Reykjavik was more than a milestone on the way to banning nuclear testing: it was a paradigm shift in the field of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation as a whole. When U.S. President Ronald Reagan and Soviet Union General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev met in Reykjavik, Iceland, from 11 to 12 October 1986, they came close to abolishing nuclear weapons altogether. While a concrete agreement was not reached at the summit itself, it demonstrated the potential of what could be achieved and thus laid the basis for the most far-reaching arms control measures for decades.

Only a year after Reykjavik, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) did away with all nuclear and conventional ground-launched ballistic and cruise missiles with intermediate ranges. The 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) reduced and limited strategic nuclear weapons. And 10 years after Reykjavik on 24 September 1996, the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT) was opened for signature.

This one area of disagreement was Reagan’s insistence to develop the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI), a programme to use ground and space-based systems to protect the United States from attack by strategic nuclear ballistic missiles. Roald Sagdeev, science advisor to Gorbachev, recalls: “I remember Gorbachev wanted to be confident that SDI would never work. He accepted arguments in favour of this conclusion from the science side and from the military leadership. However, military industrialists kept trying to change his mind. For me and many of my colleagues there was no surprise that SDI did not graduate from the lab. Even today those who hurry to move missile defenses out of R&D to deployment are at risk of cheating their taxpayers.”

The issue of nuclear testing had been discussed at Reykjavik, when the Soviet side also
signalled its openness to on-site inspections for the first time; its refusal to do so before was one of the reasons why only a partial ban on nuclear testing could be agreed on in 1963, banning nuclear explosions in the atmosphere, outer space and under water, but not underground, without a multilateral verification regime.

Reykjavik- a play by Richard Rhodes

The drama of this historic meeting between the leaders of East and West is captured in the play ‘Reykjavik’ by Pulitzer Prize-winning author Richard Rhodes. The play re-enacts the tough negotiations and passionate arguments, but also the hopeful visions of Gorbachev and Reagan for a nuclear-weapon free future. The dialogue is based on actual historical transcripts, studied by the playwright, and the memoirs of both Gorbachev and Reagan. ‘Reykjavik’ was performed as a staged reading in New York on 27 September this year, followed by a panel discussion with the participation of people who were present at the Reykjavik summit or who covered it as reporters. For more information and quotes, see press release.