

Breaking the Promise to Russia

By [Jonathan Power](#)

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The Russian European dreamers have included Pushkin, Lenin, Gorbachev and, until relatively recently, President Vladimir Putin. They have all seen their country's future as part of the "European house". But history and events have not been kind to Russia. Napoleon's invasion, revolution, two world wars, Stalin's communism and, most recently, the expansion of NATO, have shattered the dream again and again.

At the end of the Cold War and with agreement on the NATO-Russia Founding Act it seemed that big steps towards that goal were being taken. First, Russia would have a seat at NATO's table. Later it would join NATO. Later still, the European Union. Some said this would happen over ten years, others 20.

Then, smash, the dream came to an end as President Bill Clinton, bucking America's academic foreign policy elite, decided to expand NATO's membership to former members of the Soviet Union's Warsaw Pact. George Kennan, America's elder statesman on Russian issues, commented, "It shows so little understanding of Russian and Soviet history. Of course there is going to be a bad reaction from Russia, and then the NATO expanders will say that we always told you that is how the Russians are – but this is just wrong." He characterized it as the most dangerous foreign policy decision that the US had made since the end of the Second World War.

Defending Clinton and, later, George W. Bush and Barack Obama who continued the NATO expansion policy, their supporters have said that in expanding NATO eastward the West did not break its promise to Moscow not to.

But it did. As ex-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has said on many occasions there was a promise not to expand NATO "as much as a thumb's width further to the East." This is an echo of the US secretary of state, James Baker, when he spoke in St Catherine's Hall in the Kremlin on February 9th 1990, saying, there would be "no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east".

Some re-writing of history has gone on. Now Baker has ambiguously denied there was any such agreement.

There has even been an effort to show that Gorbachev himself denies that there was an agreement. And it is true that in the last few years he has said one thing and then another. This is perhaps because he is embarrassed that he never asked for the US/German commitments in writing. He has defended that decision arguing, "The Warsaw Pact still existed at the beginning of 1990. Merely the notion that NATO might expand to include countries in the alliance sounded completely absurd at the time".

Nevertheless, the evidence that a commitment was made not to expand is strong. Rodrick Braithwaite who was the UK's ambassador to the Soviet Union and then the new Russia, has written, "After Germany reunited, Václav Havel, the Czech president, called for Czechoslovakia, Poland and Hungary to enter NATO. The British prime minister and foreign secretary assured Soviet ministers that there was no such intention. NATO's secretary general added that enlargement would damage relations with the Soviet Union."

Jack Matlock, who was ambassador to Moscow for both Ronald Reagan and George Bush Senior, has said on a number of occasions that Moscow was given "a clear commitment" not to expand NATO.

Der Spiegel, the German political weekly, has been through the German and British archives. It found a minute of a conversation on February 10, 1990 when foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher spoke with Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze. Genscher said, "For us one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east." Because the conversation revolved mainly around the future of East Germany Genscher added explicitly, "As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned this also applies in general."

In a major speech on January 31 1990 in Tutzing, Genscher said there would not be "an expansion of NATO territory to the east, in other words, closer to the borders of the Soviet Union".

The British foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd, when meeting Genscher on February 6th 1990 to discuss Hungary's forthcoming free elections, was told that the Soviet Union needed "the certainty that Hungary will not become part of the Western alliance." The Kremlin, Genscher said, would have to be given assurances to that effect. Hurd agreed.

In April 2009 Gorbachev told the German newspaper "Bild", "the West have probably rubbed their hands, rejoicing at having played a trick on the Russians." It very much looks like it.

Moreover, the US gratuitously abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty and decided also to employ missile defences in central Europe, thus undermining the so-called "nuclear balance".

The West has taken advantage of a weakened Russian when instead it should have been paving the way for Russia to enter the "European House". History will not smile kindly on the dangerous and counterproductive expansion of NATO.

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Articles by: Jonathan Power

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