

Helsinki: How About a Fresh START?

As US President Donald Trump heads to Helsinki for a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump's critics continue to inveigh against what they consider an illicitly close relationship between the two, a perspective stemming from the "Russiagate" scandal drummed up by supporters of Hillary Clinton to explain her defeat in the 2016 presidential election.

Russiagate or not, this summit may represent the two countries' last, best opportunity to halt or even reverse a decade of backsliding toward frigid Cold War relations. And Trump has a ready template at his disposal for pursuing warmer relations with a formidable, but hopefully former, foe.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan met with his Soviet counterpart, Mikhail Gorbachev, in Reykjavik. As the non-profit Reagan Vision for a Nuclear-Weapons-Free World describes the summit, "[a] proposal to eliminate all new strategic missiles grew into a discussion, for the first time in history, of the real possibility of eliminating nuclear weapons forever. ... Reagan even described to Gorbachev how both men might return to Reykjavik in ten years, aged and retired leaders, to personally witness the dismantling of the world's last remaining nuclear warhead."

While the full vision didn't pan out, a year later the US and the Soviets signed the Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. Five years later came the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. "New START" arrived in 2010, shortly before relations between the two governments began to deteriorate in a big way.

At this point, the US is working on "modernizing" its existing nuclear arsenal, while Russia touts an advancing hypersonic missile program. We're moving back toward the days of American schoolchildren practicing "duck and cover" drills under constant threat of nuclear war.

The best possible outcome of the Trump-Putin summit would be a new treaty that I'll call "Fresh START." Under such a treaty, the two governments would commit to getting back on the track laid down by Reagan and Gorbachev, actively working to meet their existing obligations under Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT):

"Each of the Parties to the Treaty undertakes to pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament ..."

Nuclear weapons are weapons of terror and of Mutual Assured Destruction. They're not militarily useful outside those two ways of thinking. It's time for the two countries with the

largest stockpiles of such weapons to move together toward decommissioning and destroying those stockpiles. We may never again live in a world without nuclear weapons, but we can aspire to a world with as few of them as possible.

If Trump and Putin can deliver a Fresh START toward that goal, their summit will have been a resounding success.