

December 27, 1988

**Minutes of the Meeting of the Politburo of the
Central Committee of the Communist Party of the
Soviet Union (CPSU CC), (Excerpts)**

Citation:

"Minutes of the Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU CC), (Excerpts)", December 27, 1988, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Center for the Storage of Contemporary Documentation (TsKhSD), Moscow, fond 89, perechen' 42, dokument 24. Translated by Vladislav Zubok.
<https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/112478>

Summary:

Minutes of the Meeting of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU CC), (Excerpts) regarding the change of presidency from Reagan to Bush, defense issues and international opinion of the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

Top Secret

Single copy

(Draft record)

Meeting of the Politburo of the CC CPSU

27-28 December 1988

Chaired: Cde. M.S. GORBACHEV

Present: Cdes. V.I. Vorotnikov, L.N. Zaikov, E.K. Ligachev, V.A. Medvedev, V.P. Nikonov, N.I. Ryzhkov, N.N. Sliunkov, V.M. Chebrikov, E.A. Shevardnadze, A.N. Yakovlev, A.P. Biriukova, A.V. Vlasov, A.I. Lukianov, Yu. D. Masliukov, G.P. Razumovskii, Yu.F. Soloviev, N.V. Talyzin, D.T. Yazov.

1. About practical implementation and practical support [obespechenii] of the results of the visit of Cde. M.S. Gorbachev to the U.N.

Gorbachev. [...] We can state that our initiatives pulled the rug [out] from under the feet of those who have been prattling, and not without success, that new political thinking is just about words. The Soviet Union, they said, should still provide evidence. There was plenty of talk, many nice words, but not a single tank is withdrawn, not a single cannon. Therefore the unilateral reduction left a huge impression, and, one should admit, created an entirely different background for perceptions of our policies and the Soviet Union as a whole.

[...] Such impressive positive shifts created among the conservative part of the US political elite, and not only in the US, concern, anxiety and even fear. Thatcher also shares some of it. This breeds considerations of another kind, the essence of which is-to lower expectations, to sow doubts, even suspicions. Behind it is the plot to stop the process of erosion [and], disintegration of the foundation of the "Cold War." That is the crux of the matter. We are proposing and willing to build a new world, to destroy the old basis. Those who oppose it are in the minority, but these circles are very influential.

In the classified information which we receive they speak directly: we cannot allow the Soviet Union to seize the initiative and lead the entire world. [...]

What kind of policy will the US conduct with regard to us? There are several very interesting and serious versions. [...]

Here is one: changes in the policy of the USSR are caused by the profound crisis of communism and socialism and what is happening in the socialist world and the Soviet Union is allegedly a departure from these ideas. In other words we are dismantling socialism with our perestroika and renouncing communist goals. This version is used to devalue our peace initiatives. These are just forced steps, so they say, they do not have another option [im devatsia nekuda]. Well, there is some grain of realism in this, but only to a degree. We had something different in mind when we formulated our policy. Of course, we considered internal needs as well.

On the basis of this version comes the conclusion that the United States should do nothing on its part to consolidate positive shifts in international relations. The Soviet Union as well as other socialist countries, so they say have no way out. [The USSR] will give up its positions step by step. This is serious, comrades. The "Washington Times" writes about it. And the "Heritage Foundation" prepared recommendations for the future Bush administration along these lines.

And here is the viewpoint of liberal circles: The USSR is not renouncing socialism, instead it is rescuing it, as President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt once rescued American capitalism through the New Deal. They remind us that capitalism, in order to solve its

problems, many times borrowed socialist ideas of planning, state regulation, social programs based on the principle of more social fairness. So they do not want to allow the Right to play on their version and to devalue our peace initiatives. [...]

If this [conservative] version prevails, it will have a serious political effect. Incidentally, some elements of this concept are present in the thinking of [President-elect George H.W.] Bush. As if they are passing from Reagan to Bush. They are present in Western Europe: they say that under [US President Ronald] Reagan the United States has built up its military potential, activated their support to freedom fighters in various regions, and thereby convinced the Soviet Union that expansionist policy has no future. Some Europeans also want to consider the source of change of Soviet policy as American power.

This seems to be the most influential current. In essence it is close to the official viewpoint. Its danger [vred] is obvious, since, if it takes root and becomes the foundation of the policy of the future administration, it will contribute to the arms race and to military interference by the US in other countries. I am now following these things very closely. [...]

Now we should work out a longer-term plan of practical measures to implement the announced concept [at the UN]. On this issue the Politburo has received considerations from departments of the CC, the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Defense, and the Committee of State Security [KGB]. They provide a program of actions for the near and distant future. Perhaps this is still a first draft. We should pull our heads together and give it time.[...]

In what was discussed during the days of my stay in New York, the major issue was about the future of perestroika. And this I would like to emphasize before the Politburo. Could there be a reverse? Incidentally, this is the object of most intense speculation among the Far Right. [...] And if you analyze the content of recorded foreign broadcasts [by a special service called radioperekhvat] in languages of our country on all foreign stations, the emphasis is clearly on the difficulties of perestroika, on growing obstacles to the process in the economy, in relations among the nationalities, in the process of democratization and glasnost, etc.

When I had to stay in isolation [during the trip], I tried during those twelve days, day by day, to analyze and systematize the material on this score and to give my assessment. [Radio voices] are hammering away at the Soviet audience that perestroika is losing ground, grinding to a halt, that it has not given anything to the people, that in the leadership and the party chaos reigns, that the country is sliding toward chaos. And no matter what the leadership would undertake, it sooner or later will end up in a trap. And [that] the future of the present leadership hangs by a thread. To be frank, they say that Gorbachev is living through his last days. According to the most optimistic forecasts, he can have a year, a year and a half. True, Vladimir Alexandrovich [Kryuchkov]?

Kryuchkov. [Chairman of the KGB] People say many things.

Gorbachev. You do not want to speak up. It is so. I should not say that we are very surprised by all this. I do not want to be excessively cheerful [izlishnee bodriachestvo], but if they are upset, if they try to make these forecasts, it means that they are afraid of our perestroika. [...]

Of course, it is still premature to draw serious conclusions about the policy of the future administration, but something can be said on the basis of contacts and some information. First, it is hard to expect that this administration will aggravate relations with the USSR or will get involved in some risky international adventure [avantiura] that can undermine these relations. There seems to be solid ground for saying this. On the other hand, Comrades, I believe with full certainty that the administration is

not ready for a new serious turn in relations with the USSR which would correspond to the steps our side has undertaken. At least such is the picture today. So they say: we stay prudent, we will not hurry.

Still, at the last moment, when I managed to break away from Reagan [otortvatsia ot Reigana] I spoke to Bush about this indecisiveness. He snapped back: you must understand my position. I can not, according to American tradition, step up front until a formal transfer of power has taken place. This I understand, no question about it. We will have understanding. And he assured me—there will be continuity. He believes we should build on what has been achieved, and he will make his own contribution.

All that we have received through different channels says that, from their side, they will add to our efforts to develop our relations.

We should take into account that Bush is a very cautious politician. They say his idiosyncratic feature is the “natural caution” of Bush. It is inside him. We should see it. And what can make Bush act? Only [a threat] of the loss of prestige for the administration. So we need [these sort of] circumstances which we have now created by our initiatives to promote this process.

The mood of the present administration mostly reflects centrist sentiments in political circles of the US and Bush himself says: I am in the center. Most of those who today turn out to be in Bush's team are people who in America are called traditionalists. These people were brought up in the years of the Cold War and still do not have any foreign policy alternative to the traditional post-war course of the United States with all its zigzags to the Right, to the Left, even with its risky adventures. And we should understand it. And much will depend on how we act. I think that they [in the US] are still concerned lest they might be on the losing side, nothing more. Big breakthroughs can hardly be expected. We should produce smart policy.

[Georgi] Arbatov has just shared with the following ideas. They [the Americans] have suddenly sent a trial balloon: we are not ready, let's wait, we will see. In general, they will drag their feet, they want to break the wave that has been created by our initiatives. In response they heard that, of course, we could wait because we have much to do in other directions—Europe, Asia, Latin America. Then they say: Well, you misunderstood us.

So we should have a thoughtful, dynamic, practical policy. We cannot allow the future administration to take a protracted time out and slow down the tempo of our political offensive.[...]

Shevardnadze. [...] There is a draft resolution [on Point 1 of the Politburo agenda]. Of course, I do not consider it a final draft. We will have to work on it.[...]

It is not true that the draft [zapiska] has not been cleared with the Ministry of Defense. The reasons are well known: comrades were not in place, only Comrade Lobov was present and all these issues, all these points we agreed upon with him. We went to him, obtained his signature, etc. But this is not so important. I fear another thing. What, for instance, does the Ministry of Defense propose in its report? To present data to the Supreme Soviet only after the discussion by the Defense Council and the Politburo, etc. Should we do it, if we are getting ready for a new Supreme Soviet with a new status, new rights, new content and forms of its work? I believe it should not be done.

I have serious reservations about a proposal that the Supreme Soviet receive information only about the main lines of military build-up, and not the [actual] plans of this build-up as the draft suggests. This may result in the absence of any details in

discussion of this issue by the Supreme Soviet and in the same negative consequences we have already spoken about. Specific plans will continue to be adopted and implemented in secrecy [v zakritom poriadke] without the Supreme Soviet [s' approval]. We should not let this happen. It is absolutely unclear how the Supreme Soviet, without information about specific plans, will be able to consider seriously and approve defense expenditures. This is a very serious issue. It is also hard to understand the reasons for the objection against this clause of the [Foreign Ministry's Politburo draft resolution] where it says about a presentation for a plan and schedule of withdrawal of our troops from the territories of Allies and about its discussion with the friends.

As far as I know, a specific schedule of withdrawal has not been discussed at the Committee of Ministers of Defense [of the Warsaw Pact]. We should have such plans, to agree on them with the allies and to announce them publicly so that everybody knows about our firm intention to carry out what was stated at the United Nations, in a systematic, purposeful and orderly way. Otherwise, if everything is to be decided in a usual business order [v rabochem poriadke], as comrades [from the Ministry of Defense] write, we will become a target for allegations that we are trying to sidetrack the issue of withdrawal [from Eastern Europe] and troop restructuring [pereformirovanie] [and] to do everything contrary to what was announced from the pulpit of the General Assembly.

The following issue [in the proposals of the Ministry of Defense] is in direct contradiction to what was said at the [UN] session and to the clause of the [Foreign Ministry] draft resolution. I have in mind the formula of the Ministry of Defense that [Soviet] forces that will stay on the territory of the socialist countries after [unilateral] cuts should adopt a more, I stress, more defensive posture. These are just words but they have significance in principle. Cde. Gorbachev spoke about giving these forces a different, unequivocally defensive structure. An important and big difference. We will be caught by hand on every, so to say, detail. And now they tell us to speak not about structure, but about some kind of abstract direction. Behind this difference in terminology stands various methods of implementation of the General Secretary's address. In practice we should act in accordance with the speech at the U.N., so that will deeds would not diverge from the words.

I cannot agree either with the way the draft of the Ministry of Defense treats the issues of glasnost and openness, which are today of principled importance, of highest importance. When we carry out our unilateral steps, glasnost and openness would be maximized, in my opinion. Otherwise the desired effect will be lost, and, it seems to me, our policy will sustain a propaganda defeat. Our opponents will not hesitate to take us up on this and to sow doubts [to the effect] that the declared steps are not implemented in full.

[The military] proposes not maximum, but a permissible openness. What permissible openness means is not clear. Even more important [is] that even this permissible glasnost and openness is suggested to be applied only to the withdrawal of our troops from the territory of the Allies. As to the reduction measures on our territory, apparently no glasnost is permitted. This is, probably, wrong as well.

In general, my conclusion is that the amendments [to the Foreign Ministry draft proposed in the Ministry of Defense's] draft resolution, in particular to the military-political section, are designed not to allow genuine glasnost and openness. And I still believe that these issues are of great importance.

In conclusion, Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev], several words. You spoke about some informational reports...They want us to be nervous. And look at them, they are serious people, serious politicians...

Gorbachev. Yesterday in the morning [US Ambassador Jack] Matlock asked for a meeting with [Alexander] Yakovlev and arrived. He listened to a broadcast from Leningrad, engineered [inspirirovannuiu] by Comrade Soloviev [first secretary of the Leningrad Party Organization]. During this program chairman of the GDR government said that one should keep in mind the plots of imperialist intelligence services and their subversive activities against perestroika. Well, Matlock then said: "I have a special request from my leadership, both the current and the future one, to declare that we support perestroika."

Shevardnadze. You know, sometimes we help ourselves to blow up some foreign authorities. We found an analysis of this guy [former National Security Adviser Henry] Kissinger. Look what remained of his theory after your speech.

Gorbachev. Nothing remained.

Shevardnadze. If one says, another, second, third, we should not take it as absolute wisdom. I think we should treat it more seriously.

Gorbachev. We are used to the fact, that if, in our country, someone speaks up, then it is necessarily an official viewpoint. And there they just talk [boltaiat], you see. [...]

Gorbachev. When we discussed [alternative military service] at the Defense Council, and even considered it in the Politburo, we spoke about reductions of troops by five hundred thousand. Then, in order to resolve the issue [relating to the drafting of] students, we said: add to these five hundred another hundred thousand, to remove the issue of the enlistment of students, but let's continue talking everywhere about five hundred thousand. These five hundred [thousand] are straight army troops, and the one hundred [thousand] are construction troops. Eduard Amvrosievich [Shevardnadze] would like to announce the figure six hundred thousand, and I told him-no, because if we start comparing troop numbers, they will always poke their finger at the fact that these are construction troops, and we will insist that they are not. Therefore, officially we speak about 500 thousand.

Yakovlev. Yesterday I met with Matlock. He told me that Bush is more professional, better informed, but at the same time is more cautious. He tried to convince me that he always took part in the preparation of specific decisions, [that he] was interested in details, [that] knew many, that is: he cast the new president in the best possible light.

What else should we keep in mind in terms of putting pressure on the Americans? They are very afraid of our European and Pacific policies. They would not like to [have to] jump on [an already] departing train, a runaway train no less. They are used to being in the driver's seat. They are upset by our active foreign policy in other regions. [...]

Most importantly, Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev], you spoke many times about it, is the disappearance of the enemy image. If we continue to advance in this direction and carry out this business, we will ultimately pull the carpet from under the feet of the military-industrial complex [of the United States]. Of course, the Americans will be forced to change their approaches radically.

Yazov. In accordance with the decision of the Defense Council taken on 9 November [1988], the Ministry of Defense has already worked out the plans for withdrawal of troops from the GDR, CSSR, HPR [Hungarian People's Republic] and PPR [Polish People's Republic].

After your speech at the United Nations I attended a Party conference of the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. There was not a single question or provocative remark. Fourteen people spoke, all with approval. On Saturday I was at the conference in Kiev district of Moscow. There was a question: "Would the withdrawal affect preparedness for defense?" I answered. There were no more questions; everyone reacted with understanding. The entire armed forces of the country regard this with understanding. In the [session of the] Committee of the Defense Ministers that was held in Sofia, all ministers took it with understanding.

I believe we are ready to report to the Defense Council on our plans to implement those proposals that have been publicized at United Nations.

The Ministry of Defense does not object to publicity on the issues of military build-up in the Supreme Soviet. But according to the Constitution the Defense Council approves, so I believe that before moving them to the Commission of the Supreme Council, all the issues should be considered at the Defense Council. I do not know why Cde. Shevardnadze disagrees with this. Before Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] presented these proposals at the United Nations, this issue had been considered by the Defense Council and over here, in the Politburo. How could it have been otherwise? The Americans do not open [up] everything for us either. What we really learn from them we cannot buy for any money in the world. And why should we pass everything right away through the Commission of the Supreme Soviet? Today the Commission of the Supreme Soviet includes a very broad group [of people]. And not everybody should know everything.

Gorbachev. I think this is a misunderstanding.[...] There are many things that the Americans consider behind closed doors.

Yazov. Absolutely true.

Gorbachev. There are things that the Congress does not even consider. They can be done at the discretion of the President and the National Security Council.

Yazov. Now, on the formula about defensive direction, in his speech Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] really has mentioned cuts of 10 thousand tanks. In doing this, we have to touch on all the troops that are located in the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany. We have to include our tank divisions [in the reduction]. There are motorized regiments in tank divisions. We intend to preserve these motorized regiments. And to remove tank regiments from the tank divisions that stay in Germany, so that more tanks could be withdrawn. In this situation should we really reveal the entire structure only because we want more glasnost?

I believe that this is the prerogative of those countries that provide their territory for our troops. In any case, we will reveal what can be revealed, but it is not necessary to go all the way.

As to the schedule for withdrawal, we are ready to make a report about it. We propose to withdraw three divisions from Eastern Europe during this year and three divisions next year.

As to the part concerning the USSR and Mongolia, we are also prepared to report to the Defense Council on the schedule.

Ligachev. I would like to mention two or three circumstances...In a word, perestroika in international relations is very substantial. By the way it does not lose its class character, which was stressed by Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] in his report at the

19th Party Conference. At the same time we spoke, and justifiably so, about the priority of common human values, common human interests. I believe that if it were not for common interests of the countries that belong to different social-economic systems, there would be no unity in actions. A common interest exists apparently in the following directions. The huge burden of military budgets. It is felt by the world of socialism as well as by the world of capitalism. Issues related to the survival of humanity, ecological problems have become burning issues. All this, taken together, and above all our policy of initiatives, have led to some changes for the better.[...]

Foreign policy is a very large complex of issues. And most important among them, cardinal, is disarmament.[...] We need disarmament most of all. We carried this burden, with relation to the military budget, with the result that in the economic area we could hardly solve anything important.[...]

But this does not mean that we should weaken the defense preparedness of the country. We have enough ways, approaches, and means to reduce the excessively large military expenditures and to use rationally, pragmatically the means for strengthening the defense readiness of the country. We should tell this to the party, [and] to the party activists. Today, when the world has already begun to disarm, slowly but surely, in the final analysis, the power of the state will be determined not by military might, but by a strong economy and by political cohesion of society.

Vorotnikov. [...] I would mention only one point. You, Mikhail Sergeevich [Gorbachev] in your speech have emphasized the ambiguous approach to perestroika and the reaction by the capitalist circles, including the United States. But even in the socialist countries we run into serious problems.

Maybe in our draft resolution we should formulate directions of our policy towards the socialist commonwealth after all? Indeed, there is nothing in the draft, beside [the point about] telebridges that should be arranged together with socialist journalists. I consider the situation in a number of socialist countries so complicated [neprostaia] that we should in one or another document clarify our thinking. It flows from your speech.

Gorbachev. Comrades, let us call it a day. Our action that we have been preparing for so long and implemented has evoked a large amount of publicity. It elevates us to a new level in our thinking and work.[...] In general, I think that our resolution encompasses all these directions [political, diplomatic, ideological follow-up]. But the comrades should read it once again. Perhaps they will add something useful to it or suggest some corrections. [...]

I also have points to add. Vitaly Ivanovich [Vorotnikov] said that people ask within the country: how did it come about that we "strip down" independently? And Yegor Kuzmich [Ligachev] approached this theme from another angle: the Party should know. We will still keep it a secret, speaking frankly. And we will keep this secrecy for one reason: if we admit now that we cannot build a longer-term economic and social policy without [unilateral cuts], then we will be forced to explain - why. Today we cannot tell even the Party about it; first of all we should bring about some order. If we say today how much we are removing for defense from the national revenue, this may reduce to naught [the effect] of the speech at the United Nations. Since such a [disastrous] situation does not exist in any other country. Perhaps only in poor [nischenskikh] countries, where half of their budget goes to military spending.

Shevardnadze. For instance, in Angola.

Gorbachev. Yes. But there the budget and everything is different. We are talking about another story. If we take this [glasnost approach] now, then [people] will tell

us: your proposal is rubbish, you should cut your military expenditures by three-fourths. How do we go about it, comrades? First, in our plans we build in military expenses twice as large as the growth of national income, then our national income turns out to be going down the tubes, but we stick to our military plans. So you should [be able to] figure out [prikinte] what is going on here. For that reason we should be patient for a little bit longer. But you are all right—we will have to speak about it. Meanwhile only in a political sense.[...] By the time of 13th Five-Year Plan, Yuri Dmitrievich [Masliukov] we will implement all these decisions and will have something to say. Then our expenditures on this article [defense] will be somewhat closer to the American expenditures.

[...] A lot of work should be done on the issue of our [military] grouping in Eastern Europe. We should do it in a systematic way [planomerno]. I know that all these proposals are being prepared for the Defense Council. We agreed to hold it in early January and to discuss all these issues. [...]

[...] See that younger officers do not develop a [negative] mood: is it worth continuing military service, continuing to be in the army. This should be prevented, comrades. ... A country like ours cannot live without [an army]. Everything depends on many factors. I believe that whatever happens we should modernize the army. Incidentally, the army is needed for the maintenance of internal stability. This is an important tool in every sense. That is it.

Let's finish our exchange. It was necessary. It is really a grand-scale policy-making. I propose to instruct Comrades Shevardnadze, Zaikov, Yakovlev, Yazov, V.M. Kamentsev to finalize the draft resolution of the CC on this issue having in mind the discussion at the Politburo.

MEMBERS OF THE POLITBURO. Agreed.

[Source: Center for the Storage of Contemporary Documentation (TsKhSD), Moscow, fond 89, perechen' 42, dokument 24. Translated by Vladislav Zubok.]