

**Mikhail Gorbachev's Address to Participants
in the International Conference
The Legacy of the Reykjavik Summit**

First of all, I want to thank the government of Iceland for invitation to participate in the conference marking the 30th anniversary of the Reykjavik summit of the leaders of the USSR and the United States.

I extend greetings to veterans of international politics and diplomacy, eminent scientists and respected experts who have gathered in the capital of Iceland.

You have gathered at a crucial moment. In moments like this, we keenly feel the continuity of time, as the past engages in dialogue with the present and the future. Therefore, this date is not only an occasion to remember this historic event but also an opportunity for serious reflection on what to do in our troubled times.

How and why did the idea of meeting in Reykjavik come about? In the summer of 1986, I received a letter from President Reagan, which concerned the US-Soviet negotiations on nuclear disarmament, and the draft reply prepared by our foreign ministry. I found both texts totally unsatisfactory.

I once again became convinced that the negotiations between our delegations in Geneva were turning into a routine, bogging down in technical details, becoming a screen behind which nothing significant was happening while the nuclear arms race continued.

Yet, just a few months before, at our first summit in Geneva, the U.S. President and I had made a statement: Nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought; our countries will not seek military superiority.

But that statement was not followed by decisive steps to stop the nuclear arms race.

The overall situation in our relations was also causing grave concern. Many thought that relations were sliding back into a Cold War. US Navy ships were entering our territorial waters; the United States had tested a new, highly powerful nuclear weapon. The tensions were aggravated by hostile rhetoric and "spy scandals."

Meanwhile, the Chernobyl nuclear accident had been a vivid reminder to all of us of the nuclear danger that we faced. I have often said that it divided my life into two parts: before and after Chernobyl. The Soviet leadership unanimously agreed on the need to stop and reverse the nuclear arms race, to get the stalled nuclear disarmament talks off the ground.

The negotiations needed a strong impetus from the very top, and it could only be the result of a joint effort. A meeting between the leaders of the two countries was needed.

I proposed to President Reagan that we meet somewhere midway between Moscow and Washington: in London or Reykjavik. We settled on Reykjavik and, almost immediately, started preparations so as to come to the meeting with proposals that could open the way to a breakthrough. This was the task we set to our experts. The Politburo unanimously endorsed this approach.

As a result of discussions, we developed a concept which was set out in the Directives I took with me to Reykjavik.

We proposed a clear and coherent framework for an agreement: cutting in half all the components of the strategic triad, including a 50-percent reduction in heavy land-based missiles, which the United States viewed from the start as “the most destabilizing.” We were also ready to accept a zero option for intermediate and shorter-range missiles.

But of course, while putting an end to the offensive nuclear arms race, we insisted that a space weapons race, a missile defense race must not be allowed.

I will not give here a detailed account of our talks with the President; their records have been published.

I appreciated the fact that President Reagan, during the course of our discussions, spoke out resolutely, and I believe sincerely, in favor of ridding the world of weapons of mass destruction, of all types of nuclear weapons. In this, we found common ground.

Experts led by Akhromeyev and Nitze worked overnight and found many points of convergence based on our constructive position.

Nevertheless, we were not able to conclude an agreement. President Reagan wanted, not just to continue the SDI program, but to obtain our consent to the deployment of a global missile defense system.

I could not agree to that.

As we were saying good-bye, the President and I were, frankly, not in the best of spirits. The photos published the following day on the front pages of the world's newspapers, are evidence of that. Secretary of State George Shultz, prior to departure from the airport, hastened to call our summit a failure.

I was aware of that assessment when I entered the hall in which the press conference was to take place. Looking into the eyes of hundreds of journalists, I said to myself that we had no right to disappoint people, deprive them of hope for ending the arms race.

The key message in my statement for the press was: "In spite of all the drama, Reykjavik is not a failure – it is a breakthrough. For the first time, we looked over the horizon." This is the view I still hold today.

It was the breakthrough at Reykjavik that set off the process of real reduction of nuclear weapons. The unprecedented agreements we reached with Presidents Reagan and Bush on strategic and medium-range nuclear arms and on tactical weapons have made it possible to reduce the stockpiles and eliminate thousands of nuclear warheads – more than 80 percent of Cold War arsenals, as the Russia and the United States reported to the Non-proliferation Treaty Review Conference.

In 2010, the Presidents of Russia and the United States concluded the New Start Treaty.

Nevertheless, we have to recognize that the process of nuclear disarmament has slowed down.

I am concerned and alarmed by the current situation. Right before our eyes, the window to a nuclear weapon-free world opened in Reykjavik is being shut and sealed.

New, more powerful types of nuclear weapons are being created. Their qualitative characteristics are being ramped up. Missile defense systems are being deployed. Prompt non-nuclear strike systems are being developed, comparable in their deadly impact to the weapons of mass destruction. The military doctrines of nuclear powers have changed for the worse, expanding the limits of "acceptable" use of nuclear weapons. It is mostly due to this that the risk of nuclear proliferation has increased.

But the worst thing that has happened in recent years is the collapse of trust in relations between major powers which according to the United Nations Charter bear the primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security and which still possess vast stockpiles of nuclear weapons and must reduce them until their complete elimination. This is still their binding commitment under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The problems and conflicts of the past two decades could have been settled by peaceful, political and diplomatic means. Instead, attempts are being made to resolve them by using force. This was the case in the former Yugoslavia, in Iraq, in Libya, in Syria. I want to emphasize that this has not resulted in the resolution of these issues. It resulted in the erosion of international law, in undermining trust, in militarization of politics and thinking, and the cult of force.

In these circumstances, it is becoming increasingly difficult to speak of moving towards a nuclear-free world. We must be honest and recognize it. Unless international affairs are put back on a normal track and international relations are demilitarized, the goal that we jointly set in Reykjavik will become more distant rather than closer.

I am deeply convinced that a nuclear weapon-free world is not a utopia, but an imperative necessity. We need to constantly remind world leaders of this goal and of their commitment.

As long as nuclear weapons exist, there is a danger that someday they will be used: as a result either of accident or technical failure, or of evil intent of man – an insane person or terrorist. We must therefore reaffirm the goal of prohibiting and eliminating nuclear weapons.

Let me reiterate: this can only be achieved if international politics and international relations are demilitarized. Politicians who think that problems or disputes can be resolved through the use of military force (even as a “last resort”) must be rejected by society; they must leave the stage.

I am urging veteran leaders and diplomats, scientists, experts, and the global civil society to state in the strongest and unequivocal terms: Nuclear weapons must be prohibited. Even more: War must be prohibited.

Of all the principles of international law, the principles of non-use of force in international relations and peaceful settlement of disputes must be considered paramount.

To make it a reality, the existing mechanisms, such as the United Nations, the International Court of Justice, the Conventions, should be strengthened, and new ones created if necessary.

I believe that the question of prohibiting nuclear weapons should be submitted for consideration of the International Court of Justice.

None of the global problems faced by humanity can be solved by military means. Our common challenges – further reduction of nuclear weapons, non-proliferation, fighting terrorism, prevention of environmental catastrophe, overcoming poverty and backwardness – again need to be put on top of the agenda.

We need to resume dialogue. Essentially abandoning it in the last two years was the gravest mistake. It is high time to resume it across the entire agenda, without limiting it to the discussion of regional issues on which there are disagreements.

We need to understand once and for all: A safe and stable world cannot be built at the will or as a project of one country or group of countries. Either we build together a world for all, or mankind will face the prospect of new trials and tragedies.

I would not want to sound pessimistic. The current generation of world leaders can be seriously criticized; nevertheless, they still have a chance to make history by putting international politics back on a positive track, thus opening the way to a world without nuclear weapons. It would be a great mistake not to take this opportunity.

This is what we – political veterans, civil society, academics, all who are not indifferent – should say to our leaders, urging them to act.

I hope you have a fruitful discussion. May it contribute to positive changes which are so much needed today and which, I am sure, are possible.