

Chapter 19

Mikhail Gorbachev and the NATO Enlargement Debate: Then and Now

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The purpose of this chapter is to bring to the attention of researchers materials relating to the antecedents of NATO enlargement that have not been widely cited in ongoing discussions.

In the debate on NATO enlargement, both in Russia and in the West, the issue of the “assurances on non-enlargement of NATO” given to Soviet leaders and specifically Mikhail Gorbachev in 1989-1990 has taken center stage since the mid-1990s. The matter is discussed not just by scholars, journalists and other non-policy-makers but also by major political figures, particularly in Russia, including President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. In the West, there has recently been renewed interest in the subject following the publication of some declassified material by the National Security Archive, a Washington, D.C., non-profit organization with a somewhat misleading name.

While some of the aspects of the discussion of the “assurances” are similar in Russia and the West (conflation of fact and opinion, of binding obligations and remarks relating to expectation or intent) the subtext is different. In Russia most commentators accuse Gorbachev of being gullible and naïve and blithely accepting the assurances instead of demanding a binding legal guarantee of non-enlargement. In the West, the subtext is more often of the West’s bad faith in breaking what is supposed to be an informal “pledge of non-enlargement” given to Gorbachev. It should be noted, however, that in the eyes of Russian critics of Gorbachev what matters is not this subtext; they use it to support their narrative of Gorbachev’s gullibility, or worse.

One example is the preface to the collection of documents published by the National Security Archive in December 2017, which begins with the following:

U.S. Secretary of State James Baker's famous "not one inch eastward" assurance about NATO expansion in his meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev on February 9, 1990, was part of a cascade of assurances about Soviet security given by Western leaders to Gorbachev and other Soviet officials throughout the process of German unification in 1990 and on into 1991, according to declassified U.S., Soviet, German, British and French documents posted today by the National Security Archive at George Washington University.

The documents show that multiple national leaders were considering and rejecting Central and Eastern European membership in NATO as of early 1990 and through 1991, that 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, and that subsequent Soviet and Russian complaints about being misled about NATO expansion were founded in written contemporaneous memcons and telcons at the highest levels.

The documents reinforce former CIA Director Robert Gates's criticism of "pressing ahead with expansion of NATO eastward [in the 1990s], when Gorbachev and others were led to believe that wouldn't happen." The key phrase, buttressed by the documents, is "led to believe."¹

That indeed is the key phrase. Not so much for a Western reader, who may not regard Robert Gates as the best arbiter in the debate on NATO enlargement, but for a Russian steeped in the anti-Gorbachev narrative, who will read it as "Gorbachev was naïve/stupid enough to believe." This, indeed, is how it was "interpreted" in most of the Russian commentary of the publication.

So what was said and what was agreed on Gorbachev's watch, and what were the alternatives?

I have discussed the subject with several Russian and Western participants in the political and diplomatic processes of 1989–1991. None of them recalls that there was any substantive discussion of a possible NATO enlargement to countries of Central and Eastern Europe during those years. This is regardless of their evaluation of NATO enlargement as such, i.e. whether it was a good or a bad idea in the first place and whether it was properly managed.

At my request two participants in the process gave me access to their correspondence discussing the subject. They are Ambassadors Jack Matlock and Rodric Braithwaite. Matlock was the United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1987–1991 and he has continued to comment on U.S. and world affairs since then. Braithwaite was the UK's Ambassador to the Soviet Union and Russia until 1992.

I will first quote from Ambassador Braithwaite's letter of April 24, 2011:

Russians say they were given oral assurances by Western leaders in 1990–1991 that NATO would not be enlarged beyond united Germany. They regard the subsequent enlargement of NATO as a breach of faith. They criticize the Soviet government of the day for not having insisted on getting binding assurances in writing.

Western officials and historians say either that that no assurances were given, or that they were without significance, or that they have to be seen in the context of a rapidly changing situation.

Despite the passage of twenty years, the issue still crops up as a burden on Russia's relations with the West.

The assurances

Russians point to the following:

Assurances given in 1990:

- James Baker, US Secretary of State, 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";
- Helmut Kohl, German Chancellor, 10 February 1990: "We consider that NATO should not enlarge its sphere of activity."

Assurances given in 1991:

- John Major, British Prime Minister, Speaking to Defence Minister Yazov, 5 March 1991: "He did not himself foresee circumstances now or in the future where East European countries would become members of NATO";
- Douglas Hurd, British Foreign Secretary, speaking to Foreign Minister Bessmertnykh, 26 March 1991: "[T]here were

no plans in NATO to include the countries of Eastern and Central Europe in NATO in one form or another;”

- Francois Mitterrand, speaking to Mikhail Gorbachev, 6 May 1991: “Each of the [Eastern European] countries I have mentioned will seek to ensure its security by concluding separate agreements. With whom? With NATO, of course. ... I am convinced that is not the right way forward for Europe.” This was, of course, a prediction, not an assurance.

[*Author’s note:* recently declassified material published by the National Security Archive contains some additional references to similar “assurances.”]

This factual record has not been successfully challenged in the West. The remarks by Major and Hurd are confirmed by British records. I was present on both occasions.

A distinction needs to be drawn between the assurances given in 1990, and those given in 1991. The earlier assurances were given before agreement was reached in the “2+4” negotiations about the status of united Germany and its position in NATO between the Soviet Union, the United States, Britain, France and the two Germanies.

American officials later argued that James Baker’s remarks referred only to the possibility that NATO forces would be introduced into Eastern Germany after reunification. As they stand, however, the remarks are ambiguous, and it is not surprising that they have been interpreted as referring to a wider expansion. In the event, Baker’s point was dropped from the US negotiating position in the 2+4 negotiations, because his lawyers advised that it was not sustainable. A tortuous form of words concerning the deployment, exercising or stationing of non-German as well as German NATO forces in East Germany following reunification was agreed in the last hours of the 2+4 negotiations in Moscow on 13 September 1990.

The situation had, however, changed radically by the time John Major and Douglas Hurd spoke six months later, by when it was clear that the Warsaw Pact was on its last legs. Their remarks related specifically to expansion beyond German into Eastern Europe. They followed a speech by the Czech President Havel arguing that Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland should all be brought into NATO.

German and American leaders do not appear to have given the Russians similar assurances. Given the care with which the British normally clear statements on common issues of policy, especially with the Americans, it is barely conceivable that the two British statements should not have reflected a common Allied understanding. However the relevant documents have not yet emerged from the British archives.

The Context

Western officials now argue that given the turmoil at the time—Germany reunified much more rapidly than anyone had expected, the ending of Communist governments all over Eastern Europe, war in Iraq, and the impending tragedy in Yugoslavia—it was not surprising that Western leaders failed to consider the issue of NATO expansion more systematically: at that time the possibility seemed remote. The argument is plausible, even if it is not very respectable.

Nevertheless, the Russians were entitled to take seriously the repeated high-level assurances they were given. They were bound to feel that they had been dealt with in bad faith when the push for NATO enlargement began not long afterwards under President Clinton. It is easy to imagine how the West would have reacted if the positions had been reversed.

An Alternative?

Primakov and other Russians have since argued that the Gorbachev government ought to have got Western assurances about NATO expansion in writing. Some argue that this was one more example of Gorbachev's failure to stand up for Soviet interests.

This is unrealistic. If the Russians had demanded that the West give them written assurances, Western governments would have had to consider much more carefully whether or how they wished to bind their hands for the future. It is highly unlikely that they would have agreed. The chances of the Russians getting written assurances were close to zero.

Regardless of what assurances were or were not given, some people in the West argue that it was a major error of policy to alienate Russia by enlarging NATO into Eastern Europe without providing for a wider European security arrangement in which Russia was included. But the uncertainty following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the unsurprising concerns of the East European countries including the Baltic States that they would be left

to deal with the consequences on their own, were powerful motives for NATO to move into a vacuum. The expansion of NATO into Eastern Europe was almost inevitable in the circumstances, even though it was badly tainted by Western triumphalism and sloppy Western diplomacy.

The subsequent push to expand NATO into Ukraine, the Caucasus and even Central Asia has stalled, probably permanently.

How far the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West in the 1990s would have been slowed or prevented if NATO had not expanded must remain an open question. There were plenty of other sources of friction at the time. Expansion is now a fact, to which all are having to adapt. Russia and its Western partners seem to be settling into a more pragmatic relationship, in which both Western triumphalism and Russian bitterness play a lesser role. The question of who said what to whom in the early 1990s will eventually become a matter of concern only to historians.²²

Ambassador Matlock, who disagrees with Braithwaite on some points, particularly on the wisdom of NATO enlargement, gives his perspective on the “assurances” in his reply to Ambassador Braithwaite:

As yet, the Bush Library has not declassified many of the documents involved in the 1990 negotiations. However, what was said by Baker in his February, 1990, meetings with Shevardnadze and Gorbachev has been reported accurately both in Gorbachev’s memoirs and in the book on German unification by Zelikow and Rice (*Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, Harvard Univ Press, 1995, p. 187). It is quite possible that there was no formal discussion among the allies on this point—strange as it may seem. I was told subsequently that Baker picked up the idea from Genscher, whom he saw on his way to Moscow, and floated it with Gorbachev. It was not a formal proposal and, clearly, what he had in mind regarding expansion of NATO jurisdiction to the east was the territory of the GDR. (The Warsaw Pact was still in existence at that time and though one might have suspected that its days were numbered, nobody was thinking of NATO taking on new members in the East.)

Baker was trying to persuade Gorbachev that it would be in the Soviet interest to have a united Germany in NATO—as assurance that it would not in the future make an attempt to dominate Europe or to acquire nuclear weapons. He advanced the argument with a

comment to the effect that he did not expect an immediate answer, but wanted Gorbachev to think about it. Gorbachev's answer was sufficiently forthcoming that I advised Baker when we were riding back to the embassy that "he is going to buy this, because in fact it will be in the Soviet interest to have Germany tied to NATO and some U.S. military presence in Europe as a guarantee." (Not a direct quote, of course, but a paraphrase from memory.)

When Baker returned to Washington from his Moscow trip, he was told by State Department lawyers that there was no legal way to exclude the territory of the GDR from "NATO jurisdiction" if that territory was part of a NATO member state. So the idea was dropped from subsequent negotiations. That is probably why it was never formally discussed in NATO. Subsequently, in the two plus four negotiations, it was agreed that foreign troops would not be stationed on the territory of the erstwhile GDR, so in fact that territory was excluded from the full force of NATO jurisdiction.

This latter point is relevant because, subsequently, the Clinton Administration refused to consider bringing the East European countries into NATO with restrictions on stationing foreign troops there. "We will not have second-class NATO members!" it was argued, ignoring the fact that France was not part of the military structure at that time.

It should also be recalled that the February 1990 conversations took place just a few weeks after Bush and Gorbachev had met in Malta harbor, at which time Gorbachev pledged not to use force in Eastern Europe and Bush assured him that the U.S. would not "take advantage" of the rapidly changing situation there. It was not yet obvious in early December 1989 that German unity would occur so rapidly, or on the terms it did. But when it became clear that the East Germans had no stomach for a separate state, U.S. policy was to make sure that a united Germany stayed in NATO. If we could have done so legally, we would have been pleased to exclude the territory of the GDR from NATO jurisdiction. As it was, we all agreed that only German forces could be stationed there.

In my view, the subsequent expansion of NATO by the Clinton Administration, was an error of the first magnitude, but not because it violated promises given earlier. It was an error because it militated against bringing Russia into the European security community, which should have been a strategic goal of our countries in the 1990s. And it was a reversal of the Bush policy of not "taking advantage" of the democratization of Eastern Europe.

Matlock strongly disagrees with the critics of Gorbachev's "gullibility:"

It is easy to say that Gorbachev could have gotten a formal commitment not to expand NATO if he had asked. Nobody in the senior ranks on our side was thinking of taking in new NATO members and all would have been eager to reassure Gorbachev. But I am not sure what concrete form such assurances could have taken, other than an oral agreement that the Bush Administration would not approve new members of NATO in East and Central Europe. (A promise which, though never made, was in fact kept.) Attention was not paid to this issue. From August 1990 it was Iraq and Kuwait, then concern about the Soviet Union itself breaking up, and Yugoslavia showing even more distressing signs, plus a desire to get START nailed down while there was still a coherent Soviet government. To the best of my knowledge, nobody in a decision-making level of the U.S. government was thinking of expanding NATO or preserving the right to do so. But how, practically, could binding assurances have been given? Would the U.S. Senate have accepted a treaty that removed this option for future administrations? Not very likely. Gorbachev was probably wise not to open that potential can of worms with everything else that was going on.

Therefore, my position remains that the decision to expand NATO was a cardinal political error. It was bad policy for the reasons I have given—and gave at the time. But it is a stretch to say that, so far as the U.S. is concerned, it broke a promise made earlier.

If there is anything that contemporaneous public statements of Western officials and recently published documents prove, it is that the United States and NATO countries did not, at the time, have the policy of encouraging East European countries to seek membership in NATO. Another reason, in my view, for Gorbachev "not to go there."

It is arguable that refraining from enlargement of NATO continued to be the West's intent for a certain period of time after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Whereas Poland and some other countries raised the possibility of joining NATO, it was not enthusiastically received by NATO's key members.

As late as August 1993, when the possibility of NATO's enlargement and Poland's membership was first mentioned at the summit level

during Russian President Boris Yeltsin's visit to Warsaw, Washington's attitude to the idea was described by the *New York Times* as cautious:

The incorporation into NATO of former Communist countries, particularly Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, has been talked about among the alliance's members and theoretically welcomed.

But Washington has been cautious about bringing former Warsaw Pact countries in too quickly, for fear of antagonizing Moscow.³

Therefore, Yeltsin's response to President Lech Wałęsa's raising the possibility during the negotiations surprised his interlocutors. In hindsight, it may be argued that it gave a boost to those favoring enlargement:

But in an appearance in the gardens of the presidential residence here, Mr. Yeltsin and President Lech Walesa issued a joint statement that repeated Poland's desire for NATO membership and pointed to Mr. Yeltsin's "understanding."

Afterward, the Polish Defense and Foreign Ministers and members of Mr. Walesa's inner circle took Mr. Yeltsin's acquiescence as an occasion to push the West to open up NATO's membership."⁴

It is not clear why Yeltsin reversed the previous Russian position, described by the *New York Times* as one of "reservations about Poland's ambition to join the alliance." It is possible that he was not properly briefed by the foreign ministry or his staff before the visit, or that he just improvised, given his desire to build a new, positive relationship with Poland.

Yeltsin's attitude of "understanding" was, however, reversed after his return to Moscow. On September 15, 1993 he sent letters to Western leaders—Clinton, Major, Mitterrand and Kohl—stating Russia's official position on possible NATO enlargement in much stronger terms than it was ever stated before.⁵

Commentators at the time noted that Yeltsin's letter was sent at a time when he embarked on a collision course with the opposition, thus sharply changing the domestic political landscape and requiring him to show a strong stance in his foreign policy. It is noteworthy that, according to *The New York Times*, President Clinton at the time had not yet made the decision to endorse NATO enlargement. Ambassador

Matlock believes (private conversation) that Clinton did so during the 1996 election campaign, also for domestic political reasons—to get the votes of Polish Americans in key states.

The overall impression of the letter was expressed by a Western diplomat who said: “Yeltsin calls it an elaboration of his position, but I’d describe it as furious backpedaling.”⁶

Though the original assessment by Western diplomats, as reported by *The New York Times*, was that “the result ... is that NATO expansion is certainly further off than it could have appeared even a month ago,” it may be argued that the letter actually speeded the process as East European nations began to apply increased public pressure in favor of enlargement.

As the momentum of enlargement intensified, Russia’s position became more rigid and the coverage in the media more strident. In mid-1990s, Russian leaders began to criticize Gorbachev for failing to get “written guarantees” of NATO’s non-enlargement and articles appeared in the Russian media blaming him for the situation.

A typical example is an article by Alexei Pushkov published in early 1997 in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. Pushkov was then a TV commentator and later a member of the State Duma. He is currently member of the Federation Council (the upper chamber of the Russian parliament). (An interesting detail: in 1991 Pushkov was working in the international affairs section of Gorbachev’s executive office). I was not able to find his article on the Web but his message is I think clear from the rebuttal I was able to publish in the same newspaper a few days later:

Alexei Pushkov believes that “the current collision between Russia and NATO could have been avoided if not for yesterday’s omissions.” Now, however, Russia won’t be fooled: in “the document now being prepared” about relations between Russia and NATO there must be legally binding assurances that preclude the membership of the Baltic countries and Ukraine in NATO.

The criticisms of Gorbachev, so much in fashion now among the current Russian “elite,” are in this case groundless. Talks with Baker and Kohl [*author’s note: brief passages from which are cited in Pushkov’s article*] took place in February 1990, when the Warsaw Treaty was still in existence. For that reason alone, any attempt by

the Soviet leaders to “give concrete expression” in this way to the assurances of Western leaders would look ridiculous. And, somewhat later, they would be accused of speeding the disintegration of the Warsaw Treaty Organization by doing so. What was being discussed in 1990 was just that the structures of NATO and the military exercises of the alliance must not extend to GDR territory and that nuclear weapons not be deployed there. To that effect not only were assurances obtained but a special clause included in the Treaty on the final settlement with respect to Germany.

Of course, the subsequent decisions of the United States and NATO to admit East European countries in the alliance violate the spirit of those assurances. But conditions for that arose much later, when not just the Warsaw Treaty but the Soviet Union, too, disintegrated. However, not only did not Russia demand legally binding guarantees of NATO’s non-enlargement; initially, it did not even object to the idea of enlargement.

But even that is not the most important thing. Any country has the right to decide to be or not to be a member of any alliance. Its neighbors have a right speak about it and to make political objections. This matter, in essence, is a political rather than an international law issue. Had Russia been able to avoid self-weakening—almost self-destruction—had it been able to build normal relations with its neighbors, there would be no question of their joining NATO. This is the real “lesson of recent history.”

It’s useless to chase the chimera of “codification of intent” (Alexei Pushkov’s language). As any law student knows, you can only codify domestic or international law. A treaty that would transform NATO into a “closed company” that rejects aspiring candidates is no more than a fantasy, a utopia, which would have come to nothing then and will equally fail now. Indeed, this is a harmful utopia, since by demanding “legally binding guarantees” the Russian leadership has already painted itself into a corner from which it would be difficult get out. Selective printout of “excerpts” from archive documents will certainly not help.

From the distance of over twenty years I might add that the obsession with “legally binding guarantees” looks even more naïve now that the United States has withdrawn from both the ABM and INF treaties. What could be more legally binding than a treaty duly signed and ratified? And, since Pushkov believed that a piece of paper could have prevented the membership of Baltic states in NATO, it is easy to un-

derstand his—and Russian policy makers’—frustration when the exact opposite happened a few years afterwards, on Putin’s watch.

As the pace of NATO enlargement intensified, this frustration became more intense and more obvious. Whereas Yeltsin and, initially, Putin mostly refrained from publicly blaming Gorbachev, this changed later—paradoxically, during the Obama years, when the United States slowed the pace of enlargement and the possibility of Ukraine and Georgia becoming members was, for all practical purposes, taken off the table.

Putin chose the American film director Oliver Stone to give a condensed assessment of his view of what he sees as Gorbachev’s mistake:

When the issue of unification of Germany and of the subsequent withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe was being decided, both the U.S. officials and the NATO Secretary General, all of them, were saying that the Soviet Union could be sure of one thing—that the Eastern border of NATO would not move farther than today’s Eastern border of the German Democratic Republic.

“It was not recorded on paper. Now, this was a mistake on the part of Gorbachev. In politics, you have to record things. Even recorded things are often violated. But he just had a conversation and decided that it’s over. That was not so,” Putin replied.⁷

So how does Gorbachev respond to such criticism?

Some of his remarks, taken out of context from interviews containing “leading questions,” may give the impression that he agrees that he was “taken for a ride.” In part, this is because the issue of “assurances” is often conflated with Gorbachev’s attitude toward enlargement, which is of course negative. However, in more detailed discussions of the issue his response has been forceful.

Following the Stone interview, Gorbachev was asked by the Interfax news agency to comment on Putin’s criticism:

Today, many international news agencies have echoed Russian President Vladimir Putin’s remark made to the American film director Oliver Stone about Soviet President Gorbachev’s “mistake” of not raising the subject of guarantees of NATO’s non-enlargement to the East.

Gorbachev replied:

It is hard to understand what may have caused such a statement of the President of the Russian Federation. It seems to set aside all that was done in the sphere of international security, i.e. normalizing relations with the United States and other countries of the world. Historic meetings of the heads of the USSR and the United States were held in Geneva, Reykjavik and Malta, which eventually led to creating prerequisites for and signing of the treaty—of unlimited duration—on the elimination of all intermediate and shorter range missiles (INF Treaty), the treaty on the limitation of strategic offensive weapons (START-1), the Treaty on conventional forces in Europe, the unification of Germany and finally the end of the Cold War.

As for Gorbachev's "mistake," under those circumstances it was not even possible legally to discuss such an issue. Until July 1991, two politico-military alliances existed—NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization. The Warsaw Treaty countries did not raise the issue.

To conclude, let me also remind that the process of new members joining NATO began in 1995 and gained momentum since 2000, long after I had stepped down from the presidency of the USSR.⁸

Gorbachev's most extensive explanation of his position regarding NATO enlargement and its antecedents is contained in his recent book *In a Changing World* published in Russian in late 2018.⁹

Citing Secretary of State James Baker's remark in their conversation on February 9, 1990:

We understand that it is important not only for the Soviet Union but also for other European countries to have guarantees that if the United States continues to be present in Germany within the framework of NATO, there will be no expansion of NATO jurisdiction or military presence one inch in the Eastern direction.

Gorbachev goes on to say:

Later, these words of Baker and other documents reflecting that period's discussions on the problem of politico-military status of a united Germany became the subject of a lot of loose talk and

speculation. Some say: Gorbachev was given assurances of NATO's non-enlargement. Others: Gorbachev was unable to obtain guarantees of NATO's non-enlargement, he should have pushed harder—and then there would be no problems subsequently related to the accession of Eastern and Central European countries to NATO. Some say such things because of lack of knowledge or misunderstanding, but there are also those who do it in bad faith. So, as the phrase goes, from here on out let's go into detail.

Baker stated, "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.

Hence, the guarantees were provided exclusively in connection with the unification of Germany. What is more, as a result of enormous amount of work conducted at the political and diplomatic level, those guarantees were expressed in treaty form (the Treaty on the Final Settlement with respect to Germany of September 12, 1990). They include non-stationing of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems in the territory of the former GDR and a substantial reduction of the FRG's armed forces (to the level of 370 thousand men). All provisions of that Treaty have been fulfilled and even more: at present, the numerical strength of the FRG armed forces is 185 thousand men.

Should we then have raised the issue of NATO's non-enlargement to the East in more general terms, rather than just with respect to the territory of the former GDR? I am sure that raising it in such terms would have been simply foolish. Given that not just NATO but also the Warsaw Treaty Organization continued to exist at the time (the decision on the self-dissolution of that organization only entered into force on July 1, 1991), if we had started talking about it then, on top of everything else we would now be accused of "suggesting" the idea of NATO enlargement to Western partners as well as speeding the process of disintegration of the Warsaw Treaty Organization.

Quite a different matter is the process of NATO's enlargement to the East that began several years after I had stepped down from the presidency of the USSR. Without a doubt, it violated the spirit of the agreements reached during the Germany's unification and undermined the mutual trust that had been built through arduous efforts and was later severely tested. [It is interesting that the same argument, though phrased somewhat differently, is used in Yeltsin's letter of October 15, 1993: The spirit of the treaty on the final settlement with respect to Germany, especially its provisions that prohibit the deployment of foreign troops within the Eastern lands of the Federal republic

of Germany, precludes the option of expanding the NATO zone into the East.—Note added by me. PPJ. Let me add: I am sure that had the Union been preserved the enlargement of NATO would not have happened and both sides would have taken a different approach to creating a system of European security. What is more, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would have been different in nature if they hadn't consigned to oblivion, particularly more recently, the provisions of the London Declaration, adopted in the summer of 1990, concerning evolution of NATO into a mostly political organization, contributing to overcoming the legacy of the Cold War and strengthening the role of the CSCE.

Even though Gorbachev has been treated unfairly by the current government-directed propaganda and often by high-ranking Russian officials, including the president, he has remained generally supportive of Russia's position on NATO enlargement, i.e. its criticism of it as ruinous for relations between Russia and the West and for European and global security. Therefore, the two things—Gorbachev's defense of his foreign policy decisions during the final years of the Soviet Union and his evaluation of the subsequent NATO enlargement process and Russia's response to it—should be treated separately, instead of being conflated as is often done in by interviewers and commentators.

An example of Gorbachev's effort to strike a balance between “defense” and “offense” can be found in his forthcoming book, to be published in Germany in 2019:

Membership of a unified German state in NATO—an organization born in the years of the Cold War—was perceived by many in our country with much apprehension. We said that frankly to our negotiating partners and proposed options for solving the problem. After long and arduous discussion we agreed that Germany, as a sovereign nation, should itself decide in which organizations and alliances it would participate. But our agreements included more than that.

First, we agreed that the territory of the former GDR would have a special politico-military status.... Secondly, and that was of fundamental importance, the Germans pledged to reduce the personnel of their armed forces by almost fifty percent.

At the same time, within both NATO and the still existing Warsaw Treaty, military doctrines were being revised. There were

plans to increase the political component while reducing the military component in their activities....

Proposing then ... some kind of a “legally binding agreement” on NATO’s non-extension to Eastern Europe, as my critics are now demanding in hindsight, would have been absurd and ludicrous. We would have been accused of ruining the Warsaw Treaty with our own hands.

Under the circumstances we did our utmost. Russia was fully entitled to demand observance not just of the letter but also of the spirit of those agreements. The decision, taken a few years later, to enlarge NATO was a step toward undermining trust that had emerged in the process of ending the Cold War.

Russia had to draw appropriate conclusions from that.

* * *

Why go through all this now, when the enlarged NATO is a fact of life that cannot be reversed? Certainly the subtext of “Gorbachev’s gullibility” does nothing to contribute to the debate on the wisdom of NATO enlargement and on whether the problem of European security could have been handled differently in the 1990s. It is a mystery to me why some Western scholars are willing to provide backup vocals to this narrative.

Yet it is always useful to establish the facts and then to study what the perception of those facts was in the countries involved. Even today, when the damage caused by both sides’ mishandling of European security issues has been done, there is some value in discussing what different actors intended or believed at different points from 1989 to the late 1990s.¹⁰

While the prevailing view in the West today is that the enlargement of NATO was almost certainly inevitable, I believe that the issue, once it arose, could have been handled differently. It remains poisonous today on both sides because Russia and the West have not been able to build a constructive relationship. Was it because of bad faith or ill will? My personal view is that both sides tried, often sincerely but unfortunately with little success.

We should now look for a way forward while learning from lessons of the past. The dysfunctional policies firmly entrenched today on both

sides have to be reconsidered. A good place to start would be arms control and arms reduction, as suggested in recent articles by George Shultz, William Perry, and Sam Nunn and by Mikhail Gorbachev.

Notes

1. https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early?fbclid=IwAR0txTibkSxUqqX-vjnqwS-_YtZxRNWzY2IMx6Q73MjZCt8NOBCE_JeHwnU

2. <http://www.pavelpal.ru/node/874>.

3. Jane Perlez, “Yeltsin “Understands” Polish Bid for a Role in NATO,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/26/world/yeltsin-understands-polish-bid-for-a-role-in-nato.html>.

4. *Ibid.*

5. The letter to Clinton has been declassified and the full text can be found here: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu//dc.html?doc=4390818-Document-04-Re-translation-of-Yeltsin-letter-on>. See also <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2018-03-16/nato-expansion-what-yeltsin-heard>.

6. Roger Cohen, “Yeltsin Opposes Expansion of NATO in Eastern Europe,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/02/world/yeltsin-opposes-expansion-of-nato-in-eastern-europe.html>.

7. <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-40257219>.

8. See http://www.gorby.ru/presscenter/news/show_29766/.

9. Михаил Горбачев. В меняющемся мире. Издательство АСТ, 2018.

10. See <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/11/02/66215-adam-daniel-rotfeld-171-na-zapade-net-planov-izolyatsii-rossii-187>.