SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Subject: Marshal Sergei F. Akhromeev

Position: Personal National Security Advisor to President Gorbachev
Chief of the General Staff, 1984-1989; First Deputy Chief of the Soviet General Staff, 1979-1984; Chief of the Main Operations Directorate of the General Staff, 1974-1979

Location: Akhromeev's Office in the Kremlin (Room 409)

Interviewer: John G. Hines

Date/Time: March 5, 1990, 2:30-3:30 p.m.

Language: Russian

Prepared: Based on notes

Marshal Akhromeev promised by telephone in the morning to meet me at 2:30 p.m. during a recess of the Congress of Peoples Deputies which was in session. (He was a deputy representing Moldavia). The Congress had an unscheduled meeting in the afternoon but the Marshal broke away and kept his appointment as promised.

Comment: This exchange was taken up largely with getting acquainted and with recent events such as his resignation in late 1989 from his position as Chief of the Soviet General Staff.

Akhromeev opened the discussion with a question about where I had studied the Russian language. I explained my education and long-standing interest in Soviet affairs, my training and service as a U.S. Army Signal Officer in Germany and Vietnam, and subsequent mid-career intensive education in Russian language and Soviet affairs. I explained that I had studied advanced Russian at the U.S. Army Russian Institute in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany. He smiled knowingly. I volunteered that I understood that the Soviet military considered Garmisch a "spy school." He smiled more broadly and corrected me, "No, not a spy school, a military intelligence school. There is a difference."

I accepted his correction, assured him that I was not an intelligence branch officer but had studied the Soviet Union for many years. I explained that I now wanted to understand better the extent to which U.S. and Soviet leaders and analysts had understood or misunderstood each other during the Cold War to help avoid repetition of such a prolonged and dangerous confrontation. He accepted the objective as worthy but clearly was still struggling with the process of ending the Cold War.

Given his disposition, I asked him about the Fall 1989 Soviet announcement of unilateral reductions of 1/2 million men and rumors that he had resigned as Chief of the General Staff[1] in protest. He responded deliberately and clearly. First, he said, the analytical work on which the cuts were based had been under way in the General Staff for

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[1] General Staff will be either spelled out or abbreviated as GS throughout the interviews.

months before the decision was taken and the findings were consistent with his sense of what was necessary. Second, he retired because he was physically no longer up to the work and long hours. He said he had submitted his resignation on September 6, but stayed on for several more weeks at Gorbachev's request. Hence, his resignation occurred within a few days of the announcement of the unilateral force reductions.

Because time was running out, I asked him to what extent, in his two decades of experience on the General Staff, did operational and strategic planning as well as force planning rely on analysis and modeling for determining requirements. He responded that many groups did modeling and analysis which did contribute in some way to such decisions. This was more true in the mid-1970s and later. Many other factors, however, went into such decisions.

I asked if we could meet again, to which he readily agreed and I asked him if he could recommend an officer or officers with whom I should speak to better understand the analysis underlying Soviet strategic decisions. He thought about the question for some time and then responded that General-Colonel Korobushin had been very much involved in the process and could be very helpful.

I thanked him and said I had a small gift for him. He smiled but said that, as a government official, he couldn't accept gifts. I explained that it was a box of chocolates for his wife. He graciously accepted the gift and repeated that he would happily meet again but had to hurry to return to the congressional session.

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Interviewer: John G. Hines

Date/Time: February 8, 1991, 4:00-5:30 p.m.

Prepared: Based on notes

By the mid-1970s, both the U.S. and USSR had established the technically advanced command and control systems needed to give them confidence in central control over nuclear weapons. From the early 1970s to 1986-87, the General Staff focused on ensuring absolute control over nuclear weapons to prevent any unauthorized use by having the missile arsenal "in hand" [*v rukakh* - he gestured as if holding the reins of a horse] through strong C^3 systems. These efforts, by the mid-1970s, led to stability, which greatly reduced the likelihood of nuclear use. He said he believed the U.S. also had the necessary technical control over nuclear weapons only in the mid-1970s. Until then, there was a higher risk of an error on both sides.

In the European TVD[2] from 1972-87, the balance was good. The Soviets had a high level of readiness but were non-threatening. Akhromeev was very distrustful of U.S. intentions until he had the opportunity actually to meet his American counterparts on the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1988. The first and several subsequent meetings reassured him that the joint chiefs were thoughtful and responsible people. The mutual understanding that came from face-to-face discussions helped to create a fairly stable situation in Europe. The intentions ascribed for many years by each side to the other were incorrect.

What caused much tension in the General Staff were the many U.S. air and naval bases encircling the USSR, and the listening posts surrounding the USSR, as well as the constant use of air reconnaissance along the Soviet borders. This is how the Korean airliner got shot down.

The increased readiness of both sides usually was prompted by distrust. Each side made a tremendous misreading of the other side's intentions, which led to a greater possibility of accidental strikes. Nonetheless, there was not a very great danger of war during the period 1970-87.

At no time did the USSR ever intend to make first use of nuclear weapons. In a military sense, the side that attacked preemptively would win, but in practical terms

[2] TVD — *Teatr voennykh deistvii* — Theater of (Strategic) Military Action, for example, Central Europe from Ukraine to the western shore of Ireland.

neither side would win. Even to the General Staff it was clear that nuclear weapons were not really military weapons but were political tools.

In 1962, the USSR could not respond massively to a U.S. attack. Only in the late 1960s did the USSR acquire the capability to respond, which provided some stability. Neither side could consider selective nuclear use until the 1970s because technology and control systems before that could not support limited nuclear options (LNO).

In the early 1970s, within the military leadership, even the more conservative generals' understanding of nuclear weapons had matured to the point that they believed that nuclear weapons had no real military utility. Once a nuclear balance was established then deterrence [*sderzhivanie putem ustrasheniia*] was true of both sides. Solution of the question of control at the strategic level left unresolved the problem of positive control of nuclear weapons at the tactical level. By the late 1970s, both sides essentially had solved the question of control of tactical nuclear weapons.

Nuclear use had to be avoided if at all possible. Preemption was technically not even possible until very recently. In any case, the decision would take so long to make that the USSR would be stuck with a responsive strike.

[KGB defector] Oleg Gordievsky's revelations about the RIaN [*Raketno-Iadernoe Napadenie*][3] crisis of 1983 were self-serving falsifications. I'll explain why. There is the KGB over here [he placed an imaginary box on the table to his right] and the General Staff over there [he gestured far to his left]. The CIA is here [he gestured to my left] and the Joint Chiefs of Staff–The Pentagon–over here [on my right]. The KGB and CIA have more in common and more exchanges than do the General Staff and KGB. We in the General Staff probably would not brief a KGB officer on such secrets, especially if he was being posted to a Western embassy. Gordievsky did not know what the General Staff was doing. He told such stories to improve his standing in the West. War was not considered imminent.

SDI really can affect the future of warfare and greatly destabilize strategic relations. The side that achieves invulnerability will press this advantage. If the U.S. pursues SDI, the USSR can find cheap ways of countering the defenses, but this would undermine stability. If SDI is not included in START, then the USSR will announce unilaterally that Soviet agreement on START II will be conditional on the U.S. renouncing development of BMD.

Though the U.S. has precision weapons, technological countermeasures will be developed, e.g., to make tanks invisible. In the Persian Gulf, Iraq had no electronic countermeasures but after 5,000 U.S. sorties it still had 1,000s of tanks intact. The U.S. may be overestimating the effectiveness of precision weapons because they are being used in the Gulf War without opposition. A technologically sophisticated opponent will develop ways to counter this U.S. capability.

[3] RIaN was an acronym that the Soviets used to describe a special period of tension between 1980 and 1984 when they reported greatly heightened expectations of a nuclear attack from the U.S. See Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, *KGB: The Inside Story* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), pp. 501-507.