

NATO's Eastward Expansion: Did the West Break Its Promise to Moscow?

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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has accused the West of breaking promises made after the fall of the Iron Curtain, saying that NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe violated commitments made during the negotiations over German reunification. Newly discovered documents from Western archives support the Russian position.

No one in Russia can vent his anger over NATO's eastward expansion quite as vehemently as Viktor Baranez. The popular columnist with the tabloid Komsomolskaya Pravda ("Komsomol Truth"), which has a readership of millions, is fond of railing against the "insidious and reckless" Western military alliance. Russia, Baranez writes, must finally stop treating NATO as a partner.

Baranez, a retired colonel who was the Defense Ministry's spokesman under former Russian President Boris Yeltsin, asks why Russia should even consider joint maneuvers after being deceived by the West. NATO, he writes, "has pushed its way right up to our national borders with its guns." He also argues that, in doing so, NATO has broken all the promises it made during the process of German reunification.

There is widespread agreement among all political parties in Moscow, from the Patriots of Russia to the Communists to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, that the West broke its word and short-changed Russia when it was weak.

In an interview with SPIEGEL at his residence outside Moscow in early November, President Dmitry Medvedev complained that when the Berlin Wall came down, it had "not been possible to redefine Russia's place in Europe." What did Russia get? "None of the things that we were assured, namely that NATO would not expand endlessly eastwards and our interests would be continuously taken into consideration," Medvedev said.

Different Versions

The question of what Moscow was in fact promised in 1990 has sparked a historical dispute with far-reaching consequences for Russia's future relationship with the West. But what exactly is the truth?

The various players involved have different versions of events. Of course there was a promise not to expand NATO "as much as a thumb's width further to the East," Mikhail Gorbachev, the Soviet president at the time, says in Moscow today. However, Gorbachev's former foreign minister, Eduard Shevardnadze, speaking in the Georgian capital Tbilisi, says that there were no such assurances from the West. Even the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the Eastern military alliance, "was beyond our imagination," he says.

For years former US Secretary of State James Baker, Shevardnadze's American counterpart in 1990, has denied that there was any agreement between the two sides. But Jack Matlock, the US ambassador in Moscow at the time, has said in the past that Moscow was given a "clear commitment." Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the German foreign minister in 1990, says this was precisely not the case.

After speaking with many of those involved and examining previously classified British and German documents in detail, SPIEGEL has concluded that there was no doubt that the West did everything it could to give the Soviets the impression that NATO membership was out of the question for countries like Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia.

On Feb. 10, 1990, between 4 and 6:30 p.m., Genscher spoke with Shevardnadze. According to the German record of the conversation, which was only recently declassified, Genscher said: "We are aware that NATO membership for a unified Germany raises complicated questions. For us, however, one thing is certain: NATO will not expand to the east." And because the conversation revolved mainly around East Germany, Genscher added explicitly: "As far as the non-expansion of NATO is concerned, this also applies in general."

Shevardnadze replied that he believed "everything the minister (Genscher) said."

Not a Word

The year 1990 was one of major negotiations. Washington, Moscow, London, Bonn, Paris, Warsaw, East Berlin and many others were at odds over German unity, comprehensive European disarmament and a new charter of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. The Soviets insisted that everything be documented in writing, even when all that was at issue was the fate of Soviet military cemeteries in East Germany. However, the numerous agreements and treaties of the day contained not a single word about NATO expansion in Eastern Europe.

For this reason, the West argues, Moscow has no cause for complaint today. After all, the West did not sign anything regarding NATO expansion to the east. But is that tough stance fair?

At the beginning of 1990, the Soviet Union was still a world power with troops stationed at the Elbe River, and Hans Modrow, the former Dresden district chairman of the East German Communist Party, the SED, was in charge in East Berlin. But the collapse of the East German state was foreseeable.

Bonn's allies in Paris, London and Washington were concerned about the question of whether a unified Germany could be a member of NATO or, as had already happened in the past, would pursue a seesaw policy between east and west.

Genscher wanted to put an end to this uncertainty, and he said as much in a major speech to the West on Jan. 31, 1990 in Tutzing, a town in Bavaria. This was the reason, he said, why a unified Germany should be a member of NATO.

Moving with Caution

But how could the Soviet leadership be persuaded to support this solution? "I wanted to help them over the hurdle," Genscher told SPIEGEL. To that end, the German foreign minister

promised, in his speech in Tutzing, that there would not be “an expansion of NATO territory to the east, in other words, closer to the borders of the Soviet Union.” East Germany was not to be brought into the military structures of NATO, and the door into the alliance was to remain closed to the countries of Eastern Europe.

Genscher remembered what had happened during the 1956 Hungarian revolution. Some of the insurgents had announced their intention to join the Western alliance, giving Moscow the excuse to intervene militarily. In 1990, Genscher was trying to send a signal to Gorbachev that he need not fear such a development in the Soviet bloc. The West, Genscher indicated, intended to cooperate with the Soviet Union in bringing about change, not act as its adversary.

The plan that was proclaimed in Tutzing had not been coordinated with the chancellor or West German allies, and Genscher spent the next few days vying for their support.

As Genscher’s chief of staff Frank Elbe later wrote, the German foreign minister had “moved with the caution of a giant insect that uses its many feelers to investigate its surroundings, prepared to recoil when it encounters resistance.”

US Secretary of State James Baker, a pragmatic Texan, apparently “warmed to the proposal immediately,” says Elbe today. On Feb. 2, the two diplomats sat down in front of the fireplace in Baker’s study in Washington, took off their jackets, put their feet up and discussed world events. They quickly agreed that there was to be no NATO expansion to the East. “It was completely clear,” Elbe comments.

Part 2: Calming Russian Fears

A short time later, then-British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd joined the German-American consensus. As a previously unknown document from the German Foreign Ministry shows, Genscher was uncharacteristically open with his relatively pro-German British counterpart when they met in Bonn on Feb. 6, 1990. Hungary was about to hold its first free elections, and Genscher declared that the Soviet Union needed “the certainty that Hungary will not become part of the Western alliance if there is a change of government.” The Kremlin, Genscher said, would have to be given assurances to that effect. Hurd agreed.

But were such assurances intended to be valid indefinitely? Apparently not. When the two colleagues discussed Poland, Genscher said, according to the British records, that if Poland ever left the Warsaw Pact, Moscow would need the certainty that Warsaw would “not join NATO the next day.” However, Genscher did not seem to rule out accession at a later date.

It stood to reason that Genscher would present his ideas in Moscow next. He was the longest-serving Western foreign minister, his relationship with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze was unusually strong, and it was his initiative. But Baker wanted to address the issue himself during his next trip to Moscow.

‘One Cannot Depend on American Politicians’

What the US secretary of state said on Feb. 9, 1990 in the magnificent St. Catherine’s Hall at the Kremlin is beyond dispute. There would be, in Baker’s words, “no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east,” provided the Soviets agreed to the NATO membership of a unified Germany. Moscow would think about it, Gorbachev said, but added: “any extension of the zone of NATO is unacceptable.”

Now, 20 years later, Gorbachev is still outraged when he is asked about this episode. “One cannot depend on American politicians,” he told SPIEGEL. Baker, for his part, now offers a different interpretation of what he said in 1990, arguing that he was merely referring to East Germany, which was to be given a special status in the alliance — nothing more.

But Genscher, in a conversation with Shevardnadze just one day later, had expressly referred to Eastern Europe. In fact, talking about Eastern Europe, and not just East Germany, was consistent with the logic of the West’s position.

If East Germany was to be granted a special status within NATO, so as not to provoke the Soviet leadership, the promise not to expand the alliance to the east certainly had to include countries like Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia, which directly bordered the Soviet Union.

When the Western politicians met once again a few weeks later, their conversation was more to the point, as a German Foreign Ministry document that has now been released indicates. According to the document, Baker said that it appeared “as if Central European countries wanted to join NATO.” That, Genscher replied, was an issue “we shouldn’t touch at this point.” Baker agreed.

Positive Light

The political leaders of the day are now elderly gentlemen who don’t necessarily always find it easy to remember exactly what happened back then. Besides, they are all eager to be portrayed in a positive light in the history books. Gorbachev doesn’t want to be the one who failed to tightly close the door to the eastward expansion of NATO. Genscher and Baker don’t want to be accused of having made deals with Moscow over the heads of the Poles, the Hungarians or the Czechs. And Shevardnadze came to the conclusion long ago that there is “nothing horrible” about NATO expansion — not surprisingly, given that his native Georgia now wants to join NATO.

Their interests were different back in 1990. Bonn and Washington wanted to expedite German reunification. A few days after the talks at the Kremlin, Genscher, Baker and Shevardnadze met again, this time all together and with all of the foreign ministers of the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries present, at a disarmament conference in a converted former train station in the Canadian capital Ottawa.

At the conference, the two German foreign ministers (the East German foreign minister at the time was Oskar Fischer, who had been close to the former East German leader Erich Honecker) came together in the corridors and conference rooms, met with the foreign ministers of the four victorious powers in World War II and, in various configurations, discussed the future course of Germany. By the end of the conference, it had been decided that the external aspects of German unity, such as the alliance issue and the size of the German military, were to be resolved in the so-called “two-plus-four” talks.

Sounding Out the Soviets

Genscher says today that all the key issues should have been addressed in this forum, and that during the talks there was never any mention of excluding the Eastern Europeans from NATO membership, which the participants all confirm.

But what about Genscher’s comments to Shevardnadze on Feb. 10, 1990?

Genscher says today that he was merely “sounding out” Shevardnadze prior to the actual negotiations to determine Moscow’s position on the alliance issue and to see whether there was any leeway.

This is the official position. But there are also other versions of the events.

A diplomat with the German Foreign Ministry says that there was, of course, a consensus between the two sides. Indeed, the Soviets would hardly have agreed to take part in the two-plus-four talks if they had known that NATO would later accept Poland, Hungary and other Eastern European countries as members.

The negotiations with Gorbachev were already difficult enough, with Western politicians repeatedly insisting that they were not going to derive — in the words of then-US President George H. W. Bush — any “unilateral advantage” from the situation, and that there would be “no shift in the balance of power” between the East and the West, as Genscher put it. Russia today is certainly somewhat justified in citing, at the very least, the spirit of the 1990 agreements.

Absurd Notion

In late May 1990, Gorbachev finally agreed to a unified Germany joining NATO. But why didn’t Gorbachev and Shevardnadze get the West’s commitments in writing at a time when they still held all the cards? “The Warsaw Pact still existed at the beginning of 1990,” Gorbachev says today. “Merely the notion that NATO might expand to include the countries in this alliance sounded completely absurd at the time.”

Some leading Western politicians were under the impression that the Kremlin leader and his foreign minister were ignoring reality and, as Baker said, were “in denial” about the demise of the Soviet Union as a major power.

On the other hand, the Baltic countries were still part of the Soviet Union, and NATO membership seemed light years away. And in some parts of Eastern Europe, peace-oriented dissidents were now in power, men like then-Czech President Vaclav Havel who, if he had had his way, would not only have dissolved the Warsaw Pact, but NATO along with it.

No Eastern European government was striving to join NATO in that early phase, and the Western alliance had absolutely no interest in taking on new members. It was too expensive, an unnecessary provocation of Moscow and, if worse came to worst, did the Western governments truly expect French, Italian or German soldiers to risk their lives for Poland and Hungary?

Then, in 1991, came the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the war in Bosnia, with its hundred thousand dead, raised fears of a Balkanization of Eastern Europe. And in the United States President Bill Clinton, following his inauguration in 1993, was searching for a new mission for the Western alliance.

Suddenly everyone wanted to join NATO, and soon NATO wanted to accept everyone.

The dispute over history was about to begin.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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