

What Did the West Promise Russia on NATO Expansion?

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In 2007, Russian President Vladimir Putin complained, “What happened to the assurances our western partners made after 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 those guarantees?”

Putin was quoting correctly. He might have added, as we know from newly [declassified documents](#), that Woerner also “stressed that the NATO Council and he are against the expansion of NATO (13 out of 16 NATO members support this point of view).” The NATO Secretary General also assured the Russians on July 1, 1991 that, in an upcoming meeting with Poland’s Lech Walesa and Romania’s Ion Iliescu, “he will oppose Poland and Romania joining NATO, and earlier this was stated to Hungary and Czechoslovakia” (document 30).

Many have accused Putin of historical revisionism and denied that the West ever promised Russia that, if a unified Germany were permitted to join NATO, NATO would not expand east. But, as these three quotations from the highest level of NATO show, the declassified documents firmly establish that NATO was lying when it said in a 2014 report that “No such pledge was made, and no evidence to back up Russia’s claims has ever been produced.”

Secretary of State James Baker has also insisted no such promise was made. On February 9, 1990, Baker famously offered Gorbachev a choice:

“I want to ask you a question, and you need not answer it right now. Supposing unification takes place, what would you prefer: a united Germany outside of NATO, absolutely independent and without American troops; or a united Germany keeping its connections with NATO, but with the guarantee that NATO’s jurisdiction or troops will not spread east of the present boundary?”

Baker has been dismissive of this statement, categorizing it as only a hypothetical question. But Baker's next statement, not previously included in the quotation but now placed back in the script by the documentary record, refutes that claim. After Gorbachev answers Baker's question, saying, "It goes without saying that a broadening of the NATO zone is not acceptable," Baker replies categorically, "We agree with that" (document 6).

There are four other declassified statements that now solidify the evidence against Baker's claim. The most important is Baker's own interpretation of his question to Gorbachev at the time. At a press conference immediately following this most crucial meeting with Gorbachev, Baker announced that NATO's "jurisdiction would not be moved eastward."

The second is that, while Baker was meeting with Gorbachev, Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates was asking the same question of KGB leader Vladimir Kryuchkov in clearly non-hypothetical terms. He asked Kryuchkov what he thought of the "proposal under which a united Germany would be associated with NATO, but in which NATO troops would move no further east than they now were?" Gates then added, "It seems to us to be a sound proposal" (document 7).

The third is that, on the same day, Baker posed the same question to Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze. He asked if there "might be an outcome that would guarantee that there would be no NATO forces in the eastern part of Germany. In fact, there could be an absolute ban on that." How did Baker intend that offer? In *Not One Inch*, M.E. Sarotte reports that in his own notes, Baker wrote, "End result: Unified Ger. Anchored in a changed (polit.) NATO - whose juris. would not be moved eastward!" According to a now declassified State department memorandum of their conversation, Baker had already in this conversation assured Shevardnadze that "There would, of course, have to be ironclad guarantees that NATO's jurisdiction or forces would not move eastward" (document 4).

Finally, according to a declassified State Department memorandum of the conversation, on still the same busy day, Baker told Gorbachev and Shevardnadze, not in the form of a question at all, that "If we maintain a presence in a Germany that is a part of NATO, there would be no extension of NATO's jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east" (document 5).

Though these are Secretary of State Baker's most important assurances, they are not his only assurances. On May 18, 1990, Baker told Gorbachev in a meeting in Moscow, "I wanted to emphasize that our policies are not aimed at separating Eastern Europe from the Soviet Union" (document 18). And, yet again, on February 12, 1990, the promise is made. According to notes taken for Shevardnadze at the Open Skies Conference in Ottawa, Baker told Gorbachev that "if U[nited] G[ermany] stays in NATO, we should take care about non-expansion of its jurisdiction to the East" (document 10).

Baker's assurances to Gorbachev and Shevardnadze were confirmed and shared by the State Department who, on February 13, 1990, informed US embassies that "[t]he Secretary made clear that. . . we supported a unified Germany within NATO, but that we were prepared to ensure that NATO's military presence would not extend further eastward."

A 1996 State Department investigation by John Herbst and John Kornblum not only became official US policy but, according to Sarotte "because of the official imprimatur and the broad distribution . . . helped shape American attitudes toward the controversy of what, exactly

had been said. . . .” Herbst and Kornblum concluded that the assurances that were given had no legal force. They were able to make this judgment by separating the verbal promises from the written documents that make “no mention of NATO deployments beyond the boundaries of Germany.”

The investigation did not deny that spoken assurances had been made. And no Russian official has ever claimed that they were written in the documents; in fact, they have regretted that they were not. But written agreements can be broken too, and the US record on keeping written promises is not much better than its record on keeping spoken ones, as Trump’s breaking of the JCPOA Iran nuclear agreement and Biden’s frequent violations of the joint communiqués signed with China regarding Taiwan testify. That record led Putin to [complain](#) on December 21, 2021 that “we know very well that even legal guarantees cannot be completely fail-safe, because the United States easily pulls out of any international treaty that has ceased to be interesting to it. . . .”

The distinction that Herbst and Kornblum rely on is an act of legal sophistry. In “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin argues that verbal agreements can be legally binding and that “analysts have long understood that states do not need formal agreements on which to base their future expectations.” Verbal agreements are the foundation of diplomacy. Shiffrin argues that informal deals are important to politics and that they were particularly important to diplomacy between the US and Russia during the Cold War. As examples, he cites the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis through informal verbal agreements and the “Cold War order [that] emerged from tacit US and Soviet initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s that helped the two sides to find ways to coexist.” Verbal agreements between the US and Russia “abounded during the Cold War,” Shiffrin says. Trusting spoken promises made in 1990 was nothing new.

Furthermore, verbal agreements, Shiffrin points out, “can constitute a binding agreement provided one party gives up something of value in consideration” of what the other party promised in return. Gorbachev certainly understood Baker’s promises in this way, as he agreed to allow a unified Germany to be absorbed by NATO in return for the “ironclad” guarantee that NATO would expand no further east. It was only after these talks with Baker that Gorbachev agreed to German reunification and ascension to NATO. The “not one inch” promise was the condition for Gorbachev agreeing to a united Germany in NATO. In his memoir, Gorbachev called his February 9 conversation with Baker the moment that “cleared the way for a compromise.”

And the promises made by Baker were not the only promises made to Russia. Assurances came from the highest level of NATO and from Robert Gates, who, unlike Baker and NATO never deceived about his promises. In July 2000, Gates criticized “pressing ahead with expansion of NATO eastward [in the 1990s], when Gorbachev and others were led to believe that wouldn’t happen.”

The same promises were made by the leaders of several other nations. On July 15, 1996, now foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov, who had “been looking at the material in our archives from 1990 and 1991,” declared, according to Sarotte, that “It was clear . . . that Baker, Kohl and the British and French leaders John Major and François Mitterrand had all ‘told Gorbachev that not one country leaving the Warsaw Pact would enter NATO – that NATO wouldn’t move one inch closer to Russia.’”

Importantly, those same promises were made by German officials. West German chancellor Helmut Kohl met with Gorbachev the day after Baker on February 10. He assured Gorbachev that “naturally, NATO could not expand its territory to the current territory of the GDR [East Germany].” Clearer still, he told Gorbachev that “We believe that NATO should not expand its scope” (document 9). Simultaneously, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher was pointedly telling Shevardnadze that “For us, it is clear: NATO will not extend itself to the East.”

On March 5, 1991, British Ambassador to Russia Rodric Braithwaite recorded in his diary that when Russian Minister of Defense Dmitry Yazov had expressed that he was “worried that the Czechs, Poles and Hungarians will join NATO,” British Prime Minister John “Major assure[d] him that nothing of the sort will happen” (document 28). When Yazov specifically asked Major about “NATO’s plans in the region,” the British Prime Minister told him that he “did not himself foresee circumstances now or in the future where East European countries would become members of NATO” (document 28). On March 26, 1991, British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd informed Soviet Foreign Minister Aleksandr Bessmertnykh that “there are no plans in NATO to include the countries of Eastern and Central Europe in NATO in one form or another” (document 28). In a July 2016 [article](#), Braithwaite wrote that “US Secretary of State James Baker stated on 9 February 1990: “We consider that the consultations and discussions in the framework of the 2+4 mechanism should give a guarantee that the reunification of Germany will not lead to the enlargement of NATO’s military organization to the East”.

The clarity of the documentary record is still relevant today because it indicates that when Russia talks of a final red line at NATO expansion into Ukraine and right up to Russia’s border and of Western promises that neither NATO jurisdiction nor forces would expand beyond Germany’s borders, they are not engaging in historical revisionism as the West accuses but are expressing real existential fears and expressing legitimate expectations that the West will keep the promises they made in exchange for Russia keeping the promise it made in those 1990 and 1991 negotiations.

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