



**United Nations Office
for Disarmament Affairs**

**The Imagine Forum: From Cold War Lessons to Modern Challenges
Rebuilding Trust: Pathways to Disarmament in an Age of Nuclear Risk**

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As delivered keynote address



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Her Excellency Halla Tómasdóttir, President of Iceland,

Her Excellency Nataša Pirc Musar, President of Slovenia,

Honoured guests,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to be here today and to speak on this timely topic. My sincere thanks to the Höfði Reykjavik Peace Centre for convening today's event and for the kind invitation.

I'd like to start my address with a quote:

"We have proven that adversaries even with the most basic philosophical differences can talk candidly and respectfully with one another and with perseverance find common ground." End quote.

So said U.S. President Ronald Reagan in 1987 during his official farewell remarks to Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev.

It is a quote that aptly captures the prevailing spirit of the time, and more importantly the kind of the political leadership and courage demonstrated at a turning point in history. The spirit that, "Reykjavik Spirit" four decades ago, underpinned the Reykjavik Summit. This set the stage for the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, which ultimately helped end the decades long Cold War.

Let me quote another example of a political courage demonstrated by President Kennedy in June 1963 in his famous "Strategy of Peace" speech at American

University, only 8 months after the Cuban Missile Crisis – probably the hottest moments of the Cold War.

Referring to the US-Soviet relations, he said: “We are both devoting massive sums of money to weapons that could better be devoted to combat ignorance, poverty, and disease. We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle with suspicion on one side breeding suspicion on the other, and new weapons begetting counter-weapons”.

His speech offered a unilateral US restraint on nuclear tests in the atmosphere, expressing hope that the United States and the Soviet Union would be able to achieve a binding treaty, and an eventual move towards disarmament. Soviet leader Khrushchev responded in similar spirit. Within 10 days, US and Soviet Union agreed to establish a crisis hotline. And on 5 August 1963, foreign ministers of the US, Soviet Union and UK signed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in Moscow. This then helped open the door to the 1968 Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), and to the continuous efforts of US and Soviet (later Russian) arms control negotiations.

These visionary leaders came together, against all odds, in the common interest of humanity, and of their own national interests. At a time of acute nuclear risk, they put aside decades of baggage to focus on a single, overriding goal.

It is the kind of leadership that is invaluable at any point in history, but it is absolutely the kind of leadership we need today.

At Reykjavik, Reagan and Gorbachev had two shared revelations. First, an indefinite nuclear arms race was unsustainable. Second, no one can hide from the effects of nuclear weapons.

Today, both of these lessons are on the cusp of being forgotten. But many will remember their key message: A nuclear war cannot be won and must not be fought.

For those of us who work in nuclear disarmament, this is now a mantra. But like all scripture, it becomes hollow if not backed by action. It is easy to say, but harder to actualize.

Reagan and Gorbachev and their successors backed their words with action.

Through successive arms control treaties, transparency and confidence-building measures, threat reduction and support for multilateral disarmament, they created a safer and more secure world for all.

Sadly, today's context, when it comes to nuclear weapons, is neither safe nor secure.

The world order itself is going through a major paradigm shift, which one world leader described as a “rupture rather than transition”. It is a fluid and complex environment in which the risk of a nuclear weapon being used is reaching levels not seen since before the Reykjavik Summit.

We have now moved from a bipolar nuclear order to a more multipolar one. The return of so-called ‘great power’ competition, and the concurrent erosion of rules-based international order is resulting in unprecedented military spending in many parts of the world. Era-defining technologies, conventional capabilities with strategic effect and new domains of conflict in outer space and cyber space

are straining traditional understandings of strategic stability, arms control and non-proliferation.

The guardrails against nuclear use so painstakingly established during the Cold War are being cast aside. Strategic arsenals are uncapped for the first time in half a century. Nuclear proliferation drivers are accelerating, especially in regions of historic conflict. Threats to use nuclear weapons – both overt and veiled – are being issued frequently.

Genuine dialogue is absent, and trust has significantly eroded.

A world free of nuclear weapons remains a common aspiration, but we have strayed from the path to achieve it.

A first step back down that path, therefore, is not to forget the lessons of the Cold War.

Let me list some.

Arms races create instability. There is no such thing as ‘friendly proliferation’. More nuclear weapons make all of us less safe. Nuclear testing undermines security and leaves a legacy of destroyed lives and livelihoods.

Instead, we must remember the Reykjavik Spirit and the “Strategy of Peace” – that arms control, non-proliferation and steps in disarmament provide stability and security.

But we must also remember that this is a world different from that of the Cold War. Not only in terms of the complexity I mentioned, but in terms of how it would be affected by nuclear weapons.

Today's world is not the bifurcated separation of the Cold War. It is a globalized and inter-connected society in which vital but fragile chains secure our shared prosperity. It is one in which the cascading effects of even a limited nuclear war would produce unprecedented food insecurity, economic collapse and environmental catastrophe.

While the situation is dire, there is also some cause for optimism. If we can harness that prevailing spirit that imbued Reagan and Gorbachev with such purpose those four decades ago, I believe we can make progress.

Because in today's world, I see multiple potential pathways already back to nuclear disarmament and some very practical first steps that can be taken.

Given the levels of nuclear risk, the very first and foremost step is to take the necessary measures to ensure that nuclear weapons are never used again – intentionally, accidentally or through miscalculation.

We need the transparency and confidence-building measures that will prevent us from tipping over into disaster.

These can include technical measures such as launch notifications and hotlines. They can be doctrinal, such as credible no first-use postures or reductions in alert status. They can also be political, such as agreements on non-interference in command and control.

Above all, we need dialogue to rebuild trust. And that dialogue should be not just among diplomats. It needs to be between practitioners, scientists, generals and – as was the case with Reagan and Gorbachev and Kennedy and Krushchev – leaders.

Only by developing those vital relationships and building mutual understandings can we hope to reduce risk.

There are five other practical and concrete pathways back to nuclear disarmament that we can, and we should take.

Firstly, we should maintain and entrench the primacy of the NPT as the fulcrum of the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation regime, including fulfilment of commitments and obligations made at various NPT Review Conferences.

Secondly, we should redouble efforts to ensure that the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) can reach its full effectiveness by entering into force.

A third pathway back to disarmament relies on maintaining the decades-long downward trajectory in the global number of nuclear weapons.

I believe there is runway for another bilateral strategic arms control agreement between the United States and the Russian Federation, given the disparity between their nuclear arsenals and the other nuclear-weapon States.

However, it is clear that a more multipolar nuclear order requires a more multipolar approach to nuclear arms control.

In addition to broadening participation, nuclear arms control needs to broaden its scope. It should include all categories of nuclear weapons. It should address the growing interlinkages with new domains – especially outer space. And it should seek to develop a common understanding about the risks posed by the nexus between artificial intelligence and nuclear weapons.

A fourth pathway – and one that is essential to rebuilding trust – is to create the necessary measures to verify arms control and non-proliferation. To paraphrase another Reaganism, we should trust but verify.

Finally, a fifth pathway to nuclear disarmament is through the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. I suspect that not even the most ardent supporter of this Treaty believes it will accomplish its goals imminently. But it remains a vital outlet for non-nuclear weapon States to advocate their legitimate security concerns. Joining the TPNW is a sovereign decision for any State, but dialogue between supporters and critics could create the basis for consensus practical steps in disarmament.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A major lesson of the Cold War is that dialogue is an essential ingredient for rebuilding trust. Though neither nuclear nor global in focus, the Helsinki Final Act is an inspiring reminder of the role of TCBMs (transparency and confidence building measures) in leading states away from the precipice of armaments towards the appeals to our common humanity. In today's multipolar world, rebuilding trust between 'big powers' by themselves is neither possible nor sufficient. Middle powers and small states with vision are the essential 'connecting rods' whose shifting roles and alliances increasingly give meaning and viability to strategic stability.

Beyond this multipolarity however, we also live in a multilayered world, with a multiplicity of actors both below and above the state. Civil society and youth organizations are important contributors to trust and confidence building, as well as regional organizations in their respective contexts. The role and responsibilities of private sector actors are enormous today, especially in the designing, development, deployment and use of new and era defining technologies, such as artificial intelligence. In the final analysis therefore, rebuilding trust contributes to, and is predicated on rebuilding humanity. Another lesson of the Cold War is that with bold and visionary leadership, the burden of rebuilding trust can be made much lighter, and the search for common ground can become less cumbersome, if each one of us take these responsibilities upon ourselves.

What the people of the world expect, and deserve, is that nuclear commitments should be honoured and humanity's future survival should prevail.

The same is true for the acute need for dialogue and governance frameworks on artificial intelligence; otherwise, we will experience yet another existential threat to humanity.

Reykjavik Spirit epitomised the synergy between ambition, pragmatism and political will. That spirit needs to be revived if we are to rebuild trust and the pathway to nuclear disarmament and, in turn, a safer and more secure world for all. What was started here forty years ago should be taken to its logical conclusion.

I thank you very much for your attention.