

Reykjavik fiasco

Close Encounters

High hopes accompanied the Reykjavik summit. They were soon dashed. The mini-summit delivered nothing. **Gerard Holden** argues the only silver lining is that it leaves the Tories on the defensive

The Reykjavik mini-summit came as a surprise to most observers of East-West relations, not least to the unsuspecting citizens of Reykjavik. Throughout the polemics of the 'Daniloff/Zakharov affair' in September, it had looked unlikely that any sort of summit meeting could go ahead. The evident division and uncertainty of the Reagan administration made it seem equally unlikely that any kind of arms control agreement could be signed.

In the immediate aftermath of the Reykjavik meeting, it looks as though there are no agreements in sight and the summit process is grinding to a halt.

During the summer months preceding the mini-summit, a number of domestic and international pressures could be seen operating on the USA and USSR, although it was easier to see what Gorbachev hoped for from such a meeting than to identify clear US goals. Since the Geneva summit in November 1985, Gorbachev had argued that any further summit must involve solid agreements on arms control, or at least identifiable progress towards such agreements, most importantly on a Comprehensive Test Ban and/or some kind of constraints on Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) development.

Such a position is hard to retreat from, and Gorbachev may have seen Reykjavik as a way of testing whether

Reagan would really compromise on any central arms control issue. If so, the summit process could go ahead; if not, Gorbachev could avoid the embarrassment of returning empty-handed from a full summit, and could argue more convincingly that he had done his best but the US could not be budged.

Gorbachev's handling of Soviet foreign since mid-1985 has been significantly more flexible and imaginative than his immediate predecessors. He has injected a new note of urgency into Soviet calls for restraining the arms race, and this has tended to convince middle opinion in the West, at least in Europe. The unilateral nuclear testing moratorium (announced in July 1985) and a number of subsequent proposals, including the January 1986 long-term disarmament plan, have been combined with more energetic presentation of policy (and smart PR gambits like sending Raisa Gorbachev to Iceland while Nancy Reagan languished at home). In addition, more attention has been paid to relations with Western Europe, Japan and China, than was the case under Brezhnev.

Although NATO likes to make charges of Soviet 'wedge-driving' between Western Europe and the USA, it is fairly clear that Soviet policy is primarily aimed at bringing pressure to bear on the USA through the medium of Western European governments. There has been widespread acceptance of the argument that Gorbachev needs a stable international situation and arms control agreements to release resources for the civilian economy, although this is a more complex question than is sometimes suggested. Medium and long-term developments like avoiding excessive expenditure on a Soviet response to SDI are of more economic importance than short-term arms control, and Gorbachev certainly does not believe that a reduction in defence spending would be *sufficient* to revitalise the Soviet economy as a whole – but the economic issue is certainly important.

Gorbachev also needed Reykjavik to convince domestic audiences that his conciliatory policy towards the West had borne some fruit. In a number of recent speeches, he had complained about the slow pace of implementation of his domestic policy initiatives, and it would be reasonable to assume that a success in foreign policy would have given him increased authority and room for manoeuvre domestically.

There have also been indications of unhappiness among the Soviet military with his foreign policy. As long ago as May, the Soviet Chief of Staff, Marshal Akhromeyev, spoke at a press conference of the 'moral-political' advantage which the USSR had gained from its unilateral test moratorium; his words seemed to be chosen to stress military support for party policy, but did not rule out the possibility of military

disquiet over the purely military aspects of the policy, and so could also have served as a veiled reminder that the 'moral-political' advantage would need to be turned into a more tangible result. More recently, several respected Western sovietologists have picked up further rumblings of unease among the military, and after the impasse at Reykjavik, Gorbachev will have problems waiting for him at home.

By way of contrast, Reagan seemed almost to blunder into accepting Gorbachev's suggestion of the mini-summit. In the summer and early autumn, the administration came under pressure from Congress on a number of issues including spending on SDI and strategic weapons, nuclear testing, and eventually South African sanctions, where a presidential veto was overridden. It would be a mistake to interpret these events as indicating a fundamental shift in US foreign policy, but it was at least clear that Reagan could not take congressional support for granted, and Gorbachev's hopes of pressuring Reagan on SDI and testing were not total miscalculations. With mid-term elections in November, Congress and the public did seem to be demanding at least a show of conciliation from Reagan.

It is often argued that a right-wing president (Nixon being the prime example) can negotiate with the USSR more flexibly than would be possible for a liberal Democrat, but Reagan also has to guard himself against attacks from the Right. Here is the conservative columnist George Will, writing in the *Washington Post* in between the Daniloff-Zakharov 'trade' and the mini-summit itself: 'Ronald Reagan wants a summit in order to practice therapeutic policy. Mikhail Gorbachev wants a summit because he dines on people who think like that.' Reagan's personal popularity means that he could probably outflank such criticism if he really wanted agreements with Gorbachev. The likely opposition from the most hawkish elements *within* his administration, notably the arms control critics Richard Perle and Caspar Weinberger, would be more difficult to deal with.

It was to counter such criticism from the Right that Reagan spoke in the week before Reykjavik of the need to place human rights and 'regional issues' like Afghanistan on the agenda, in the full knowledge that not only was this not the Soviet agenda, but that there was little chance of substantive agreement between the sides on these issues. The new Soviet leadership is evidently more confident that it can give as good as it gets in a battle of denunciations over human rights, although the release this year of Anatoly Shcharansky, Yuri Orlov, and Irina Ratushinskaya has, if anything, weakened the Soviet argument that no 'linkage' should be made between human rights and other questions.

Since March 1985, revived US-Soviet negotiations have been conducted in a joint 'Nuclear and Space Talks' forum in Geneva. The central issues have been the US Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) and the related questions of the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) Treaty and a Comprehensive Test Ban (CTB).

The 1972 ABM Treaty prohibits any extensive development of the kind of anti-missile defences envisaged in Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative. Since the likely response of the USSR to SDI would be to increase the number and sophistication of its strategic nuclear weapons, it has become clear that no agreement to cut these weapons on either side is likely unless the US agrees to place limitations on its SDI research and development.

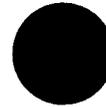
US reluctance to join the Soviet moratorium on nuclear testing is also related to SDI. Behind the reasons given publicly by the USA – first that a test ban would be unverifiable, and later that continued testing was needed to keep the nuclear stockpile usable – has been a desire to test 'third-generation' nuclear weapons involving directed nuclear energy, and to develop specific applications of this research which would be involved in SDI.

The USSR's arms control diplomacy during 1986 has focused on the need to restrain SDI and achieve a ban on testing, which are essentially strategic issues between the two major powers, though with implications for Europe. On the American side, there was some evidence of flexibility on limited forms of agreement at the European level. In September, an agreement was reached in the Stockholm Conference on Disarmament in Europe forum on notification and observation of military manoeuvres, and at the same time reports emerged that the Soviet and US positions on Intermediate Nuclear Forces (cruise, Pershing II, and SS-20s) were moving closer together.

The Stockholm agreement, while limited, was at least an agreement, but the prospects of agreement on SDI and strategic weapons have never looked good, and now look worse after Reykjavik. It seems extremely unlikely that the US will change its position on nuclear testing.

The pre-Reykjavik positions of the two sides on SDI involved suggestions for mutual commitments not to withdraw from the ABM Treaty for a set period, thus possibly restraining the development of SDI. The Reagan administration seemed reluctant to concede any agreement which would place any effective constraints on the programme, and it was hard to see the USSR signing any essentially cosmetic agreement which fell short of doing this. (The USSR knows that SDI as described by Reagan won't work, but there is still a fear of the unpredictable military consequences of a massive research programme.)

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◀ The prospect of a 'grand compromise', trading SDI development for large cuts in strategic missiles, had been welcomed by US arms control advocates outside the administration. The USSR seems to have made this kind of offer, including a tightening of the ABM Treaty, during the Reykjavik meeting itself, and the breakdown of the meeting came over this point. Reagan seems to have offered deep missile cuts (according to Shultz, total elimination) and a 10-year extension of the ABM Treaty, but to have insisted on a 'broad' interpretation of the treaty, which would have made such a commitment of little value.

Reagan's personal commitment to SDI, and the impossibility of shifting his administration's hardliners on the issue, probably made this outcome inevitable. From the Soviet point of view, the most optimistic calculation now may be that Reagan's successor will be unable to sustain the necessary political and economic support to continue with SDI.

In the run-up to Reykjavik, the US administration appeared less rigid on nuclear weapons in Europe, and was widely considered to be prepared for an agreement in this area. Gorbachev had in fact made it very difficult for the US not to admit the possibility of agreement, since during 1986 he made several adjustments to the Soviet negotiating position on Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF). The USSR first accepted that an INF agreement was possible without agreement on SDI, then that INF weapons should not be included in the 'strategic' balance, and then lifted its earlier stipulation that British and French nuclear forces would need to be frozen before any INF deal could be agreed. In return, the US proposed a cut to 100 INF warheads on either side, and a compromise deal was confidently predicted before the Reykjavik meeting.

In the event, it seems to have fallen victim to the central breakdown over SDI, although it is not clear whether the USSR reversed its earlier position on separating INF from SDI negotiations (perhaps an exercise in summit brinkmanship), or the deal proved impossible for other reasons.

At the time of writing, this is one of the oddest aspects of the Reykjavik events – did Gorbachev suddenly reverse a policy on INF which he had taken great pains to develop? Or was there some kind of US disinformation campaign, with the stories about a likely INF deal being leaked when it was in fact far from completion, in order to discredit Gorbachev when the summit collapsed? Early reports were contradictory, but it did not look as though there had simply been a failure to agree on numbers of warheads.

The question also arises of why the Reagan administration might have shown more flexibility on the European

issues than on strategic weapons and SDI. One possibility is that an INF deal looked like a good way of strengthening the credibility of West European Atlanticist governments and of multilateral disarmament, at a time when opposition parties like the West German SPD and the British Labour Party were consolidating defence policies which would, to varying degrees, certainly cause tensions within NATO if put into practice.

The State Department may possess enough sophistication to try this strategy, although Perle and Weinberger have recently shown that the Pentagon has more straightforward ways of approaching the problem of recalcitrant Europeans. Perhaps an equally likely explanation is that minor concessions in Europe were the maximum on which the factions of the administration could all agree, since even Perle has never been particularly concerned about Euromissiles and always recognised their political rather than military significance.

How will the Reykjavik communication breakdown affect the British debate on defence and disarmament? One could argue that now no agreement seems possible in the short term, the unilateralist peace movement and the Labour Party will be in a relatively straightforward position: multilateralism again looks a sham, as the peace movement has often argued, with the US bearing the brunt of the blame.

The last point is likely to be accepted by many European commentators – pre-Reykjavik coverage by sources like the *Observer*, *Financial Times*, and *Panorama* suggested this very strongly. (In this sense, a significant part of Gorbachev's foreign policy, the desire to convince Western Europe of Soviet sincerity on arms control, has already succeeded.)

It is quite possible that in these circumstances, nuclear unilateralism could gain Labour more votes than it loses, if we set aside for a moment the question of Labour's ability to present the policy coherently.

If some kind of Euromissile deal can eventually be rescued from the collapse of the mini-summit, the position may become more complicated. Labour could argue that pressure from below has forced the US and USSR into an agreement, and this should be taken as a starting-point for further reductions in nuclear forces. However, it is not clear that Labour would be able to make this argument stick, and Thatcher's speech at the Bournemouth Tory conference has already indicated that she at least is convinced that Labour is as vulnerable on defence as in 1983.

In the event of an agreement, Labour would have had to deal with a counter-argument on these lines: multilateralism has worked, the original 1979 NATO dual-track decision to deploy new weapons and negotiate at the same time has been proved to be the correct

approach, the USSR is not unilateralist and Labour should not rock the boat. Although the possibility now seems to have evaporated, Labour and the peace movement might have been left in a difficult position by an agreement which left a token number of cruise missiles at Greenham. This underlines the importance for Labour of developing its non-nuclear strategy in a way which will not be too vulnerable to fluctuations in US-Soviet relations.

There would have been nothing particularly surprising about Soviet participation in such an agreement involving cruise, since the January 1986 Gorbachev proposals and his subsequent diplomacy have themselves been of a 'dual-track' nature. As well as the sweeping proposals for a nuclear-free world, which echo peace movement demands and suggest a more ambitious agenda than traditional 'arms control', Gorbachev's proposals have always contained elements designed to appeal to centrist European Atlanticists. The aim has been to establish as wide a range of support as possible, and thereby put the maximum pressure on the US leadership. One only has to recall David Owen's enthusiastic response to Gorbachev's January 1986 proposals to appreciate they were not aimed exclusively at unilateralist peace movements. Whether or not one takes literally the Soviet commitment to a nuclear-free world by the year 2000, in practice the situation has been such that this 'utopianism' has always been likely to give way to the more limited arms control aspects of Gorbachev's proposals.

The silver lining of the Reykjavik events may be that the peace movement is not faced with the problems of demobilisation which might have resulted from a partial agreement. In that sense, Reagan may have done Labour and CND a favour in the short term, by identifying his own stubbornness over SDI as the prime reason for the failure of the meeting. Gorbachev now has the problem that Reagan's unreasonableness has been made all the more obvious, but Soviet policy has not produced any concrete results. Furthermore, if there was indeed a retreat from the earlier Soviet position on the INF issue, Gorbachev has for the first time looked uncertain in his handling of policy towards Western Europe.

Even so, West European NATO governments will now be on the defensive over US policy. Reagan and Shultz will doubtless try to argue that since the threat of SDI has such a powerful effect on the USSR, the programme should be continued and adequately funded. Whether Congress will fall for this is another matter – since the administration hasn't actually got any agreements out of the Soviet side, it is a thin line of defence. Never has 'bargaining from strength' looked such a hypocritical strategy. ●

'Smart PR gambits like sending Raisa Gorbachev to Iceland while Nancy Reagan languished at home'





Photo: Frank Spooner Pictures

Khrushchev: Opening act in the drama



Photo: Hulton Picture Library

Intervention: Soviet tanks after fierce fighting outside the Killian barracks in Budapest

1956

1956 was one of those momentous years to which the label 'turning point' can be attached without a shade of embarrassment. The 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party proved to be the most significant since 1917. Together with the Soviet military intervention in Hungary, it ensured that the international communist movement – including the British Communist Party – was never to be the same again. Then there was Suez crisis, and much else. **Eric Hobsbawm**, (below) in this interview with Gareth Stedman Jones, tells the story.



This year is the 30th anniversary of 1956, arguably a turning point in the history of the communist movement, and the British Left. Perhaps I could begin by asking you to give a rough chronology of what you think were the important events of 1956 and how they affected you?

It was a very dramatic year and it worked up to a climax rather like a good play. Essentially it started in February with the 20th congress of the Soviet Communist Party, in the course of which Khrushchev made his famous secret speech in which he denounced Stalin. The foreign delegates – including Harry Pollitt, Palme Dutt and George Matthews from Britain – were sent away to speak elsewhere, so they didn't hear it. Then nothing much happened, except that it was clear something fairly drastic had been said and people began to get a bit dissatisfied. At the end of March there was a congress of the British Communist Party. It was after that congress that opposition, or at any rate uncertainty, started to be expressed.

Edward Thompson wrote a letter, which, by coincidence, was published in the *Daily Worker* early in June on the very same day on which the text of Khrushchev's secret speech was released by the US state department. It had been leaked somewhere in the Soviet Union, and it was shortly afterwards published in the *Observer*. Officially, of course, it still didn't exist. Now after that, a good deal of debate developed within the communist move-

ment. Mostly it was fairly muffled. Though right from the start Togliatti, the general secretary of the Italian Communist Party, in answering some questions put by an Italian journal, gave some fairly straight answers, arguing that the way the thing had been explained simply as a cult of personality wasn't good enough; what one had to account for was how the Soviet Union had got into this state.

At this stage, the second dramatic element comes in, namely Suez. At the end of June, Nasser was elected president in Egypt and within a month the Suez canal had been taken over by the Egyptians, and the plotting between the British, French and Israelis started which eventually culminated in the Suez war at the beginning of November.

In the meanwhile there were various other developments. For instance, about then Ghana became the first African country to achieve independence; and Tito, who previously had been drummed out of the international communist movement, came back and visited Moscow. Things were obviously happening. Meanwhile the Poles started rioting in June.

And while all this was happening, it was quite clear that in the British Communist Party something fairly dramatic was happening because Harry Pollitt resigned from being general secretary and became chairman, and Johnny Gollan took over. While the