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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY  
NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE**

**EDUARD SHEVARDNADZE -- A PROPHET WITHOUT  
HONOR IN HIS OWN LAND**

**CORE COURSE 1 ESSAY**

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| Report Documentation Page                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                    |                                     |                            | Form Approved<br>OMB No. 0704-0188                  |                                 |
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| 1. REPORT DATE<br><b>1996</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                    | 2. REPORT TYPE                      |                            | 3. DATES COVERED<br><b>00-00-1996 to 00-00-1996</b> |                                 |
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE<br><b>Eduard Shevardnadze - A Prophet Without Honor in His Own Land</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                    |                                     |                            | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER                                 |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5b. GRANT NUMBER                                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER                          |                                 |
| 6. AUTHOR(S)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                    |                                     |                            | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER                                  |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5e. TASK NUMBER                                     |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER                                |                                 |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)<br><b>National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                    |                                     |                            | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER            |                                 |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                            | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)                    |                                 |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     |                            | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)              |                                 |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT<br><b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 14. ABSTRACT<br><b>see report</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                    |                                     |                            |                                                     |                                 |
| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                    |                                     | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES<br><b>10</b>                    | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
| a. REPORT<br><b>unclassified</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | b. ABSTRACT<br><b>unclassified</b> | c. THIS PAGE<br><b>unclassified</b> |                            |                                                     |                                 |

## **Eduard Shevardnadze -- A Prophet Without Honor In His Own Land**

### **Introduction**

Although many pundits had predicted the Soviet Union's eventual demise, when Eduard Shevardnadze was appointed foreign minister in July 1985 few observers recognized how soon the end would come, or how swiftly fundamental change in the Soviet Union's foreign policy would be accomplished. Shevardnadze's early understanding of his country's problems and his vision for solving them helped shift the focus of Soviet foreign policy from an obsession with military strength and the balance of power toward securing the nation's security through an end to Soviet isolation and reform of its internal political and economic processes. Over time, the nation's continuing economic decline, Shevardnadze's idealism, and the perception that he received little in return for concessions made to the West, alienated the nation's political elite and probably contributed to both his and Mikhail Gorbachev's departure from power. There can be little doubt, however, that Shevardnadze's stewardship of Soviet foreign policy during the period of transition was a major reason for the relatively peaceful demise of the Soviet totalitarianism, or that the ideas he championed will remain a part of the political debate in Russia for the foreseeable future.

### **Right Time, Right Place, Right Man**

It can be argued that much of Eduard Shevardnadze's success in transforming Soviet foreign policy is attributable to three factors. First, he came to the job with little or no foreign

policy experience Unbound by participation in the formulation of previous foreign policies he was in an excellent position to reexamine basic assumptions about the Soviet Union's national interests Second, he instituted his reforms at a time when a deteriorating economic base made some form of change inevitable It is likely the Soviet Union's unsustainable economic situation both shaped Shevardnadze's assumptions about the nation's interests, and forced the conservative elements of the political elite to give him more room for maneuver than they might have if the status quo could have been more easily sustained Finally, Shevardnadze was not alone Although he and Gorbachev did not always agree, it seems clear that neither could have accomplished as much without the support of the other.

#### **Realist's Perception, Idealist's Prescription**

Although clearly an idealist by the end of his tenure, a case can be made that when Shevardnadze first became Foreign Minister many of his assumptions about how the world worked reflected the realism of his predecessors A Rand Corporation study prepared in July 1990 for the Under Secretary for Defense policy notes that "Shevardnadze's early pronouncements on international issues were by no means conciliatory, and gave no hint of the strongly anti-military posture he was to adopt in mid-1988"<sup>1</sup> Concern about the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), as well as other intractable irritants in the U S - Soviet relationship, led initially to a decision to focus diplomatic efforts on Europe and other countries in an attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> John Van Oudenaren, The Role of Shevardnadze and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Making of Soviet Defense and Arms Control Policy, (A study prepared for the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy by the Rand Corporation, July 1990.) 9.

“end run” the problems facing Soviet-American relations — a classic balance of power response.<sup>2</sup> Shevardnadze’s early support for disarmament, both nuclear and conventional, is also most credibly explained as a recognition that the Soviet Union could no longer afford the arms race or compete technologically with the SDI, making mutual disarmament the only way to maintain an equilibrium

At some point prior to mid-1988 it appears that Shevardnadze’s perception of the threats facing his nation began to change. The Rand Corporation study for the Defense Department suggests that a May 1986 speech by Gorbachev to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) may have been one turning point. In his speech Gorbachev spoke of a world characterized by growing interdependence, called for a more flexible Soviet Diplomacy, implied criticism of the military, and most importantly, debunked the belief that the Soviet Union could be as strong as any coalition of states opposing it.<sup>3</sup> The extent to which this speech influenced Shevardnadze’s thinking is unclear, but it set the stage for Shevardnadze’s later efforts at MFA reform, and laid the foundation for introducing *perestroika*’s “new thinking” to the ministry. How much of this “new thinking” Shevardnadze brought with him to his job, and how much the realization that the Soviet Union’s means no longer matched its objectives affected his thinking is probably unknowable. What is clear from the record is that by mid-1988 Shevardnadze was championing a markedly different Soviet foreign policy. Set out below are its major tenets

- The world is increasingly interdependent. International problems are better addressed through political interaction than reliance on military power.

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<sup>2</sup> Eduard Shevardnadze, The Future Belongs to Freedom, (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 80.

<sup>3</sup> Oudenaren, Rand Corporation Study 11.

- Demilitarization is essential
  - Total military superiority against any possible coalition of foes is unattainable
  - The high-cost of using nuclear weapons has made the threat of the use of force a less effective policy for nuclear powers
  - The military should, however, retain reasonably sufficient military power to defend the nation
- The nation's external strength, including its military strength, is dependent on the strength and development of its economy and technology
- Foreign policy can only be effective if it reflects the values of the nation
- Democratization of the nation is a prerequisite to effective participation in an interdependent world

The Soviet Union's tradition of isolation and its faltering economy provided both a constraint on Shevardnadze's freedom of action, and an opportunity for change. Not only did the weakening economic outlook create a climate for change, it helped pressure the nation's political elite to support, or at least not openly oppose, mutual disarmament. The changes in both external and internal policies engendered by *perestroika* and *glasnost* captured the West's imagination, creating pressure on western leaders to support Gorbachev and Shevardnadze's liberalization with concessions of their own. Gorbachev's extraordinary popularity in western Europe also provided Shevardnadze an opportunity, which he did not fully capitalize on, to play Europe off against the United States. (Admittedly such a strategy probably carried more risks than benefits in the long run.) On the other hand, managing any endeavor in a period of

declining economic strength and shrinking political expectations is always constraining. Not only were resources limited, the true depth of the Soviet Union's economic problems eventually became known to the West making U.S. concessions more difficult to secure. The more Shevardnadze opened his country to the West, the more he exposed the weakness of his bargaining position -- this was just one of several paradoxes Shevardnadze faced.

Shevardnadze's prescription for securing his nation's future was classically idealist. He rejected the notion that the security of the nation was determined largely by external forces, and for the first time highlighted the importance of domestic policies. Caroline Ekedahl and Melvin Goodman in their soon to be published work on Shevardnadze identify his four fundamental objectives: "restoring the initiative and responsibility of the people, revitalizing and restructuring the sagging economy (*perestroika*), creating a nonthreatening international environment that would not drain resources, and demilitarizing and deideologizing policy."<sup>4</sup>

Some have suggested that Shevardnadze was just an "activist" with no strategic game plan for implementing his vision. I share Ekedahl and Goodman's rejection of this notion.<sup>5</sup> It is unlikely the radical change in Soviet (Russian) foreign policy achieved by Shevardnadze could have been accomplished by mere *ad hoc* activism. An examination of the historical record supports the contention that Shevardnadze had both a strategic vision, and a reasonably coherent "game plan" for achieving his objectives. The chart below demonstrates how Shevardnadze's major policy initiatives all worked to support the four fundamental objectives identified above by Ekedahl and Goodman.

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<sup>4</sup> Carolyn M. Ekedahl and Melvin A. Goodman, The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze, Chapter 2 (State College, PA: Penn State University Press, forthcoming June 1996) 11.

<sup>5</sup> Ekedahl and Goodman, The Wars of Shevardnadze 9.

| Restoring People's Initiative                            | Revitalizing Sagging Economy                             | Nonthreatening Intl. Environment                                          | Demilitarizing and Deideologizing Policy                                  |
|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| support for <i>perestroika</i> and <i>glasnost</i>       | nuclear, conventional and chemical disarmament           | nuclear, conventional and chemical disarmament                            | nuclear, conventional and chemical disarmament                            |
| support for democratization                              | withdrawal from Afghanistan                              | withdrawal from Afghanistan                                               | withdrawal from Afghanistan                                               |
| reform of MFA                                            | support for <i>perestroika</i> and <i>glasnost</i>       | support for Desert Storm                                                  | support for Desert Storm                                                  |
| closer political and economic relationship with the West | support for democratization                              | support for <i>perestroika</i> and <i>glasnost</i>                        | support for <i>perestroika</i> and <i>glasnost</i>                        |
|                                                          | closer political and economic relationship with the West | support for German reunification and more independence for eastern Europe | support for German reunification and more independence for eastern Europe |
|                                                          |                                                          | support for democratization                                               | support for democratization                                               |
|                                                          |                                                          | reform of MFA                                                             | reform of MFA                                                             |
|                                                          |                                                          | closer political and economic relationship with the West                  | closer political and economic relationship with the West                  |

### Success Abroad Not Translated Into Prosperity At Home

Whether Shevardnadze's foreign policy is considered a success depends largely on an observer's perspective. The conservative political elite of Russia view Shevardnadze's tenure as a time of capitulation to the West in return for little in terms of tangible benefits. Considered objectively, but out of context, there is no denying that the Soviet Union was weaker, less influential, and in many ways less secure when Shevardnadze left office than when he had

arrived In the West, however, Shevardnadze is credited with ending Soviet isolation, helping to create the conditions necessary for eventual economic rebirth, and generally making the world a safer place by reining in the Soviet military and sharply reducing the distrust and suspicion that had been the hallmark of superpower relations for nearly half a century

Regardless of how one views Shevardnadze's record, it is probably more instructive to consider the built-in limitations on the success contained in his strategy, and how these led inevitably to his loss of credibility with the nation's political elite Earlier I identified three factors important to Shevardnadze's success. a fresh perspective, economic conditions that mandated change; and the support of Gorbachev The first two factors persisted, but in December of 1990 when it became clear his vision no longer enjoyed Gorbachev's full support Shevardnadze resigned In retrospect, erosion of support for Shevardnadze's vision may have been inevitable This was, in part, because of another of the paradoxes Shevardnadze had to confront

The central pillar of Shevardnadze's vision was that a nation's security rested not on its ability to project military power, but on its internal strength and ability to compete in an interdependent world To reach his objectives he supported, among other policies, democratization, restoration of private initiative, more freedom of expression, and strategic retreat When eastern Europe and other Soviet client states emboldened by Shevardnadze's policies sought to break away from the Soviet orbit Shevardnadze faced his most difficult challenge If he was to be consistent in his message he could not oppose their efforts His policy of what Ekedahl and Goodman call "strategic retreat from the 'imperial overstretch' of the

Brezhnev era" was also an important precondition to economic revival at home<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, the web in which the Soviet Union had captured its satellite states included economic and trade, as well as military, strands The paradox Shevardnadze faced was that he had to withdraw from eastern Europe to conserve resources for the domestic economy, but in doing so he destroyed the bulk of the Soviet Union's external economic relationships.

This leads to what Shevardnadze admits to have been his and Gorbachev's major mistake In interviews in both Time<sup>7</sup> and Fortune<sup>8</sup> magazines Shevardnadze pointed to delay in implementing economic and market reforms as a critical error Had Gorbachev and Shevardnadze begun economic reform at home sooner it might have been possible to manage a military-political retreat from eastern Europe while maintaining the bulk of the trading relationship When the Warsaw Pact began to crumble, however, the Soviet Union's economy was in such a depressed state that it had nothing to offer When Shevardnadze's intentional strategic retreat became a rout the nation's domestic strength was still in sharp decline, and western economic assistance still an illusory promise Because of the delay in implementing economic reforms, the domestic renewal which Shevardnadze's policies were supposed to support was nowhere in sight Under these conditions a nationalist backlash was probably inevitable It should also come as no surprise that as astute a politician as Gorbachev sought to distance himself from Shevardnadze in the face of growing discontent Despite continued international support, Shevardnadze's effectiveness ended when he could no longer convince a sufficient portion of his domestic constituency that his efforts would in fact increase the nation's

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<sup>6</sup> Ekedahl and Goodman, The Wars of Shevardnadze 2.

<sup>7</sup> "The Dark Forces are Growing Stronger," Time, October 5, 1992: 65.

<sup>8</sup> "Shevardnadze Speaks Out," Fortune, [date unknown].

security Like the biblical visionaries before him, Shevardnadze became a prophet without honor in his own land He became, in the view of the army and KGB, the most hated figure in the land -- "the man who sold the empire"<sup>9</sup>

### **Lessons for the United States**

Shevardnadze was correct to identify domestic strength as the key to national security Despite his problems and eventual resignation, he deserves a great deal of credit for the radical change in Soviet (Russian) foreign policy that he helped engineer As long as he worked in tandem with Gorbachev's efforts at domestic liberalization and revitalization he was successful. As foreign policy reform began to move ahead of domestic policy reform the ground work for Shevardnadze's eventual departure was laid. There are important lessons for U.S planners to draw from Shevardnadze's problems. Despite the United State's stable political system, strong economic base, and open society, our foreign policy is seldom effective when we permit it to lead domestic policy Failure to build a domestic consensus doomed our foreign policy in Vietnam and Somalia, and may eventually undermine our efforts in Bosnia The most dangerous situation we face, however, is the national debt It is already forcing difficult foreign policy choices, and if left unchecked has the potential eventually to force the U S into choices analogous to those faced by Shevardnadze when he first took office. We too must avoid the error of allowing domestic economic reform to take a back seat to foreign policy considerations

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<sup>9</sup> Simon Sebag Montefiore, "Eduard Shevardnadze," The New York Times Magazine, December 26, 1993: 18.