

Chapter 3

The George H.W. Bush Administration's Policies vis-à-vis Central Europe: From Cautious Encouragement to Cracking Open NATO's Door

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More than two decades after the 1997 Madrid NATO summit, scholars still debate why the U.S. government under President William J. Clinton favored inviting Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join the transatlantic Alliance. Given that American foreign policy is often marked as much by continuity as it is formed by change, this chapter seeks to leverage the greater current access to the documents of the George H.W. Bush Administration to sketch the situation that Clinton officials found when assuming office.

Overall, I seek to outline how the Bush Administration's priorities towards Central Europe were embedded in its broader approach vis-à-vis Europe. In a nutshell, I argue that U.S. views towards Central Europe evolved from cautious encouragement of politico-economic reform in 1989, to addressing regional concerns in order to achieve German reunification within NATO in 1990, and, by the time Bush left office, to a consensus around the necessity of opening the Alliance's door to Central European states.

To substantiate my arguments, I rely primarily upon internal Administration memoranda—documents mostly collected at the Bush Library; upon U.S. exchanges with British officials—recently declassified by the UK National Archives; and upon numerous interviews with former Bush Administration policymakers.

Struggling for European Stability and American Influence in 1989

As the Bush Administration assumed office in January 1989, its key players believed that they had to manage Soviet retrenchment, chaperone German ambition, and retain U.S. influence over European affairs.¹ With the Soviet economy crumbling, General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev was trying to reform his country. To gain the necessary breathing space, he was pursuing détente with the West. Moscow's behavior could reduce tensions and, potentially, end the Cold War. Nevertheless, U.S. officials concluded it also endangered cohesion within the Western Alliance.² In addition, pressures were mounting in West Germany for the continent's dominant economic power to take advantage of Soviet weakness to bring the two German states closer to each other.³ At the same time, the European Community was moving towards deeper economic integration, stoking fears of protectionism among Washington policymakers.⁴ Against this background, White House planners concluded that, if the United States wanted to avoid long-lasting instability or objectionable consolidation in Europe, it had to work to mitigate the continent's existing explosive potential and to remain a European power over the long term.

The new foreign policy team held that a slowdown of European developments was necessary to secure these distinct American aims. This assessment had a major impact on the Administration's views on Central European affairs.⁵ The Reagan Administration had embraced Soviet efforts at normalizing relations and reducing armaments.⁶ In contrast, some Bush officials thought the Kremlin's reforms were not genuine, but just a ruse to rejuvenate the communist system.⁷ A majority within the new administration, however, worried more about either *perestroika's* failure or its success.⁸ Were Gorbachev to move ahead too swiftly either at home and abroad, he might be toppled from within. Change in both the Soviet Union and Central Europe would have to wait.⁹ Were the Soviet reformer to succeed in normalizing Soviet relations to the West, the threat from the Kremlin would diminish and communism would probably vanish. And yet, such success could also flush U.S. forces out of Europe, unravel the transatlantic Alliance, and lessen American influence over the continent. Such an outcome would complicate the U.S. management of global economic and political re-

lations—priorities that mattered a lot to many within the Bush Administration.¹⁰

Confronted with these trade-offs, the most cautious American policymakers thought best a U.S.-Soviet arrangement over Central and Eastern Europe. The Administration's principal decisionmakers, however, believed Washington could achieve more.

Days before Bush's inauguration, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger visited Moscow. He delivered a letter from the incoming President, one stating that the new Administration would need time to "reflect."¹¹ However, ostensibly in his personal capacity, Kissinger also hinted at the "idea" of a USSR-U.S. "condominium over Europe." Such an agreement would ensure that the Europeans "do not misbehave," Gorbachev told the Politburo, and noted that this was an opportunity not to be missed.¹² Kissinger was concerned that the Kremlin would lure the Western Europeans into a deal. The Soviets might remain engaged in the continent's affairs, while the United States—having won the ideological confrontation—would return home. As a solution, Kissinger's condominium arrangement could have had both powers retrench.

Bush officials saw few reasons for such extreme cautiousness.¹³ Soviet weakness involved risks, but also offered opportunities.¹⁴ Maybe it was possible to eradicate communism, have the Soviets out of Europe, and keep the Americans in—thereby retaining Washington's say in Western European affairs.¹⁵

To achieve these multiple aims, the Administration not only needed to address German aspirations, but also for the Soviet Union to both implement reforms and avoid breakdown—a needle that proved anything but easy to thread.¹⁶

On the one hand, U.S. policymakers understood that if the Soviet Union were to stagnate in a "frustrating, seemingly endless, struggle" to "reform its society from above while preserving central control," the states in Eastern and Central Europe would revert to a "historical pattern of fractious and unstable internal politics, persistent economic weakness, and bitter national rivalries," and cause great problems for European stability.¹⁷

On the other hand, American officials knew that moving ahead too fast might bring Gorbachev down.¹⁸ There was “a big opportunity” in Central Europe, Bush told Canada’s Prime Minister Brian Mulroney already in January 1989, “if we can get our act together.” However, he argued, “there is also danger,” as pushing too far might cause the situation to get out of control. At that point, the President believed, “the tanks might come in.” His conversations with British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher reveal that the West had neither the interest nor the willingness to intervene in such a situation.¹⁹

Working within these confines throughout 1989, the Administration concluded that promoting reforms in Central Europe aided overall U.S. goals but remained a risky business.²⁰ As the region was becoming more independent, the United States should “exploit” these openings, but had to do so in a “prudent way,” a key official wrote.²¹ Thus, in his April 1989 foreign policy statement on the region, Bush stated that he wanted Central Europe to be “free, prosperous, and at peace.” However, to the dismay of many who sought a more resolute Washington push, the President added that his government was pursuing these goals “with prudence, realism, and patience.”²² In Eastern Europe, Bush’s overall goal was not to “stir up trouble,” but also not to pursue a “post-Yalta arrangement,” one in which he would be “sitting with the Soviets to divide spheres of influence,” he told the Italian leadership in May 1989. Instead, he wanted to promote democracy and capitalism without being so “flamboyant” that the Soviets would “feel the need” to take actions that would reverse “movement towards freedom.”²³ Numerous American Allies shared Washington’s concerns vis-à-vis the involved risks.²⁴ Thus, when Bush visited Poland and Hungary in July 1989, his message remained one of cautiousness and restraint.²⁵

At the same time, other politico-economic constraints limited the Administration’s efforts. On the one hand, significant domestic pressures from various supporters of Central European nations pushed for action, and U.S. officials were aware that economic assistance was their “best lever.”²⁶ On the other hand, much stood in the way of employing such instruments. In contrast to Europe or Japan, the United States had few economic links to Central and Eastern Europe. In addition, separating dealings with the Soviet Union from those with its satellites proved a challenging feat. Also, if the United States was to offer Poland or Hungary “special treatment” on the “debt front,” this would

compromise Washington's overall policy towards debtor countries, undermining negotiations with other key middle-income creditors.²⁷ Further, the foreign policy bureaucracy faced stark domestic fiscal constraints. The NSC staff reported that meetings broke down whenever the question of spending American taxpayer dollars came up.²⁸ Last but not least, U.S. officials faced a chicken-or-the-egg-problem: they were not convinced that piecemeal economic and political reform would slowly lead to more reforms, stability, and prosperity; therefore, they were reluctant to invest too many resources before major reforms were implemented.²⁹

Pursuing German Reunification within NATO in 1990

A year into the Bush Administration, it became clear that the Brezhnev Doctrine was defunct. Gorbachev would neither employ force nor condone its use, German reunification was impending, and Washington needed to act if it wanted to secure its influence in Europe.³⁰ To avoid West Germany becoming a disenfranchised giant at the continent's core, the White House had already supported the concept of eventual unification in spring 1989, and, by the beginning of 1990, decided to reinforce Bonn's efforts to achieve a rapid resolution.³¹

To assuage the concerns of Germany's neighbors and avoid European balancing against Bonn's new-found power, the U.S. government pledged to uphold NATO and retain armed forces in Europe for years to come.³² Yet for Washington to be able and disposed to do so, a unified Germany had to remain in NATO, subordinating its military to the integrated NATO command, willing to host American troops, and ready to maintain U.S. nuclear weapons on its soil.³³ Obtaining both Germany's unification and sustaining its membership in NATO under such conditions was not going to be easy. Bush officials expected there would be opposition in both West and East.³⁴

Against this background, the White House also understood that U.S. policy towards Western, Central, and Eastern Europe was tightly linked together.³⁵ "Our future as a European power will depend in large measure on how well we grasp these new opportunities," the NSC wrote to the President at the beginning of 1990. Germany was quickly filling the European power vacuum in Central Europe. Soon, the only

powers with “real influence” in the region were going to be Germany and the Soviet Union, the NSC argued. On the one hand, this was “not the architecture of a stable European security order,” American officials believed, as such a framework invited a return to the “cyclical pattern of Russo-German conflict and condominium that bedeviled Europe from 1870 to 1945.” On the other hand, U.S. engagement would help shape German reunification, manage “an eastward drift” in Germany’s policy, and strengthen the “future position” of the United States within European security and economic affairs. Thus, the NSC resolved that the United States had to remain engaged in Central Europe “between Germany and Russia.”³⁶

To both tie Germany to the West and stabilize Central Europe, the Administration had to beat back alternative approaches to European security in the region.³⁷ “The idea of a neutralized Germany would [...] fit into the fanciful visions among some in the new leadership [in Central Europe] of a demilitarized Europe of perpetual peace,” Scowcroft wrote to Bush in January 1990.³⁸ On the one hand, leaders like Václav Havel of Czechoslovakia not only harbored “pro-American sentiments,” but thought of future American engagement as a necessary “counterweight” to German economic and political power. Nevertheless, Bush officials believed these newcomers to power politics did not yet grasp the links between economic, political, and military affairs. Havel sought a bloc-free, demilitarized Europe. Scowcroft described him as “a man with a mission and in a hurry.”³⁹

Therefore, in a number of subsequent meetings at the White House, the President sought to impress upon Havel the interconnecting nature of the numerous elements underpinning an American involvement in Europe. “It is clear that the presence of American troops is a stabilizing factor,” the Central European leader concluded, to the relief of his U.S. interlocutors.⁴⁰

At the same time, the American government worked to dispel an emerging Polish-German border dispute. A solution was needed in order to both ease unification and to have Warsaw distance itself from Moscow, abstain from balancing against Bonn, and see the new German state in a positive light. During winter 1989, seemingly for domestic political reasons, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl refused to state publicly that Poland’s Oder-Neisse Western border was a settled

matter. To gain leverage with Bonn, Warsaw dragged its feet on having Soviet forces go home and kept talking about retaining Moscow involved in European security affairs.⁴¹ Polish decisionmakers started considering a return to European ententes—balances in which France and Britain would ally with Poland and others to counter German power.⁴² “In the past, peace was only guaranteed when a strong France was aligned with a strong Poland,” a Warsaw official told a policymaker in Paris. Last but not least, to have their voices heard, the Poles were also trying at the beginning of 1990 to insert themselves into the German reunification process.⁴³

The U.S. government understood that it had to deal with the issue. Not only were Polish concerns by themselves hindering reunification, but the unsettled border question offered European powers in both West and East a convenient tool to delay—and, potentially, to derail—reunification.⁴⁴

The White House pushed the German leadership to find a solution.⁴⁵ By the end of March 1990, Kohl was telling Bush that he was “firmly determined” to accept the current border even if it was “a bitter burden of history.”⁴⁶

At the same time, Bush worked on the Poles to have them accept a compromise. Not only was Washington offering to put pressure on the German Chancellor, but the quickly emerging singular superpower was providing Polish decisionmakers with reassurances that a Germany in NATO and an American presence in Europe would limit Bonn’s future ability to leverage Warsaw.⁴⁷ Maybe both Americans and Soviets “could remain in Germany,” Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki told Bush. “You may be right,” the President answered, but gently pushed in the opposite direction, arguing that the window of opportunity for Soviet “pulling back” was unlikely to last for all too long.⁴⁸

Having successfully dealt with these crises of the day, Bush officials realized already by the spring and summer of 1990 that Central European affairs were bound to remain in a state of flux. Soviet power would all but fade away—at least momentarily, while German influence would expand at a brisk pace. Thus, U.S. policymakers judged that all Central Europeans thought American “association” would be a “potential counterweight” to efforts by the French and Germans to establish political and economic “spheres of influence.”

At the same time, some in the region were already realizing that security concerns would not remain dormant forever, and were asking for institutional reassurance arrangements.⁴⁹ “How would NATO respond if Czechoslovakia applied for membership?” Havel’s security advisor asked an NSC official. With the Warsaw Pact gone but outside of NATO, where would these states find security in the “Europe of the future,” White House analysts probed.⁵⁰ In the short term, non-binding security assurances might suffice. Over the long term, however, this was questionable.⁵¹

Nonetheless, U.S. officials were still very cautious. They argued that before Germany was unified and Soviet forces were gone, Washington should “avoid being seen” as rushing in to “fill the void” left by a Soviet Union in retreat.⁵²

Shepherding Integration and Cracking Open NATO’s Door in 1991–1992

The ink on Germany’s unification not yet dry, the Administration started worrying about the sustainability of U.S. influence in Europe—the core concern vis-à-vis the continent during Bush’s last two years in office.⁵³ With a unified Germany in NATO, the United States had made itself the renewed guarantor of European security.⁵⁴ As a consequence, European powers were quickly developing contradicting incentives.⁵⁵ On the one hand, they wanted to ensure that Washington did not gain too much leverage over them—with Paris at the forefront of such efforts.⁵⁶ On the other hand, Europeans wanted to obtain credible assurances that the United States was still willing and able to provide for the continent’s security—a goal particularly important to smaller powers.⁵⁷

U.S. officials worried that the Europeans might pursue alternative security arrangements. Some worried that European decisionmakers might be “seduced” by “pan-European collective security.” Others were afraid that leaders on the continent might even be more inclined to pursue an independent Western European “defense pillar.”⁵⁸ Bush policymakers feared that European security integration could potentially render NATO obsolete, thereby depriving the United States of its main lever of influence over the continent and severing the transatlantic bond.⁵⁹

Managing European efforts at security integration proved a challenge.⁶⁰ Offsetting attempts at limiting American influence worked best when Washington's commitments were trusted. However, at home, political pressures for a "peace dividend" and the popular mood were pushing against America's obligations—both in Europe and all around the world.⁶¹ Also, it quickly became clear (as had been the case during the Cold War and despite some Bush officials hoping the opposite) that America's security position in Europe could not be easily or quickly translated into leverage over economic or political affairs—a fact that diminished domestic support for engagement even further.⁶²

Whereas the Iraq intervention gave Washington a credibility boost,⁶³ the Bush Administration's decision against going to war when the Yugoslav crisis erupted in 1991 reinforced doubts in Europe about U.S. willingness to spend blood and treasure to ensure the continent's security.⁶⁴ Within this context, and given that most threads of Europe's future ran through Paris, throughout both 1991 and 1992 Bonn remained reluctant to block a French push towards increased European security independence.⁶⁵

Against this background of transatlantic relations, security questions in Central Europe were becoming more salient. With the Warsaw Pact now history, political leaders in East and West believed the region was sliding into a security vacuum. Washington tried reassurance. At their June 1991 meeting in Copenhagen, NATO foreign ministers concluded that security would be "safeguarded" through "interlocking institutions." Two months later, the August coup in Moscow was a stark reminder that there was little beyond words to ensure security. "It was quite a shock," a former Hungarian politician remembered.⁶⁶

Expanding German influence and Western European ambivalence posed other problems. All Central Europeans were looking to Germany for trade and investment, but uncertain how Bonn would use its clout.⁶⁷ Washington's reticence to get involved and European inability to agree upon a common approach towards the breakup of Yugoslavia suggested that in the absence of institutional frameworks, Western powers would be primarily looking out for themselves. Last but not least, neither Paris nor London envisaged the Central European states joining the European Community for at least two decades.⁶⁸

Accordingly, the French foreign minister told Bush already in spring 1991 that the former Warsaw Pact countries wanted to “join NATO”—a longing that only intensified over the next months and years. “They realize that the only firm ground in Europe is the Atlantic Alliance.”⁶⁹

Bush officials believed that U.S. steps in Central Europe had to take into account Washington’s priorities relative to Moscow. The United States was facing a Russian “political landscape” that “few Americans understand,” Scowcroft told the president. He advised walking a fine line between encouraging reform and avoiding entanglement.⁷⁰ U.S. Secretary of State James Baker sent a somewhat more ambitious message from Moscow in September 1991: “We have a tremendous stake in the success of the democrats here.”⁷¹ And yet Americans officials were aware that the Russian economy was broken, the pace of reform slow, and the outcome uncertain.⁷² Becoming too involved bore certain risks and ambiguous benefits.⁷³ At the same time, U.S. officials believed that much spoke against organizing an “anti-Soviet coalition” whose frontier would be the Soviet border. Moscow would react negatively, potentially leading to a “reversal” of the “positive trends.”⁷⁴

As 1991 ended, U.S. officials argued it was strategically wiser to hold NATO’s expansion as an ace up the Western sleeve. The NSC suggested that the key to “keeping the Russians out of Europe” was “the unspoken but credible threat to extend the Alliance eastward if Russian expansionism is ever rekindled.”⁷⁵

Over the subsequent months, Washington planners assessed that Central Europe’s yearning for American involvement offered both challenges to and unique opportunities for cementing U.S. influence in Europe—influence that was deemed necessary for achieving broader U.S. political and economic goals. In terms of challenges, the Central Europeans’ fears—rekindled by recent instability and American hesitancy—ranked high. U.S. analysts concluded if the U.S. government blocked NATO expansion, the “new democracies” would lose interest in a transatlantic bond and seek entrance into Western European security structures.⁷⁶ Nobody in the region believed seeking such shelter was “ideal.” In America’s absence, there was “little military teeth” in European frameworks.⁷⁷ And yet, within a decade, the Europeans, led by Paris, would merge security and economic institutions, with the

Community thus becoming the “de facto keeper of European peace.”⁷⁸ As a consequence, NATO would be marginalized. Washington would retain “indirect and implied” security responsibilities due to the linkage between the Alliance and Western European security structures. Equally, the U.S. government would have “little to say” about European decision-making.⁷⁹

Nonetheless, American officials thought there was also opportunity, if only Washington would take advantage of the current “period of flux.”⁸⁰ On the one hand, Western Europe was becoming more assertive.⁸¹ Its leaders believed Washington wanted “a say” in European affairs but was no longer willing to “invest the corresponding financial and security resources.” Hence, they were building parallel institutions, thereby limiting American clout. On the other hand, Central Europeans were among the strongest proponents of Washington’s “continued involvement” in Europe.

Against this background, the CIA argued that the U.S. position as “the only global power” still gave it “leverage with the Europeans.” The United States had a clear comparative advantage: Europe’s post-Cold War structure on the “political/military dimension of security” contained a “glaring gap,” providing Washington with a “stronger hand.” Therefore, the analysts concluded that a “reliable and predictable” U.S. commitment to assist in dealing with regional tensions “in the eastern half of the continent” would increase the U.S. government’s sway in both West and East.⁸²

During Bush’s final year in office, a consensus appears to have slowly emerged: Washington should offer the Central Europeans the perspective of joining NATO. The French believed already at the end of 1991 that the Americans were tilting towards “seeking to offer” the countries in Central Europe “Alliance security guarantees.”⁸³ During the same time period, analysts who would later serve in the Clinton Administration argued for elaborating criteria for admitting new members to the NATO club.⁸⁴ By the end of March 1992, the NSC was arguing that the United States should “signal” to the East Europeans that they “may become eligible” for NATO membership.⁸⁵ By June 1992, policy planners seemed to believe that a consensus was emerging within the Administration towards opening “up the Alliance to new members,” although details had yet to be “worked out.”⁸⁶

Four months before Bush left office, a State Department memorandum stated that that “the benchmark will be high (and will take years to achieve),” but that the United States “will finally be giving” the states from this region “a yardstick by which they can measure their progress.” American diplomats also admitted that “handling Russia will be critical.” The U.S. government could not accept the British view “that Russia can never join NATO.” Such a step would be interpreted by Russians as a “long-term strategy to isolate it from Europe.”⁸⁷

Conclusion

Throughout Bush’s time in office, the dual goal of keeping Europe both stable and integrated within the quickly expanding American order required Washington to maintain its influence on the continent. To that end, the Administration’s best bet was to carefully manage the demise of communism, help ease the Soviets out of Europe, and arrange for the United States to remain the continent’s security guarantor.

During 1989, this meant cautious encouragement of reform. During 1990, it involved garnering support for German reunification in NATO. And during 1991-93, it meant pushing back against French-driven European security integration efforts and a slowly emerging consensus that Central European states should be admitted into the Alliance.

To the hard-nosed policymakers of the Bush Administration, keeping Central Europe away from NATO involved undeniable risks. Offering these states an accession perspective brought opportunities to advance both stability and influence. However, it also opened a “Russian Question” in European politics. As they left the corridors of power, Bush officials passed on these trade-offs to the incoming administration. It might be that President Clinton and his associates built their choices on a completely different set of concerns. And yet, if continuity is any guide, students of NATO enlargement could start by investigating whether Bush-era imperatives still applied in the mid-1990s.

Notes

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3. Brent Scowcroft, "Memo Bush: Dealing with the Germans," August 7, 1989, BPL, Scowcroft Collection, 91120 Soviet Power Collapse in Eastern Europe—SNF—May 1989 [1].

4. Charles Stuart Kennedy, "Interview with William Bodde," October 5, 1998, Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project (ADST) - available online; and CIA Directorate of Intelligence, "EC-1992: The Revitalization of Europe," January 25, 1989, BPL, Scowcroft Collection, 91148 Other (January-March 1989).

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8. George H. W. Bush, "Memo for Agencies: Comprehensive Review of US-Soviet Relations," February 15, 1989, BPL, NSC Collection, Robert D. Blackwill Chronological Files 30542-002, January February 1989 [2]. Also, telephone interview with Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) official, Zurich, April 2018.

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13. Interviews with NSC officials, New York and Washington, October and December 2018.

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26. Robert D. Blackwill, "Memo for Scowcroft: Strategy toward Poland and Hungary," September 19, 1989, BPL, NSC Collection, Peter W. Rodman Files CF00206, Europe - Eastern, 1989.

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