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NATO's Eastward Enlargement

What Western Leaders Said

by Hannes Adomeit

The Russian narrative that President Gorbachev's consent to Germany remaining in NATO in 1990 was based on the West's commitment not to expand the Atlantic Alliance eastward beyond the territory of the unified Germany has recently received unexpected support. A study entitled "What Gorbachev heard" by the US NGO National Security Archive culminates in three assertions: First, discussions of NATO in the context of German unification negotiations in 1990 were not at all narrowly limited to the status of East German territory. Second, beginning in early 1990, several Western heads of state or government and foreign ministers were considering the extension of NATO membership to Central and Eastern European countries but then rejected the idea. Third, therefore, subsequent Soviet and Russian complaints about being misled about NATO expansion are justified, given that NATO did indeed later enlarge. These assertions have little basis in fact.

"Breach of Promise" by the West

Hardly any other issue has put such a strain on the relations between Russia and the West than NATO's eastward enlargement. This step by the Atlantic Alliance plays a central role in the Kremlin's narrative. NATO's eastward enlargement is claimed to be the core element of a comprehensive strategy of containment aimed at weakening and humbling Russia. The military means employed to implement this strategy are claimed to consist of establishing military bases in Russia's immediate vicinity and of moving NATO military forces ever closer to the country's borders. The Kremlin's narrative has a strong moral dimension. The West is accused of having violated firm guarantees, commitments and assurances given by European and American political leaders and NATO at the time of the negotiations about German unity in 1990 and in the following year that NATO would not expand eastward beyond the territory of the former East Germany if Moscow agreed to unified Germany membership in NATO.

For many years, Soviet President and General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), Mikhail Gorbachev, contributed to fostering this narrative. For instance, in an interview with Germany's *Bild* tabloid in April 2009, he claimed that "Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and others assured me that NATO would not move one centimetre to the east. The Americans did not abide by this assurance and the Germans were indifferent about it. Perhaps they even rubbed their hands in glee at how well they had hoodwinked the Russians."

In the end, however, Gorbachev acknowledged the historical truth. In October 2014, in an interview with the Russian daily *Kommersant*, he stated unequivocally that "The topic of 'NATO expansion' was never discussed; it was not raised in those years [1989-1990]. I am saying this with a full sense of responsibility. Not a single Eastern European country brought up the issue, not even after the Warsaw Pact had ceased to exist in 1991. Western heads of state and government, too, did not raise it."

One might have thought that this would have put paid to the “NATO guarantees” and “breach of promise” claims. This, however, has not at all been the case. The Kremlin has clung stubbornly to Gorbachev’s original account. For instance, at the 43rd Munich Security Conference in February 2007, Vladimir Putin, in his then capacity as head of government, asked: “What happened to the assurances our western partners made after [sic] the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today? No one even remembers them. But I will allow myself to remind this audience what was said. I would like to quote the speech of NATO General Secretary Mr Woerner in Brussels on 17 May 1990. He said at the time that “the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee”. Where are these guarantees?”

Unexpected Support

The claim that a linkage existed between Western commitments not to expand NATO eastward beyond the territory of the unified Germany and Gorbachev’s consent to Germany remaining in the Western Alliance has recently received support. On 12 December 2017, Thomas Blanton and Svetlana Savranskaya from the NGO National Security Archive at the George Washington University in Washington DC put on the web a study with extensive documentation as *Briefing Book #613*. Entitled “What Gorbachev Heard”, the treatise culminates in three related assertions: (1) The discussions of NATO in the context of German unification negotiations in 1990 were not at all narrowly limited to the status of East German territory. (2) Beginning in early 1990, several Western heads of state or government and foreign ministers were considering the extension of NATO membership to Central and Eastern European countries but only later rejected the idea. (3) Therefore, subsequent Soviet and Russian complaints about being misled about NATO expansion are justified, given that NATO did indeed later enlarge.¹

Stephen F. Cohen, professor emeritus of Russian studies at Princeton University, has lauded the Blanton and Savranskaya claims. In his view, the authors had now “established the historical truth” about the broken promise. “All of the Western powers involved—the US, the UK, France, and Germany itself—made the same promise to Gorbachev on multiple occasions and in various emphatic ways. If we ask when the West, particularly Washington, lost Moscow as a potential strategic partner after the end of the Soviet Union, this is where an explanation [should] begin.”² What, then, is the validity of such assertions?

Lack of Validity

When accessing the website for *Briefing Book #613* one should first realize that the official status suggested by its designation, the “National Security Archive”, is misleading. The research institution is by no means a U.S. Government entity but rather an NGO.³ The impression that the research outfit has published previously unknown documents that now required history to be rewritten is also false. The documents cited as evidence for the “NATO guarantees” are not new. They have merely been interpreted from a perspective favoured by Blanton and Savranskaya. The main piece of evidence provided by the authors are U.S. Secretary of State Baker’s talks with Gorbachev and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze on 9 February 1990. They cite known documents according to which Baker agreed with Gorbachev’s statement in response to the assurances that

¹ Blanton, Thomas / Savranskaya, Svetlana (2017): “NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard”, *Briefing Book #613*, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>.

² Cohen, Stephen (2018): The US “Betrayed” Russia, but It Is Not “News That’s Fit to Print”, *TheNation.com*, <https://www.thenation.com/article/the-us-betrayed-russia-but-it-is-not-news-thats-fit-to-print/>.

³ Given the website’s name, for example, “National Security Archive”, one might think that one has landed on the website of the US state archives, the *U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*. The Internet address at which *Briefing Book #613* can be accessed is <http://nsarchive.gwu.edu>, and that of the US state archive <https://www.archives.gov/>. The National Security Archive was founded in the early 1980s and has its origins in the left-wing spectrum of US society. It is probably not wrong to assume that its name has been quite intentionally chosen to create the impression that it is a governmental organization comparable or identical to the US state archive. Securing the release of classified documents and making them available to the public remains the organization’s mission to this day.

“NATO expansion is unacceptable.” Baker assured Gorbachev that “neither the President nor I intend to extract any unilateral advantages from the processes that are taking place,” and that the Americans understood that “not only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries as well it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO, not an inch of NATO’s present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction.”

What did Baker’s phrase of “NATO’s military jurisdiction” and (also used by Baker) “NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO” mean? Nothing other than that, in the eastern part of Germany, no armed forces would be incorporated into NATO’s integrated command structures. After all, the Bundeswehr and the armed forces of most other West European allies had been assigned to a joint NATO command headed by a US four-star general as commander-in-chief. Furthermore, the limitation for NATO forces was initially only intended to remain in force for a transitional period, that is, until the Western Group of Soviet Forces had been withdrawn from the GDR. Indeed, the presence of both NATO and Soviet forces in the eastern part of Germany at the same time was hardly conceivable. Hence, it is inadmissible to conclude that assurances concerning the expansion of NATO command structures and the stationing of NATO forces on the territory of the former GDR had anything to do with promises concerning the enlargement of the Alliance *east of a unified Germany*. But this is exactly what the two authors have done – as has Putin. While outlining his understanding of the NATO “guarantees”, his quote in 2007 lumped the statements Wörner had made on 17 May 1990 together with the period “*after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact*”, an event that had taken place on 1 July 1991.

The scope of the assurances, however, is clear when checking the original version of Wörner’s speech. The NATO General Secretary said that NATO forces would not be stationed “beyond the territory of the Federal Republic”, that is not beyond West Germany. He said nothing about territories beyond the eastern part of Germany and nothing about countries belonging to the still existing Warsaw Pact. This is emphasised by the continuation of Wörner’s statement that Putin withheld: “We [NATO] could conceive of a *transitional period* during which a reduced number of Soviet forces could remain stationed in the present-day GDR.”⁴ Such an arrangement, indeed, was ultimately included in the Two-plus-Four Agreement of 12 September 1990. The relevant provision reads as follows: “Foreign armed forces and nuclear weapons or their carriers will not be stationed in that part of Germany [that is, the eastern part] or deployed there.”⁵

Horst Teltschik, foreign policy adviser to Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl at this turning point in German history and one of the most important contemporary witnesses, has confirmed these connections. “In 1989/90, I participated in all the talks between Federal Chancellor Kohl and [President George H.W.] Bush, [Secretary of State James] Baker, [President François] Mitterrand, [Prime Minister Margaret] Thatcher and Gorbachev and attended various NATO, EU and G7 summits. At no point was there any mention of NATO enlargement beyond Germany. The issue under negotiation concerned the transitional status of the former GDR and Berlin as long as Soviet forces were deployed in the GDR.”⁶

Exploratory Talks and Considerations are not “Guarantees”

As an exception to the general rule, Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, did establish a linkage between Gorbachev’s consent to Germany’s reunification and its membership of NATO and NATO guarantees that the Alliance would not be expanded eastward beyond the former GDR. Speaking at the Evangelische Akademie in Tutzing on 31 January 1990, he called on NATO to declare unequivocally that “whatever happens in the Warsaw Pact, there will be no expansion of NATO territory eastwards, that is to say, closer to

⁴ Wörner, Manfred (1990): *The Atlantic Alliance and European Security in the 1990s. Address by Secretary General Manfred Wörner to the Bremer Tabakscollégium* (17 May), http://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1990/s900517a_e.htm.

⁵ *Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany*, Article 5, <http://www.documentarchiv.de/brd/2p4.html>.

⁶ Personal communication on 8 January 2018.

the border of the Soviet Union”.⁷ Accordingly, he told his British counterpart, Douglas Hurd, on 6 February 1990 that “the Russians must have some assurance that if, for example, the Polish Government left the Warsaw Pact one day, they would not join NATO the next”.⁸ Blanton and Savranskaya describe what then happened as follows: “Having met with Genscher on his way [...], Baker repeated exactly the Genscher formulation in his meeting with Foreign Minister Shevardnadze on February 9, 1990 [...]; and even more importantly, face to face with Gorbachev.” The authors have provided no evidence for this assertion – for good reason, because it does not exist.

Although Genscher considered the possibility of NATO enlargement beyond the former GDR and even made a remark about it to Shevardnadze,⁹ a distinction must be drawn between informal or exploratory talks of this nature on the one hand and negotiations, promises, commitments or indeed guarantees on the other. The authors have blurred this distinction. They also fail to distinguish between matters discussed with Gorbachev, hence “What Gorbachev heard”, and coordination and decision-making among Western states. Finally, they inadmissibly mingle talks and negotiations on the European security architecture, including NATO’s changed role, with the Alliance’s expansion, be it with regard to some special status in the former GDR or its enlargement eastward beyond the borders of eastern Germany.

Conclusion

Why was NATO’s eastward enlargement beyond the borders of the former GDR *not* a subject of talks or negotiations with Gorbachev? The answers can be found both in the Western camp and the Soviet Union. In 1990, the Western heads of state and government were far from assuming that the Warsaw Pact would soon collapse. But even if this had been the case, the West could not have simply disregarded the principle established by the CSCE Founding Act that granted its signatory states the “the right to be or *not* to be a party to treaties of *alliance*.”¹⁰ Like Western leaders, Gorbachev also assumed that the Warsaw Pact would continue to exist. He shared the view held by his Chief of the General Staff, Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev, that the Pact could be reformed and that the “state interests” of its members would keep it alive if the ideological cement that had held the alliance together were removed.

Such illusions were still nurtured in late February 1990 by the (first non-Communist) Polish prime minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who, “given the German problem”, even considered permitting the presence of Soviet forces in Poland after their withdrawal from the GDR.¹¹ His remarks also show that there was no willingness in East Central Europe to apply for a NATO Membership Action Plan. Contrary to that, there were some, such as Václav Havel, who made a case for the dissolution of both blocs. It can be concluded, therefore, that in 1990, there were no reliable assurances and no negotiations on NATO enlargement beyond the territory of the unified Germany. Whether or not eastward enlargement was a good idea is another matter. Whatever the case may be, a breach of promise or contract has nothing to do with it.

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⁷ Genscher, Hans-Dietrich (1990): Zur deutschen Einheit im europäischen Rahmen, *Tutzinger Blätter* 2, pp. 3-13, http://www.2plus4.de/chronik.php3?date_value=31.01.90&sort=003-001.

⁸ Foreign and Commonwealth Office (2010): *Documents on British Policy Overseas, Series III, Volume VII: German Unification, 1989-1990* (Oxford/New York, NY: Routledge), pp. 261-64.

⁹ According to a Federal Foreign Office memorandum Genscher assured his Soviet counterpart Shevardnadze on 10 February 1990: “We are aware that NATO membership for a unified Germany raises complicated questions. For us, however, one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east.” Since this meeting was primarily about the GDR, Genscher is noted to have explicitly added: “As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general.” However, in his memoirs, Genscher did talk not of any “guarantees” of “assurances” given to the Soviet Union in this connection but rather of a “sounding out” (*Sondierungen*) prior to negotiations proper.

¹⁰ Conference on Security and Co-Operation in Europe: Final Act, <http://www.osce.org/helsinki-final-act?download=true>.

¹¹ Mazowiecki, Tadeusz (1990): remarks at a press conference in Warsaw (21 February), quoted from Associated Press.