

SESSION OF THE POLITBURO OF THE CC CPSU
6 October 1986

Chaired by cde. GORBACHEV M. S.

Present cdes. Aliev G.A., Gromyko A.A., Zaikov L.N.
Ligachev Ye.K. Ryzhkov N. I., Solomentsev M. S.,
Chebrikov V. M., Dolgikh V. I., Yeltsin B. N.
Sokolov S. L., Talyzin N. V., Biryukova A. P.,
Dobrynin A. F., Zimyanin, M. V., Razumovsky G. P.
Yakovlev A. N., Kapitonov I. V.

1. About the loss of nuclear submarine of the USSR Navy.

GORBACHEV. On October 6, at 11:03 a.m. a nuclear submarine of the USSR Navy, which suffered an accident in the Sargasso Sea, has sunk at a great depth. The crew was evacuated by other vessels which reached the submarine. There are no losses among the crew with the exception of those about which we were informed earlier. The cause of the accident and of the loss of the submarine is not yet clear. Could it have happened due to lack of competence of the crew or because of cowardice.

SOKOLOV. The boat sunk notwithstanding the fact that the pressurized air reserve was not used up.

GORBACHEV. The events developed the following way: the boat was taken for towing, but the tow cord broke. Again—not clear why? In short—one mystery after another. Lev Nikolaevich says that at the depth of 700 meters the pressure of water will squash the boat. Again—it is unclear what would happen in that event. One would think that all these issues had to be thought through in advance. We also do not know whether radioactivity would spread and to what degree.

The Americans were observing the process of emergency evacuation. A question arises, can they raise our boat to the surface, and if yes, then what kind of information can they obtain?

DOBRYNIN. Several years ago the Americans raised a section of our submarine, which sunk in the Pacific Ocean.

GORBACHEV. Our quick reaction and information about the accident on the boat had its result. Reagan thanked us for the information. The Americans even offered their assistance and informed us that their planes will be present in the area of the accident. In his conversation with Dobrynin, Caul [sic]¹ especially noted the speed of our reaction and said that it has great

¹ Raul Castro. Misspelled in the document.

importance for informing the world public because previously they would learn about such things from American media reports.

So far we do not have information about whether the command and control equipment was destroyed after the crew left the boat.

SOKOLOV. Not everything was destroyed.

GORBACHEV. But there should be some documents, which define precisely what could be left and what must be destroyed in case of an accident.

SOKOLOV. We have such documents.

DOBRYNIN. But a lot depends on the time factor. It might be impossible to fulfill all these requirements.

GROMYKO. Airplanes have "black boxes." Were similar appliances removed from the submarine?

GORBACHEV. Yes, these appliances were removed. They are on our ship, which conducted the salvage operation.

SOKOLOV. It is possible that some items had not been destroyed, because they were confident that the boat would not sink and they would be able to tow it.

GORBACHEV. As far as information about the loss of the boat, it would be expedient to act in the same way as we acted last time, i.e. to send information to the Americans, the IAEA and the TASS. Besides, we should inform leaders of the socialist countries as well. In our information we should reiterate that according to the conclusion of the experts, a possibility of a nuclear explosion is ruled out after the boat has sunk. At the same time, we could say that the experts see a possibility of radioactive contamination at great depth after a certain period of time.

GROMYKO. But we should add that it would not be dangerous in scale.

GORBACHEV. Maybe we should put it in a more general form: "Experts are studying the consequences of the loss of the boat."

RYZHKOV. This is better.

GROMYKO. And by all means, we should issue a statement via TASS, so that our own people know about the loss of the boat.

GORBACHEV. Yes, we should make this statement on the radio and television, and urgently, without waiting till the end of the day.

Now let us hear cde. B. N. Chernavin's report.

CHERNAVIN (USSR Deputy Defense Minister) I am reporting. The USSR Chief of Navy Commission analyzed the situation with the submarine, which suffered an accident, around the clock; it developed recommendations and passed them on to the commander of the submarine. We did everything to try to save it. But it proved impossible. At 11:03 a.m. the submarine sunk at the depth of 5.5 thousand meters.

How did events develop after the last Politburo session? Our emergency vessels reached the boat and evacuated the crew. The boat stayed on the surface. Brown smoke was coming out of the destroyed shaft. It was decided to fight for saving the boat. A reconnaissance team was dispatched on the boat, which conducted inspection of the entire hull of the boat by hand to locate the exact place that was heated.

GORBACHEV. Don't they have sensors to do that?

CHERNAVIN. No.

After the investigation they found that the hull was not heated. Then it was decided to send the people inside the boat. They inspected the first, second and third compartments, which turned out to be dry. The accumulator battery was also in working order. But the third compartment had some gas accumulation. Apparently, gas seeped in from the fourth compartment through the ventilation system, which encircles the entire submarine.

GORBACHEV. No leak was found?

CHERNAVIN. A report came in stating that three compartments were dry.

GORBACHEV. What did the control instruments show; they were located in one of these compartments, were they not?

CHERNAVIN. The instruments showed that the air supply was at 45%.

GORBACHEV. What about the reactor?

CHERNAVIN. The reactor has been shut down. Everything was at zero. Trim was about one degree. They decided to blow the tanks. The trim decreased to 0.5%. This is not dangerous because the accident trim is 7-8 percent.

GORBACHEV. Who determined the cable length to tow the boat?

CHERNAVIN. The calculations were done by specialists.

GORBACHEV. What was the location of the [towline] break?

CHERNAVIN. That hasn't been established yet: it's night over there, dark and high waves.

GORBACHEV. Maybe the towing cable pulled the boat down?

CHERNAVIN. No, its weight is incommensurable with the weight of the submarine.

MASLYUKOV(Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR). The tow cable could have nothing to do with the loss of the boat.

CHERNAVIN. The commission's decision-making was further complicated by the absence of worrisome reports. At this time we cannot make definitive judgments about the causes of the sinking. We only have speculations. It cannot be ruled out that water entered the nose section but, it is unclear why. Yesterday's information was as follows: they blew the tanks again, [manually] probed the fourth emergency compartment and reported that it has two parts – heated and not heated. Specialists concluded that there was water in the lower, cold part. What are the reasons for its penetration? Possibly, this happened because of leakage in the bulkheads and water coming in from the fourth compartment into others. Leaking could occur because of water coming into the ventilators and also through the communication lines. The seals could have been corroded by oxidants.

GORBACHEV. This couldn't be sabotage?

CHERNAVIN. We do not have data to make such a conclusion.

GORBACHEV. Why did the fire start after the submarine surfaced?

CHERNAVIN. It is unclear. However, we do have a hint. A representative from the Special department, who was on the submarine, suggested that there could have been a short circuit during the water pump's activation in the fourth compartment. It could have been that before turning it on they didn't check the power supply.

GORBACHEV. So they were incompetent?

CHERNAVIN. For now we have no concrete information. This is just a hunch. However, we know one thing for sure: water did enter the fourth compartment.

GORBACHEV. Have documents and codes been withdrawn?

CHERNAVIN. Yes. They are on the ship. Allow me to continue the presentation on the course of events. A towline was attached to the submarine and its towing began. However, today at 8:05 we received a report that the towline broke and the submarine submerged by another meter. We gave a command to blow its main ballast tanks. The captain responded that this was impossible because the front hatch was in the water and the central hatch was jammed.

GORBACHEV. Why were there people on top of the submarine, and not inside? Were they being cautious? Could the commission's instructions have limited the people's initiative?

CHERNAVIN. No, we have not limited the initiative. During the period of time between 9:00 and 9:45 the events developed very quickly. The submarine started to sink. We gave permission to nine people who were on the submarine to disembark. A command was given to the captain to disembark as well. He refused. Only when he received an order from the

Commander in Chief did he get into a dinghy and left the submarine. At 11:03 the submarine has sunk.

GORBACHEV. Did you try to estimate what would happen with the submarine after it sinks before the sinking or were there preliminary estimates [done beforehand]?

CHERNAVIN. Such estimates do exist in principle. I know the relevant data by heart. Specialists on the nosecone say that there won't be a nuclear explosion. Under certain circumstances, 40 Kg of TNT may go off, but again, this will not bring about a [nuclear] explosion. The plutonium will disperse and sink.

Regarding the charges, they are contained in a metal ball. After it sinks to the bottom, a corrosion process will begin which will lead to the spread of radioactivity. However it will be limited and will not reach the surface. This is a long-term process.

GORBACHEV. And what will happen to the reactor?

MASLYUKOV. There will also be corrosion but it happens very slowly, over decades.

GORBACHEV. If the Americans raise our submarine [to the surface], what information can they get?

CHERNAVIN. It's possible that they'll take an interest in the nosecone and the reactor's construction. However there are no new secrets there because this submarine is an older design. Also the punch cards may interest the Americans.

GORBACHEV. Why weren't they withdrawn?

CHERNAVIN. They are located in a special safe. We do not have precise information about their fate.

GORBACHEV. How is the submarine's captain characterized?

CHERNAVIN. His entire service was on submarines, he's been a captain since 1984. This was his third patrol.

AKHROMEYEV. Regarding the punch cards, they may give away information only in the case one knows the exactly planned location for a missile launch.

KOKSANOV (First Deputy Minister of the Shipbuilding Industry). The second part of the emergency situation is unclear. One could imagine that they mistook the smoke that had proliferated across the entire submarine through the ventilation system as the fire.

DOBRYNIN. Perhaps several ships should be left at the location of the accident so as to deny the Americans an opportunity to try to raise the submarine?

GORBACHEV. We should look into this.

On the whole we should impartially, objectively, and thoroughly find out the reasons for the accident and the loss of the submarine.

Further, as I already said, it is important to get a message about what has happened to the socialist countries, the Americans, the IAEA, and make a report via TASS. Herewith it is necessary to specify that there is no threat of a nuclear explosion or nuclear contamination.

To prevent the Americans from raising the submarine we should say that we are developing organizational and technical measures connected with further steps related to what has occurred.

LIGACHEV. In the TASS report it's important to say that the personnel of the sunken submarine was evacuated to Soviet ships that arrived.

GROMYKO. Reasons remain unclear. We need to sort them out completely.

GORBACHEV. Considering this exchange of ideas, let's adopt a resolution reflecting the following points.

First of all, to take into account the information of comrade Chernyavin V. N. about the measures taken to rescue the submarine and the circumstances of its loss.

Second, comrade L. N. Zaykov's commission will continue studying the causes of the submarine accident and will report the results to the Central Committee Politburo.

Third, the Ministry of Defense of the USSR, Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, and Commanders of the various armed services must adopt additional measures of raising the organization and discipline and also implementing the operating rules of military technology, excluding emergencies.

Fourth, inform the Americans, leadership of the socialist countries, IAEA, and Soviet public about the submarine's loss.

Members of the Politburo: Agreed

The resolution is adopted.

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GORBACHEV. I am working now on the materials for negotiations with Reagan. I will send personally to you the proposals on the main positions for the talks on issues of nuclear disarmament, as well as the draft of agreements as coordinated directives of the General Secretary of the CPSU and the U.S. President to Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the USSR and the USA about preparation of the agreements on issues of nuclear disarmament. I am asking you

to read them carefully and prepare your comments, and we will meet to exchange opinions [on them] on October 8.

MEMBERS OF THE POLITBURO. Agreed.

[Signed A. Lukyanov]

[Source: The Volkogonov Collection, Reel 18. U.S. Library of Congress. Translated for the National Security Archive by Svetlana Savranskaya and Tal Solovey].