

Record of Conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and the US Secretary of State George Shultz.  
February 22, 1988, Moscow.

Shultz: In any case, we discussed these questions more thoroughly than we ever have before. We have not reached any specific conclusions, but our work was useful. Our discussions are becoming more mature.

On the questions of Angola and Cambodia we have come to the agreement that there are possibilities for interaction. We discussed the problem of the Iran-Iraq conflict. I would like to hear your thoughts on this subject. This pertains to Afghanistan.

We welcome your statement on Afghanistan. We think that the situation right now is very promising. We would like for this round of the Geneva talks to be the last. We can see that there is movement in this process. We would like for this difficult process to finally be finished.

At the same time it is quite natural for our side to try to obtain certain assurances regarding the content of this process. Yesterday I tried to explain what I am talking about. We discussed this question in detail yesterday, and I would like to hear your thoughts.

I would like to speak about the Middle East, a region I will be visiting soon.

Gorbachev: First, I would like to state some general thoughts on the role of our countries—the USSR and the US—in the regional conflict settlement efforts. I feel that in these matters we should be the example of cooperation to the world. If we achieve this cooperation, we can hope that the conflicts would be resolved with the consideration of the interests of all sides involved.

Shultz: I can agree with that.

Gorbachev: We will not be able to break up the painful knots that have built up around the world if we use other approaches.

I am saying this because I feel that you still have a negative approach to our sincere desire to work with you to resolve these acute problems. Maybe this is because your approach has been set a long time ago. Or maybe the policies coming from the National Security Council are at the heart of it. They still think that the Soviet Union remains and will continue to be a State with which the United States will come into conflict everywhere in the world; and we will always be “guilty.” If this approach remains, then we cannot count on progress and collaboration.

We could draw an entirely different conclusion from the fact that we are both have presence everywhere. I’ve said this many times to you, and I have said it publicly. Since we are present everywhere, we simply have to balance our interests. This kind of an approach would stimulate the search for decisions and solutions. This is our philosophy. It is important for the understanding of regional situations.

How is our philosophy interpreted, particularly in the Afghanistan question?

We brought our plan of action to Washington. You were the first to whom we told this plan and we asked for your collaboration in finding a solution to this complex and acute problem. We took into account and accepted your considerations regarding the Geneva negotiations, that an agreement should be reached as soon as possible; and that our withdrawal should not be tied to the formation of a coalition government in Afghanistan. Regrettably, a conversation about this did not happen in Washington.

Nevertheless, we believe that our countries can collaborate on the situation that has built up around Afghanistan. We could provide an example of how regional conflicts should be

approached. In order to give you an impetus in this direction, we presented our recent statement. After this we saw some movement from you.

But what's happening? You are rejecting your own advice. If we want to have a neutral, non-aligned, independent Afghanistan, then let the Afghans discuss and decide what kind of government they should have. What do you find unacceptable in this idea? Isn't this what you have been talking about all the time?

We talked about the fact that after the agreement is signed, both you and we would have less power to influence the situation. We are seeing this already: it is more difficult to work with our friends. Everybody thinks about himself, about his future and the future of his country. And this is quite natural.

I still think that we can play a role in the settlement of this conflict. You wanted us to make a statement about the withdrawal of our troops, to provide a date and a timeframe for the withdrawal. We did this. The way is open.

I welcome what you said about the Geneva negotiations, that this round should be the last one. This is the only right approach. After all, we cannot dance to the tune of the moods and emotions of this or that side of the conflict. This question is too important to the Soviet Union to be doing Polka dances to please somebody. And yet we cannot ignore the fact that some people have the insolence—I am not afraid to use that word—to say that the Soviet Union's statement about the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan is only propaganda.

Shultz: We do not say that. We welcome your statement and accept it as such. Already six months ago I believed in the seriousness of your intentions, when E.A. Shakhnazarov first told me about them.

Gorbachev: I would like to again assure you that we have no intentions of creating a springboard in Afghanistan, we are not yearning for warm seas, etc. That's rubbish. We never had such intentions and we do not have them now.

One of the reasons why we would like you to contribute to a speedy signing of the Geneva agreements is to allow Afghanistan to become an independent, non-aligned, neutral country with the type of government that the Afghans want themselves. Let's guide the matter from both sides in the direction of a bloodless settlement.

Shultz: I agree.

Gorbachev: You asked me to talk about the Middle East and the Iran-Iraq conflict.

Shultz: Allow me to say a few words before you begin.

I will not repeat everything that I said yesterday to E.A. Shevardnadze. I am sure you have a copy of that conversation. I talked about the core of our concerns, in the light of which we view the Geneva process. We would like for the process to work well. I have not changed my point of view since I spoke with you in Washington about the difficulties of forming a coalition government.

Gorbachev: It is not going to be formed in Moscow or Washington.

Shultz: And not in Pakistan.

Gorbachev: All the more so not in Pakistan.

Right now contacts are being established between the Afghans that we did not even know about. There are some things going on there that neither you, nor we know about. We should not present ourselves as a kind of arbiter of Afghanistan's fate.

Shultz: Alright. I am ready to limit myself to what has been said. Let us move on to the Iran-Iraq conflict.

Gorbachev: Please convey to the President that we are hoping for collaboration with the American side in the settlement of the Afghan question.

Iran-Iraq conflict. It looks like certain new elements in the collaboration between our countries, both bilaterally and within the framework of the Security Council, have come up in the process of looking for a settlement of the problems. We appreciate this. This is important in its own right, as well as from the point of view of the UN Security Council's future prospects. It is very important for such interaction to continue and not wither.

We are prepared to collaborate with you during the next stage. But right now centrifugal tendencies are appearing in the Security Council. The US is the chair of the Security Council right now. We need an effort. We did not fail in our chairmanship at the Council. You should not fail in yours.

Shultz: We would like to be successful.

Gorbachev: We will help you in that.

Shultz: Yesterday we discussed a somewhat new approach to this problem. We did not reach an agreement, but the discussion was comprehensive.

The solution we are proposing would have three main components. Firstly, there would be a mandatory embargo on supplying weapons to a country that does not follow the previous resolution. In addition to that there are two more ideas. A specific date should be determined on which the embargo on weapons would come into effect. But there should be a period of say thirty days between this date and the vote at the Security Council. Moreover, the general secretary would be offered to create a special negotiations group or assign a special representative, who would deal exclusively with this question.

What E.A. Shevardnadze said yesterday is true—the UN General Secretary has many other responsibilities. That is why it would be a good idea to add this new element to the general picture with the aim of activating the negotiations. This kind of a representative would work within a timeframe. At the same time, he could address the Security Council at a certain point and say that in his opinion the date when the resolution would go into effect should be postponed, since there is visible progress in the efforts. This way, the representative would have some leverage. This is the new idea that came up during the discussion.

Gorbachev: We will discuss your proposals. In this context the idea is new to us. We are prepared to make a constructive contribution to the solution of this problem. I would like to ask you to convey the following to the President: in our opinion, is it vitally important not to allow this conflict to grow and expansion. This conflict should not become the center of a dramatic situation that would involve many countries.

We are very worried about this possibility. That is why we should carefully adjust all our steps. Of course, we need to act firmly and consistently, but at the same time we should take care that we do not get the opposite result of what we are striving for.

Shultz: Yes, we understand that.

Gorbachev: Tell me, did you consider the possibility of reducing your military presence in the Persian Gulf? Or do you think that such a step could be seen as a sign of weakness? You could use fewer ships to achieve your goals.

Shultz: The task we are performing is ongoing. We are carrying it out successfully. Recently we reduced our presence in the Persian Gulf by two large ships. As a result, the configuration changed and the scale of our presence was reduced. Our goal is still the same, but we decided that we can carry it out with smaller means.

We are not striving to keep large numbers of ships there. When the scale of the problem decreases, our presence will too.

[Colin] Powell: When E.A. Shevardnadze raised this question yesterday, I told him that the accumulation of our forces in the Persian Gulf in the last 6-6 [sic] months has led to the addition of only two warships. The majority of the accumulation consists of mine-sweepers, helicopter carriers and other ships that do not pose a threat and are necessary only for the mine-sweeping operation.

As we understand the situation, we adjust the scale of our presence. This is how we found it possible to withdraw two large ships. As the threat decreases and we understand the situation we can make further adjustments.

Gorbachev: Very well. As I understand, with this we can conclude the discussion of the Iran-Iraq conflict.

Shevardnadze: We agreed to continue having consultations on this question.

Gorbachev: An Iranian element is present in the Afghan situation. We will have to take that into consideration.

Shultz: We understand that. This element is also present in the Middle East equation. I talked about that yesterday.

Gorbachev: You are right. Iran wants a fundamentalist government to form in Afghanistan.

Shevardnadze: And not only there.

Shultz: It seems like the Iranians would not mind fundamentalist governments in the Kremlin and in Washington. (Laughter)

Gorbachev: But it is unlikely that they are counting on it. Maybe they are praying for it.

Now about the Middle East. We studied your proposals, which we obtained through Ambassador Matlock. Moreover, almost all the Arabs to whom you appealed with these proposals, also appealed to us.

I welcome the starting process, even though it is still rather weak, of collaboration in finding a solution to this chronic problem. We were waiting for you to understand that it is difficult to resolve this problem without the participation of the Soviet Union. I think we may have common interests here.

We are advocating a universal, just settlement with the consideration of the Arabs' interests, including the Palestinians, and Israel's interests on the basis of returning the occupied territories and resolving other questions. No other approach stands a chance here. It is impossible to ignore any side's interests. We are reviewing your proposals from this perspective. Of course, there are certain differences between us. But we both understand that it is impossible to impose any decision and it is unacceptable to ignore the interests of any of the sides or groups.

In this light, a critical interpretation of your proposals on the Middle East is taking place. Many believe that despite the elements of flexibility in your proposals, they are nevertheless based on an old approach; that under the cover of a discussion of a conference on the Middle East, the same policy of separatist dealings with a limited number of participants is followed. An example of this is that Syria is outside the framework of your proposals. Everybody also noticed that your proposal reflects a negative position in relation to the Palestinian settlement, and particularly the PLO [Palestine Liberation Organization].

This is how people see it: on the one hand, your proposals seem to be aimed at trying to secure a cease-fire, to alleviate the acute situation in Gaza and the West Bank. If this were done

together with the general settlement, it would be understandable. But if it is not, it's a totally different matter.

As you know, we offered to start the work of a preparatory committee with the participation of the permanent members of the Security Council, which would discuss in detail all the aspects of preparing the conference. We suggested that the forum could be used for the discussion of multilateral as well as bilateral aspects of the settlement. We think that this is a clear and understandable approach.

[Source: Archive of the Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow, Fond 1, opis 1.  
Translated by Anna Melyakova for the National Security Archive]