

LOOKING BACK: The Nuclear Arms Control Legacy of Ronald Reagan

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Ronald Reagan, the 40th president of the United States, died on June 5, 2004, at his home in California. His presidency spanned one of the most tumultuous periods in U.S.-Soviet relations and the history of the nuclear arms race. This article summarizes the Reagan record on nuclear weapons and arms control with the Soviet Union. Some parts of the essay are drawn from “Arms Control and National Security: An Introduction,” published by the Arms Control Association in 1989.

Ronald Reagan came to the presidency as a long-time critic of arms control and detente with the Soviet Union, the preeminent U.S. strategic adversary during his eight years in office. Throughout the 1970s, Reagan had argued that the United States was falling behind the Soviets in the nuclear competition and that U.S. long-range ballistic missiles were becoming increasingly vulnerable to Soviet attack. During his 1980 election campaign against President Jimmy Carter, Reagan contended that the unratified Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty II (SALT II) was “fatally flawed.” As president, Reagan accelerated strategic nuclear modernization plans and launched modern efforts to build a national missile defense system through his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), raising tensions with the Soviet Union and prompting widespread public concern about the possibility of war between world’s two major nuclear superpowers.

Yet, Reagan’s early opposition to U.S.-Soviet arms control negotiations gradually gave way to a more conciliatory approach that was consistent with his growing concern about the threat of mutual assured destruction. By the time he had left office, Reagan had overcome the reluctance of many of his closest advisers to engage with the Soviets and had forged an enduring diplomatic partnership with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev. That partnership, combined with strong U.S. and European public pressure for nuclear restraint, led to some of the most sweeping arms control proposals in history and helped usher in a new age in U.S.-Russian relations.

Reagan and Gorbachev eventually concluded the landmark Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) agreement and established the foundation for the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which was concluded in 1991. Nevertheless, the full promise of Reagan’s and Gorbachev’s proposals for radical nuclear weapon reductions remain unfulfilled. U.S. and Russian nuclear forces, although smaller, still confront each other, and many of the strategic weapons systems promoted by Reagan remain in place or have been revived.

INF and the Reagan Buildup

Soon after taking office, and under pressure from NATO allies, the administration resumed talks to limit intermediate-range nuclear forces based in Europe, a process that had begun under Carter. At the outset of these negotiations, the United States proposed the elimination of all U.S. and Soviet intermediate-range (1,000-5,500 kilometers) nuclear weapons on a global basis, the so-called zero-option, which the Soviets rejected. The two sides would gradually move closer to an INF agreement over the next six years.

Reagan’s first nuclear initiative, however, went in the opposite direction. In October 1981, he unveiled his plan for a major, strategic modernization program to add thousands of additional warheads and a variety of new delivery systems to the U.S. arsenal, while improving U.S. command and control capabilities. The strategic package, which in large part built on previous programs, called for a big increase in bomber forces, including 100 B-1Bs and the development of stealth bombers, a new land-based 10-warhead strategic missile (the MX), and new intermediate-range missile deployments in Europe. In addition, he proposed deploying more than 3,000 air-launched cruise missiles on bombers. Reagan called for accelerated development and deployment of the Trident II D-5 submarine-launched ballistic missile and sea-launched cruise missiles.

The MX missile was among the most technically and politically controversial programs of the first years of the administration. The MX was more precise and more powerful but was considered by many to be a destabilizing first-strike weapon. Due to strong bipartisan opposition, the original plan to shuttle MX missiles on an extensive rail network in the western United States was scrapped. In November 1982, after considering more than 30 basing plans, the Reagan administration proposed deployment of 100 MX missiles in fixed silos.

The nuclear buildup also led to increased activity at more than a dozen major aging and unsafe nuclear-weapon production plants and called for continued nuclear testing. Under Reagan's watch, spending on nuclear weapons research, development, testing, and production totaled \$39.5 billion (in constant 1996 dollars), a 39 percent increase over the previous eight-year period.^[1] The cost of environmental remediation at these sites now exceeds \$6 billion annually.

The aims of the U.S. strategic buildup were twofold: to reduce U.S. vulnerability by expanding the number and diversity of nuclear weapons and to increase Soviet vulnerability so that the United States could acquire the capability to fight and win an extended nuclear war. The prospect of an arms race seemed less frightening to Reagan, who said in 1978 that "the Soviet Union cannot possibly match us in an arms race," than to his predecessors. Continued Soviet missile programs and a skyrocketing U.S. budget deficit, however, called into question the validity of this judgment.

The proposed buildup was based on the controversial notion that U.S. nuclear superiority would provide greater military and political leverage vis-à-vis the Soviets. The Pentagon's 1984-88 Defense Guidance document, which was leaked to reporters in 1982, stated that, in the event of nuclear war, "[t]he United States must prevail and be able to force the Soviet Union to seek earliest termination of hostilities on terms favorable to the United States." To many observers, this statement appeared to reflect a belief that nuclear war could be won, a view that Reagan and his top aides had attributed to Soviet leaders. In public statements, Reagan denied he held this view and said, "Everybody would be a loser if there's a nuclear war."

Nevertheless, public concern about the possibility of nuclear war grew as the superpower relationship degenerated into exchanges of hostile rhetoric. An NBC/Associated Press public opinion survey in December 1981 found that 76 percent of Americans believed that nuclear war was "likely" within a few years, an increase from 57 percent just six months earlier. Many arms control advocates argued that Reagan was using dubious claims of Soviet superiority and resisting calls to re-engage the Soviets on strategic nuclear arms control talks in order to achieve U.S. nuclear strategic superiority. They said the effort would only backfire, spurring the arms race to new heights. Moreover, critics of the Reagan buildup feared that an effort to make Soviet forces vulnerable could increase Soviet incentives to launch a first strike in a crisis.

By early 1982, a broad-based citizens' campaign had coalesced behind the idea of a verifiable, bilateral freeze on nuclear weapons development, deployment, and testing. That year, more than 200 city councils and nine state legislatures passed resolutions endorsing the freeze and, in November, voters in nine out of 10 states passed freeze referenda. Although it was sharply criticized by the White House, growing congressional and popular support for the freeze proposal helped put public pressure on the Reagan administration to initiate strategic arms talks with the Soviets.

Strategic Arms Control

In mid-1982, Reagan agreed to resume strategic nuclear arms reduction talks, dubbed START. The initial U.S. START proposal required much greater cuts in Soviet than in U.S. forces, especially land-based missiles, which comprised the bulk of the Soviet strategic nuclear arsenal. The proposal also omitted constraints in areas where the United States held a lead, such as strategic bombers and air-launched cruise missiles. The Soviet Union rejected the U.S. approach and proposed further reductions within the SALT II framework. Two years of

fruitless negotiations followed. Then, in 1983, as the United States began deployment of Pershing II and ground-launched cruise missiles in Europe, the Soviet Union left the bargaining table.

Meanwhile, Reagan's revised MX deployment plan remained unpopular in Congress. Reagan responded by appointing a commission on U.S. strategic nuclear forces, led by Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft. The commission would later endorse MX deployment and a proposal pushed by some congressional Democrats for research for a smaller intercontinental ballistic missile with one or possibly two or three warheads. The Scowcroft commission also took issue with the claim of hard-liners in the Reagan camp who charged that U.S. forces were vulnerable to a Soviet first-strike and urged the administration to pursue a more flexible and pragmatic approach to the strategic arms talks.

According to some historians of the era, Reagan became increasingly disturbed about the possibility of an inadvertent nuclear exchange after U.S. nuclear war planning exercises in 1983 and 1984, which led the Soviets to upgrade their nuclear alert level. This incident rattled Reagan, who said in a January 1984 speech that the highest priority in U.S.-Soviet relations should be reducing the risk of nuclear war and reducing nuclear arsenals. In a speech delivered to the United Nations just six weeks before the 1984 presidential election, Reagan positioned himself as a peacemaker by calling for a new round of comprehensive arms negotiations with the Soviets.^[2]

Star Wars

With the arms talks deadlocked and public and congressional support for a nuclear weapons freeze mounting, Reagan initiated a new chapter in the strategic debate on March 23, 1983, when he announced his aim to develop space-based anti-ballistic missile systems that would render nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." The administration would subsequently call the comprehensive research effort SDI, but it was quickly dubbed "Star Wars" because of the systems' planned reliance on high-technology laser and beam weapons deployed in space.

In recent years, Reagan administration officials have claimed that the actual technical success of such a system was unimportant; what really mattered was convincing the Soviets that they would have to make unsustainable technological and financial commitments to keep pace with the United States. The Kremlin would therefore be more amenable to arms control agreements. Reagan's national security adviser, Robert C. McFarlane, claimed that the administration "primarily committed to launching it with the expectation that we would never have to build it because the Soviets would come our way in the arms control setting."

That was not the public case made by the administration at the time. Reagan and Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger repeatedly held out the promise of an anti-ballistic missile defense system that could provide a "security shield" to protect the population and eliminate the prevailing strategic situation of mutually assured destruction.

Critics of Star Wars asserted that these futuristic defenses would not work effectively, would stimulate a defensive and offensive arms race, and would make war more likely in a crisis by provoking a preemptive strike. SDI also threatened the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, which was designed to constrain such a program and which would have to be abrogated or violated long before a deployment decision could be made.

To circumvent these constraints, the Reagan administration in October 1985 advanced a controversial reinterpretation of the ABM Treaty that would allow for the development and testing of space-based and other mobile ABM systems and components. This so-called broad interpretation actually contradicted the treaty, which prohibited the testing and development of space-based defenses and/or development of a nationwide missile defense system.

Twenty years and \$124 billion since Reagan's 1983 speech, the old strategic missile defense program continues [\[3\]](#) and the ABM Treaty is gone. Still far from being operationally effective and reliable, such defenses are now ostensibly designed to counter ballistic missile threats from smaller states, though Russia and China remain wary and ready to counter future deployments.

Nonproliferation Under Reagan

The Reagan administration's efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons to other states were often secondary to countering the Soviet threat. Although his administration led the way in creating a missile export control organization (the Missile Technology Control Regime), efforts aimed at constraining Pakistan's emerging nuclear weapons program proved too little, too late. Pakistan was able to leverage its support for anti-Soviet rebels in Afghanistan into a waiver of proliferation penalties and a grant of U.S. military assistance. In place of the penalties, the Reagan administration sought assurances from Pakistan's military dictatorship that they would not enrich uranium to a level suitable for making nuclear weapons. By 1987, however, Pakistan had already produced enough highly enriched uranium for one or two nuclear bombs. By the 1990s, leading Pakistani nuclear scientists had developed a black-market nuclear trading network.

A New Partner and New Thinking

In January 1985, as the United States deployed new missiles in Europe, the Soviet Union agreed to Reagan's proposal for resuming arms control negotiations on strategic, intermediate, and defensive weapons. In November 1985, Reagan held a summit meeting with the new Soviet premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, which was Reagan's first with any top Soviet leader. The Geneva meeting brought a new note of civility to superpower relations but achieved no immediate results. Both sides continued publicly to advocate radical, presumably non-negotiable, solutions to the nuclear dilemma. At the same time, each side continued to develop and deploy new and more advanced weaponry.

In July 1985, Gorbachev proclaimed the first of several unilateral moratoria on Soviet nuclear testing. Despite congressional resolutions urging the start of negotiations on a comprehensive test ban treaty, Reagan did not reciprocate, believing that continued testing was crucial to nuclear modernization efforts and SDI. As a result, comprehensive test ban talks were delayed for another nine years. In January 1986, Gorbachev countered Reagan's Star Wars initiative with a three-part plan for nuclear disarmament by the year 2000. Although the proposal was uniformly rejected by his administration, Reagan's private response to his secretary of state, George Schultz, was, "Why wait until the end of the century for a world free of nuclear weapons?" [\[4\]](#)

Prospects for arms control received a major setback when, in May 1986, after several reports alleging Soviet treaty violations, Reagan renounced his previous "political commitment" to SALT I and II on strategic offensive arms, which led to a strong negative reaction from Congress and U.S. allies in Europe and, ironically, added to pressure for limitations on the nuclear buildup.

Meanwhile, the Reagan White House sought to respond to Gorbachev and counter the perception that the Soviet Union was leaning further forward to reduce the nuclear threat. Reagan proposed the abolition of all nuclear-armed missiles with the continued development of SDI, a proposal that was radical even if it would result in a balance of nuclear forces more favorable to the United States. The proposal was rejected by Gorbachev, but the two sides continued negotiations on nuclear arms reduction proposals.

Expectations ran high in the run-up to the Reykjavik summit of October 1986. To the horror of some Reagan advisers, the two leaders privately spoke of the elimination of all nuclear weapons. In the end, however, the meeting defined more modest areas of agreement and remaining problems for a new arms control regime. Although the two sides agreed in principle to the "zero-option" for no intermediate nuclear forces in Europe and to a halving of strategic offensive arms, the meeting deadlocked over the issue of strategic defenses and the

proper interpretation of the ABM Treaty.

Closing the Deal

In early 1987, the Reagan administration intensified its efforts to make strategic defenses a key component of U.S. nuclear strategy. A formal move to adopt the new “broad” interpretation of the ABM Treaty and prepare for early deployment of SDI was seriously contemplated by the administration. At the same time, the political furor over the administration’s Iran-Contra arms-for-hostages scheme led many in the White House to push for an arms control breakthrough that could revive Reagan’s sagging popularity.

At this critical juncture, Gorbachev’s flexibility helped achieve a breakthrough. Gorbachev decided to de-link the INF negotiations from the larger strategic discussions (including Soviet calls for limiting SDI to a research program) and essentially agreed to accept the zero-option position of the United States on intermediate-range missiles. Gorbachev’s shift was apparently informed by the growing sense that it would be many years before SDI could be deployed. This move set the stage for agreement on an INF Treaty that was signed at a Washington summit in December 1987 and entered into force six months later. The INF Treaty proved to be a political and strategic watershed that helped transform the U.S.-Soviet relationship. The pact established new verification provisions and eliminated an entire class of nuclear weapons, many of which had been deployed under Reagan’s watch.

Work on the draft strategic arms agreement continued during 1988 and at the next summit meeting in Moscow in late May and early June 1988. Despite the earlier success on intermediate-range nuclear forces, the sides failed to resolve remaining differences over the interpretation of the ABM Treaty and the terms of the offense/defense relationship under START. The START negotiations under Reagan would, however, lead to the eventual negotiation and signing of START I by Gorbachev and President George H. W. Bush in July 1991. By 2003, each side had reduced their deployed arsenals to the START ceiling of 6,000 warheads and eliminated many of the missiles and bombers affected by the treaty. Yet, Reagan’s “trust but verify” axiom of arms control has been abandoned in the latest U.S.-Russian strategic arms reduction agreement, which will lower deployments to no more than 2,200 warheads but will not require dismantlement of retired systems or new verification provisions.

Reagan’s mixed legacy has permitted rival claimants to offer divergent views of his role in the end of the Cold War and the easing of nuclear tensions in the 1990s. Some facts, however, are beyond dispute. Reagan presided over a massive nuclear buildup and launched an expensive effort to build a defense against strategic missiles, which exacerbated tensions with Moscow. His military policies catalyzed widespread anti-nuclear activism that increased the political impetus for nuclear arms control. Yet, Reagan’s unconventional leadership style and determination also allowed him to reach out to the Soviet leadership and relate to Gorbachev’s new and bold thinking. Together the two leaders set their nations on a path toward arms control arrangements that reflected their personal abhorrence for nuclear war and addressed domestic and international concern about where Cold War nuclear rivalry might eventually lead without such restraint.

ENDNOTES

1. Schwartz, Stephen, et al, *Atomic Audit: the Cost and Consequences of U.S. Nuclear Weapons Since 1940*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1998, Table A-2.
2. Powaski, Ronald E., *Return to Armageddon: The United States and the Nuclear Arms Race 1981-1999*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
3. For fiscal years 1984-2004. Christopher Hellman, Council for a Livable World, personal conversation, June 2004.
4. Shultz, George P., *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993.