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Meeting between Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping (Excerpts)

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Summary:

Gorbachev and Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping discuss Sino-Soviet relations as well as relations with the United States.

Credits:

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Russian

Contents:

- English Translation

[Deng asked whether I [Gorbachev] remember his message, passed through the Romanian president three years ago. At the time he proposed to meet with me, if the “three obstacles” to Sino-Soviet normalization were overcome. I said that I valued this step appropriately, that the message stimulated our thinking, which also went in the same direction.]

Deng Xiaoping: I must say that your first public statements gave an impulse for this question to be raised. In the situation of the “Cold War,” of a many years of a confrontation, the relevant problems were not appropriately resolved. The situation in the world remained tense. Frankly speaking, problems of Soviet-American relations remain the central questions of international politics. [...]

In your speech in Vladivostok I saw the opportunity of reaching a turning point in relations between the USSR and the USA. One could see a clear possibility to move from confrontation to dialogue. The possibility of lowering the “temperature” in the world situation manifested itself. This would fulfill the aspirations of the entire human kind. A problem arose before the Chinese people: could Sino-Soviet relations improve? Moved by this motivation, I passed a message to you. After three years, we finally met.

Gorbachev: you raised the “three obstacles,” therefore one needed three years, so to speak, a year for each obstacle.

Deng Xiaoping: Now we can officially declare that Sino-Soviet relations have been normalized. [At this point [Gorbachev and Deng] shook hands].

Today you will have a conversation with the General Secretary of CC CCP Zhao Ziyang. This means that relations between our parties have also been normalized.

Gorbachev: I think that we can congratulate each other with the normalization of relations between our countries. I share your views about the state of the world. Relations between the USSR and the USA, the USSR and the PRC, the great powers, and the international situation in general, are entering a new course. When looking at the key problems of the present-day, at the problems of world socialism, you and I have discovered a large number of coincidental moments, therefore it was possible to start the movement towards each other.

Deng Xiaoping: I would like to say a few words about Marxism and Leninism. We have studied it for many years. From 1957, from the meeting of Communist parties in Moscow, until the first half of the 1960s, our party had sharp polemics on this question.

Gorbachev: I remember very well the discussion, which you conducted with Suslov.

Deng Xiaoping: As one of the participants in this polemics, I, one can say, played an important role in it. Almost 30 years have passed since then. Turning one’s sights to the past, one should say that many words, which were then being said by both sides, turned out to be empty.

Gorbachev: I can’t judge [and] I will take your word for it. I share your thought but 30 years did not pass in vain—we were able to figure many things out. And our commitment to socialist ideals did not lessen from this; by contrast, we rose to a new level of comprehension of socialism.

Deng Xiaoping: I agree. More than 100 years have passed since the time of the birth of Marxism. Big changes happened in the world, which prompted the creation of new conditions in different countries. And even Marx would not have been able to answer all the questions, which came up after his death.

Gorbachev: Now we study Lenin’s legacy more attentively, especially the works that relate to the period after the establishment of the Soviet power. He changed [and] corrected his views.

Deng Xiaoping: I associate myself with your statements. But Lenin, too, would have been unable to give answers to all questions, to foresee the emergence of specific problems. And no one has the right to expect it from him. Modern Marxists must continue to develop Marxism-Leninism taking into consideration the specific conditions.

Gorbachev: I value this part of our conversation. It gives us the opportunity to discover coinciding elements in the appraisal of Marxism, in the views towards socialism. This will help us better appraise the processes which are occurring in our countries, develop policy from scientific positions, work out a scientific attitude towards the world that surrounds us.

Deng Xiaoping: I would like to stress again that the situation in the world is constantly changing. Science is developing rapidly, one can say that one day of the present-day is equal to several decades and even centuries in the ancient society. He who cannot develop Marxism-Leninism taking into consideration the new conditions is not a real Communist. Why do we say that Lenin is a great Marxist? Because he, basing himself not on books but on logic and philosophy, realized the October revolution in one of the most backward countries. And the great Marxist Mao Zedong also did not borrow the templates of Marxism-Leninism in the task of the revolution and construction. But China, too, was a backward country. Could Marx have foreseen that backward Russia would have the October revolution? Could Lenin have foreseen that in China the revolutionary struggle, in the course of which the strategy was adopted to encircle the city by the countryside, would be crowned with complete success? In general one can say that a conservative, routine approach can only lead to backwardness.

Gorbachev: Our every step forward comes with difficulty. The changes are taking place painfully. It seems that it is already clear that there is no one model of social development, which had been approved by some world center. Nevertheless, the current leadership is suspected of a revisionist sin. Undoubtedly, the current stage of development has great significance for socialism. The future of our countries depends on how we will be able to adapt ourselves to new challenges.

Deng Xiaoping: Therefore, I can formulate the following conclusion: our two countries consider it necessary to take into account their own concrete conditions in the task of the construction of socialism. There is no ready-made model of any kind.

Gorbachev: In this we can state our complete agreement.

Deng Xiaoping: I know that you are also in favor of expressing the meaning, the point of our meeting through the 8-character formulation, which, in Russian translation, mean: "to close the past, and open the future."

Gorbachev: In this we can state our full mutual understanding. We have accepted this formula and also believe that one should draw a line under the past, turning one's sights to the future.

Deng Xiaoping: How can one close the past and open the future? Let's do it this way: after this meeting of ours we will no longer stir the past. But now I would like to touch on this topic.

Gorbachev: I think that after all it would be better to speak more about the present and the future.

Deng Xiaoping: Yes, indeed, the main emphasis should be placed on the future but it would be incorrect if I did not say anything today about the past. I will express the point of view of the Chinese side. This does not mean that our point of view has attained general recognition. Each side has the right to express their own point of view.

Gorbachev: Fine.

Deng Xiaoping: Now I would like to express my thoughts on two issues: first, to touch on the question of the losses, inflicted on China by a number of powers, and, second, to say from where China was threatened in the last thirty years.

Then [Deng Xiaoping] named, among countries who inflicted damage on China, first and foremost Great Britain and Portugal, because they first occupied the Chinese territory, created concessions, captured Aomen (Macao). He spoke at length about the losses inflicted by Japan, tsarist Russia, which obtained the largest gain from China, and about the Soviet Union. With this he had in mind that Russia, up until the October revolution, had a sphere of influence in Northeastern China, centered on Harbin. And in general, [Deng Xiaoping] stressed, Russia, through unequal treaties, received more than 1.5 million square kilometers of Chinese territory. And already after the October revolution, in 1929, the Soviet Union captured the islands on the Amur and Ussuri rivers near Khabarovsk].

When in 1954 there was a Soviet delegation in China headed by Khrushchev (Bulganin and Mikoyan were part of it), the Chinese question turned to them with the question: isn't it the time to solve the question of Mongolia? Khrushchev responded then that one should work with the Mongolian comrades on this question. In our understanding such a response in practice meant a refusal to solve the problem. This way, Outer Mongolia, which is now called the Mongolian People's Republic [and] which occupies 1.5 million square kilometers, was separated from China.

In the 1950s the main danger came from the USA. During the Korean War China, in essence, entered into a direct scuffle with the United States. Of course, we remember that the Soviet Union helped up by supplying weapons. But we paid for these supplies at a 50% discount. In the [19]60s the situation in the Soviet-Chinese relations sharply changed in the direction of aggravation. The Soviet Union increased military construction in the region of the Sino-Soviet border, built up the military contingent to one million people. The number of missiles increased here, having reached one third of the missile arsenal of the Soviet Union. Under these conditions, we, naturally, made the appropriate conclusion from where the main danger to China came. During those years Nixon and Kissinger visited China.

I would like to note that approximately 30 years ago, or, to be precise, in 1960, I visited Moscow at the head of a Chinese delegation. It was then that the split occurred between our countries. The question is not in the ideological differences. We were also wrong. If you are interested in it, you could look at the protocol record of the conversation, in particular, at my speech. It is not common to give titles to such speeches, but if one penetrated its content, then one can see that its main theme was that the Soviet Union incorrectly perceived China's place in the world.

I, like you, do not like to make speeches looking at notes. And in those years I spoke without a text in front of me. But I would like to stress that the essence of all problems was that we were in an unequal situation, that we were slighted and oppressed. In spite of all of this, we well remember that in the [19]50s the Soviet Union helped China in the creation of the industrial base.

I expressed my point of view. Let us not talk about it anymore. Let us think that I spoke out, and forgot what I had said. The main aim is to close the past and open the future. I only expressed my views in order that the Soviet comrades better understand the Chinese side.

Gorbachev: I would like to briefly state my point of view on this question. Probably your statements are not indisputable after all with regard to how relations developed between tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union on the one hand, and China on the other. We see them differently. With regard to some things, especially in the recent past, we feel a certain culpability and responsibility on our part. As for the remote past, this already belongs to history. How many changes have happened in many lands! How many states have disappeared, and new ones have appeared! This is a historical process, accompanied by a movement of peoples and by changes of territorial characteristics.

History cannot be re-written; it cannot be remade anew. If we took the road of restoring past borders on the basis of how things were in the past, which people lived on which territory, then, in essence, we'd have to re-draw the entire world. This would lead to a world-wide scuffle. The principle of the inviolability of borders gives stability to the world [and] saves it. We base ourselves on the realities.

The generation to which I belong was brought up in the spirit of friendship with China. In the years of its struggle against the Japanese aggression, we were on its side.

Deng Xiaoping: As far as the historical questions are concerned, I touched on them in order to put an end to them. Let the wind blow away these questions. And after our meeting we will not return to this topic again. Let us consider that we expressed our opinions. This was just a narrative. Let us also consider that the past is over with.

Gorbachev: Good. Let's put an end to this.

[Gorbachev asked about concrete steps for future development of Sino-Soviet relations in political, economic, scientific and cultural spheres].

Deng Xiaoping: With the normalization of relations—and we believe that your visit means normalization of relations along the state and party lines—contacts and ties between our countries will grow, and the tempo of their development will be high.

[Gorbachev spoke about the importance of resolving the Cambodian problem. Deng agreed that new opportunities will appear for this, now that the two countries will cooperate. But, he said, "only the Soviet Union can influence Vietnam].