

The Legacy of Reykjavik: Remarks

Rozanne L. Ridgway

WHEN I RECEIVED the invitation from Secretary George Shultz and Dr. Sidney Drell to participate in this conference, enclosing a preliminary program, I was delighted to accept and to pick up their offer to comment on the program as it was being developed. As you would expect, my comment was that Reykjavik was about much more than arms control and nuclear weapons reductions. Standing alone, it was but a couple of days in one small town, ending—as had so many other meetings—in the absence of agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, Reykjavik, for all its importance in hindsight in the arms control arena, was of far larger significance. It was, in fact, the center point in the Cold War end game.

So this is my personal perspective—a few points that stood out in my mind as I thought about this conference.

The conduct of that end game, which probably began in the early 1980s, included a U.S./Soviet dialogue that differed in dramatic and telling ways from that of preceding decades. To be sure, we may well not have arrived at Reykjavik without

Ambassador Rozanne Ridgway is Chairman of the Board of the Baltic-American Enterprise Fund and a director of several American corporations. Her thirty-two-year career in the U.S. Foreign Service included a period as Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Canada, in which capacity she oversaw preparations for and participated in all five Reagan-Gorbachev summits, including Reykjavik.

the strengthening of the NATO alliance and the steadfastness of our allies throughout those decades and, in some respects, without their insistence that defense be accompanied by dialogue. Dialogue in that phrase was “dialogue with the Soviet Union,” but equally important was the willingness of the United States to engage in meaningful dialogue, to engage in consultations with its allies. In the case of both the Geneva and the Reykjavik meetings—there was, you will recall, a reluctance to call them summits—this meant consultations before, during, and after the event.

That said, let me take up the several elements that made up those different and telling ways that constituted the policy and process framework of the Reykjavik meeting, the agenda, and the atmosphere. If there were time, it would be informative to take up the Geneva meeting as well, but I will touch upon that historic moment only in reference to Reykjavik.

A few years before Reykjavik, and in time for Geneva, the United States had shaped the totality of its interests in the relationship with the Soviet Union into a four-point agenda: human rights, arms control, regional issues, and bilateral concerns.

Human rights issues encompassed, as examples, the treatment of dissidents (most famously Anatoly Scharansky, Andrei Sakharov, Yuri Orlov), religious freedom, travel, family reunification, denial of emigration for Jews and others, and the suppression of information. Whenever we met with Soviet leadership, the human rights discussion always began the meetings. The opening fireside chat in Geneva—President Ronald Reagan, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, and two interpreters—was about human rights, emigration, and open societies. Reykjavik was no different. The meeting began with human rights.

I needn't lay out for this audience the several arms control

issues except to add the footnote that there were, in the background of the more prominent nuclear matters, questions relating to conventional forces in Europe. Indeed, it was in the context of the Conference on Disarmament in Europe in the mid-1980s, dealing with transparency and conventional forces, that the Soviet Union had agreed to onsite inspections. The question of whether such inspections would be accepted was fundamentally answered by the time of Reykjavik, although some on the U.S. side had been surprised that the Soviets expected onsite inspection to be reciprocal.

Regional issues reflected the headlines of those times—Afghanistan, Nicaragua, the Middle East, Ethiopia, Cambodia, Angola—and the overall topic of Soviet support for so-called national liberation fronts. Europe was not excluded, and at the opening of the Vienna Review Conference of the Helsinki Final Act, Secretary Shultz spoke of a “Europe whole, free, and secure.”

And finally came the bilateral category—trade, air safety, search and rescue, the environment, housing, consulates, and cultural exchanges.

In pursuing these interests, the United States had decided to forego “linkage” among them. Lack of progress on one would not mean the sacrifice of all others. KAL-007 did not mean we would break off intermediate-range nuclear forces and Strategic Arms Reduction Talks, terminate negotiations on a grain agreement, or cancel meetings with Soviet representatives. We would, instead, continue to press the totality of our agenda, especially human rights.

Turning away from linkage was key to moving the relationship forward, but it invited—even more than what had become normal—the predictable protests of those who saw no value in negotiations with the Soviet Union on any topic. And on the road to Reykjavik, as on the road to Geneva, there were

more than enough opportunities for linking Soviet behavior to some or all of the agenda topics.

There were tragedies: Major Arthur Nicholson.

There was human drama: seaman Miroslav Medved jumping ship in New Orleans.

And there were very real diplomatic dilemmas: journalist Nick Daniloff's arrest and imprisonment in Moscow

. . . to throw everything off track.

Each was handled in its own context. Spies, an overstuffed U.N. mission, brazen electronic intrusions into the architecture of a new embassy in Moscow—they all offered opportunities to try to stop the dialogue, and when they didn't, there was always, as Secretary Shultz noted in his memoir of this period, the charge of "slave labor."

President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev, in the Joint Statement signed in Geneva, agreed to two summit meetings, Washington and Moscow. But Gorbachev had not budged President Reagan from the SDI in Geneva and a post-Geneva campaign to frighten the Allies had not succeeded. Elaborate personal messages with ever more elaborate arms control proposals did not move the two sides any closer to an agreement that could be the required centerpiece of a Washington summit. For the Soviets, SDI would not go away. Our best efforts at gaining their understanding of a transition from offense to defense were gaining traction at the expert level, but not at the political level. The relationship was stalled and threatened by the Daniloff affair. The Soviets, for whom the four-part agenda was at that time largely an American diplomatic fiction, took steps to undo the Daniloff knot, meet our concomitant demands for release of dissidents and intending emigrants, and prepare a summit meeting. For the Soviet Union, Reykjavik, as with Geneva, was about the SDI.

If you recall the coverage of the event, the media, the talk-

ing heads, retired generals, and diplomats saw Reykjavik as an arms control summit, the United States as unprepared for the moment, and the President as dangerously uninformed and gullible.

I would simply say that in the conversations between President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev, in the simultaneous negotiations being led by Paul Nitze, and my own work on all other topics, that simply was not true. We were extraordinarily well prepared. The books and proposals and issues prepared for Secretary Shultz's meetings with Andrei Gromyko, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Gorbachev in all the months before Reykjavik and Geneva, and all the work done to back up President Reagan's correspondence with Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko and Gorbachev—all of that work went with us to Reykjavik, as did our Geneva arms control negotiating teams. We were fully prepared to discuss all the regional issues and the bilateral topics. We were ready to move in any and all directions and had a delegation that could back our preparedness.

And in the human rights corner of Hofdi House, we made progress. In his day, Gromyko had declined to discuss human rights. At the Geneva Summit, it was considered a U.S. agenda item to which the Soviets objected, as always, as "interference in internal affairs," although Gorbachev and the team listened. The agreed Geneva Joint Statement refers only to humanitarian matters, which was as far as the Soviets would go, insisting that, among other reasons, the Russian language could not accommodate the precise words "human rights." At Reykjavik, the Soviet side seemed to have altered its thinking on the topic. They discovered the words "human rights" *did* translate into Russian. They signed on. Human rights *and* humanitarian affairs could be on the agenda. Where once lists and letters had to be left on the table because the Soviet side would not accept

them across the table, in Reykjavik they accepted a box-load of names of intending Jewish emigrants. They were prepared to engage in discussion in which, they said, they would cite their views of our human rights transgressions. We said, “Cite away—let’s discuss and agree to record our agreement to discuss again.” As the Reagan-Gorbachev dialogue broke off and delegations departed Hofdi House in the instant, our progress was never recorded formally.

Some would say, and I understand this, that it wasn’t much progress anyway, and others that the failure to reach recorded closure on human rights was a loss of secondary importance. However, the human rights dialogue had expanded far beyond lists of names, to discussions of open societies as successful societies, of the freedom of thought and intellectual exchange necessary to keep pace with a rapidly changing world. A far more textured and philosophical exchange was taking place under those two important words “human rights.” And if self-interest weren’t enough to overcome the entrenched resistance to the topic, then it helped that Max Kampelman had pointed out to them—persuasively, I believe—that the Soviet Union had signed the Helsinki Accords and, in a sovereign act, had itself agreed to the legitimacy of the topic. So where was the “interference in internal affairs”? Reykjavik probably will always be an arms control event, but it was equally important for human rights.

I’ve been asked to confine my remarks to fifteen minutes, and I’m sure I’ve passed that limit. But I would like to make one final point regarding the relevance of the Reykjavik meeting, in all its aspects, for today’s nuclear challenges.

The internal burdens on the conduct of a nearly four-year dialogue by President Reagan and Secretary Shultz with the Soviet Union were enormous. There was a persistent and often debilitating effort to prevent contact, to remove substance from

dialogue, to march in place or to block movement, to label those working on behalf of the president as everything from “wimps” to “symps,” to misrepresent intentions, to defeat presidential decisions. I recall all too vividly that when the United States offered medical help to the Soviet Union after Chernobyl, a department that shall go unnamed refused licenses for the isotopes and machinery that make up modern nuclear medicine that were destined for Chernobyl victims. At Reykjavik, when a break in the meeting lasted longer than Gorbachev expected, President Reagan referred to his “battling bureaucracies.” And there were bureaucracies on both sides tugging at coattails—or worse. One simply had to have a firm grasp on the objective and not lose heart or courage.

As well, by Reykjavik, through the care taken in Geneva to provide the right setting, to bring simultaneous translation to the summit level, and to demonstrate that social courtesies and a respectful demeanor are not signs of weakness or a willingness to sign anything, it was possible to proceed with startling candor and frankness, occasional sarcasm, and frankly aggressive diplomacy without risking irreparable harm to the interests of the United States and its allies.

Solid preparation and assembling a team of willing players are obvious ingredients for successful negotiations, but *never underestimate the power of courtesies, a fireplace, and leaders who understand the moment and are willing to grasp it*. President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev, however different their reasons, were such leaders.

And the rest really is history.