

Interview with

**SERGEI PETROVICH TARASENKO**

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O.S. What did Shevardnadze see as the fundamental task of foreign policy, both when he came to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and after he had familiarized himself with his post? I remember someone talking about how at first Shevardnadze, if he wasn't afraid of every functionary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, at the very least was unsure of himself, since he didn't understand the full complexity of the Ministry's enormous bureaucracy. I would like to understand the goals that Shevardnadze set for himself, as well as the logic that governed his actions. I would like to hear how you viewed our foreign policy options and what was possible to accomplish in those conditions. Did Soviet foreign policy have some unfinished business left by Gromyko, or was his experience useless? Did we have a chance at agreeing with the Americans on more advantageous terms? Was there some kind of conception of foreign policy, and did there exist some method for realizing it? Or was Shevardnadze improvising?

C.T. Even before Shevardnadze came to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs there was a realization that foreign policy was going to have to change. It was clear that we had amassed such a negative legacy of regional conflicts and impasses at the negotiating

table that we had to free ourselves from them. At that time, with respect to the United States alone, we were conducting negotiations on seven fronts. By then the Soviet Union had acquired a very negative image in world public opinion. We interfered in everything, made threats. We carried a terrible burden.

So it seemed that the first thing we needed to do was to change the country's image, since we could no longer play the role of a rogue state. To borrow a term from the world of sports, you could say that the best we could do was bluff.

O.S. Judging from what you are saying, by 1985 we had tallied up a less than enviable score in foreign affairs?

S.T. In all respects we were up against the wall. On the scale of world public opinion, we were on the level of barbarians. We were feared, but at the same time no one respected us. We were regarded as an evil power, the "evil empire." So our first task was to change this image at the psychological level. We had to get out of the corner into which we had been driven with respect to human rights, freedom to emigrate, Afghanistan, etc. But all we could do was snap at people, like a dog. There were demonstrations against us everywhere. Protest demonstrations greeted our foreign minister, who at that time was Gromyko, wherever he went. They were held practically every day in front of our embassy in Washington.

O.S. And what conclusion did Shevardnadze draw after analyzing the situation?

S.T. That we had to change the country's image, that we had to become a normal country. He drew this conclusion from the very beginning, without ever studying the situation. Soon after he was appointed he had to prepare for the Helsinki summit, where he met U.S. Secretary of State George Schultz for the first time. He had to go there with

something. At his meeting with Schultz, Shevardnadze read only what his assistants had prepared for him. He had to justify himself the whole time.

O.S. But the West, after all, was purposely causing anti-Soviet hysteria. And that's a fact you can't escape.

S.T. But we responded in kind. The West had significantly greater opportunities in this regard. Few people read articles published in *Pravda*. But the world read the *New York Times*, etc. The only people who read *Pravda* were Fidel Castro and Krishna Menon (Romesh Chandra?) from the World Peace Council, whose services we paid for. They were praised to high heavens in *Pravda*. Furthermore, Krishna Menon often outdid *Pravda* itself with his denunciations. He expounded the Soviet position better than the Soviet leaders themselves. But, of course, for a huge fee.

So we had to get out of the impasse in which the Soviet Union had found itself by the mid-1980's.

O.S. In other words, there was nothing positive awaiting Shevardnadze when he came to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1985?

S.T. Not exactly. But we were not in an advantageous position at the time. Starting with his very first trips abroad, Shevardnadze, who was met everywhere with protest demonstrations, was the first Soviet minister who began to speak with the protesters. Whether it was at the embassy in some country or near that country's ministry of foreign affairs, as soon as he saw pickets with placards like "Russians out of Afghanistan!" Shevardnadze would get out of his car, walk up to the picketers, speak with them, invite their representatives to the embassy, and spend a few hours with them. As a result, by early 1986 the demonstrations against us had already disappeared. In

other countries we encountered a public that was interested in the goals and plans of the Soviet minister's visit. The press also showed great interest. Thus, in the course of half a year, Shevardnadze had removed psychological antipathy toward our country.

O.S. So quickly? That can't be.

S.T. Yes, by spring of 1986 the situation had already improved.

O.S. At the same time there were improvements in maintaining propaganda on Soviet foreign policy?

S.T. It improved thanks to Shevardnadze. He appeared everywhere.

O.S. And he was not even a professional!

S.T. Exactly. For example, before his first visit to Japan in January 1986, Shevardnadze had never held a press conference. He was invited in Japan to give a speech at a large press conference. He agreed without hesitation. We were very nervous. But Shevardnadze calmly answered questions for two hours.

O.S. Were the Japanese shocked?

S.T. Forget the Japanese, we were shocked! Because before that not one of our ministers had ever been so open and, for the most part, honest. They would always evade every single question. Gromyko used to say things like: "That's a provocation! I refuse to answer that question!" But Shevardnadze answered every question, discussed it, and made various points. He conducted an intelligent conversation with people, acknowledging a particular position as mistaken or defending it. When a defense was possible, of course.

O.S. And the accomplishments of Shevardnadze's predecessor – how could they be put to use? Were there any ways in which our position was a little stronger?

S.T. No, we were on the defensive at every turn.

O.S. And what did Shevardnadze see as the main reason for that position?

S.T. To be honest, we didn't look for a reason. We determined that this was the position. We understood that there was a need to change the situation.

O.S. You wanted to change the situation quickly?

S.T. As quickly as possible. Besides, we also started speaking then for the first time about the need to change the tone of our discourse with the world to one that was more reasonable and measured. In other words, we thought that we had to do so, if not to rid ourselves of the legacy bequeathed to us, then at least to balance it in our favor with a new language, new approaches, a new image for the country, a new way of interacting with others. And as quickly as possible. We tried not to dismiss straight off everything the Americans proposed. The tone of our conversation started to change right away. We started talking like serious people concerned about the state of affairs, rather than tearing our opponent to pieces with some problem.

O.S. In your opinion, this approach was more realistic?

S.T. Not only more realistic, but the only one possible. Our position was such that, no matter what we said, no level of sophistication could save us. Afghanistan, for example. We could not stay there. It was like sitting on a powder keg. That is, there were situations that demanded fundamental political decisions. It was unlikely that anything would be accomplished by tone of voice, debate, and conviction. But there were dozens of other questions in which language was important, where you just had to smile.

O.S. So, in regard to our image, the turning point came in the winter of 1986?

S.T. Yes. We stopped being barbarians in the eyes of the whole world.

O.S. In your view, this was the main positive result of the initial period of Shevardnadze's tenure as minister?

S.T. Yes. We could have achieved this even quicker if Shevardnadze in his first speech at the U.N. in September 1985 had revealed the Soviet Union's new priorities. But back then Shevardnadze said: "It's early! We're getting ahead of ourselves. For now let's preserve the continuity." Nonetheless, at that time Gromyko was the formal head of state, the president. For that reason we paid him his due respect.

O.S. And did Gromyko himself attempt to meddle in Shevardnadze's activities in 1985 or 1986? Did he try to make any comments regarding the new line in Soviet foreign?

S.T. I can think of only one example. In 1987, the anniversary of the Soviet diplomatic service was observed. Naturally, the plan was to celebrate this anniversary in the spirit of Soviet times: awarding medals and prizes, a gala evening in the Columned Hall, etc. Gromyko forbade all of this. Why? Maybe he was jealous. I can find no explanation for his decision. He was still influential back then as a member of the Politburo. But he was such a small-minded person that he even passed up the eulogistic words that might have been said in his honor as the minister of foreign affairs, a post he held for some thirty years.

O.S. And did Shevardnadze want to mark the occasion?

S.T. Yes.

O.S. But who played the leading role at that time in foreign policy? Ultimately, Gorbachev, right? Did Shevardnadze abide by his wishes?

S.T. I can say, with the caveat that in this case I am not being objective, that ultimately Shevardnadze played the leading role. Gorbachev had a poor understanding of the outside world.

O.S. But Shevardnadze also had little contact with the outside world before 1985.

S.T. Shevardnadze knew a lot of what, in theory, he should not have known. In this regard his personal qualities, his education, and his level of sophistication play an important part. In my opinion Shevardnadze is a born diplomat.

O.S. And how would you respond to the statement that in foreign policy Gorbachev needed just a single person who was devoted to him personally, someone who would carry out his orders without questioning him, and that's why he chose Shevardnadze, who was ready to follow "Gorbachev's line"?

S.T. The only problem is that there was no "Gorbachev line." For a long time there was no line as such to speak of. He appointed a foreign minister and expected this minister to oversee this area.

O.S. In other words, Gorbachev gave Shevardnadze a great deal of room for maneuvering?

S.T. But there's one catch. Shevardnadze was experienced in everything that concerned Soviet reality. He knew that standing out from the crowd was frowned upon. So at the beginning Shevardnadze didn't make much of an impression. Maybe in private Shevardnadze and Gorbachev discussed certain issues. I don't know. But Shevardnadze knew how the system worked, and for him the most important thing from the beginning was to lure Gorbachev into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, so that Gorbachev would speak before the staff to explain our mission. In other words, he had to persuade

Gorbachev that his appearance before his colleagues in foreign affairs was important.

This became the first item on Shevardnadze's agenda.

Gorbachev had no understanding of foreign policy. But when it was time for him to give a speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, his assistants – Shakhnazarov and others – wrote the text of his speech. Shevardnadze himself surreptitiously slipped Gorbachev a few ideas. In May 1986, Gorbachev gave a speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

O.S. How much time passed after Shevardnadze's appointment?

S.T. A lot. If Gorbachev had anything to say about foreign policy, he would come to the Ministry after a couple days. I know that Shevardnadze spent a lot of time "working on" Gorbachev on the subject of his visit to the Ministry. But Gorbachev didn't have a particular desire to do that. According to Soviet tradition, such a speech should be accompanied by some important foreign policy initiative, so that it would make a big splash in the world. So Gorbachev's speech at the ministry was unusual: the KGB immediately confiscated the tape recording of his speech, no transcription was made, and I never saw this speech in written form. It was as if a secret speech of some kind had been given. The speech was published only after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

O.S. Why? What was so special about the speech?

S.T. I was present at the event and I can't say that I remember anything in particular. The only thing I remember is when Gorbachev spoke about how the old cadres dominated in the Ministry. I didn't like his speech at all. It was banal. There were no revelations.

O.S. Were you expecting more?

S.T. No, I was happy that Gorbachev said anything at all. But as a result of what he said, none of our activities were forbidden. True, as a specialist in U.S. affairs, I remembered Gorbachev's words that an "American abscess" had developed at the Ministry. He criticized the excessive focus on America and called for devoting greater attention to Europe and "Third World" countries.

O.S. What was the general mood at the Ministry? Were there people who were disappointed by Gorbachev's speech?

S.T. For the majority of workers at the Ministry, the most important thing was to get in to the speech. What Gorbachev was going to say didn't especially concern them.

O.S. One gets the impression that Gorbachev didn't have a clearly defined foreign policy program.

S.T. That's probably true. It's possible to make inferences. However, in the absence of a written text of Gorbachev's speech, and given people's poor memory, all we could do was allude to Gorbachev when additional foreign policy measures were being worked out. "In accordance with the tasks defined by Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev in his speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," etc. If you were writing a letter to military personnel, you'd refer to Gorbachev's speech. In general, that technique was characteristic of Shevardnadze. He used the authority of the speech so as to be able immediately to incorporate into policy those things that he wanted and that he supposedly got from Gorbachev's speech. The second time Shevardnadze employed this technique was during the Nineteenth Party Conference in the summer of 1988. Before the conference we did nothing to work out a theoretical conception of foreign policy. But as soon as the conference was over, in the two weeks after completing its work, we held a

scholarly workshop at the Ministry. Shevardnadze took an active part in planning it. It was precisely at this time that the beginnings of the “new thinking” arose, a new approach to issues in foreign policy. We turned away from the idea of class struggle and opposition to the West.

O.S. But by that time, of course, Gorbachev’s book, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World*, had come out.

S.T. That’s a shallow book.

O.S. In other words, your decisions at this Ministry conference were more radical than what Gorbachev had written a year earlier?

S.T. You won’t believe it, but we didn’t even read the book. I don’t even think that Shevardnadze read it. We preferred to read commentaries on it. So we couldn’t cull anything from this book.

O.S. It’s amazing that you didn’t find the word of the general secretary to be authoritative.

S.T. I didn’t, at least. For example, during the Geneva summit in 1985 I sat and wrote down Gorbachev’s words. He said things that were banal, and he spoke in a primitive way.

O.S. Were you very disappointed?

S.T. Yes. It just made me feel uneasy.

O.S. But before this your attitude toward Gorbachev was different: you harbored some kind of hope or enthusiasm?

S.T. We liked what Gorbachev said about the need for change. We were very clever and found in Gorbachev’s speeches phrases on which to base our actions.

O.S. So you had to read his speeches even more carefully!

S.T. Yes, we got what we needed by listening. But in Geneva we were ashamed of our leader. At long last we wanted a leader who was outstanding and brilliant, who would say smart things.

O.S. An intellectual?

S.T. Yes. I wouldn't say that Gorbachev was such an outstanding personality as compared with Gromyko. After all, Gromyko possessed solid command of his field.

O.S. But Reagan was also primitive.

S.T. Yes, the leaders in general weren't distinguished by their great intellects. The meetings with Schultz, Baker, and McFarland are another matter. In terms of intellectual content they surpassed the Gorbachev-Reagan talks. They are worth reading to see how people posed questions and how they were answered. In this context you can see both Shevardnadze and the interlocutor.

O.S. To put it more simply, Gorbachev immediately demonstrated his weakness as an intellectual, his lack of preparedness?

S.T. He is probably not without talent. But at the university he was the deputy party secretary. You know that people in such positions usually don't study.

O.S. But there are all sorts of leaders. Take, for example, Andropov or Bush. A completely different intellectual level.

S.T. As regards Bush, I wouldn't say that he was so brilliant.

O.S. But he was a little smarter than Reagan.

S.T. He had a different kind of education.

O.S. Returning to your impressions of Geneva, is it possible to say that for you it

was a sort of turning point? You expected more from Gorbachev?

S.T. Yes. I wanted to ascertain his level of education.

O.S. Getting back to Gorbachev's speech at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, why wasn't it published?

S.T. Either they were uncertain of its value, or they thought that Gorbachev had said secret things from which the "enemy" would be able to glean the direction of Soviet foreign policy. Maybe they thought that, since, as they believed, this was a speech announcing a new initiative, they would be revealing inside information, thereby violating confidentiality and giving the "enemy" additional knowledge. Maybe Gorbachev himself wanted the speech to be published but was convinced to let go of this plan. I can only guess.

O.S. Were you at the meeting at Reykjavik in 1986?

S.T. Yes.

O.S. How did Gorbachev conduct himself there? What distinguished this meeting from the previous one?

S.T. He was more active in Reykjavik. And the subject matter was more lively. Reagan was in a dreamlike state. He met with Gorbachev one on one; the only others present were the interpreter, N. N. Uspensky, and myself, as the person who arranged the meeting. On the American side, besides Reagan, there was Matlock and an interpreter. The plan was to explain the essentials of Soviet disarmament initiatives in the course of this very discussion. About five minutes after the conversation started, Gorbachev sees that Reagan is half asleep. Gorbachev then said to one of us that the ministers ought to be present, otherwise he would be speaking to no good purpose. After Reagan woke up and

consented to this, Schultz and Shevardnadze were called in. Then Gorbachev stated his initiatives. Schultz approved of them ardently. But when the leaders left to take a break, Richard Pearl, Kampelman, and Bert joined in the discussion. The two Richards – Pearl and Bert – played an especially important role. And then these two professionals infuse a sober spirit into the euphoria that Schultz experienced after familiarizing himself with Gorbachev's initiatives. They wouldn't allow any digressions into the area of SDI.

O.S. Why did Gorbachev emphasize SDI so much?

S.T. Because we were afraid of SDI.

O.S. But we had an answer to SDI. I heard about it from some former specialists in this area.

S.T. We had no such answer!

O.S. But SDI was unrealistic!

S.T. At this very moment it is being made a reality.

O.S. In your opinion, did the Soviet leadership take the SDI threat seriously?

S.T. At my level in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the idea was not taken seriously, because after reading literature with criticisms of SDI by scientists, I came to the conclusion that SDI was really just empty talk. But Gorbachev didn't read this criticism. The generals kept feeding him all this information about the threat of SDI.

O.S. As a result of Gorbachev's concern over SDI, the summit in Reykjavik was broken off.

S.T. I wouldn't say it was broken off. It's a good thing that it ended in an impasse. God forbid if some agreement had been reached about liquidating rockets. Then you would have seen a commotion. All of Europe would have resisted.

O.S. In your expert opinion, if we had signed everything that was proposed in Reykjavik...

S.T. ...it would have been a catastrophe.

O.S. So why were such proposals made?

S.T. Proposals are made without expecting that they'll be accepted. But Reagan is the kind of person who gets carried away. He first advocated the idea of a non-nuclear world. Of course, this was judicious idealism, since missiles posed the only serious threat to the United States. But Reagan's eyes always welled up with tears every time he started speaking about his dream of a non-nuclear world.

O.S. And did you try to use this romanticism of Reagan's to gain something that would be to our benefit?

S.T. Besides Reagan, who could abandon himself to all sorts of fantasies, there were also other members of the U.S. delegation. They quickly brought things back to reality. They didn't even allude to the president's words, but stuck to the official administration position. And any references to the president's words weren't considered. Only the official directives maintained by the U.S. Security Council were taken into account.

O.S. For Shevardnadze, did the United States remain an enemy in the international arena? Or was there a dramatic change in his personal attitude toward the United States?

S.T. After the Nineteenth Party Conference, when we were confronted with difficulties within the country, we were coming to the realization that we could also hold out for a while and even maintain our status as a great power, but only if we relied on the

United States. We felt that if we were to move two steps away from the United States, we would be thrown back. We had to stay as close as possible to the United States. Our policy toward Saddam Hussein was also a result of this understanding.

O.S. That point of view arose in 1988?

S.T. Yes, when our economic hardships began and when our policy of acceleration turned out badly. The United States had always sought to finish us off. At that time, the Americans would have calmly broken off relations if we had continued to behave in a confrontational manner. They had, after all, sought to pressure us to increase military expenditures to the breaking point.

O.S. What should the Soviet Union have done in 1988?

S.T. Adopt the position of a partner.

O.S. Weren't we already partners?

S.T. We were about as much like partners as football players from opposing teams. We should have followed a realistic political line. We had received money from the Americans, which we could have used in an intelligent way. In fact, we did away with the Jackson-Vanik amendment. U.S. trade policy with us started to loosen up.

O.S. We had no alternative to this course?

S.T. Only immediate surrender. We had to renounce communism right away, ban the Communist Party, call on American advisors to write us a new constitution, as they did in Japan, etc. That was our only alternative.

O.S. Were we doomed?

S.T. To the credit of our foreign policy, we quickly adapted. We made the transition to a position of political friendship with America before there were any

objective factors that made such a transition advantageous. We took advantage of having done things early.

O.S. In other words, we were in no position to maintain the *status quo* in our Cold War rivalry?

S.T. We had neither the strength nor the opportunity to do so.

O.S. Then how do you regard the point of view that says that the Soviet Union had the opportunity to continue its rivalry and preserve its position in the world?

S.T. Preserve what? Please be more specific.

O.S. For example, a military presence in Eastern Europe.

S.T. By that time our intentions in that region were irrelevant. We were driven out of there.

O.S. But we could have used the armed forces deployed in Eastern European countries for exerting political pressure.

S.T. It is our good fortune that we removed our troops from Eastern Europe before they could have gotten shot at. Another six months would have brought conflicts in Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Our military bases would have come under fire. And we would have had to bring our troops out of there anyway, but by that time they would have been under fire. I'll give you an example. In one of our conversations with the military commanders we asked them, "Will you be able to maintain troops in the West after the unification of German currency?" After thinking everything over carefully, the military commanders said that they didn't have the hard currency needed for maintaining our troops in Germany. I would add personally that in Honecker's time, in the 1980's, we suffered great hardships in maintaining our western forces.

O.S. It follows from what you're saying that in 1985 we were inevitably headed for the reefs and it was clear that the only thing we could do was soften the blow?

S.T. Turn away slightly and bring the ship to a sand bar rather than the rocks.

O.S. Then how does one respond to the opinion that the Gorbachev-Shevardnadze foreign policy was incompetent, hasty, and didn't consider geopolitics; that personality was confused with state interests, as in Gorbachev's relations with Bush and Shevardnadze's with Baker?

S.T. That's a silly point of view. You have to act on the basis of hard facts. In politics, hard facts mean state power, resources, and opportunities to exercise this power. With half the GNP, you can't compete as equals with the United States.

O.S. That is to say, if we could have maintained the status quo, we would have.

S.T. Yes.

O.S. And you and Shevardnadze would have been the first to champion that?

S.T. Of course. But because what was happening inside the country had little to do with foreign policy, was independent of it, even if our foreign policy had succeeded, we still would have collapsed. We would have maintained the façade but destroyed the back wall. When Gorbachev made a visit to somewhere, he would always say to Shevardnadze: "It would be a good idea to ask for some money." That started in 1989. How do you score a victory with so many losing positions? The only possibility was to lean on our rival and, from this position, even give him advice.

O.S. Did the Americans have a real notion of how weak we were?

S.T. They knew our real chances and never erred with regard to their chances of destroying us.

O.S. By economic means?

S.T. By military means, even.

O.S. Despite parity?

S.T. Despite parity. Later on they had the bright idea of switching the rivalry from the military to the economic sphere. Which is what they did.