

August 23, 1990

**Record of a Conversation of M. S. Gorbachev with
President of Afghanistan Najibullah**

Citation:

"Record of a Conversation of M. S. Gorbachev with President of Afghanistan Najibullah", August 23, 1990, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Gorbachev Foundation, Moscow. Provided by Anatoly Chernyaev and translated by Gary Goldberg for CWIHP <https://wilson-center-digital-archive.dvincitest.com/document/117254>

Summary:

Gorbachev and Najibullah discuss the instability in the Soviet Union following perestroika reforms, and the comparatively quiet situation in Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Soviet troops.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from Leon Levy Foundation

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

M. S. GORBACHEV. Cde. Najibullah, I welcome you to Moscow. I hope that your rest in our country has gone well.

NAJIBULLAH. I am genuinely thankful to our Soviet friends for the attention shown me and my family.

I took it with special appreciation that you, Mikhail Sergeyevich, found an opportunity to receive me for a conversation in spite of your enormous workload. I know at what a strenuous pace you have to work at the present time and therefore I highly appreciate your agreement to this meeting.

M. S. GORBACHEV. In fact, today our country is undergoing an exceptionally critical period of its development when it has to make such big decisions and when the future of Soviet society has to be determined. All this requires an enormous mobilization of forces and total commitment. In a word, the load is great. Possibly in some respects it is now quieter in Afghanistan than here.

Evidently those problems which we are deciding can justly be called problems of growth. If you consider them from today's positions then they, of course, cannot fail to cause serious concern. However, from the point of view of the future and ultimate objectives it could hardly be expected that in such an enormous country as the Soviet Union deep revolutionary changes and the reconstruction of all facets of life could occur smoothly and painlessly.

I will say openly: the first-priority issue today is to stop the further development of crisis phenomena and keep the state of affairs in its present form. Otherwise the situation will deteriorate further. The Soviet people and the leadership of the country understand this well and are experiencing it. It is clear that the only way out of the present situation is to move the cause of perestroika forward. But everything here is not so simple.

As is well known the practical implementation of perestroika was preceded by discussions around this idea and development of the theory and practice of perestroika. When perestroika was discussed at the level of theory then everyone greeted it as an important and urgent step on the path to the renewal of society. But the realization of the policy of perestroika has touched all spheres of public life - the government, the Party, the army, personnel, etc. and has exposed socioeconomic problems and problems of inter-ethnic relations which had accumulated over the years.

The task before us at the present time is to do everything necessary to stabilize the socioeconomic situation. This would permit us to remove tension and create conditions to gradually come to a solution of other problems through corresponding phases. Right now two central questions are on the agenda - acceleration of economic reform and transition to a market [economy], and preparation of a union treaty. In concentrating on these fundamental political problems we of course are in no way forgetting about the need to satisfy the needs of the people in food, housing, restoring [navedeniye] proper order, and ensuring discipline in the area of material production.

It needs to be noted that the political situation in the country is quite acute. Opposition forces speculate much about current difficulties although they propose nothing new. Some of them advocate "capitalization", which our people would never do. The Soviet people support the idea of a transition to a regulated market, that is to a market which would open the way to efficient labor, enterprise, and initiative, while preserving social justice.

In my speech in the Odessa Military District I touched especially on those problems which worry our entire country today.[\[1\]](#)

NAJIBULLAH. I have carefully familiarized myself with your speech.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Now attempts by certain forces are being noted at using the discussion about means for fundamental reforms of the economic system to cancel everything that has been done up to this time. However it is clear that reliance on leftist radicalism and war communism has not stood the test of time and history. At the same time this does not quite mean that a conclusion follows from this about a crisis of socialism. Our own rich, accumulated experience allows us to see the goals and continue moving with conviction toward a revolutionary renewal of society within the framework of the socialist choice we have made considering the achievements of world civilization, the Twentieth Century first and foremost.

The coming months will clarify much. Questions of the type "will the current leadership hold onto power?" are now already being tossed about, even in the newspapers. We are convinced power needs to be retained at whatever cost. If others came to power it would put the country through serious trials. For in this case a possible alternative is that matters would lead to a dictatorship.

I am confident that the choice we have made is the correct one. But we need to remove socioeconomic tension and bitterness as quickly as possible. That is why I have considered it necessary to cut short my rest in order to deal with all matters in real earnest.

Yesterday we discussed issues associated with economic reform, the transition to a market, and preparations for a union treaty with a group of comrades for six hours. Today, at the request of N. I. Ryzhkov, I have to meet with members of the Presidium of the USSR Council of Ministers. Right now approaches to solving the most immediate, medium-term, and long-term problems are being worked on.

As you see, our meeting takes place at a very difficult time. I want to note that we are churning our relations with Afghanistan quite a bit. With all our own difficulties we hold Afghanistan and the solution of the Afghan problem in our field of vision constantly for we view the fate of Afghanistan as a part, an important part, of perestroika.

As the development of events shows, in spite of all its efforts the Afghan opposition is not managing to secure the realization of its planned goals. Differences and internecine conflict in the enemy camp are intensifying. All attempts to unite its uncoordinated forces have ended unsuccessfully.

As far as I know the situation in your country as a whole is quiet and all primary transportation arteries are functioning. The leadership headed by the President and the government and Party bodies are working actively. In our view the holding of a Party congress and the adoption of decisions important for the fate of the country was a timely step. The renaming of the Party to "The Fatherland Party" symbolizes, it seems, its readiness both in policy and in practice to collaborate with all national forces.

All this confirms the analysis which we made together back in the fall of 1985 when perestroika was proclaimed. I want to especially note your personal service and great role in this context. It is also important to travel further on the planned path and not lose one's bearings and give way to defeatist sentiments. I include both you and myself in this completely.

I know that you have already been informed of the results of Eh. A. Shevardnadze's conversation with US Secretary of State J. Baker in Irkutsk.^[2] We have formed the opinion that the Americans are beginning to better understand the realities of present-day Afghanistan. Such a conclusion can be drawn in particular from the fact that long ago they advanced a demand that President Najibullah renounce power as a preliminary condition for beginning an all-Afghan dialogue and starting the process of forming new bodies of power and holding elections. Now, such conditions are not raised, although President Najibullah himself has declared his readiness to renounce power for the sake of Afghanistan if, of course, the people want this.

The impression is being created that the Americans are actually concerned with the danger of the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. They think, and they frankly say this, that the establishment today of fundamentalism in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran would mean that tomorrow this phenomenon would encompass the entire Islamic world. And there are already symptoms of this, if you take Algeria for example.

But the Americans were and will remain Americans. And it would be naïve if one permitted the thought that we see only this side of their policy and do not notice other aspects. It is clear that the US is not opposed to fundamentalism becoming the banner of 40 million Soviet Muslims and creating difficulties for the Soviet Union. They object only to it affecting their own interests. The US also approaches East European issues in a similar fashion, trying to tie them to the West. Of course, they would also like to see the Soviet Union weakened.

As regards the process of a political settlement of the Afghan problem I note that the RA government is operating from active positions here both inside the country and in the international arena and trying to make the negotiations process more active.

In spite of our own difficulties and problems and all the changes inside the country we, of course, considering all of these circumstances, will continue the policy of supporting the Afghan leadership and developing cooperation with Afghanistan. I think that today we are right to talk about collaboration, keeping in mind existing opportunities you have for this.

Another position with regard to Afghanistan - if, let's say, the present Soviet government were to leave Afghanistan to its own fate - it would not be understood in our society, although, of course there are people who think otherwise. These are assorted populists, etc.

NAJIBULLAH. Chairman of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet Yeltsin publicly came out for halting aid to Afghanistan.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Yeltsin speaks like "an old, broken record" always and everywhere. He has two themes in all: first, "the bad Center is guilty of everything" and second, "take everything in your own hands and do it yourselves". In a word, a latter-day anarchist who, it is true, cannot be compared with [Russian revolutionary agitator and political writer Mikhail Aleksandrovich] Bakunin, an eminent figure of our history.

I will try to include Yeltsin in the real process of perestroika but I do not know whether this can be done. Nevertheless, efforts in this direction continue because in the present conditions of our society the unresolved status of various problems, even such ones, also ricochets on the President. I think that either this phenomenon itself will go up in smoke or Yeltsin will be restructured and join the work. There should not and cannot be a place in politics for personal resentments and ambitions, especially when the fate of a country is being decided, although it needs to be admitted that affection and goodwill between its members have a certain importance for the

effective workings of any leadership.

NAJIBULLAH. Before beginning an analysis of the military and political situation in Afghanistan permit me to cordially congratulate you, Mikhail Sergeyevich, on your re-election as CC CPSU General Secretary. The Afghan people know you as their true friend, a consistent fighter for peace and security in the entire world, including in Afghanistan, and as an eminent political figure of modern times who enjoys the deserved respect both in the Soviet Union and among the world community.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Thank you for your congratulations.

I would like you in the course of the analysis of the military and political situation to also give your assessment of the changes in Pakistan's position after [Pakistani Prime Minister B[enazir] Bhutto was removed from power.][\[3\]](#)

NAJIBULLAH. As is well known, the Geneva Accords regarding Afghanistan are a good basis for achieving a political settlement and establishing peace in our country. But if Afghanistan and the USSR honestly observed the agreements which were reached, the other parties to the agreements have traveled another road. As a result the scale of aggression and interference in the affairs of Afghanistan has not decreased but has begun to increase.

In the process of facing armed pressure from the Afghan opposition independently the RA government has managed not only to frustrate their plans to seize power in the country but to demonstrate convincingly its vigor and vitality. Having suffered defeat in combat operations at the front the enemy made an attempt to undermine the Party and government from within and attain their goal by organizing a military coup. The failed plot of former Minister of Defense Sh[ahnawaz] Tanay was a link in a chain of military confrontation between the government and the extremist part of the opposition.[\[4\]](#)

As a whole, the situation around the country is entirely satisfactory. Combat operations are being mainly waged in provinces bordering Pakistan and several other regions. However, as before, the enemy is subjecting Kabul and administrative centers to missile bombardment and artillery shelling. Nevertheless, the process of normalization of the situation is gaining strength. Particular evidence of this is that almost 2/3 of the field commanders have ceased armed combat.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Are they simply maintaining neutrality or are they participating in social, political, and economic activity?

NAJIBULLAH. In crossing to the side of the government they join various armed formations or take part in peaceful activity.

Thanks to the aid of the Soviet Union we are managing to completely solve the problems of supplying the population with essentials at a satisfactory level and to maintain economic activity. Only recently as a result of the delay of Soviet deliveries have there arisen difficulties in the supply of fuel and grain. I am confident that these are temporary difficulties which will be soon eliminated with the aid of Soviet friends.

As regards the state of affairs among the Afghan opposition, it is characterized by a continuing exacerbation of differences among them, and a deepening of the split between the Alliance of Seven in Peshawar and the Shiite organizations based in Iran. We are trying to use this situation to expand our contacts with various opposition forces, in particular with Afghan emigrants in Europe and first of all with the circle of

former King Zahir Shah.

M. S. GORBACHEV. The extremist part of the opposition, as far as is known, has a quite negative attitude toward Zahir Shah.

NAJIBULLAH. We think that in any case the extremists will not participate in a political settlement. Indecisiveness in combat operations against the government of Afghanistan and internal differences among the various groups of the opposition have led to even Pakistan becoming disappointed in their creation - the so-called "transitional government of Afghan mujaheddin". All this is also increasingly influencing the mood of the Afghan refugees, who are beginning to more insistently demand their return home.

M. S. GORBACHEV. How many refugees are outside Afghanistan?

NAJIBULLAH. The total number of refugees is 5-5.5 million, including about 3 million in Pakistan, up to 1.5 million in Iran, and 1 million in other countries.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Part of the refugees will obviously not return to the country.

NAJIBULLAH. Of course, it's mainly the Afghan emigrants in Western countries who will not return. However the overwhelming majority of refugees live in exceptionally difficult conditions and therefore they will return home.

In a word, the situation is gradually developing in our favor. The RA government holds the political and military initiative in its hands which permits it in the final analysis to confidently count on the opposition entering into talks. We have traveled a considerable portion of the road. A small sector lies ahead, but it is the most difficult part.

It seems that the Americans understand the present-day realities of Afghanistan well. As has become known, for example, in a report of the Special US Representative to the Afghan Mujaheddin P[eter] Tomsen it frankly talks about the inability of the opposition to achieve the goals it has set and about the stability of the government of Afghanistan. Moreover he proposed the US Congress hold off on refusing to support the mujaheddin, motivated by the fact that the Soviet Union, under pressure of their own domestic problems, will "be forced to cease aid to the Afghan government".

M. S. GORBACHEV. The US would like to attain much else [by] exploiting our difficulties.

NAJIBULLAH. It is completely obvious today that we were forced to wage armed combat since the war was imposed on us by enemies. However, for all this, we remain adherents of the policy of national reconciliation and are taking diligent practical steps to implement it. It is sufficient in this connection to list those measures which have been implemented by the government in recent months, namely: the cancellation of the state of emergency; the formation of a new government headed by a figure unaffiliated with a party, F. Khalek'yar; the changes made to the country's Constitution; and a number of decisions directed at developing private enterprise, attracting foreign capital to the country, etc.

The second congress of the Party, held after a 26-year interval, renamed the PDPA the "Fatherland Party" and adopted a new party Program and Charter. The congress was held in an atmosphere of unity, glasnost, and democracy and confirmed that the overwhelming majority of Party members favor deepening the policy of reconciliation, and dialogue and collaboration with other political forces of society. But it needs to be

admitted there are also others who are opponents of national accord. True, there are few of them, and they have no importance.

At the present time we are working actively on implementing decisions adopted by the Loya Jirga and the Party congress. Preparations are underway for a national referendum and elections will be organized in accordance with the results.

After Sh. Tanay's unsuccessful coup the state of affairs in the armed forces of Afghanistan improved notably. The morale and fighting spirit of the personnel are strengthening and coordination of activity between the three branches of the armed forces is increasing. In spite of all negative predictions in the spring and summer period Afghan troops carried out a number of successful operations in Jalalabad, in the Paghman District of Kabul Province, and in other regions. In the last four months the Towraghondi-Kandahar, Kabul-Gardez, and Kunduz-Takhar roads were again opened for transport traffic.

The government of the country, the capabilities of which are limited for well-known reasons, has begun to work actively.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Events have confirmed the correctness of the joint conclusion we reached about the need for such a government in which prominent people unaffiliated with a party will work.

NAJIBULLAH. Of the membership of the current government 17 were educated in Western countries, two in Egypt, one in Turkey, and six in the Soviet Union. I think that even US President G. Bush could not suggest a better government make-up for Afghanistan.

M. S. GORBACHEV. A good argument which Eh. A. Shevardnadze will be able to use in subsequent conversations with the Americans. Actually, whom could they suggest? Hekmatyar?

By the way, how is the institution [institut] of governors working?

NAJIBULLAH. Quite effectively. Moreover, we have started to expand their authority. In a number of cases the administrative and territorial division was reexamined and new administrative units were created in order that the governor be first of all acceptable to the population which lives in this territory.

Returning to the theme of the work of the government I will note that without the aid of the Soviet Union it would scarcely have been able to deal with the problems facing the country. I will say openly that voices are heard ever more frequently in Afghanistan that supposedly President Najibullah and the Party say they are in favor of a coalition but in fact are not interested in one. In this regard a reason is advanced as an argument that when the government was formed by the Party its activity was provided every manner of support. However as soon as the government was headed by an unaffiliated person it encountered enormous difficulties in its work.

If we glance at the history of relations between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union then we will again be convinced that they are based on the firm foundation laid by V. I. Lenin and Emir Amanullah and have deep roots. Even in the difficult years of the Civil War Soviet Russia gave Afghanistan aid after they restored their independence. In turn, Afghanistan helped the Soviet Union in the '20s and '30s in the fight against basmachestvo^[5] and in the Second World War they did not permit their territory to be turned into a springboard for fascist aggression against the Soviet people.

From the middle of the '50s Soviet-Afghan collaboration actively developed in an increasing direction. Many in Afghanistan really saw and felt that the preservation and deepening of good-neighborly relations with the Soviet Union had great importance for the future of our country. From that time they tied themselves to the Soviet people forever with bonds of friendship and sympathy.

After the 1978 April [Saur] Revolution and especially in the years that Soviet troops were in Afghanistan our countries reached an exceptionally high level of cooperation and collaboration. And although the leaders of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan have courageously recognized the errors of the decision to deploy Soviet troops, a considerable part of the Afghan public nevertheless remains devoted to the ideals of friendship with the USSR and, as before, associates their aspirations with your country. In the conditions of a difficult military and political situation in Afghanistan when there is no longer support from Soviet troops, they closely follow how the attitude in the Soviet Union is developing at the present time toward events occurring in Afghanistan.

Obviously these people represent a considerable force in present-day Afghanistan and are right to think that the Soviet Union bears a certain moral responsibility that its loyal friends be secured a fitting place in the future structures of state power in Afghanistan. Naturally, certain biased assessments of Afghan events recently appearing in the Soviet Union cannot fail to concern your friends, against whom similar statements are being used.

I am convinced that past mistakes should in no account overshadow the reality and the actual state of affairs, which is more and more developing in favor of the RA government. The government of Afghanistan is acting aggressively and in solidarity and holds the political and military initiative against a background of various collapsing opposition alliances. We think that in the next two-three years we will be able to achieve a decisive breakthrough in the cause of complete normalization of the situation in the country. The Afghan government firmly intends to go forward along the path of political settlement and national reconciliation but it will be practically impossible to realize these goals without the support and aid of the Soviet Union.

As it seems, our enemies - the Afghan opposition, Pakistan, and the US - have still not shown their cards to the end. I agree with you that they are interested in strengthening the positions of Islamic fundamentalism not only among the peoples of Soviet Central Asia but among all Soviet Muslims. Equivalent retaliatory actions will be required to disrupt similar plans and here, in our view, the interests of the Soviet Union and Afghanistan closely overlap.

I have prepared several ideas regarding the further development of bilateral economic collaboration and a number of specific requests for aid for the remainder of 1990 and in 1991. If you agree I could discuss these issues in detail with N. I. Ryzhkov or [USSR Minister of Shipbuilding] I[gor] S. Belousov.

In recent years the Soviet Union has invested many men and much material in Afghanistan and made considerable sacrifices for the Afghan people. Therefore to refuse Afghanistan aid right now, as some figures in the Soviet Union propose, would be a betrayal of those who fought in Afghanistan who have done so much in the name of our friendship, including warriors who are still captives of the Afghan armed opposition.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Neither the past, nor the future of Afghanistan gives anyone the right to approach such issues superficially, on impulse, and deprive the Afghan people of the opportunity to fight for a new Afghanistan. It is also impossible to disregard the common border of almost 2,500 km. between our countries.

NAJIBULLAH. I repeat the idea I told you, that the present economic difficulties of the Soviet Union are the problems of a transitional period and problems of growth. I am confident that the efforts of the Soviet leadership in the very near future will turn the development of the situation around in the direction of an improvement.

As regards Afghanistan, then we are already prepared for mutually beneficial collaboration with the Soviet Union, although in insignificant amounts for the time being. In no way are we interested in the Afghan people being perceived simply as a consumer and nothing more. And, all the same, for the next two-three years the development of the situation in Afghanistan will as before depend to a large degree on your policy .

Some words about Pakistan. As is well known, Pakistan is an artificially created country within whose boundaries they have tried to create a single nation on a common religious basis.

M. S. GORBACHEV. R. Gandhi, too, gave such an assessment.

NAJIBULLAH. Pakistan can be compared to a boiling kettle which is full of various contradictions and antagonisms - religious, national, and ethnic. In order to keep this "kettle" from exploding Pakistani leaders are trying to let off the "steam" of public dissatisfaction, diverting the attention of their people to problems of an external nature. At one time it seized upon the Afghan problem eagerly and actively heated it up. At the present time the Kashmir issue has become a safety valve.

For decades the military has decided and dictated the policy of Pakistan. And even after B. Bhutto came to power the policy of the Pakistani administration regarding Afghanistan remained unchanged: it was only sort of dressed "in civilian clothes." Nevertheless, right now when Pakistan is allied [zaangazhirovan] with Saudi Arabia in connection with the conflict in the Persian Gulf and when Pakistani-Indian relations have sharply heated up, it's evidently possible to expect some slackening of attention by Pakistan toward the Afghan problem.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you, Mikhail Sergeyevich, for the constant attention to Afghanistan and the support and aid which the Soviet leadership and all the Soviet people are giving us in our efforts to achieve peace and stop the war in Afghanistan.

Everything that I said about the importance of Soviet assistance to those Afghan forces which have tied their fate to Afghan-Soviet friendship in no way means that I am concerned about my personal well-being. I assure you that I am ready to sacrifice not only my post but even my life in the interests of Afghanistan and the interests of our friendship.

M. S. GORBACHEV. The truth is that neither President Najibullah nor Gorbachev need much. The main thing are the interests of our peoples and governments.

I thank you for the interesting and well-reasoned analysis of the military and political situation in Afghanistan. I follow the development of events in Afghanistan closely but I consider it quite useful to supplement and deepen my impressions with the view of the Afghan leadership.

I completely share your ideas about the interests of Afghanistan and the Soviet Union coinciding in strategic terms. I add to this that during the ten years of close collaboration our countries have experienced a drama together and sealed the bonds

connecting the peoples of the two countries with blood. The duty of the Afghan and Soviet leaderships is to protect and develop the good traditions of relations between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan based on the coinciding interests and existing foundations of friendship. These should determine the specific content of our policy and its application.

Indeed, in present conditions the aid of the Soviet Union to your country can and should have another nature and be implemented in a different scale. In this context we note your statements about the possibilities of giving bilateral collaboration a mutually beneficial character. Obviously we need to move forward in this direction. In a word, there are all the prerequisites for continuing collaboration between our countries, helping Afghanistan finish the great cause it has begun there and preserve the long-standing friendship between the Soviet and Afghan peoples in the future. I stress again - we are not in favor of a discontinuance but in a normal development of relations.

In this connection I welcome your desire to meet with I. S. Belousov with whom you can discuss specific issues of Soviet-Afghan collaboration.

We will also continue our support in terms of advancing a peaceful settlement of the situation in and around Afghanistan. This is urgently needed so that the cause to which we have given so much is successfully concluded in the interests of our countries.

EH. A. SHEVARDNADZE. Cde. Najibullah, we would like to suggest to you that you speak on national television or meet with representatives of the Soviet press. I think that such a speech of yours would be useful, considering the great interest in Afghanistan in our country.

NAJIBULLAH. I will use this opportunity with pleasure.

EH. A. SHEVARDNADZE. Cde. Najibullah, in connection with your upcoming visit to India we think it important that you try to bring the Indians to some specific agreements, for example, in the area of economics.

NAJIBULLAH. I agree with your ideas, although to be sure, I think that it will be difficult to do this. The Indian side, proceeding from their own interests in connection with Kashmir, is stubbornly trying to involve Afghanistan in opposing Pakistan but it is not trying very eagerly to give specific support to settling the Afghan problem.

M. S. GORBACHEV. Concluding our conversation I would like to note that the exchange of opinions was exceptionally useful, in my view. The main thing is that we wound our political clocks, figuratively speaking.

I wish you success in your work for the good of the Afghan people.

[1] Gorbachev gave a speech in the Odessa military district on 17 August 1990.

[2] The meeting between Shevardnadze and Baker took place from 31 July - 2 August 1990 in Irkutsk.

[3] Benazir Bhutto was forced to resign in August 1990.

[4] In 6 March 1990 Defense Minister Lt. Gen. Shahnawaz Tanay, with the alleged support of the air force and some divisions of the army, leads an unsuccessful coup

attempt against Najibullah's government.

[\[5\]](#) "Basmachestvo" is the term for the anti-Soviet nationalist movement against Soviet rule in Central Asia during this period.