

May 16, 1989
**Excerpts from Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev
and Zhao Ziyang**

Citation:

“Excerpts from Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Zhao Ziyang,” May 16, 1989, History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Mikhail Gorbachev, Zhizn' i Reformy, Vol. 2 (Moscow: Novosti, 1995), pp. 441-445
<http://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/119290>

Summary:

Zhao Ziyang and Gorbachev discuss political and economic changes ongoing in China.

Credits:

This document was made possible with support from the MacArthur Foundation and the Leon Levy Foundation.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

- English Translation

[...]

Zhao Ziyang: You probably know that Deng Xiaoping, beginning from the Third Plenum of CC CCP, which took place in December 1978, has been leader of our party, generally recognized as such inside the country and beyond its borders. In spite of the fact that at the 13th Congress in 1986-1987 he, at his own wish, left the ranks of the CC [Central Committee] and the Standing Committee of the Politburo CC CCP [Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party], all our party comrades know that they cannot do without his leadership, wisdom and experience. At the first Plenum, elected by the 13th Congress, a fairly important decision was made—that in all big questions we should turn to him as to a leader. This decision was not published but I am informing you about it today.

Gorbachev: Thank you for your confidence. It is gladdening that inter-party contacts immediately reached such a level. As a result of the talks with Deng Xiaoping we accepted the formula, which he also put forward previously: look openly to the future, and as for the past, to draw a line under it.

[The two discuss inter-party cooperation. Zhao speaks in favor of exchange of ideas between the CCP and the CPSU, even though each country has its own specifics].

Gorbachev: [...] And now, when the processes of democratization have unfolded, everyone is a panic. He who falls behind loses—this was confirmed by our recent elections. But those who have turned to the people, sensed the necessity of changes, turned out to be capable of acting under the new conditions. [...]

Zhao Ziyang: [...] Of course, the students look at many things naively, simplistically. They think that no sooner do they put forward a slogan that the party and the government will be able to solve all problems within one day. Now one can sense a shortage of mutual understanding between party and state institutions on the one hand, and youth and students on the other. We do not fully understand their mood; they do not fully understand us. Four generations of people live in the country, and there must be mutual understanding among them. I belong to the second generation, the students—to the fourth, and Deng Xiaoping—to the first.

Gorbachev: We generally face the same problems; we, too, have hot heads. That said, many of them are good people, committed to the task of renewal of socialism. People are worried about the course of the perestroika, by the fact that someone is holding this process back, places obstacles in its path [vstavliaet palki v kolesa]. And we see that in many respects they are right. For us, the forces of inertia, torpor and conservatism have proven to be very resilient.

Zhao Ziyang: Here we speak the same language with you. I think that at the present time the socialist movement has really entered a decisive stage. Many young people are asking: who has the advantage now, socialism or capitalism. The youth has a hard time imagining the degree of backwardness of pre-revolutionary China or of old Russia. Besides, even under the socialist regime, mistakes of subjective nature were made. In China—on the part of the leadership of the CCP. After the Second World War many countries underwent political and economic reforms, which softened internal social and class contradictions. China, however, for a long time held on to the old models, to the system, which has outlived itself, which was implemented in the USSR after the October revolution, when it was in the capitalist encirclement and became afflicted by the military intervention.

The advantages of socialism can manifest themselves only through reforms; only they can increase its attractive force. Now we have to respond to the challenge made by capitalism. We have no other way out, no other weapon but to walk the road of reforms.

There are even such people who consider that Marxism has outlived itself. Of course, I disagree with this point of view. But if Marxism is unable to answer questions, which arise in the

world, in the capitalism and in the socialist countries, if it cannot provide a theoretical explanation for them, then truly it has outlived itself. Therefore it is necessary to develop Marxism in accordance with the developing situation, one needs new theoretical and conceptual approaches. I was told that in the morning you and Deng Xiaoping already discussed this question. I am glad that you have a unity of views with respect to this [question].

Gorbachev: I welcome your last statement in many different respects. If we do not draw appropriate lessons from the experience of the past, it will be difficult for us, and the further, the more so. Have Marxism and socialism been defeated? I would say that what was defeated was the dogmatic views of socialism, of its role and prospects.

Formerly, if anyone uttered the word "reform," he was immediately numbered among the opportunists. True, there were many opportunists, too. But if we are raising the question of reforms, then what is it—opportunism, revisionism or revolutionary theory and practice? I think the second.

Zhao Ziyang: I also think that reform is simply necessary for moving forward. This is the only way. At the same time, its realization is a difficult task for us. China has been conducting the reform of the economic system for ten years. During this period we attained great successes. One can say with confidence that the current face of China is to a great extent different from the face of the past. Reform is developing along all directions. Now we face the difficult question about the role of the law of value under the circumstances of public ownership of the means of production. It cannot work without the market. When limiting prices for the majority of goods, one cannot even talk about implementing the law of value. But if we remove these restrictions in the conditions of the deficit of goods, it will be difficult to control the scale of the high prices. This is exactly the consequence of the old economic system, of the deficit economy.

These are difficult but interrelated questions. We used to approach them simplistically. But now we consider that solving them is a long process. You, comrade Gorbachev, spoke out in favor of exchange of opinions between our scientists. I am also for cooperation of our scientists, especially in the questions of economic theory. China has held many meetings with Western specialists. But, in my opinion, it would be more important to organize exchange of views between specialists of the socialist countries, especially of those which are undergoing the process of reform.

[Gorbachev talks about the importance of political reforms. Zhao Ziyang says that China should also avoid a large difference in the pace of economic and political reforms. He says that the 13th Congress already that political reforms were mentioned in the work of the 13th CCP Congress, and that the Chinese were interested in separating party and government functions].

We do not intend to take things towards creation of a new party system, analogous to the one in the West, where parties replace each other in power. We have other historical conditions, other practice; no party is capable of replacing the CCP. Besides it, there are eight other democratic parties and groups. We consult with them, mutually control each other, but the Communist party has a leading and directing role. [...] Will the one-party system be able to provide for the development of democracy, will, under it, one be able to implement effective control over negative phenomena, fight corruption, which has a place in party and state institutions? [...]

[I]n China there is great interest and attention towards political reform in the Soviet Union. It is especially drawing the attention of the intelligentsia, which is demanding that China learns from you, takes on your experience. We have an institute, whose students passed a letter to the [Soviet?] embassy with the request to listen to your speech on the subject of "Political reforms in the USSR." [...]

I paid attention to your formulation about the legal socialist state. This is very useful to us. We thought about it. In my opinion, there is also the question of complete independence of the judiciary. If the relevant laws are developed, will the judiciary have the right of the last word?

Gorbachev: I think one should go towards exactly this. If the judiciary is democratically formed, if it is composed of truly respected, authoritative persons, if they are placed highly enough in legal and economic terms, and if, finally, mechanisms are created, which would guarantee the mutual control of the entire system, then there would be confidence that such a judiciary would make the right decisions. [...]