components may be a key element in the ongoing negotiation, but in the gray area between the Soviets' current laboratory definition of permissible research and the Administration's claim that anything goes, there should be a way of accommodating Gorbachev's fear and Reagan's dream.

If Smith is right, the compromise that the two leaders had failed to reach at Reykjavik may yet be struck. Both leaders promised to persist in seeking an agreement. At his press conference immediately after the meeting, Gorbachev said, "The road we have traveled toward these major agreements—major accords on the reduction of nuclear arms—gives us substantial experience, gives us substantial gains here in Reykjavik." In a televised address from Moscow two days later he said, "The American leadership will obviously need some time. We are realists and we clearly understand that the questions, which had remained unresolved for many years and even decades can hardly be resolved at a single sitting." A week after that speech he delivered another one in which he complained that the American side was giving a distorted version of the events in Iceland. But he reaffirmed that "we are not removing these proposals; they still stand. Everything that has been said by way of their substantiation and development remains as before." "The Reykjavik meeting," he added,

“greatly facilitated, probably for the first time in many decades, our search for disarmament.”

Reagan, too, looked to further negotiation. “I’m still optimistic that a way will be found,” he said in a televised speech of his own after Reykjavik. “The door is open and the opportunity to begin eliminating the nuclear threat is within reach. . . . Our ideas are out there on the table. They won’t go away. We’re ready to pick up where we left off. Our negotiators are heading back to Geneva, and we’re prepared to go forward whenever and wherever the Soviets are ready.” Within three weeks Shultz and Shevardnadze met again, this time in Vienna, to try to pick up the pieces. That meeting failed to break the impasse over SDI and, in Shevardnadze’s words, “left a bitter taste.” American officials in Vienna had the impression that the Soviets might be stalling for time to reassess the American political situation in the wake of the Democratic Party’s regaining control of the Senate just two days before the meeting. Nonetheless, both Shultz and Shevardnadze called for patience and reiterated their determination to press forward on future negotiations.

Almost immediately after they ended in disappointment, therefore, the Reykjavik and Vienna meetings were already beginning to appear as another stage, a difficult and discouraging stage perhaps but far from the last one, in the ongoing effort to regulate the military competition between the superpowers.

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With the Reykjavik meeting, Reagan and Gorbachev were two-thirds of the way to matching the trio of summits that Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev had held during the heyday of *détente*. Relations between the United States and the Soviet Union were not, however, returning to the conditions of the early 1970s. The political arrangements of that period have sunk into the past, weighted down with controversies and recriminations. The Reagan-Gorbachev relationship, however it turns out, will be different. Moreover, however the bargaining on arms control ends, the interaction of these two leaders, including the roller-coaster course of relations in 1986, demonstrates some enduring principles about the Soviet-American relationship itself. Those principles essentially concern limits—on what the superpowers can do both to each other and with each other.

One is the limit to how far Soviet-American relations can deteriorate. Particularly during his first term, Reagan had been the most anti-Soviet American president in 30 years, perhaps ever. He had aimed not at solidifying the status quo in East-West relations but at overturning it. His rhetoric toward Moscow had been harsh. The Soviet leaders had responded with even harsher language of their own. Each side had tried briefly to impose a diplomatic boycott on the other. Yet at no time, even when relations were at their worst—even after the Korean airliner episode and the Soviet walkout from the Geneva talks in 1983—had there been a serious danger of war. Moreover, none of the major agreements that had been reached in more cordial times came unstuck. The European settlement that the *détente* of the early 1970s had produced never even came under critical scrutiny. While the SALT agreements were the objects of a good deal of such scrutiny, they remained in force, at least until late 1986. And in 1985 the two leaders found themselves agreeing to meet regularly. The business they had with each other was too compelling to ignore.

The first half of the 1980s, and the policies that both sides pursued in that period, also showed that neither was likely to gain a decisive advantage over the other. By agreeing in principle to meet on a regular basis and to seek diplomatic accommodation on some of the issues that divided them, the two leaders were implicitly acknowledging the limits of their ability to get their way unilaterally. For both men, this was a lesson that took some time to learn.

In his June 1982 address to the British Parliament, Reagan had called the Soviet Union “inherently unstable” and said that it was facing a “great revolutionary crisis.” He had implied that the United States should exploit that instability and aggravate that crisis. By the time he first met with Gorbachev in November 1985, he had ceased to make such claims. He had even signed a presidential directive that concluded that the United States had at best only a very modest ability to influence internal Soviet policy and should focus instead on influencing its external policy.

One way to influence the foreign policy of the Soviet Union was to discourage Soviet expansionism by supporting anti-Soviet insurgencies in the Third World. The Reagan Doctrine, which committed the United States to such support, was still very much in force at the time of Reykjavik. But that hallmark policy of the Administration was encountering difficulties at

home. On the issue of Nicaragua, the White House was under public and congressional pressure to couple the military and humanitarian aid for the anti-Sandinista rebels with genuine support for the diplomatic effort to achieve a negotiated settlement, known as the Contadora process.

Meanwhile, there were signs that the Soviets, too, had begun to understand the limits of unilateralism in the nuclear competition. Nikolai Ogarkov, the former chief of the Soviet General Staff, spoke of the fruitlessness of the arms race and said that nuclear superiority was a mirage. Soviet specialists on strategic affairs not only called for a "new way of thinking" about the problems of stability—some of them sometimes also tentatively attempted to think and write in new ways.

Some of the most interesting statements that Gorbachev made during his first 18 months in power concerned what he and other Soviet spokesmen referred to as "common security." At the end of the Geneva summit he expressed his "profound conviction that less security for the United States of America compared to the Soviet Union would not be in our interests, since it could lead to mistrust and produce instability." He elaborated on this theme in his address to the 27th Party Congress three months later:

The character of present-day weapons leaves a country no hope of safeguarding itself solely with military and technical means. The task of ensuring security is increasingly seen as a political problem, and can be resolved only by political means. . . . Security can only be mutual. . . . It is vital that all should feel equally secure, for the fears and anxieties of the nuclear age generate unpredictability in politics and concrete actions.

Gorbachev's reassuring words may simply have been part of another Soviet campaign to lull and divide the West. But they may also have reflected the beginning of a welcome, if belated, Soviet recognition that the Leninist principle that politics is always a matter of *kto-kogo*—who will prevail over whom—was simply not operative, or for that matter even acceptable, in the strategic nuclear relationship. Gorbachev's words may have bespoken a Soviet conclusion similar to the one strategists in the West had long since reached; however fiercely they may compete elsewhere, in conducting the nuclear arms race the superpowers best serve their own interests by maintaining an equilibrium and jointly fostering the goal of strategic stability. Even though many details remained to be clarified and nego-

tiated, the terms to which the Soviets agreed in Reykjavik suggested that they might be prepared eventually to accommodate some American concerns and cooperate to achieve a more stable nuclear balance.

SDI had undoubtedly played an important part in inducing the Soviet leadership to rethink what common security meant in the strategic nuclear competition. It had forced them to face up to some of the more dangerous consequences of their excessive accumulation of land-based ballistic missile warheads. If they pressed for advantages in the familiar area of offensive weapons, they might find themselves plunging into the unfamiliar and treacherous terrain of high-technology strategic defense. To make matters worse, the Americans would have arrived there first, and would feel much more at home.

Reagan, too, came up against obstacles to altering the nuclear relationship between the superpowers. As he made clearer than ever at Reykjavik, SDI was his bid to change the rules, indeed to change the game itself. But by then, for all his own devotion to SDI and for all the disagreements about how the ABM treaty should be interpreted, he found himself having to offer repeated assurances that the program would proceed under the terms of the treaty. SDI therefore seemed likely to flourish only to the extent that it was compatible with deterrence and arms control. Reykjavik was bound to increase the pressure on him to use it as a "bargaining chip" to get reductions in offensive weapons. That rationale was a far cry from the President's original vision, proclaimed in March 1983, of an impregnable astrodome over the United States that would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete."

Indeed, while Reagan's conduct at Reykjavik demonstrated his continuing belief in that vision, few officials outside the Oval Office of the White House shared his hope. Virtually his entire government either had abandoned the idea of a comprehensive defense that would make traditional deterrence unnecessary or had never subscribed to the idea in the first place.⁴

If the Reagan-Gorbachev relationship demonstrated the limits to both what the superpowers could do to thwart each other and how far their relations could deteriorate, it also illustrated the upper limits on improvement in their relations. The poten-

⁴ See Michael Mandelbaum and Strobe Talbott, *Reagan and Gorbachev*, New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1987, chapter 4.

tial accord that was glimpsed in Reykjavik would certainly go beyond the limitations on offensive weapons established by the SALT II treaty of 1979. But the grand compromise, if it ever came about, would scarcely represent a whole new approach to strategic arms control. Quite the contrary, it would reaffirm not only SALT II but SALT I by linking limits on strategic defense with restrictions on strategic offense.

Thus, even as they broke with some of the procedures that their predecessors had followed, Reagan and Gorbachev were moving in the direction of restoring a measure of continuity with the past. Moreover, just as Reagan had learned to live and work with Gorbachev, he was learning to live with the old, familiar problems of asymmetries in force structures, theoretical vulnerabilities and the moral as well as practical dilemmas of deterrence.

If the worst that was likely to happen between the superpowers was not all that bad, the best was not all that good. The fundamental conditions of Soviet-American relations were likely to persist. This, in turn, meant that the ritual of Soviet-American summitry was likely to have a long run, and for all the reasons that had led Reagan and Gorbachev to engage in that ritual themselves, both in the fairly traditional summit at Geneva in November 1985 and in the strange interlude at Reykjavik a year later.