In the second half of the 1990s, when NATO was preparing to extend its membership eastward, Russian officials began to claim that the entry of former Warsaw Pact countries would violate a solemn “pledge”—made in the context of German unification diplomacy—not to include any former Communist countries into the alliance. Over the past decade or so a debate has been raging over the question whether or not Western policymakers made any legally binding commitment never to move NATO’s borders eastward.¹

As Philipp Zelikow and Mark Kramer have pointed out, the declassification of documents from all sides bear out that neither the United States nor any other Western country pledged not to expand NATO beyond Germany.² Joshua Itzkowitz Shifrinson has claimed that the United States was playing a double game, leading Gorbachev to believe that NATO would be subsumed in a new European security structure, while in truth working to ensure hegemony in Europe and the maintenance of NATO.³

In this chapter I emphasize that the West did not play a double game. I argue that NATO itself pursued a policy of two tracks.

First, the aim was to open up NATO, but slowly, cautiously and combined with an expanded effort to engage Russia. NATO’s gradual approach was the means to secure Central and Eastern Europe and to support Mikhail Gorbachev’s and Boris Yeltsin’s reforms.

Second, by working gradually, NATO hoped to buy time and to work out a cooperative relationship with Russia. The emergence of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in November 1991 reflected NATO’s gradual but also inclusive approach.
The initiative was designed to give the Central and East European countries a perspective for closer association and eventual NATO membership. At the same time, the endeavor was intended to include Russia in the future European security system.

In Search of Security: The Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

The countries of Central and Eastern Europe had always been looking West even when Europe was divided. Ronald Asmus pointed out that “rejoining the West had been an important leitmotif of the revolutions of 1989.” The events of 1989 and Germany’s unification transformed Europe. The Warsaw Pact dissolved in 1991. The question now was, what would come next?

NATO’s opening was not a predetermined affair. First of all, it was imperative for NATO to adapt itself and to change its doctrine. The process of NATO’s transformation was initiated at the London Summit in June 1990. U.S. President George Bush emphasized that we “must build a transformed alliance for the new Europe of the 21st century.” In the same vein, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher said that “our signal from this meeting must continue to be one of resolve in defence, resolve and unity in defence coupled with willingness to extend the hand of friendship to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.” At London, NATO extended a “hand of friendship” to the Warsaw Pact countries, inviting them to form a new relationship with NATO and to establish regular diplomatic liaison with NATO in an effort to think aloud with each other during a historic period of change. This involved meetings between the Ambassadors of the Central and East European countries in Brussels and visits by NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner and his staff to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Initially, the Central and Eastern European countries sought only closer ties with NATO, not membership. However, given the crisis in Yugoslavia and the aborted coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991, the political leaderships of the Central and Eastern European countries were afraid of a security vacuum developing in their region. Starting in 1990, Czechoslovakian President Václav Havel, Polish Pres-
ident Lech Wałęsa and Hungarian Prime Minister József Antall articulated their desire to develop the closest possible relations with NATO.

Equal security was a precondition for them also in their endeavor to join the European Community. But from their vantage point, only NATO was able to provide the kind of hard security they were seeking. In September 1990, Poland’s Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki told George H.W. Bush that “no one doubts the direction of change—toward the market—is irreversible, but Poland needs some signs that their economic problems are appreciated by the Western world.” In October 1990, in a conversation with Bush, Antall made the point that “economic problems can create social problems. I don’t know if we can control the situation. If we don’t, that would be a huge propaganda victory for conservatives in the Soviet Union and China.”

In November 1990, Havel emphasized that “with the collapse of communism in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary and other countries, we may be facing a temporary vacuum as all the old links cease to exist. It could be breeding ground for chaos and instability. Our democracies are just emerging. To fill this vacuum is not just our problem; it is also an obligation of the West.” Therefore, the reformers in the East were seeking Western assistance to transform their economies.

Western policymakers were meanwhile confronted with a multitude of challenges. In late 1990 and early 1991, Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and the ensuring war in Iraq somewhat diverted the Bush Administration’s attention from Eastern Europe. The formation and the maintenance of the global coalition against Hussein took up most of Bush’s time. Against this background, in March 1991, Germany’s Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher reminded Bush that “with regards to Eastern Europe, this is critically important too. They badly need our economic help and we are prepared to work with you. [...] Also there is a security vacuum now in Eastern Europe. We need to give these countries an answer to the question they are asking. It must make them feel more secure but it also must be in our own interest and it must not be provocative to the Soviets. We need to give them this answer very soon.”

In 1991, the Central and Eastern European countries were in a challenging situation. In addition to complete economic transformation from plan to market with Western assistance, their leaders were eager
to establish the broadest possible ties. In March 1991, in a conversation with President Bush, Lech Wałęsa emphasized that “we resolutely desire to join Western Europe and the United States in political, economic and military terms.” Wałęsa reiterated Poland’s need for international security. He argued that “we are ready for cooperation in every respect, even military. This doesn’t mean that we are anti-Soviet or anti-German, but rather that we are pro-peace and security.” Meanwhile, the Warsaw Pact was effectively dissolved on March 30, 1991.

Bush did not feel in the position to give any sort of security guarantees. He emphasized the need to take a gradual approach. Bush understood Wałęsa’s “sense of urgency.” At the same time, he thought it impossible to provide immediate military assistance. Instead, he argued that “we still feel that the best assistance that we could possibly provide is to encourage our private sector.”

Bush sensed Wałęsa’s concern over the situation in the Soviet Union. Wałęsa watched Bush’s diplomacy with Gorbachev very closely. Bush argued that “we support Gorbachev because he has been right before. [...] We must reward whatever he does that is cooperative. I know you are worried about gradualism on the part of the West and its response to Poland’s needs, and I know you are also worried about military security.”

The West certainly rewarded Mikhail Gorbachev’s cooperative security policy. In 1990, Kohl’s financial help for the Soviet Union had been essential to buy his consent to Germany’s unification, basically offering cash credits and covering the cost of removing Soviet forces from East Germany. In 1991, the West Germans were unilaterally funneling massive amounts of assistance to Moscow to shore up the Soviet economy. Time and again, Helmut Kohl justified his actions stating “it certainly was not in the West’s interest for instability to reign in the Soviet Union. That country had to be integrated into the world economy.”

To that end, Mikhail Gorbachev was invited to participate in the G-7 Summit in London in 1991. However, the USSR failed to stabilize. With the coup of August 1991, Gorbachev lost power and the USSR was on the path towards its dissolution.
A Euro-Atlantic Security Initiative: The Establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council

The August 1991 coup had affected the thinking in Central and Eastern Europe in profound ways. Ronald Asmus wrote that “the initial announcement of the coup had sent shivers down the spines of many in the region and reminded them how vulnerable their newly won freedom and independence might be.”

Central and Eastern European leaders immediately requested clear signal of support both from Washington and NATO headquarters in Brussels. Both Havel and Wałęsa worried about the lack of meaningful security guarantees. NATO's hand of friendship and the establishment of NATO liaisons offices meant little in the fall of 1991. József Antall of Hungary felt that the coup in Moscow had been proof that it had been right to have acted in haste to get the Soviet troops out of Hungary. He emphasized that “it would have been horrible if this had taken place under the former situation.”

The August 1991 coup highlighted the urgency to build a basis for a new peace order in Europe based on cooperative security as long as Mikhail Gorbachev was still in power. It underlined the need to construct a “new Euro-Atlantic community” of nations in an effort to provide the Central and Eastern European countries a perspective for closer ties with the West going beyond NATO's hand of friendship.

President Bush advanced two initiatives to address both challenges.

First, following the aborted coup in Moscow, he proposed a unilateral move on nuclear weapons. Bush was eager to make progress while he still had Gorbachev as a partner. His proposals entailed the idea of getting rid of all tactical nuclear weapons except those launched from the air. Other elements of the Bush initiative took bombers and missiles off alert, pressed de-MIRVing of missiles and canceled some nuclear modernization programs. The purpose of the Bush initiative was to signal to the leaders and the peoples in the Soviet Union that NATO's policy would enhance their security and build stability.

Bush’s second initiative was aimed at the transformation of Europe’s security architecture; Secretary of State James Baker and Hans-Dietrich Genscher issued a common declaration highlighting their ambi-
tion to create a “Euro-Atlantic Community that extends East from Vancouver to Vladivostok.” This vague rhetoric pointed to moving on with something more tangible from London in 1990. They emphasized that “the Atlantic link, European integration and cooperation with our Eastern neighbors are the linchpins of this community.” And their premise was that promoting democratic institutions in Central and Eastern Europe “complements the maintenance of a common defense in ensuring security”.

The Baker-Genscher declaration was the birth hour for the establishment of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). The aim was to institutionalize NATO’s new relationship with the new democracies of Central and Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and to formalize “the liaison relationship by establishing a more routine set of meetings among the sixteen and the liaison countries, perhaps as a “North Atlantic Cooperation Council.”

Genscher told Bush and Baker that it was imperative “to give the Soviets some kind of a framework for continuing to participate in Europe and also to prevent Balkanization of the Soviet Union or Eastern Europe.” Moreover, he stressed that Germany wanted full associate and then full membership in the European Community (EC) for the Central and Eastern European countries. His verdict was clear: “We now have to decide how to help the Central and Eastern Europe countries and the Soviet Union: We cannot let them fail.”

Genscher was for EC membership for the Central and Eastern European countries, and also for loose but formalized NATO ties with them and the USSR. The establishment of the NACC was a means to find a way to expand relations and dialogue between NATO and the Central and Eastern European countries. It was intended to provide assurance of U.S. participation and to place NATO in the forefront of European security.

The timing was as important as the content of the NACC initiative. There was as yet no blueprint for the transformation of Europe’s security system. In December 1991, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were granted associate EC status. However, their future relationship towards NATO remained unclear.
In October 1991, President Bush’s National Security Advisor, Brent Scowcroft, told Václav Havel that Czechoslovakia’s relations to NATO “is in the nature of the growing European community as it relates to NATO. [...] We are interested in close relations, but there is a debate over how to expand and how fast. This is caught up in the question of Europe and its relation to NATO and the European defense system.”

NATO’s Rome Summit in November 1991 was the birth hour for the NACC. NATO’s Heads of State adopted a declaration on peace and cooperation in order to define a new security architecture in Europe. Moreover, they welcomed the prospect of a strengthening of the role of Western European Union (WEU), both as the defense component of the process of European unification and as a means of consolidating the European pillar of the Atlantic Alliance.

A month earlier, NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner had stressed that, in a broader sense, the purpose of NATO’s Rome Summit was to “describe NATO’s role with the context of the Euro-Atlantic framework and the transatlantic axis which is fundamental both to European order and to the new world order.” Wörner made the point that “we need a new picture of NATO, not as a military alliance confronting the Soviet Union, but as a military alliance confronting instability and uncertainty, and as a political alliance gaining in importance for establishing and carrying out this new European and world order.”

The rapid collapse of the Soviet Union, however, quickly outpaced NATO’s adaption.

Central and Eastern European leaders were not content with closer institutional cooperation short of membership. Polish Prime Minister Krzysztof Bielecki highlighted his country’s need to join the institutions of the West: “When we are members of the family of the democratic community, we will feel secure.” Bielecki favored a dissolution of the Soviet Union and its conversion to a collection of sovereign states. Only thus would the promotion of democracy be feasible, he argued. In fact, as he told Bush, “for me the Soviet Union doesn’t exist.”

Helmut Kohl held a different view. He favored cohesion, stability and a continued role for Mikhail Gorbachev in a new Russian or
post-Soviet federation. Kohl believed that “a catastrophe awaits us if the USSR disintegrates completely.”

In the autumn of 1991, Bush held a middle position: He continued to support Gorbachev while he established contacts with the republics and its leaders such as Yeltsin, Kravchuk, Nazarbayev and others.

In 1992, Russia’s need for economic assistance and the emergence of the Western relationship with Boris Yeltsin’s government overshadowed Central and Eastern European pleas for NATO membership. In February 1992, Russia’s domestic situation and its economic reforms were clearly the most pressing item on the agenda of President Bush’s first summit meeting with Boris Yeltsin.

Western policymakers did not address the issue of NATO’s opening in public. George Bush thought that a public debate over NATO’s opening might upset the emergence of the Euro-Atlantic security order. In June 1992, he told Antall that “we do have a responsibility to be a stabilizing force in Europe, also with Russia. In that respect we have unique responsibilities.”

Nonetheless, behind the scenes a strategy debate was under way over NATO’s opening. In March 1992, Britain’s NATO Ambassador John Weston argued in favor of an early declaration by NATO “of its readiness to accept in due course enlargement by any new member state of the European Union that is willing to assume the full obligations of NATO membership.” Weston reiterated that there was an urgent need to address NATO’s enlargement question at a time when the future enlargement of the European Union was taken for granted. His idea to meet potential Russian concerns was “to persuade them that they are sui generis because of Russia’s seize and importance and that these require a special relationship with major world players.” Rodric Braithwaite, one of John Major’s key foreign policy advisers, pointed out that “the trick would be to persuade the Russians that, as a Eurasian power, their future remained global, not narrowly European.”

The public debate over NATO’s opening became more urgent with the outbreak of war in the former Yugoslavia, in particular Bosnia-Herzegovina, in April 1992. In May 1992, Havel, Wałęsa and Antall met in Prague to declare that their goal was full-fledged NATO membership.
NATO’s opening, however, was not yet on the Western agenda. The Bush Administration did not take a position. When Braithwaite visited Washington in July 1992, his impression was that the Americans agreed with the premise that only NATO could provide the kind of security that potential new members of the European Community sought. But the Bush Administration was reluctant to take the lead. Braithwaite pointed out that “the British could not make the running alone. The Americans needed to be active now, without seeming to dictate.”

In 1992, against the background of the Balkan wars and Russia’s economic free-fall, NATO mostly avoided the delicate enlargement question. At its Spring Ministerial Meeting in 1992, the Alliance mainly discussed its new responsibilities in crisis management: NATO committed itself to support peacekeeping missions under the roof of the CSCE. The December 1992 NATO Ministerial produced an empty statement on “enhanced security from Vancouver to Vladivostok.” The debate on NATO’s opening was postponed until 1993—with a new American President.
Notes


18. Asmus, op. cit., p. 16.


35. Ibid.

