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“Present at the Closing: A Personal Insight into the Last Days of the Soviet Union”

Mr. David A. Mr. Chikvaïdze

(This summary report was compiled by Ms. Arbenita Sopaj of Kobe University)

Following the introduction by Prof. Ai Kihara-Hunt, Ambassador Yasushi Akashi took the floor by describing Mr. David Mr. Chikvaïdze as a native of Georgia and a long-time diplomat who worked for both Presidents Mikhail Gorbachev during the last days of the Soviet Union and for Boris Yeltsin in the first year of the new Russia. Referring to the two periods of the United Nations` 75-year history, Mr. Akashi mentioned that Mr. Chikvaïdze`s career consisted of diplomatic work for the national government during its last years and for the United Nations for the subsequent 30 years. Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mr. Chikvaïdze moved to the United Nations and took up challenging assignments both in New York and Geneva. While in New York, he performed a variety of politically sensitive roles, negotiating humanitarian aid with the DPRK government and assisting Sergio Vieira de Mello in negotiating with Yugoslav authorities on humanitarian needs of the people. In Geneva, he first served as a senior adviser to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and a spokesman for the Commission on Human Rights. Mr. Chikvaïdze also worked as Director of the UN Library and Head of the UNOG Cultural Diplomacy. He is currently Chef de Cabinet providing political advice and support to the Director-General of the United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG). Mr. Akashi expressed his expectation to hear a firsthand insightful account of what had happened during the crucial transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation.

After Mr. Akashi's introductory remarks, Mr. Chikvaidze opened his keynote presentation by expressing appreciation to the principal organizers, the Global Peacebuilding Association of Japan and the Academic Council on the UN System in particular Professor. Sukehiro Hasegawa and Ai Khiara-Hunt for organizing this event – one of the first events of the 30th anniversary year of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He expressed his special thanks to Mr. Yasushi Akashi – “a true legend in the United Nations” and his former supervisor – for his participation and his profound opening remarks.

To succinctly describe what it was like to experience the last days of the USSR, Mr. Chikvaidze cited the memoir of the last American Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack F. Matlock ‘Autopsy on an Empire’, in which the author described well the state of mind of Mr. Chikvaidze who served as an aide to President Gorbachev at the time. As everyone else in the Kremlin, he felt the emotional brunt of the President's resignation. In his case, however, there was an added element: as he recounted, in the space of twenty minutes, he found himself in the same room, same building, same Kremlin, same city, but a different country. His Russian friends and colleagues standing in the same room also felt this, but less acutely, because their common big country had fallen apart, with its pieces breaking off on the periphery, while for Mr. Chikvaidze, an ethnic Georgian, his little native land was actually one of the pieces that fell away.

Prior to joining the Administration of the President of the USSR as a Protocol and Presidential Advance Officer, Mr. Chikvaidze had a five-year tour of duty, his first diplomatic posting, as Special Assistant to the Ambassador and Chief of Protocol at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C., returning in September 1990 to Moscow, six months after Gorbachev was elected President of the USSR. He referred to his five years in Washington as the most interesting, rewarding, and memorable of his entire career, but noted that work for the President which entailed advance preparation of the President's and First Lady's official travel had its unique rewards. One of these was the honor of being the protocol lead during the preparation of the first-ever state visit by a Soviet Head of State to Japan. Mr. Chikvaidze recalled that it was one of his most difficult preparatory periods of any visit – due primarily to the constant changes to the program that the Soviet side proposed – but, thanks to the patience and excellent cooperation of Japanese Protocol, it was the most successful and memorable of all visits that he had been involved in. Mr. Chikvaidze underscored that while he and his colleagues at the Soviet Embassy in Washington knew what was going on back in the country, they did not feel the acuteness of what was germinating and developing, due primarily to the extraordinary time that US-Soviet relations were going through, a time of regular foreign minister meetings; of three summit meetings, two in Washington, one in New York and of many governmental delegations. Most importantly, the Soviet and American staff were working not as adversaries, but as one team, often helping each other out in tough situations. It was a true equal camaraderie that masked to a certain extent what was developing in the Soviet Union.

Upon the start of his work with Gorbachev, he never imagined how close the end really was. Actually, as he stressed, no one imagined, including leading intelligence agencies of the world, which were later faulted for totally missing the signs of a superpower on its deathbed.

Mr. Chikvaïdze did not go into the many reasons for the collapse of the USSR, since that was not the objective of his presentation and, most of these were already part of the public record. But he conceded that he had observed a growing indifference about the fate of the country among the population. The country had lost support inside, there was no constituency left to fight for it. Even the communist party bureaucracy, which one would assume would have been the prime constituency to support the country, was ideologically and managerially 'exhausted' and had long become a bureaucracy unto itself. Worse still, the country had stopped producing manufactured goods.

A turning point was the August 1991 coup attempt, which saw the brief isolation of President Gorbachev at his seaside resort and the rise of Boris Yeltsin. At the time of the coup attempt, Mr. Chikvaïdze was on leave with his family, visiting his parents in Holland, where his father was Soviet Ambassador. With all the lines to Moscow overloaded, or down, Mr. Chikvaïdze could not get through to his office. As he kept calling Moscow, he went ahead and changed his ticket for an earlier return to Moscow, much against his father's objections, who was afraid that his son, as an aide to Gorbachev, would be arrested at the airport upon arrival.

In November 1991, Mr. Chikvaïdze was promoted to de facto deputy chief of the Secretariat of the USSR President, a Georgian at the ripe old age of 33, as he emphasized! It was during those two months of November-December, that Mr. Chikvaïdze and his colleague, office roommate, and friend to this day, the other deputy chief of the Secretariat Andrei Denisov, currently Russian Ambassador in Beijing, started developing a feeling of being on the Titanic.

The last days were filled with drama. Following President Gorbachev's resignation speech, Mr. Chikvaïdze sat in his office contemplating his future options, when a friend of his, a British diplomat called him to check the quickest way to get to Gorbachev a letter from Prime Minister John Major, which was the first reaction of any world leader to the resignation of the Soviet President. Mr. Chikvaïdze vividly described as he read and translated the letter to President Gorbachev standing in the front office of the President and Gorbachev's grateful reaction to the letter, when suddenly a TV set started replaying the entire resignation speech, which Gorbachev watched mesmerized, reliving the pain and stress all over again.

The last team of Administration staff almost literally turned off the lights in the Kremlin.

At the conclusion of Mr. Chikvaïdze's presentation, three panel discussants made their comments, recounting their involvement with the Soviet Union.

The first panelist, Ambassador Tsuneo Nishida, former Japanese Ambassador to the United Nations, spoke about his experience in the last days of the Soviet Union. His association with the Soviet Union lasted long. When he joined the Ministry in 1970 and two years later, he went to Munich to continue his studies at the University of Munich. In 1972 he had witnessed the massacre of Munich Olympic Games. It was a horrific event remembered as one of the first acts of terrorism in big cities. Three years later, he was transferred to East Berlin, while Berlin was still divided into East and West Berlins. He was the first Japanese diplomat to open the new embassy in East Berlin. From 1982-85 he was in Moscow working as the first secretary at the Japanese Embassy.

When he arrived in Moscow, he was talked to by the KGB officer in charge of Capitalism Countries who boastly said to Nishida that his file was 30 cm high thanks to STASI (East German Spy Agency). The long speeches made by Brezhnev, being old and feeble, were hard to be followed while his local Russian staff confessed he could understand only 30%. It was time of “Stagnation”. But Russians were still happy because Brezhnev was less brutal than his predecessors.

To make a breakthrough Brezhnev wanted to invade Poland but he couldn't get through. The Soviet could not afford to any longer. The burden of invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops December 1979 was getting heavier and more costly every day. In Moscow among citizens the rumors were circulating ;something terrible might be happening there in Afghanistan. Many of young Soviet soldiers died and, even worse, they were tortured so badly that they were alive but so deformed not to be recognized who they were. At first, it was thought as a fake rumor, but later it was circulating widely, and mothers of young soldiers stood up and claimed the truth so desperately as authorities could not resist any longer. It was another good example Russian mothers are strong as always!

Apparently the Soviet Empire began to decline and it took still some time before Gorbachev finally declared the collapse of the Empire in 1991. When Mr. Nishida was director for Russian Affairs at the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he has visited Moscow and was staying at the Hotel Ukraine to watch the coup attempt by Communist Royalists. He said he still remembered the sound of cannons and fires, while he couldn't understand who's fighting against whom. It was a chaotic and historic moment! The capital was hit by the same Russians not by Americans.

In 1993 Yeltsin, the first democratically elected President of newly born Russia, paid a visit to Japan after two times cancellation of his Japan trip. It was an exciting and dramatic trip and it was the best one made by Russian leaders, amicable and very fruitful one as the Tokyo Declaration was produced. It seemed that Four Islands of Northern Territories were closest to Japan in the long history of tough negotiations between Japan and Soviet Union/ Russia. When Ambassador Nishida was staying in Washington as political counselor of the Japanese Embassy, the Soviet Empire collapsed. Ambassador Nishida concluded his remarks by saying that we were all players in this drama of history and each of us accountable for our actions and their consequences.

Dr. Lise Howard shared reflections on three matters: 1. Her experiences as a foreign student during the collapse of the Soviet Union, 2. What the end of bi-polarity meant for the UN, and 3. What the current great power transition may mean for world peace. First, Prof. Howard recounted her studies in the USSR, in Leningrad, during the spring of 1990 as an undergraduate learning Russian, and then in 1991-92, as a first-year student in the Law Faculty of Leningrad/St. Petersburg State University. She had majored in Soviet studies at Barnard College of Columbia University.

Howard recalled that during the economic collapse, everyone, Soviet citizens and foreign students alike, were issued ration coupons for all basic goods—milk, oil, pasta, meat, eggs, soap, vodka, cigarettes, etc. She would trade her cigarette ration coupons for other goods. Acquiring goods with these ration coupons required waiting in line for many hours every day, which did not leave much time for studying or work. Dr. Howard arrived in Leningrad in August of 1991, and lived for the year in a Soviet dormitory, with soviet students from other parts of the USSR—Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Lithuania, etc. many had mixed heritage and considered their primary identity to be Soviet. Everyone knew the Cold War was over. That had ended in 1989, with the fall of the Berlin wall. No one around really believed the USSR could end.

The Soviet Union had a common identity; robust political institutions; a legal system; an integrated economy. She was studying Soviet Constitutional Law. None believed that an entirely legal, political, and economic order could simply end. Students debated that if the Soviet Union were to end, it certainly would not be peaceful. However, in the space of two weeks in December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and its end was largely peaceful. Second, Dr. Howard reflected on the immediate aftermath of how the end of the Soviet Union reverberated in the UN system. She was working at the UN in New York from 1992-1994, for the New York City Commission for the United Nations.

She mused that at the UN, prior to the collapse of the USSR, Soviets, and Americans used to walk into meetings with great bravado and ownership. After the collapse, only the Americans had such swagger. The Russians have lost their bravado. Some Americans tried to be humbler, as in Mr. Chikvaidze's example of Ambassador Matlock. The rise of unipolarity meant increasing attention to peace, democratization, and human rights. UN peacekeeping was taking off, even though many important missions experienced trouble—in Somalia, Rwanda, and in Bosnia/Srebrenica. Dr. Howard then went onto do doctoral research in Political Science at UC Berkeley, with the same advisor (Professor Ernst B. Haas) as Her Excellency the late Sadako Ogata. Dr. Howard wanted to study the sources of success and failure in UN peacekeeping. Third, Dr. Howard reflected on the current great power transition. According to Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap hypothesis, 2/3s of the time, great power transitions result in violence. She argued that it is in every human's interest on the planet that our leaders work together to solve the problems that are not unique to any country: climate change, pandemic disease, AI, and armed conflict. Even in the midst of rivalry and changing military power, our common future, our very existence, relies on cooperation. She argued that we beat the odds once in our lifetimes, with the peaceful end of the US-USSR competition. In light of the current rise of China, will we be able to beat the odds again?

Dr. Vesselin Popovski, Professor and Executive Director, Centre for the Study of the United Nations at the Jindal Global University in India, was a student in Moscow from 1983-1988. He presented the reasons for the collapse of the Soviet, **Economic Collapse** – low efficiency, no individual initiative, impossibility to compete in world markets. 1983-84 Reagan announced his 'star wars' program.

Gorbachœv realized a simple economic calculation of economic weakness to sustain such a level of sophisticated weapons. **‘Perestroika’**, attempt to reduce bureaucracy, and move to a more efficient economy. **Ideological Collapse**, ‘living with lies’ (Havel). If Communism is the best system, why are we not allowed to travel to the West? **Glasnost**: attempt to open the Soviet society, resulting in releasing political prisoners, re-publishing prohibited books (Solzhenitzyn). **Gorbachœv**: the historical figure, beloved globally.

Western glorification and making him a ‘Hero’, forgetting **Boris Yeltsin**, Walesa, Havel, and many who both did more and who suffered more. Objective factors – weak economy and wrong ideology - also lead to the collapse, not only individuals. The **role of People** at the End of Communism – people who marched in the streets, some of them died (East Germany and Romania). Reagan and Thatcher were offering ‘moral support’, but Poles, Czechs, and Russian brave young people were crucial.

Similarly the **Arab Spring** 2011: role of Obama or David Cameron was ‘moral support’, they did very little to replace Mubarak or Gaddafi, young generation realized the change faster – like with Greta Thunberg on Climate Change now. Soviet co-operation - Shevardnadze (as FM) - to end the Iran-Iraq War, to achieve peace in Mozambique, Namibia, Salvador, Cambodia. My memory as young diplomat in the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, 1988-1991: desk officer in the UN Department, Human Rights Section at the time of violations of the rights of the Turkish Minority. Our delegations in New York Geneva, Vienna, struggled to explain these violations. We had to report back to the Foreign Minister (Petar Mladenov) the heavy criticisms at international forums signaling that this policy does not work, ‘Causa Perduta’ (lost cause). We can delay the agony, but sooner or later this policy will collapse. Mladenov became the ‘Gorbachv’ in Bulgaria demanding the withdrawal of old die-hard Communists Zhivkov and achieving it in November 1989. He referred to his book **“End of Oppression”** (2012) which explained the transition from dictatorships to democracy in Eastern Europe and Latin America.

In a subsequent discussion period, Ambassador Yanagisawa made her brief remarks by recalling several events that took place before the collapse of the Soviet Union, including Gorbachev’s visit to Beijing two months before the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 and the fall of the Berlin wall. Ambassador Yanagisawa stated that at that time she was a passive observer of the Soviet Union until 1993 when the Government of Japan decided to provide official development assistance to the former Soviet Republics. Since then, she worked for the countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus as a development professional. Ambassador Yanagisawa shared her observation that China might have learned some lessons from the sequence of the political reform (glasnost) and economic reform (perestroika). Ambassador Yanagisawa concluded her observations by stating that Russian Federation is acting as a downsized version of the Soviet Union in some spheres, particularly in the UN, though Russia isn’t as hostile as the Soviet Union but still, it's not an agreeable friendly partner who occasionally acts differently. She stated that she was wondering what will be transpiring in the future of the UN cooperation with Russia, and China!

Prof. Stephen Browne recalled the early days following the break-up of the Soviet Union when he was assigned to Ukraine as the first UN representative from 1992 to 1996. He was welcomed in Kyiv since, thanks to Stalin, Ukraine had been a separate voting member of the UN General Assembly from the earliest days and thus already knew the organization.

As with the rest of the diplomatic community at the time, he mistakenly thought that the triple revolution of statehood, democracy, and the market economy would be achieved during his four-year assignment, but even today the process is not finished. After three generations of Soviet rule, it was difficult for mindsets to change easily. He gave the example of the Human Development Report which he wanted to introduce in the country as one of the UN's flagship publications. After many long conversations with academic and government counterparts, he heard a lot about objective Soviet concepts of human resources development and was unable to get across the more subjective notion of human development which meant putting the individual at the center of concern and widening individual choices. After many conversations, he thought that he had achieved a breakthrough when one of the Ministers finally said he understood the concept: "ah, you mean pregnancy!" he said. It was then he realized that he had not made any progress at all.

Ambassador Inomata expressed his gratitude to Mr. David Chikvaдзе for helping the Nagasaki people to conclude an agreement to extend the permanent exhibit of the atomic bombing at the Palais des Nations. The role of non-state actors, e.g., NGOs and civil societies should be recognized in the solution to global systemic issues such as the current COVID-19-induced crisis requiring a whole-of-society response. He concluded by stating that no transition can take place without the support of the people, and this can be applied to China as well.

Mr. Inoue gave his comments concentrated on political and economic aspects. In the case of the Soviet Union, neither the political system nor the economic system was working, and the state collapsed. In the case of China, the communist party government changed the economic system from a planned economy to a capitalist economy and survived. He asked if President Gorbachev had managed to change the economic system, could the Soviet Union have survived? If the Soviet Union collapsed not because of the economic system but because of the political system, this may mean that China's communist regime cannot be maintained for a long term.

Mr. Kuroda having worked together with Mr. David Chikvaдзе indicated that early 1990's UN restructuring resulted in a greater recognition of humanitarian issues with the establishment of the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA, now the Office of the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA) along with streamlining political and peacekeeping departments. Mr. Akashi present today a few years later led DHA. Mr. Kuroda stated that over thirty years many changes have happened in former USSR countries but some haven't as evidenced from the recent conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in Nagorno-Karabakh. Mr. Kuroda asked Mr. Chikvaдзе for his insight on what have changed and what haven't in Russia, and where it is headed?

There was a lively discussion about the causes of the collapse of the USSR which centered around the economic and ideological as well as ethnicity issues. Professor Takaaki Mizuno, asked about the extend of parallels that might have existed between China's iron grip on its territory and ethnic minority peoples in Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Uighur population in the north-western region of Xinjiang.

In his remarks after the fascinating keynote speech and discussants' remarks. Mr. Akashi cautioned not to make easy comparisons of different national experiences of the former Soviet Union and China although both have tried to put into practice what Karl Marx preached. Their actual experiences in the implementation of policies are not so similar for easy comparison. The communist ideology implemented by the Soviet Union was quite different from the communist ideology practiced by the Chinese. In concluding the online seminar, the President of GPAJ, Dr. Hasegawa in concluding remarks said that while he was teaching at Hosei University, he was explaining what had made the Soviet Union to collapse by the constructivism theory of international relations developed by Alexander Wend and the failure of western realist and liberal thinkers to foresee what was coming. What was revealing in today's seminar was the economic and political stagnation had become critically serious for many years as pointed out by the keynote speaker and panel discussants.

Yet, the general public and even those in government office did not foresee the rapid collapse of the Soviet System when it started in 1991. What was remarkable was the relatively peaceful transfer of power and change in governance structure from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation. Another point that became clear during the discussion was the differences that existed between the Soviet experience and the Chinese experiment that made difficult any easy comparison requiring careful analysis.