

**Mikhail Gorbachev**

## US Military an 'Insurmountable Obstacle to a Nuclear-Free World'

Interview Conducted by *Joachim Mohr* and *Matthias Schepp*

**In a SPIEGEL interview, former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev discusses morals and politics in the nuclear age, the crisis in Russian-American relations and his fear that an atomic weapon will some day be used.**

**SPIEGEL:** Mikhail Sergeyevich, during your inaugural speech as general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in March 1985, you warned of nuclear war and called for the "complete destruction of nuclear weapons and a permanent ban on them." Did you mean that seriously?

**Gorbachev:** The discussion about disarmament had already been going on for too long -- far too long. I wanted to finally see words followed by action because the arms race was not only continuing, it was growing *ever more dangerous* in terms of the number of weapons and their destructive capacity. There were tens of thousands of nuclear warheads on different delivery systems like aircraft, missiles and submarines.

**SPIEGEL:** Did you feel the Soviet Union was under threat during the 1980s by the nuclear weapons of NATO member states?

**Gorbachev:** The situation was that nuclear missiles were being stationed closer and closer to our adversary's borders. They were getting increasingly precise and they were also being aimed at decision-making centers. There were very concrete plans for the use of these weapons. Nuclear war had become conceivable. And even a technical error could have caused it to happen. At the same time, disarmament talks were not getting anywhere. In Geneva, diplomats pored over mountains of paper, drank wine, and even harder stuff, by the liter. And it was all for nothing.

**SPIEGEL:** At a meeting of the Warsaw Pact nations in 1986, you declared that the military doctrine of the Soviet Union was no longer to plan for the coming war, but rather to seek to prevent military confrontation with the West. What was the reason behind the shift in strategy?

**Gorbachev:** It was clear to me that relations with America and the West would be a lasting dead end without atomic disarmament, with mutual distrust and growing hostility. That is why nuclear disarmament was the highest priority for Soviet foreign policy.

**SPIEGEL:** Did you not also push disarmament forward because of the financial and economic troubles facing the Soviet Union in the 1980s?

**Gorbachev:** Of course we perceived just how great a burden the arms race was on our economy. That did indeed play a role. It was clear to us that atomic confrontation threatened not only our people but also all of humanity. We knew only too well the weapons being discussed, their destructive force and the consequences. The nuclear catastrophe at Chernobyl provided us with a rather precise idea of what the consequences of a nuclear war would be. Decisive for us were thus political and ethical considerations, not economic ones.

**SPIEGEL:** What was your experience with US President Ronald Reagan, who many saw as a driving force in the Cold War?

**Gorbachev:** Reagan acted out of honest conviction and genuinely rejected nuclear weapons. Already during my first meeting with him in November of 1985, we were able to make the most important determination: "Nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought." This sentence combined morals

and politics -- two things many consider to be irreconcilable. Unfortunately, the US has since forgotten the second important point in our joint statement -- according to which neither America nor we will seek to achieve military superiority.

**SPIEGEL:** Are you disappointed in the Americans?

**Gorbachev:** So many decades pass, but unfortunately some things do not change. Already back in the 1950s, President Dwight D. Eisenhower stated the problem by its name. The power of the military-industrial complex continued to be enormous under Reagan and his successor George Bush. Former US Secretary of State George Shultz told me a few years ago that only a conservative president like Reagan could have been in a position to get the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty through the Senate. Let's not forget that the the "Zero Option" that Reagan himself proposed (*eds. note: the proposal to remove all Soviet and American intermediate-range nuclear missiles from Europe*) had many opponents in the West. They considered it to be a propaganda stunt and they wanted to thwart Reagan's policies. After the Reykjavik summit in 1986 (*eds. note: the subject of the summit between Reagan and Gorbachev was nuclear disarmament*), Margaret Thatcher declared: We won't be able to handle a second Reykjavik.

**SPIEGEL:** Did you really believe at the time that you could achieve a world free of nuclear weapons?

**Gorbachev:** We not only proclaimed a nuclear weapons free world as a major goal -- we also named concrete interim goals. In addition, we aspired to the destruction of chemical weapons and are now close to achieving that goal. Limiting conventional weapons was also on our agenda. That was all inextricably linked to a normalization of our relations. We wanted to move from confrontation to cooperation. We achieved a lot, which shows that my approach was completely realistic.

**SPIEGEL:** Many accused you of using your demand as a tactic to present the Soviet Union as a peace-loving country.

**Gorbachev:** No, there was no propaganda at play and it was not tactical. It was important to get away from the nuclear abyss our countries were marching toward when they stationed hundreds of intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Europe.

**SPIEGEL:** Why were the negotiations over intercontinental ballistic missiles so much tougher than those over intermediate-range missiles?

**Gorbachev:** In Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986, Reagan and I not only established the framework for eliminating intermediate-range missiles, but also for halving the number of intercontinental missiles. But Reagan was up against strong resistance from the hawks in the US administration. This continued under Bush, so, in the end, we only finally signed the treaty in summer 1991. With the strategic long-range weapons there were also technical questions. And then we also had the problem with the missile defense.

**SPIEGEL:** You were unable to convince Reagan to abandon his SDI project, which aimed to create a defensive shield against nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles. Did that upset you?

**Gorbachev:** Reagan wanted it no matter what. That's why in Reykjavik we weren't able to turn our agreements on intercontinental missiles and intermediate-range missiles into treaties. In order to break the impasse, we offered the Americans concessions and uncoupled the negotiating package. We agreed on a separate treaty addressing the intermediate-range missiles. Reagan and I signed it in Washington in December 1987.

**SPIEGEL:** The stationing of American intermediate-range missiles led to mass demonstrations by the peace movement in Germany ...

**Gorbachev:** ... and Helmut Kohl then played a very positive role in the establishment of the treaty with the elimination of the Pershing 1A missiles.

**SPIEGEL:** The nuclear warhead belonged to the Americans, but the missiles were German. Kohl declared that the missiles could be destroyed if the US and Russia came to an agreement on the destruction of the intermediate-range missiles.

**Gorbachev:** If Kohl had not dispensed with them, we would not have signed.

**SPIEGEL:** Was there actually resistance to your disarmament policies within the Soviet ruling elite?

**Gorbachev:** Every member of the leadership at the time understood the importance of disarmament. All the leading politicians had experience and a sober view of things. Just think about Foreign Minister Andrei Gromkoy ...

**SPIEGEL:** ... who had the nickname "Mr. Nyet" in the West because of his hardline negotiating tactics ...

**Gorbachev:** ... but like all the others, he understood how dangerous the arms race was. At the top, we were united at the time about ending it.

**SPIEGEL:** How did disarmament treaties materialize under your leadership?

**Gorbachev:** The Soviet Union had a strict and clear system for the preparation of politburo decisions. They happened through the so-called Five, a committee made up of representatives from relevant agencies and experts. We took into consideration the positions of our negotiating partners without jeopardizing the Soviet Union's state security. The politburo weighed proposals and then issued directives to our negotiation delegations and also to me, the general secretary and later president, for summit meetings. That happened prior to Reykjavik in 1986, Washington in 1987 and other meetings. The politburo, in turn, fell back on proposals from experts, which it then reviewed and discussed.

**SPIEGEL:** Can the goal of a nuclear free world still be achieved today?

**Gorbachev:** It is the correct goal in any case. Nuclear weapons are unacceptable. The fact that they can wipe out the entirety of civilization makes them particularly inhumane. Weapons like this have never existed before in history and they cannot be allowed to exist. If we do not get rid of them, sooner or later they will be used.

**SPIEGEL:** In recent years, a number of new nuclear powers have emerged.

**Gorbachev:** That's why we should not forget that the elimination of nuclear weapons is the obligation of every country that signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty. Though America and Russia have by far the largest arsenals at their disposal.

**SPIEGEL:** What do you think of the oft-cited theory that mutually assured destruction prevents nuclear wars?

**Gorbachev:** There's a dangerous logic in that. Here's another question: If five or 10 countries are allowed to have nuclear weapons, then why can't 20 or 30? Today, a few dozen countries have the technical prerequisites to build nuclear weapons. The alternative is clear: Either we move toward a nuclear-free world or we have to accept that nuclear weapons will continue to spread, step by step, across the globe. And can we really imagine a world without nuclear weapons if a single country amasses so many conventional weapons that its military budget nearly tops that of all other countries combined? This country would enjoy total military supremacy if nuclear weapons were abolished.

**SPIEGEL:** You're talking about the US?

**Gorbachev:** You said it. It is an insurmountable obstacle on the road to a nuclear-free world. That's why we have to put demilitarization back on the agenda of international politics. This includes a reduction of military budgets, a moratorium on the development of new types of weapons and a prohibition on militarizing space. Otherwise, talks toward a nuclear-free world will be little more than empty words. The world would then become less safe, more unstable and unpredictable. Everyone will lose, including those now seeking to dominate the world.

**SPIEGEL:** Is there a risk of war between Russia and the West over the crisis in Ukraine?

**Gorbachev:** We have reached a crossroads in relations between America and Russia. Many are already **talking about a new Cold War**. Talks between both powers over important global problems have practically been put on ice. That includes the question of nuclear disarmament. Trust, the very capital we

worked so hard to build, has been destroyed.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you believe there is a danger of nuclear war?

**Gorbachev:** I'm very worried. The current state of things is scary. The nuclear powers still have thousands of nuclear warheads. Nuclear weapons are still stationed in Europe. The pace of reducing stockpiles has slowed considerably. We are witnessing the beginning of a new arms race. The militarization of space is a real danger. The danger of nuclear proliferation is greater than ever before. The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty has not entered into force, primarily because the Americans did not ratify it. This would have been extremely important.

**SPIEGEL:** Do you think Russia will once again begin to use its nuclear capabilities as a bargaining chip in international relations?

**Gorbachev:** We have to view everything in context. Unfortunately, formulations have reappeared in the nuclear powers' military doctrines that represent a relapse to the language that predated the Soviet-American declaration of 1985. We need a new declaration, probably from the United Nations Security Council, that reasserts nuclear war as inadmissible -- it knows no winners.

**SPIEGEL:** Isn't a world without nuclear weapons just a nice dream?

**Gorbachev:** No matter how difficult the situation is, we must not fall into resignation or panic. In the mid-1980s, there was no shortage of people who thought the train to atomic hell was unstoppable. But then we achieved a lot in very short space of time. Thousands of nuclear warheads were destroyed and several types of nuclear weapons, such as intermediate-range missiles, were disposed of. We can be proud of that. We accomplished all that together. It should be a lesson for today's leaders: for Obama, Putin and Merkel.

**SPIEGEL:** Mr. Gorbachev, we thank you for this interview.

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