

# Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion

Joshua R. Itzkowitz  
Shiffrinson

**D**uring the negotiations on German reunification in 1990, did the United States promise the Soviet Union that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would not expand into Eastern Europe? The answer depends on who is being asked. Russian leaders since the mid-1990s have claimed that the United States violated a pledge that NATO would not expand into Eastern Europe following German reunification. More recently, they have argued that Russian actions during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and in Ukraine were in part responses to the broken non-expansion agreement.<sup>1</sup> Many U.S. and allied policymakers and pundits counter, however, that Russian claims of a non-expansion commitment are a pretext for Russian adventurism. From this perspective, the United States never promised to limit NATO expansion, with NATO itself declaring in 2014: “No such pledge was made, and no evidence to back up Russia’s claims has ever been produced.”<sup>2</sup> Post-Cold War U.S.-Russian relations are thus over-

---

Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson is Assistant Professor in the Department of International Affairs at the George Bush School of Government at Texas A&M University.

---

For help on prior drafts, the author thanks Paul Avey, Stephen Brooks, Jasen Castillo, Keith Darden, Jennifer Dixon, Jeffrey Engel, Jennifer Erickson, Flavia Gasparri, Francis Gavin, Katherine Geohegan, William Inboden, Sean Kay, John Mearsheimer, Simon Miles, Larry Napper, Christian Ostermann, Kathleen Powers, Joshua Rovner, John Schuessler, James Graham Wilson, William Wohlforth, and the anonymous reviewers. He is especially indebted to Brendan Green and Marc Trachtenberg for their feedback. For exceptional research assistance, he thanks Claire Berger, Hannah Fletcher, and Julie Thompson. An earlier version of this article appeared online in *Foreign Affairs*. See <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142310/joshua-r-itzkowitz-shiffrinson/put-it-in-writing>.

---

1. Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 3–6; Kenneth N. Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 22; David Herszenhorn, “Away from Shadow of Diplomacy in Geneva, Putin Puts on a Show of His Own,” *New York Times*, April 17, 2014; “Direct Line with Vladimir Putin,” April 17, 2014, *President of Russia* website, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/7034>; Vladimir Putin, “Address by President of the Russian Federation,” March 18, 2014, *President of Russia* website, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/6889>; and “Interview by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, in a Special Edition of the Programme ‘Voskresny vecher s Vladimirom Solovyovim’” (Moscow: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 11, 2014), [http://www.mid.ru/brp\\_4.nsf/0/FD8AF549D728FB9844257CBB002BEDD4](http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/FD8AF549D728FB9844257CBB002BEDD4).

2. NATO, “Russia’s Accusations—Setting the Record Straight,” fact sheet (Brussels: NATO, July 2014), [http://www.nato.int/nato\\_static/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2014\\_07/20140716\\_140716-Factsheet\\_Russia\\_en.pdf](http://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2014_07/20140716_140716-Factsheet_Russia_en.pdf). See also Steven Pifer, “Did NATO Promise Not to Enlarge? Gorbachev Says ‘No,’” *Brookings Up Front* blog, November 6, 2014, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/>

---

*International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), pp. 7–44, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00236

© 2016 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

shadowed by a standoff over the history of U.S.-Soviet relations at the end of the Cold War.<sup>3</sup>

Western scholars are similarly divided on the question of what the United States offered the Soviet Union in 1990. Drawing largely upon public statements and memoirs by Western and Soviet leaders, some scholars in the 1990s contended that NATO's eastward expansion violated what Michael McCgwire termed "top-level assurances" against NATO enlargement.<sup>4</sup> More recently, however, access to declassified archival materials has led most scholars to agree with the historian Mary Sarotte, who writes that "contrary to Russian allegations, [Soviet President Mikhail] Gorbachev never got the West to promise that it would freeze NATO's borders."<sup>5</sup> Still, current studies are divided into two schools of thought over the process and implications of the 1990 reunification negotiations for NATO's future. One school largely agrees with U.S. policymakers that—as Mark Kramer claims—NATO expansion into Eastern Europe "never came up during the negotiations."<sup>6</sup> As a result, Russian accusations of a broken non-expansion promise are "spurious."<sup>7</sup> In contrast, a second school contends that a NATO non-expansion offer that may have applied to Eastern Europe was discussed briefly in talks among U.S., West German, and Soviet leaders in February 1990. This non-expansion proposal was quickly withdrawn, but given the February meetings, Russian complaints cannot be entirely dismissed: the United States and the Soviet Union never struck a deal against NATO expansion, yet Soviet leaders may have thought otherwise.<sup>8</sup>

---

2014/11/06-nato-no-promise-enlarge-gorbachev-pifer; Chris Miller, "Russia's NATO Expansion Myth," *Cicero Magazine*, May 28, 2014, <http://ciceromagazine.com/opinion/russias-nato-expansion-myth/>; and Michael Ruhle, "NATO Enlargement and Russia: Myths and Realities," *NATO Review*, 2014, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/Russia-Ukraine-Nato-crisis/Nato-enlargement-Russia/EN/index.htm>.

3. Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Put It in Writing: How the West Broke Its Promise to Moscow," *Foreign Affairs*, October 29, 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/142310/joshua-itzkowitz-shifrinson/put-it-in-writing>.

4. Michael McCgwire, "NATO Expansion: A Policy Error of Historic Importance," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (January 1998), p. 26.

5. Mary Elise Sarotte, "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow about NATO Expansion," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), p. 96.

6. Mark Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 2009), p. 41; and Mark Kramer and Mary Elise Sarotte, "Letters to the Editor: No Such Promise," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (December 2014), p. 208.

7. Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," p. 55.

8. Mary Elise Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward? Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the Origin of Russian Resentment toward NATO Enlargement in February 1990," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (January 2010), pp. 119–140; Sarotte, "A Broken Promise?"; Mary Elise Sarotte, 1989: *The Struggle to Create Post-Cold War Europe*, rev. ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014), pp. 219–229; Thomas Blanton, "U.S. Policy and the Revolutions of 1989," in Svetlana Savranskaya, Thomas Blanton, and Vladimir Zubok, eds., *Masterpieces of History: The Peaceful End*

Resolving the question of whether the United States advanced a NATO non-expansion pledge requires analysis of the course and motivations of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union in 1990. Given both the United States' dominance within NATO and its outsized influence on the issue of German reunification in 1990, the key to determining whether Russian accusations have merit is understanding the rationale behind U.S. actions at the time.<sup>9</sup> In the process, an analysis of previous U.S. policy can inform current U.S. and NATO policy, international relations theory, and diplomatic history. For example, determining whether Russian charges of U.S. betrayal are correct can help explain whether bellicose Russian actions in Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere in Europe are in part a response to NATO's post-Cold War expansion or an effort to alter the status quo in Europe.<sup>10</sup> Since the late 2000s, many Western policymakers and pundits have attributed Russian actions to a revisionist foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, Russian claims against NATO are misleading; Russian actions in and around the former Soviet Union represent a Western failure to halt Russian adventurism; and only a firm Western response now can keep future Russian threats in check. As Anne Applebaum argues, the West's cardinal mistake was to "underrate Russia's revanchist, revisionist, disruptive potential."<sup>12</sup> Conversely, evidence that Russian accusations are not fabrications implies that Russia's actions may stem from feelings of insecurity and real worries that the West is an unreliable partner. Hard-line measures to deter

---

*of the Cold War in Eastern Europe, 1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 93–95; Alexander Von Plato, *The End of the Cold War? Bush, Kohl, Gorbachev, and the Reunification of Germany*, trans. Edith Burley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 184; and Kristina Spohr, "Precluded or Precedent-Setting? The 'NATO Enlargement Question' in the Triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow Diplomacy of 1990–1991," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (October 2012), pp. 24, 48–50.

9. The United States did not cause German reunification, but it did play a dominant role in ensuring that reunification went forward in the face of international opposition and in establishing the conditions under which it occurred. See Alexander Moens, "American Diplomacy and German Unification," *Survival*, Vol. 33, No. 6 (November/December 1991), pp. 531–545.

10. John J. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (October 2014), pp. 77–89; and Michael McFaul, "Moscow's Choice," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 6 (December 2014), pp. 167–171.

11. Daniel J. Fried, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Protocols to the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949 on the Accession of the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Croatia*, 110th Cong., 2nd sess., 2008, S. Hrg. 110-507, pp. 6–14; David J. Kramer, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Hearing on Ukraine—Countering Russian Intervention and Supporting a Democratic State*, 113th Cong., 2nd sess., 2014, S. Hrg. 113-602, pp. 58–60; John Herbst, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, *Hearing on U.S. Policy in Ukraine: Countering Russia and Driving Reform*, 114th Cong., 1st sess., 2015, S. Hrg. 114-77, pp. 51–54; and Stephen Sestanovich, "Could It Have Been Otherwise?" *American Interest*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (April 2015), <http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/04/14/could-it-have-been-otherwise/>.

12. Anne Applebaum, "Don't Accept Putin's Version of History," *Slate*, October 17, 2014, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/foreigners/2014/10/nato\\_and\\_eu\\_expansion\\_didn\\_t\\_provoke\\_vladimir\\_putin\\_american\\_triumphalism.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/foreigners/2014/10/nato_and_eu_expansion_didn_t_provoke_vladimir_putin_american_triumphalism.html).

Russian aggression such as troop deployments and sanctions will therefore only increase Russia's sense of isolation and betrayal.<sup>13</sup>

An examination of this case is also useful for international relations theory and diplomatic history. Since the end of the Cold War, analysts have treated the U.S.-Soviet negotiations over German reunification and NATO's post-Cold War continuation as a shining example of how great powers can overcome past rivalries and find ways to cooperate.<sup>14</sup> Although the cooperation narrative is being challenged as scholars gain increasing access to Western and Eastern bloc primary sources, it remains influential in policy, international relations theory, and historiographic circles.<sup>15</sup> Russian accusations of a broken non-expansion pledge thus raise fundamental questions over the nature of U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russian relations during and after the end of the Cold War. In particular, if the United States violated a promise not to expand NATO, then scholars must further examine the drivers of U.S. foreign policy at the end of the Cold War and the sources of stable diplomatic settlements writ large.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, if Russian claims of a NATO non-expansion pledge are bogus, and if Russian behavior in places such as Georgia and Ukraine is meant to upend Europe's status quo, then scholars must determine why a party to an accepted diplomatic deal may reject that arrangement in favor of a revisionist foreign policy.

Drawing on a wider array of U.S. archival materials than prior studies and applying insights from international relations theory, this article refines and challenges scholarship on a NATO non-expansion pledge by tracing the evolution of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union and European security throughout the 1990 diplomacy on reunification.<sup>17</sup> In line with research by

---

13. Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), chap. 3.

14. Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), chap. 7; and Andrew O. Bennett, "Trust Bursting Out All Over: The Soviet Side of German Unification," in William C. Wohlforth, ed., *Cold War Endgame: Oral History, Analysis, Debates* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), pp. 175–204.

15. For critiques of the cooperation narrative, see Sarotte, 1989; and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, "Falling Giants: Rising States and the Fate of Declining Great Powers," Texas A&M University, 2016.

16. G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of American Postwar Order," *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 43–78.

17. Previous studies rely heavily on documents from Russian and European archives, declassification efforts by the National Security Archive and Cold War International History Project, Freedom of Information Act releases from the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and the private papers of individuals involved in the 1990 negotiations. Employing these documents, past studies have shown that the topic of NATO expansion came up briefly in conversations with U.S., Soviet, and West German leaders at the start of February 1990, only for

Sarotte and others sympathetic to Russian claims, I show that despite the absence of a formal deal, the United States did raise the issue of NATO expansion with the Soviet Union during the 1990 negotiations. In contrast to what scholars sympathetic to Russian claims propose, however, I argue that the topic of NATO expansion was more than just a fleeting aspect of the negotiations in February 1990. Additional archival evidence indicates that U.S. officials repeatedly offered the Soviets informal assurances—a standard diplomatic practice—against NATO expansion during talks on German reunification throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 1990. Central to this effort was a series of bargaining positions through which the George H.W. Bush administration indicated that Europe's post-Cold War order would be acceptable to both Washington and Moscow: NATO would halt in place, and Europe's security architecture would include the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> Collectively, this evidence suggests that Russian leaders are essentially correct in claiming that U.S. efforts to expand NATO since the 1990s violate the "spirit" of the 1990 negotiations: NATO expansion nullified the assurances given to the Soviet Union in 1990.<sup>19</sup>

Distinct from what Soviet leaders were told in 1990, however, I also present new evidence suggesting that the United States used guarantees against NATO expansion to exploit Soviet weaknesses and reinforce U.S. strengths in post-Cold War Europe. To do so, the United States adopted positions designed to give it a free hand in Europe following German reunification—allowing it to decide whether and how to expand the U.S. presence on the continent—even while telling Soviet leaders that Soviet interests would be respected. Baldly stated, the United States floated a cooperative grand design for postwar Europe in discussions with the Soviets in 1990, while creating a system dominated by the United States. Although it remains unclear whether and why

---

the United States and West Germany to stop explicit discussion of limits on NATO's future by the end of the month. Documents that the George Bush Presidential Library (hereafter GBPL) has released in a declassification review since the late 2000s, however, have added significantly to scholars' understanding of U.S. decision-making in 1990. This article thus combines the findings of past studies with recently released U.S. government documents to examine U.S. policy toward NATO expansion and the future of European security throughout 1990. The results provide a fuller picture of U.S. strategy toward the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War and the origins of Russian complaints of a broken NATO non-expansion pledge by showing that the substance of U.S.-Soviet negotiations after February 1990 touched directly on NATO's future role in European security and Soviet strategic concerns. On the prior paucity of U.S. government documents on the 1989–90 period before the late 2000s, see Sarotte, 1989, p. 247 n. 55. For their declassification efforts, I cannot praise enough Rachael Altman, Buffie Hollis, Robert Holzweiss, Mckenzie Morse, Zachary Roberts, Simon Staats, and Elizabeth Staats at the GBPL.

18. See Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "The Unraveling of the Cold War Settlement," *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 6 (December 2009), pp. 46–54.

19. Maxim Kórshunov, "Mikhail Gorbachev: I Am against All Walls," *Russia behind the Headlines*, October 16, 2014, [http://rbth.com/international/2014/10/16/mikhail\\_gorbachev\\_i\\_am\\_against\\_all\\_walls\\_40673.html](http://rbth.com/international/2014/10/16/mikhail_gorbachev_i_am_against_all_walls_40673.html).

Soviet leaders believed the U.S. proposals, this two-pronged strategy helps explain how the United States exploited the reunification issue to reify its preeminence in post-Cold War Europe.<sup>20</sup> By extension, the U.S.-Russian dispute over NATO expansion may be less a product of Soviet/Russian misrepresentation or misinterpretation of what happened in 1990, and more the result of the divergence between the cooperative approach that the United States presented to the Soviet Union and the United States' quieter efforts to maximize its power in Europe.

The remainder of this article proceeds in six sections. First, I review the U.S.-Russian dispute over a NATO non-expansion pledge. In the second section, I highlight conceptual and historical problems with the non-expansion pledge debate and suggest a revised standard against which to assess Russian claims. Drawing heavily from U.S. archival materials, I then review the 1990 negotiations to identify what the United States offered the Soviet Union and why the terms of this deal could have suggested to the Soviets that NATO would not expand. Following this, I offer evidence that the United States misled the Soviet Union. In the fifth section, I reevaluate the non-expansion debate in light of these findings. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the analysis for U.S. and NATO policy, international relations theory, and Cold War historiography.

### *The Non-Expansion Pledge Debate*

Russian policymakers have claimed for more than two decades that, during the 1990 negotiations on German reunification, the United States promised the Soviet Union that NATO would not expand into Eastern Europe.<sup>21</sup> Commenting on NATO's preparations for its first round of expansion in the mid-1990s, for instance, Russian President Boris Yeltsin wrote President Bill Clinton that "the treaty on the Final Settlement with respect to Germany signed in September 1990 [. . .] excludes, by its meaning, the possibility of expansion of the NATO zone to the East."<sup>22</sup> Russian political analyst Sergei Karaganov was even more explicit in 1995, asserting: "In 1990, we were told quite clearly by the West that the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and German unification

---

20. For discussion of the United States' efforts to reinforce its position in post-Cold War Europe, see Mary Elise Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to 'Bribe the Soviets Out' and Move NATO In," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010), pp. 110-137.

21. Walter B. Slocombe, "A Crisis of Opportunity: The Clinton Administration and Russia," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *In Uncertain Times: American Foreign Policy after the Berlin Wall and 9/11* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 86.

22. Quoted in Luis Tomé, "Russia and NATO's Enlargement" (Brussels: NATO, June 2000), pp. 14-15.

would not lead to NATO expansion."<sup>23</sup> In the 2000s and 2010s, Russian Presidents Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev made similar assertions. In 2009, for example, Medvedev charged that Russia had received "none of the things that we were assured, namely that NATO would not expand endlessly eastward and our interests would be continuously taken into consideration." And in 2014 Putin declared, "[W]e were promised that after Germany's unification, NATO wouldn't spread eastward."<sup>24</sup> More authoritatively, Mikhail Gorbachev has repeatedly argued that the Soviet Union received a non-expansion pledge. In 2008, for instance, the former Soviet leader argued: "The Americans promised that NATO wouldn't move beyond the boundaries of Germany after the Cold War"; in 2014 he clarified that although NATO expansion may not have been explicitly discussed in 1990, expansion remained "a violation of the spirit of the statements and assurances made to us in 1990."<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, an array of former U.S. policymakers and pundits reject claims of a non-expansion pledge.<sup>26</sup> Former Secretary of State James Baker, for instance, has repeatedly denied that the negotiations over German reunification included a non-expansion promise.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, former National Security Council (NSC) staffer Philip Zelikow argued in 1995 that "the option of adding new members to NATO has not been foreclosed by the deal actually made in 1990."<sup>28</sup> Steven Pifer, who served as the deputy director of the State

23. Quoted in Anatol Lieven, "Russian Opposition to NATO Expansion," *World Today*, Vol. 51, No. 10 (October 1995), p. 198.

24. Medvedev quoted in Uwe Klussmann, Matthias Schepp, and Klaus Wiegrefe, "NATO's Eastward Expansion: Did the West Break Its Promise to Moscow?" *Der Spiegel*, November 26, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/nato-s-eastward-expansion-did-the-west-break-its-promise-to-moscow-a-663315.html>; and Putin quoted in Herszenhorn, "Away from Shadow of Diplomacy in Geneva, Putin Puts On a Show of His Own."

25. Adrian Blomfield and Mike Smith, "Gorbachev: U.S. Could Start New Cold War," *Telegraph*, May 6, 2008; and Kórshunov, "Mikhail Gorbachev." Gorbachev's claims have varied subtly over time: though consistent in arguing that the Soviet Union received a non-expansion pledge, he has equivocated over how explicitly the issue was discussed. Compare the above with, for example, Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), p. 529.

26. There are some exceptions among former policymakers. Former Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates, for instance, argued in 2000 that "Gorbachev and others were led to believe that [NATO expansion] wouldn't happen." See "Gates interview, July 23–24, 2000, College Station, Texas" (Charlottesville: George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia, 2011), p. 101, [http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp\\_2000\\_0723\\_gates.pdf](http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_2000_0723_gates.pdf). Similarly, former Ambassador to the Soviet Union Jack Matlock noted in 1995: "We gave categorical assurances [. . .] that if a united Germany was able to stay in NATO, NATO would not be moved eastward." See Matlock quoted in Philip Zelikow, "NATO Expansion Wasn't Ruled Out," *New York Times*, August 10, 1995.

27. See Baker's comments in Michael Gordon, "Anatomy of a Misunderstanding," *New York Times*, May 25, 1997; Klussmann, Schepp, and Wiegrefe, "NATO's Eastward Expansion"; and Bill Bradley, "A Diplomatic Mystery," *Foreign Policy*, August 22, 2009, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/08/22/a-diplomatic-mystery/>.

28. Zelikow, "NATO Expansion Wasn't Ruled Out."

Department's Soviet Desk in 1989–90, likewise contends that "Western leaders never pledged not to enlarge NATO."<sup>29</sup> And in 2014, NATO released a report asserting that "[n]o pledge was made, and no evidence to back up Russia's claims has ever been produced."<sup>30</sup> Many foreign affairs pundits, meanwhile, have made similar statements. Anne Applebaum, for example, maintains that "no promises were broken" with NATO's expansion; James Kirchick has proposed that "Russia's cries of Western betrayal are really just a smokescreen"; and Edward Joseph describes the 1990 deals as "at best" ambiguous "with respect to NATO's further eastward expansion."<sup>31</sup>

For their part, scholars examining the 1990 negotiations over German reunification generally accept that the United States never agreed to forgo NATO expansion into Eastern Europe.<sup>32</sup> Kramer, for instance, concludes that the record "undermine[s] the notion that the United States or other Western countries ever pledged not to expand NATO beyond Germany."<sup>33</sup> Working largely with German documents, Kristina Spohr likewise finds that "NATO enlargement was not precluded" in the negotiations.<sup>34</sup> And in arguably the most extensive research on the subject, Sarotte has repeatedly challenged claims of a non-expansion promise, concluding in 2009 that "no formal agreements were reached," as the 1990 negotiations kept "open the door for future expansion to Eastern Europe."<sup>35</sup> In later work, Sarotte found that Gorbachev failed "to get assurances in writing [. . . and] missed opportunities to challenge the United States on the topic later."<sup>36</sup> These findings caused her to conclude that "the Soviet Union could have struck a deal with the United States, but it did not."<sup>37</sup> Simply put, "Gorbachev never got the West to promise that it would freeze NATO's borders."<sup>38</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars are divided over whether the diplomatic talks on

---

29. Pifer, "Did NATO Promise Not to Enlarge?"

30. NATO, "Russia's Accusations."

31. Anne Applebaum, "The Myth of Russian Humiliation," *Washington Post*, October 17, 2014; James Kirchick, "NATO Expansion Didn't Set Off the Ukrainian Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2014, <http://www.foreignpolicy.org/content/nato-expansion-didnt-set-ukrainian-crisis>; and Edward P. Joseph, "NATO Expansion: The Source of Russia's Anger?" *National Interest*, May 1, 2014, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/nato-expansion-the-source-russias-anger-10344>. For an exception, however, see Klussmann, Schepp, and Wiegrefe, "NATO's Eastward Expansion."

32. A search of English-language sources using Google Scholar and JSTOR turned up only one study based on declassified sources arguing that the Soviet Union received binding pledges against expansion. See Von Plato, *The End of the Cold War?* pp. 178–179, 184.

33. Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," p. 41.

34. Spohr, "Precluded or Precedent-Setting?" p. 52.

35. Sarotte, 1989, p. 228.

36. Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward?" p. 139.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

38. Sarotte, "A Broken Promise?" p. 96.



German reunification lend some support to Russian claims of a broken non-expansion pledge. Especially important are a series of February 1990 conversations among U.S., Soviet, and West German officials in Moscow during which U.S. and West German negotiators advanced some kind of verbal offer against some form of NATO expansion. Scholars agree, for example, that Baker told Gorbachev and Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze on February 9, 1990, that “there will be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction or NATO’s forces one inch to the East,” if Gorbachev consented to German reunification.<sup>39</sup> Subsequently, Baker also agreed with Gorbachev’s assertion that “a broadening of the NATO zone is not acceptable.”<sup>40</sup> Reinforcing this message, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher offered Soviet leaders similar terms the following day. These talks, moreover, carried real consequences, as Gorbachev agreed to negotiate the terms of German reunification following the discussions with Baker and Kohl.<sup>41</sup>

Still, scholars disagree on the implications of these meetings and, thus, whether to sympathize with Russian claims of a NATO non-expansion pledge. One perspective, advanced most directly by Kramer, supports the position of former policymakers that the February 1990 talks were simply that—talks narrowly focused on NATO’s future in a reunified Germany.<sup>42</sup> Hence, because the offer focused on Germany rather than all of Eastern Europe and because nothing was ever codified, subsequent Russian complaints about NATO enlargement lack an empirical basis.<sup>43</sup> “No Western leader,” Kramer writes, “ever offered any ‘pledge’ or ‘commitment’ or ‘categorical assurances’” about NATO expansion into Eastern Europe.<sup>44</sup>

An alternate account developed by Sarotte, Thomas Blanton, and Spohr, however, treats the February 1990 talks as creating understandable confusion in Russian circles over what the United States promised.<sup>45</sup> From this perspective, some or all of the February discussions may have alluded to limiting NATO’s future in Eastern Europe.<sup>46</sup> As Sarotte describes the discussions, how-

---

39. Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” p. 48.

40. Blanton, “U.S. Policy and the Revolutions of 1989,” pp. 93, 95.

41. Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence,” p. 120.

42. Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” pp. 41, 51. Similarly, see Robert Service, *The End of the Cold War, 1985–1991* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015), p. 432.

43. Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” pp. 51–52.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

45. Sarotte, 1989, pp. 103–115, 219–228; Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” pp. 127–129; Blanton, “U.S. Policy and the Revolutions of 1989,” pp. 93–95; and Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting?” especially pp. 48–49.

46. There is some disagreement among these authors over whether some or all of the February 9–10, 1990 talks involved discussion of a non-expansion pledge. Spohr, for example, argues that U.S. officials focused narrowly on NATO’s future in East Germany, and that it was West German officials who broached the general non-expansion issue. Sarotte’s work, on the other hand, appears

ever, U.S. leaders saw these terms as being raised “speculatively” as part of an ongoing negotiation and far from a final deal. The United States was thus free to revise the offer and, by late February, was already moving to sidestep talk of limiting NATO’s future presence by extending NATO’s jurisdiction over the former East Germany (i.e., the German Democratic Republic, or GDR).<sup>47</sup> Still, Soviet officials may have seen the early February talks as offering a firm guarantee against NATO expansion: used to operating in a world where a leader’s word was his or her bond, they could have believed that they had reached an agreement in which, once the Soviet Union took steps on reunification, NATO would not move into Eastern Europe.<sup>48</sup> This school of thought thus identifies a particular moment in the 1990 negotiations that generated a misunderstanding whereby Soviet/Russian officials focused on what was verbally presented to them in early February. In contrast, U.S. officials emphasized the narrower terms advanced in later conversations and eventually codified as part of the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany.<sup>49</sup> No deal was reached against NATO expansion, but Russian charges are therefore not so much misleading as they are a misinterpretation of events.<sup>50</sup>

### *Informal Agreements, Politics, and the Non-expansion Pledge Debate*

At the heart of the non-expansion pledge debate is the question of what constitutes an agreement in world politics. Although they disagree over the specifics of what was discussed in the February 1990 talks, both schools of thought suggest that only formal, written, and codified agreements matter when assessing diplomatic deals. Spohr, for example, argues: “If no de jure promises on

---

inconsistent: in some places, she claims that U.S. and West German officials “affirmed that NATO would not move eastward at all,” but elsewhere comes close to the position of former policymakers by arguing that the talks “focused on the question of whether or not NATO would extend itself over the GDR.” This article shows that NATO expansion to all of Eastern Europe was raised by U.S. officials from the start of the process. See Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting?” pp. 24–30; Kramer and Sarotte, “Letters to the Editor,” p. 209; Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” p. 137; and Sarotte, 1989, pp. 114–115.

47. Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” p. 128; and Sarotte, 1989, p. 114.

48. Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” pp. 127, 139.

49. “Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany” in Sherrill Brown Wells, ed., *American Foreign Policy Documents, 1990* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 1991), doc. 191.

50. Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” pp. 128–129, 137–139; Sarotte, “A Broken Promise?” pp. 91, 96; and Angela E. Stent, *Russia and Germany Reborn: Unification, the Soviet Collapse, and the New Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 140–141. Spohr is more equivocal on whether Russian charges are misinterpretations or misrepresentations, arguing that Soviet leaders may have misunderstood the 1990 talks, but concluding that Russian complaints signal “an effort by Russian officials to use history to legitimize current political positions.” See Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting?” p. 54; and Christopher Clark and Kristina Spohr, “Moscow’s Account of NATO Expansion Is a Case of False Memory Syndrome,” *Guardian*, May 24, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/24/russia-nato-expansion-memory-grievances>.

NATO's future membership and size were made, then there was nothing that subsequently could be judged as having been 'betrayed' by NATO expansion.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, former Secretary of State Baker, Kramer, and Zelikow emphasize that the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany is silent on the question of NATO expansion beyond East Germany.<sup>52</sup> Likewise, Sarotte stresses that Soviet leaders failed to obtain "written assurances" against NATO expansion; the United States and West Germany only "briefly implied" that a non-expansion deal "might be on the table."<sup>53</sup>

The real issue, however, is not whether a formal agreement ruled out NATO expansion—even Russian leaders claiming a broken promise do not argue that the Soviet Union received a formal deal. Instead, the question of a non-expansion pledge involves whether various informal, even implicit, statements of U.S. policy in 1990 can be viewed as promises or assurances against NATO expansion, and whether discussions among U.S., Soviet, and West German officials related solely to East Germany or to Eastern Europe as a whole. Here, even studies acknowledging that U.S. policymakers in February 1990 briefly discussed limits on NATO's future presence risk understating the significance of U.S.-Soviet bargaining in 1990 by missing the importance of informal deals to politics, in general, and to Cold War diplomacy, in particular. In U.S. domestic politics, for example, an informal offer can constitute a binding agreement provided one party gives up something of value in consideration of payment in goods or services.<sup>54</sup> A similar principle applies to international politics: not only are formal agreements often the codification of arrangements that states would make regardless of a formal offer, but if private and unwritten discussions are meaningless, then diplomacy itself would be an unnecessary and fruitless exercise.<sup>55</sup> Instead, a host of behaviors associated with international bargaining and political understandings with other states, including interactions with foreign leaders and conciliatory diplomatic gestures, are based on what another side does or says independent of formal arrangements.<sup>56</sup> More generally, analysts have long understood that states do

---

51. Spohr, "Precluded or Precedent Setting?" p. 48.

52. Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," p. 53; Zelikow, "NATO Expansion Wasn't Ruled Out"; and Baker quoted in Sarotte, 1989, pp. 114, 273 n. 105.

53. Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward?" p. 138; and Sarotte, "A Broken Promise?" p. 91.

54. Arthur Corbin, Joseph Perillo, and John Murray Jr., *Corbin on Contracts*, Vol. 2, LexisNexis Online, 2015, Part B; and Arthur Corbin, Joseph Perillo, and John Murray Jr., *Corbin on Contracts*, Vol. 3, LexisNexis Online, 2015, Topic 1. I thank Daniel Adler, Keith Edwards, Eric Lorber, and Marc Trachtenberg for help on this point.

55. Jana Von Stein, "Do Treaties Constrain or Screen? Selection Bias and Treaty Compliance," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (November 2005), pp. 611–622.

56. Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Keren Yarhi-Milo, *Knowing the Adversary: Leaders, Intelligence, and Assessment of Intentions in International Relations* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

not need formal agreements on which to base their future expectations; as Secretary of State John Kerry acknowledged, even non-“legally binding” agreements constitute a “necessary tool” of foreign policy.<sup>57</sup> Put simply, explicit and codified arrangements are neither necessary nor sufficient for actors to strike deals and receive political assurances.

Moreover, informal agreements and understandings were especially important during the Cold War. The 1962 Cuban missile crisis, for example, was resolved in part through an informal agreement whereby the United States and the Soviet Union each removed missiles near the other’s territory.<sup>58</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, an unofficial alliance developed between the United States and China, as each turned to the other to balance Soviet ambitions in Europe and Asia.<sup>59</sup> And as Marc Trachtenberg shows, Europe’s Cold War order emerged from tacit U.S. and Soviet initiatives in the 1950s and 1960s that helped the two sides find ways to coexist within a divided Europe.<sup>60</sup> Ultimately, informal arrangements abounded during the Cold War as the United States and the Soviet Union competed for power, influence, and security.<sup>61</sup>

The theoretical, political, and contextual importance of informal arrangements has large implications for understanding U.S.-Soviet diplomacy in 1990. First, it suggests that the evidence employed in current studies already raises questions about the official view that the Soviet Union never received a NATO non-expansion pledge. Given that U.S. and West German leaders may have offered a verbal commitment against NATO expansion in February 1990, and that they received something of consequence in return (i.e., Gorbachev’s agreement to negotiate German reunification),<sup>62</sup> the February talks may be even more important than prior studies recognize. If a non-expansion offer was advanced, then both diplomatic practice and international relations theory suggest that the U.S. and West German discussions with the Soviet Union produced a strategically meaningful agreement, regardless of whether the terms were formalized.

Second, even scholarship acknowledging the importance of the February

---

57. Charles Lipson, “Why Are Some International Agreements Informal?” *International Organization*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (October 1991), pp. 495–538; and Michael Gordon, “Kerry Criticizes Republican Letter to Iranian Leaders on Nuclear Talks,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2015.

58. Barton Bernstein, “Reconsidering the Missile Crisis: Dealing with the Problems of American Jupiters in Turkey,” in James Nathan, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1992), pp. 94–96.

59. Robert S. Ross, *Negotiating Cooperation: The United States and China, 1969–1989* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

60. Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999).

61. Lipson, “Why Are Some International Agreements Informal?” pp. 497–499; and John Lewis Gaddis, “The Long Peace: Elements of Stability in the Postwar International System,” *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (Spring 1986), pp. 132–141.

62. Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence,” p. 120.

1990 talks may miss other guarantees against NATO expansion advanced later that year. Notably, Sarotte, Blanton, and other scholars who treat the February 1990 offer as strategically significant nevertheless argue that subsequent shifts in the U.S. negotiating position meant that the earlier offer was overtaken by events. If, however, informal agreements carry strategic significance, then simply arguing that the U.S. position later changed is not sufficient to show that a non-expansion pledge was compromised. Rather, the importance of informal understandings means that to fully evaluate whether the United States pledged to forgo NATO expansion, one must understand the substance of the diplomatic arrangements undergirding German reunification in general. Doing so requires determining what U.S. and allied leaders conveyed to Soviet leaders to convince the Soviet Union to agree to German reunification, identifying the conditions under which Western policymakers indicated reunification would take place, showing how this deal evolved throughout 1990, and placing these arrangements in the context of U.S.-Soviet relations at the end of the Cold War. Only then can one address the underlying issue in the NATO expansion debate: whether Soviet/Russian leaders are correct that the United States offered informal guarantees against NATO expansion throughout 1990.

### *Suggesting a Settlement: The Diplomacy of 1990*

A fuller reading of the diplomatic record shows that the Soviet Union repeatedly received assurances against NATO expansion into Eastern Europe. These promises were a central feature of U.S.-Soviet negotiations throughout 1990, as diplomatic bargaining evolved from a U.S. and West German effort to engage the Soviet Union on German reunification to shaping the substance of the deal and ultimately the formal terms that the Soviet leadership accepted in September 1990. That said, there is also strong evidence showing that the United States misled the Soviet Union in the 1990 talks. As Sarotte first noted, a growing body of evidence indicates that U.S. policymakers suggested limits on NATO's post-Cold War presence to the Soviet Union, while privately planning for an American-dominated post-Cold War system and taking steps that would attain this objective.

#### BACKGROUND TO A DEAL: HOLDING THE U.S. LINE

The possibility of German reunification became an active U.S. policy consideration in the second half of 1989 amid mounting unrest in East Germany.<sup>63</sup>

---

63. The possibility of German reunification was of concern to the Bush administration from early 1989. Initial U.S. efforts, however, focused on limiting the risk that reunification would undermine West Germany's relationship with NATO and preventing the Soviet Union from using reunifica-

Throughout the fall of 1989, U.S. policymakers feared that a collapse of East German authority would precipitate a scramble to reunify the two Germanys. Such action would threaten European stability by raising the question of whether a reunified Germany would be allied with the United States or the Soviet Union, whether it would become a neutral actor, or whether it would emerge as part of an altogether new European security arrangement.<sup>64</sup> Unless Germany reunified within NATO, the United States' influence in Europe would be significantly diminished.

The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989, transformed concerns about Germany's future from hypothetical worries into political realities. Immediately, U.S. policymakers sought to ensure that any new arrangements between East Germany and West Germany not undermine the latter's commitment to NATO.<sup>65</sup> Pursuing this objective, however, risked a strategic confrontation with the Soviet Union, as a reunified Germany within NATO represented what U.S. National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft termed "the Soviet Union's worst nightmare"—a situation that would "rip the heart out of the Soviet security system."<sup>66</sup> Preventing this outcome had long been a primary Soviet interest and, into late 1989, U.S. policymakers concluded that the Soviet Union retained two options to achieve this end. First, the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies could use force to block reunification.<sup>67</sup> Although not necessarily likely, Soviet intervention was "among the World War III scenarios" that U.S. policymakers took seriously.<sup>68</sup> Second, short of using force, the Soviet

---

tion as propaganda against the West. For early U.S. discussion, see Robert L. Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider's Account of U.S. Diplomacy in Europe, 1989–1992* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), pp. 97–98; and Frank Costigliola, "An 'Arm around the Shoulder': The United States, NATO, and German Reunification, 1989–1990," *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 1994), pp. 95–96. For U.S. concerns, see Brent Scowcroft to the President, "The NATO Summit," March 20, 1989, folder "NATO Summit—May 1989," box CF00779, Kanter Files, GBPL; and Robert Zoellick, "NATO Summit—Possible Initiatives [Zoellick Draft]," May 15, 1989, folder 5, box 108, Baker Papers, Seelley Mudd Manuscript Library (hereafter SMML), Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey.

64. Scowcroft, "The NATO Summit"; Zoellick, "NATO Summit—Possible Initiatives"; and R.G.H. Seitz to the Secretary, "The Future of Germany in a Fast-Changing Europe," October 10, 1989, box 38, Soviet Flashpoints, George Washington University National Security Archive (hereafter NSA). For discussion of the United States' preference for the status quo, see Sarotte, 1989, pp. 26–27.

65. Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, "The German Question," and enclosure "Handling the German Question at Malta and Beyond," November 20, 1989, folder "Malta Summit Papers (Preparation) December 1989 [1]," box CF00717, Rice Files, GBPL.

66. Brent Scowcroft to the President, "The Soviets and the German Question," November 29, 1989, folder "German Unification (November 1989)," box 91116, Scowcroft Files, GBPL. For similar discussion based largely on European sources, see Kristina Spohr, "Germany, America, and the Shaping of Post-Cold War Europe," *Cold War History*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (April 2015), pp. 225–229.

67. Spohr, "Germany, America, and the Shaping of Post-Cold War Europe," pp. 225–229.

68. State-Defense-NSC Working Group, "GDR Crisis Contingencies," November 6, 1989, and accompanying note from Robert Blackwill to Brent Scowcroft, November 7, 1989, folder "German

Union could play to German nationalist aspirations and propose that talks on reunification be conditioned on altering the reunified state's relationship with NATO.<sup>69</sup> Kohl's decision on November 28, 1989, to propose a plan for reunification in a speech to the West German parliament without consulting the United States or mentioning NATO lent credence to this concern, suggesting that West German leaders might compromise their country's existing relationship with NATO to secure Soviet support for reunification.<sup>70</sup>

A path to reunify Germany without weakening West Germany's relationship to NATO or risking conflict with the Soviet Union only appeared at the start of 1990, as the Soviet threat to use force declined.<sup>71</sup> By late January 1990, the collapse of Communist authority in Eastern Europe owing to the Revolutions of 1989 led U.S. policymakers to conclude that Soviet forces "were fast being pushed out" of the region.<sup>72</sup> Even if it wanted to, the Soviet Union was, as then-NSC staff member Condoleezza Rice described, "unable to reextend its tentacles" into the region.<sup>73</sup> If the Soviet Union were to stop reunification or guide the process in ways that would harm U.S. interests, it would have to do so at the bargaining table. Indeed, the longer the issue of German reunification went unaddressed, the more likely it was that Soviet leaders would seize the agenda to gain diplomatic influence over its eventual terms.<sup>74</sup> As the German people lobbied for reunification and East Germany

---

Reunification 11/89-6/90 [1]," box CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL; and Brent Scowcroft to the President, "The Future of Perestroika and the European Order," undated [late November/early December 1989], folder "Malta Summit Papers (Preparation) December 1989 [3]," box CF00717, Rice Files, GBPL.

69. Seitz, "The Future of Germany in a Fast-Changing Europe"; and Scowcroft, "The Soviets and the German Question."

70. George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Random House, 1998), pp. 194-198.

71. As Kohl's late November 1989 speech indicates, U.S. and West German leaders began exploring possible options for reunification in the last two months of 1989. These efforts helped each side consider possible strategies, but remained nascent and uncoordinated. Into early 1990, the United States was still searching—as Zelikow and Rice recount—for "answers to the hard questions about how German reunification might come to pass." See Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 156, 172-175. For discussion of American uncertainty, see Brent Scowcroft to the President, "U.S. Diplomacy for the New Europe," December 22, 1989, folder "German Unification (December 1989)," box 91116, Scowcroft Files, GBPL; Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, "Responding to a Soviet Call for a German Peace Conference," and enclosure to the President, [undated, circa January 15, 1990], folder "German Reunification—2+4," box CF01414, Hutchings Files, GBPL.

72. Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, "Your Breakfast with Kissinger: Managing the German Question," January 26, 1990, folder "German Reunification 11/89-6/90 [1]," box CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL; and William Webster (CIA Director) and Harry Soyster (Defense Intelligence Agency Director), testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, *Hearing on Threats Facing the United States and Its Allies*, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., 1990, S. Hrg. 101-780, pp. 57-62.

73. Condoleezza Rice to Brent Scowcroft, "Showdown in Moscow?" February 1, 1990, folder "USSR—Gorbachev," box CF00719, Rice Files, GBPL.

74. Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, "Germany," January 30, 1990, and enclosure, Brent

unraveled, the United States faced growing incentives to take the initiative on reunification while blocking Soviet opportunism.<sup>75</sup> Alongside their West German counterparts, U.S. policymakers decided to explore the following questions: (1) would the Soviet Union accept reunification, (2) what would it take to bring the Soviets to the bargaining table, and (3) most important, what would the Soviet Union demand—especially with regard to Germany's relationship with NATO—in return for allowing reunification to proceed?<sup>76</sup>

“IRON-CLAD GUARANTEES” AGAINST EXPANSION, JANUARY–FEBRUARY 1990

Efforts to establish a concrete framework for negotiating whether and how German reunification would occur began in earnest with a speech by West German Foreign Minister Genscher. Speaking in Tutzing, West Germany, on January 31, 1990, Genscher advanced a quid pro quo: there would be “no extension of NATO territory to the East, i.e., nearer the borders of the Soviet Union” if the Soviets allowed reunification.<sup>77</sup> Genscher, a political rival of Kohl, may have had domestic reasons for trying to seize the lead on reunification, but his proposal echoed interest among other Western officials in exploring whether the Soviets would accept reunification in exchange for limiting NATO's reach.<sup>78</sup> During talks with Secretary of State Baker in Washington on February 2, 1990, Genscher elaborated that, under his plan, “NATO would not extend its territorial coverage to the area of the GDR nor anywhere else in Eastern Europe.”<sup>79</sup> Baker subsequently embraced Genscher's idea and supported it both publicly and in private.<sup>80</sup>

---

Scowcroft to the President, “A Strategy for German Unification,” n.d., document 9000922, NSC PA Files, GBPL.

75. Sarotte, 1989, pp. 68–86, 92–102.

76. Robert Blackwill to Brent Scowcroft, “The Beginning of the Big Game,” February 7, 1990, folder “German Reunification 11/89–6/90 [1],” box CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL.

77. Frank Elbe and Richard Kiessler, *A Round Table with Sharp Corners: The Diplomatic Path to German Unity* (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos, 1996), p. 79.

78. Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” p. 122; Scowcroft, “A Strategy for German Unification”; Brent Scowcroft to the President, “Trip Report: Wehrkunde Conference in Munich, FRG February 3–4 1990,” folder “German Reunification 11/89–6/90 [1],” box CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL. Genscher led the liberal Free Democratic Party in uneasy partnership with Kohl's Christian Democratic Union. With FRG elections scheduled later in 1990, Genscher had reason to distinguish his policy from Kohl's.

79. This account is drawn from the State Department's description of the Baker-Genscher meeting. See Secretary of State to American Embassy Bonn, “Baker/Genscher Meeting February 2,” February 3, 1990, folder “Germany—March 1990,” box CF00775, Kanter Files, GBPL. Note that it contradicts reports on the meeting in some of the literature that describe the talks as applying only to East Germany and not the rest of Eastern Europe. Compare, for example, the account here to Spohr (who claims that the Genscher-Baker meeting left “the territories east of the GDR untouched”) and Zelikow and Rice (“Baker understood Genscher to say [. . .] that NATO's territorial coverage would not extend to the former GDR”). See Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting?” p. 18; and Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, p. 176.

80. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 176–177; Elbe and Kiessler,



The U.S.–West German position on NATO non-expansion served as the basis for meetings in Moscow on February 7–9, 1990, between U.S. officials, led by Secretary of State Baker, and their Soviet counterparts.<sup>81</sup> In line with descriptions of these meetings by Kramer, Sarotte, Spohr, Zelikow and Rice, and others, the partially declassified U.S. transcripts indicate that Baker repeatedly linked German reunification to a NATO non-expansion pledge.<sup>82</sup> On February 9, 1990, for example, Baker told Shevardnadze that the United States was seeking a reunified Germany that would remain “firmly anchored” in NATO, while promising “iron-clad guarantees that NATO’s jurisdiction or forces would not move eastward.”<sup>83</sup> Baker returned to these points in a meeting with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze later that day. In it, Baker acknowledged “the need for assurances to countries in the East” and pledged that “there would be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east” if Germany reunified within NATO.<sup>84</sup> In this latter meeting, Baker even asked Gorbachev whether the Soviet Union preferred a reunified Germany that was neutral or one that maintained “ties to NATO and assurances that there would be no extension of NATO’s current jurisdiction eastward.”<sup>85</sup>

Although the relevant section of the U.S. transcript is redacted, the Soviet record of the conversation further indicates that when Gorbachev informed Baker that “a broadening of the NATO zone is not acceptable,” Baker quickly agreed.<sup>86</sup> Having seemingly reached an understanding, Gorbachev ended the discussion on a positive note, telling Baker that “what you have said to me about your approach and your preference is very realistic. So let’s think about that.”<sup>87</sup> Significantly, Baker publicized the quid pro quo in a press conference, saying that the United States proposed “there should be no extension of NATO forces eastward in order to assuage the security concerns of those of the East of

---

*A Round Table with Sharp Corners*, p. 88; and Thomas Friedman, “U.S. Backing West Germany’s Unity Idea,” *New York Times*, February 7, 1990.

81. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 176–179; and Sarotte, 1989, pp. 105–107.

82. Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” pp. 47–49; Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” pp. 128–129; Sarotte, 1989, pp. 110–111; Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting?” pp. 21–26; and Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 179–185.

83. Memorandum of Conversation (hereafter Memcon), “Second One-on-One, the Secretary, Eduard Shevardnadze,” February 9, 1990, box 38, Soviet Flashpoints, NSA.

84. Memcon, “Secretary Baker, President Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze,” February 9, 1990, box 38, Soviet Flashpoints, NSA.

85. *Ibid.*

86. “Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker, February 9, 1990,” in Savranskaya, Blanton, and Zubok, *Masterpieces of History*, doc. 119.

87. Memcon, “Secretary Baker, President Gorbachev, Eduard Shevardnadze.” To be clear, Gorbachev emphasized that Baker should not ask for the Soviet “bottom line” at that moment. In context, however, Gorbachev seems to have taken Baker’s proposal as representing the minimum terms on which additional negotiations could occur.

Germany [*sic*],” and that reunifying Germany in NATO was “not likely to happen without there being some sort of security guarantees with respect to NATO’s forces [ . . . ] or the jurisdiction of NATO moving eastward.”<sup>88</sup>

Other administration officials echoed Baker’s offer. In a conversation whose details came to light in 2013, Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates accompanied Baker to Moscow and discussed similar terms in a meeting with Soviet intelligence chief Vladimir Kryuchkov on February 9, 1990.<sup>89</sup> As the declassified transcript of the discussion reveals, Gates affirmed that “we support the Kohl-Genscher idea of a united Germany belonging to NATO but with no extension of military presence to the GDR. This would be in the context of continuing force reductions in Europe. What did Kryuchkov think of the Kohl/Genscher proposal under which a united Germany would be associated with NATO, but in which NATO troops would move no further east than they now were? It seems to us to be a sound proposal.”<sup>90</sup> The transcript of the conversation also shows that Kryuchkov, unlike Gorbachev, was not enthusiastic about the U.S.–West German proposal. Nevertheless, this does not detract from the importance of Gates’s offer. Not only did Gates advance a parallel pledge to Baker’s, but his praise for the plan as a “sound proposal” suggested broad U.S. support for a deal in which NATO would move no further east that Soviet leaders could not have missed. Tellingly, Gates’s discussion with Kryuchkov also belies the notion that Baker’s offer was merely speculative; instead, it indicates more support within the Bush administration for the NATO non-expansion pledge than Sarotte and others suggest.<sup>91</sup> Meanwhile, Kohl met with Gorbachev in Moscow on February 10, 1990, telling the Soviet leader that “naturally NATO could not extend its territory” into East Germany. That same day, Genscher told Shevardnadze that “NATO will not expand itself to the East.”<sup>92</sup>

Thus, by mid-February 1990, U.S. and West German officials had proposed

---

88. Department of State, Press Release, “Press Conference of James Baker III Following U.S.-USSR Ministerial Meetings, Moscow, USSR, February 9, 1990,” PR No. 14, February 16, 1990, folder 20, box 161, Baker Papers, SMML.

89. Prior studies have not mentioned Gates’s presence on the trip, whereas participants’ memoirs mention Gates’s presence but omit the substance of his discussion. See Robert M. Gates, *From The Shadows: The Ultimate Insider’s Story of Five Presidents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), pp. 490–492; and Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, p. 184. Details of Gates’s conversation only emerged with the 2013 declassification of Memcon, “Robert M. Gates and V.I. Kryuchkov,” February 9, 1990, folder “Gorbachev (Dobrynin) Sensitive July–December 1990 [1],” box 91128, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.

90. Memcon, “Robert M. Gates and V.I. Kryuchkov.”

91. This makes sense: it is unlikely that Baker would negotiate over as important a subject as Germany’s future without significant intra-administration coordination. On Baker’s speculation, see Sarotte, 1989, p. 114; and Baker’s comments in Gordon, “Anatomy of a Misunderstanding.”

92. Kohl quoted in Sarotte, 1989, p. 112; and Genscher quoted in Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting?” p. 30.

the outlines of a new strategic landscape to Soviet policymakers. In the nascent deal, Germany would reunify, the Soviet Union would retrench, and NATO would not move into the former East Germany or points beyond. The State Department itself suggested the trade-off, informing its embassies that “[t]he Secretary made clear that [ . . . ] we supported a unified Germany within NATO, but that we were prepared to ensure that NATO’s military presence would not extend further eastward.”<sup>93</sup> In any ordinary sense of the term “eastward,” all of the countries to which NATO expanded in the 1990s would remain outside the Western orbit. Soviet leaders were effectively promised that Soviet cooperation on Germany would be met by Western restraint.

The U.S.–West German pledges had dramatic consequences, as Gorbachev agreed to allow German reunification to proceed immediately following his conversation with Kohl on February 10.<sup>94</sup> In doing so, Gorbachev was not simply conceding to Western demands. Rather, in an environment where informal arrangements were commonplace, the Soviet leader was agreeing to the U.S.-backed offer by making the concession sought by the United States and West Germany. During a subsequent conference in Ottawa on February 13, 1990, the Soviet leadership reinforced the point by accepting U.S. proposals for “Two-Plus-Four” talks to facilitate the security aspects of German reunification.<sup>95</sup> In short, within one week of meeting Baker, Gates, and other Western leaders in Moscow, the Soviet leadership began moving in the very direction sought by the United States on the basis of U.S.–West German proposals.

“SPECIAL MILITARY STATUS” FOR EAST GERMANY, FEBRUARY–APRIL 1990

While Baker and Gates were meeting with the Soviet leadership to sketch the outlines of the non-expansion pledge, its contents were coming under scrutiny from within the U.S. government for appearing to leave all of East Germany—which would soon become part of unified Germany—outside NATO security guarantees.<sup>96</sup> To clarify the U.S. position, Bush sent Kohl a letter on February 9, 1990, explaining that the United States wanted a “unified Germany [ . . . ] in the

---

93. Secretary of State, “Briefing on U.S.-Soviet Ministerial,” February 13, 1990, State Department Freedom of Information Act website (hereafter DOS/FOIA), <http://foia.state.gov/Search/Search.aspx>.

94. “Delegationsgespräch des Bundeskanzlers Kohl mit Generalsekretär Gorbatschow” [Federal Chancellor Kohl’s delegation talk with General Secretary Gorbachev], in Hanns Jürgen Küsters and Daniel Hofmann, eds., *Deutsche Einheit: Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik* (Berlin: Directmedia, 2004), doc. 175. I thank Simon Miles for this translation. For more on Gorbachev’s concession, see Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” pp. 131–132.

95. “Two Plus Four Statement Made during the Open Skies Conference, Ottawa, 14 February 1990,” in Adam Daniel Rotfeld and Walther Stützle, eds., *Germany and Europe in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 168.

96. Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting?” pp. 24–25; and Sarotte, 1989, pp. 124–125. See also James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s, 1995), pp. 233–234.

Atlantic alliance" in which East Germany would enjoy "special military status" within NATO.<sup>97</sup> Seeking to address this issue further, U.S. and West German leaders met at Camp David on February 24–25, 1990, and agreed on revised terms to present to the Soviet Union. Now, the United States and West Germany would offer the former East Germany "special military status" within a reunified Germany:<sup>98</sup> NATO would have "jurisdiction" over the area even if NATO military structures did not extend to former East German territory.<sup>99</sup> All of reunified Germany would then formally be in NATO and covered by NATO security guarantees. Scholars including Sarotte, Kramer, and Spohr, as well as former policymakers consider this revised offer a major shift in U.S. policy: in proposing to extend NATO security guarantees to all of Germany, the United States was closing off Soviet opportunities to codify the NATO non-expansion pledge and voiding prior assurances against NATO expansion.<sup>100</sup>

Given the importance of informal bargains in diplomatic negotiations, however, and taking into consideration the diplomacy around the late February 1990 talks, I argue that the proposal for special military status for East Germany reinforced, rather than overturned, U.S.–West German assurances against NATO expansion. On one level, the proposal left unanswered the question of how the offer related to prior pledges against NATO expansion. This may be partly because U.S. officials were themselves unclear as to what special military status entailed:<sup>101</sup> it was only in the spring of 1990 that the

---

97. Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward?" pp. 129–130; and "Schreiben des Präsidenten Bush an Bundeskanzler Kohl 9. Februar 1990" [Letter from President Bush to Chancellor Kohl, February 9, 1990], in Küsters and Hofmann, *Deutsche Einheit*, doc. 170.

98. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 214–215. The idea of a "special military status" was initially raised by NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner and discussed inside the U.S. government concurrent with the early February Baker-Gorbachev talks. It took until late February, however, for the idea to solidify and for the United States to communicate the offer to the Soviet leadership. See Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 184–187, 214–215; Brent Scowcroft to the President, "Meetings with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl," February 24–25, 1990, and enclosed talking points, "Points to be Made for Meetings with FRG Chancellor Helmut Kohl," folder "[Helmut] Kohl Visit—February 1990," box CF00774, Kanter Files, GBPL; Memcon, "Telephone Conversation with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union," February 28, 1990, GBPL online, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memconstelcons/1990-02-28—Gorbachev.pdf>.

99. Memcon, "Meeting with Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany," second meeting, February 25, 1990, GBPL online, <http://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/memconstelcons>.

100. See, for example, Zelikow, "NATO Expansion Wasn't Ruled Out"; Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," pp. 49–52; and Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward?" pp. 132–136.

101. Robert Blackwill to Brent Scowcroft, "Europe," February 9, 1990, folder "German Unification," box CF00716, Rice Files, GBPL; U.S. Department of State, "Interview of the Honorable James Baker on 'This Week with David Brinkley' with Guest Interviewers George Will and Sam

United States proposed that special military status meant that there would be “no NATO forces in the territory of the GDR” as Soviet forces withdrew from the area; only in the summer did Soviet and Western negotiators agree on the details of East Germany’s future military position.<sup>102</sup> Thus, during the press conference following the February 24–25 Camp David meetings, Bush declared in general terms that “the former territory of [East Germany] should have a special military status, that it would take into account the legitimate security interests of all interested countries, including those of the Soviet Union.”<sup>103</sup> Nor did a telephone conversation between Bush and Gorbachev on February 28 help clarify the issue. During the call, Bush told Gorbachev that “the unified Germany should remain in NATO; that American troops will remain in Europe as long as the Europeans want them; and that there needs to be a special status for the former territory of the GDR.” Further, the president pledged that the United States would recognize the “legitimate security interests” of all parties.<sup>104</sup> Notably, in highlighting limits to NATO’s future role in Germany and recognizing the need to acknowledge Soviet “security interests,” Bush was echoing comments by Baker and Gates during their February 9 talks with the Soviet leadership. Combined, the new terms could be interpreted as explaining how NATO would avoid expanding eastward if Germany reunified within NATO.<sup>105</sup>

Also important is the strategic backdrop against which the 1990 negotiations occurred. Just as policymakers in the early Cold War recognized that control of

---

Donaldson, February 18, 1990,” PR No. 20, February 20, 1990, folder 22, box 161, Baker Papers, SMML.

102. Quote from A. Goodman, F. Miles, and R. George, “Theme Paper: German Unification,” May 23, 1990, DOS/FOIA. By August–September 1990, negotiators further agreed that a special military status meant that non-German NATO forces would not be permanently stationed on former East German territory, and that even West German units assigned to NATO could move into the area only after Soviet forces withdrew. For the evolving U.S. position, see B.P. Hall, “Security Issues in the Two-Plus-Four,” April 5, 1990, folder “German Reunification 11/89–6/90[2],” box CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL; James Baker et al., “Memorandum of Conversation,” May 18, 1990, folder “Gorbachev [Dobrynin] Sensitive 1989–June 1990 [Copy Set] [2],” box 91127, Scowcroft Files, GBPL; and Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, “German Unification: New Problems at End Game,” August 27, 1990, folder “United Germany [2],” box CF01414, Hutchings Files, GBPL. For final terms, see “Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany.”

103. George H.W. Bush, “The President’s News Conference Following Discussions with Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Federal Republic of Germany,” February 25, 1990, in Gerhard Peters and John Woolley, eds., *American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=18188&st=&st1=>.

104. Memcon, “Telephone Conversation with President Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union.”

105. There is some evidence that Soviet leaders interpreted the special military status offer in this manner: as Zelikow and Rice report, Shevardnadze did not seem to realize even in mid-March 1990 that “Washington and Bonn had already dropped the [Tutzing] formula and were now taking an even less compromising stance.” See Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, p. 231.

a unified Germany was the key to dominance in Europe, so did policymakers in 1989–90 recognize that East Germany and West Germany were the respective hearts of the Warsaw Pact and NATO.<sup>106</sup> As Gorbachev told Kohl in Moscow on February 10, “When you say that NATO would disintegrate without Germany, this also applies to the Warsaw Pact.”<sup>107</sup> Added to the fact that NATO is foremost a military alliance, offering the former East Germany special military status takes on new meaning: if NATO’s two largest members were willing to limit their military presence in the former East Germany, then the Soviet Union had good reason to believe that prior pledges against NATO expansion would be upheld regardless of whether NATO jurisdiction formally covered East German territory. Indeed, even as discussion of special status for East Germany was in its early stages, Rice underscored the relationship between Western offers and Soviet concerns, writing to Scowcroft in mid-February 1990: “Moscow’s primary concern will be that there be no further shift—in perception or reality—in the East-West strategic balance.”<sup>108</sup> Conferred special status on East Germany could thereby signal that U.S. and West German leaders were willing to limit NATO’s future relationship with the Soviet Union’s most important ally and, in turn, the rest of Eastern Europe. Logically, if NATO did not militarily move into the territory of this ally, then it would be unlikely to move further east to include less important states.

“A TRANSFORMED ALLIANCE,” MARCH–AUGUST 1990

Having floated a non-expansion pledge in February 1990 and clarifying that this offer might include special status for the former East Germany, U.S. policymakers in the spring and summer of 1990 offered the Soviet Union additional terms that reinforced the assurances against NATO enlargement. These included promises that the Soviet Union would not be strategically isolated in post-Cold War Europe, that NATO would not exploit Soviet weaknesses, and that Europe’s post-Cold War security architecture would be increasingly inclusive. The resulting bargaining thereby used discussions over the future of

---

106. On early Cold War concerns, see Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*; and State Department Policy Planning Staff, “Resume of World Situation,” PPS/13, February 6, 1947, in Anna Kasten Nelson, ed., *The State Department Policy Planning Staff Papers*, Vol. 1 (New York: Garland, 1983), pp. 132–134.

107. “Gespräch des Bundeskanzlers Kohl mit Generalsekretär Gorbatschow Moskau, 10. Februar 1990” [Meeting of Federal Chancellor Kohl with General Secretary Gorbachev, Moscow, February 10, 1990], in Küsters and Hofmann, *Deutsche Einheit*, doc. 174. Thanks go to Simon Miles for translation.

108. Condoleezza Rice to Brent Scowcroft, “Preparing for the German Peace Conference,” February 14, 1990, and enclosure to the President, “Preparing for the Six Power German Peace Conference,” folder “German Reunification 11/89–6/90 [1],” box CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL.

European security to underscore the non-expansion deal by implying limits on NATO's post-Cold War role and the United States' post-Cold War dominance.

The Bush administration recognized that fear of NATO encroachment and loss of international prestige drove Soviet opposition to German reunification in NATO; as Baker commented in June 1990, "The Soviet Union doesn't want to look like losers [*sic*]." <sup>109</sup> The consequences of this situation became especially clear beginning in March of that year, when Soviet policymakers advanced a set of demands to buttress Soviet power and limit NATO's post-Cold War dominance in Europe as the price for German reunification. <sup>110</sup> As the Central Intelligence Agency reported, these demands included calls to disband the Warsaw Pact and NATO, as well as to slow reunification until the two alliances could be replaced with an "all-European security structure" centered on the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). <sup>111</sup> These demands put pressure on the United States to advance an alternative "package" to convince the Soviet Union to agree to German reunification without sacrificing NATO. <sup>112</sup>

First presented by Baker during a mid-May 1990 visit to Moscow, the U.S. package—which became known as the "Nine Assurances"—combined points raised in earlier discussions into a single deal. <sup>113</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the three most important elements were promises (1) to gradually strengthen the CSCE by providing it with mechanisms designed to suggest that it might evolve into a pan-European security institution that would complement NATO and aid in the "development of a new Europe"; (2) to limit mil-

---

109. Baker quote from "Draft Memcon for President's Meeting and Dinner with Chancellor Kohl," June 8, 1990, folder "Germany—Federal Republic of—Correspondence [1]," box CF01413, Hutchings Files, GBPL. For Soviet concerns, see [no author listed; appears to be Robert Zoellick], "Two Plus Four: Advantages, Possible Concerns, and Rebuttal Points," February 21, 1990, box 38, Soviet Flashpoints, NSA; and "Notes from Jim Cicconi re: 7/3/90 pre-NATO Summit briefing at Kennebunkport," July 3, 1990, folder 3, box 109, Baker Papers, SMML.

110. Hannes Adomeit, "Gorbachev's Consent to Unified Germany's Membership in NATO" (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, December 11, 2006), p. 10. Gorbachev's foreign policy sought what he termed a "Common European Home" based on collective security and conflict resolution measures (particularly via the CSCE), economic integration, and plans for NATO and the Warsaw Pact to draw closer together as political rather than military alliances. See Marie-Pierre Rey, "'Europe Is Our Common Home': A Study of Gorbachev's Diplomatic Concept," *Cold War History*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (January 2004), pp. 33–65.

111. Central Intelligence Agency, "Soviet Policy on German Unification," [no date; prepared for May 29, 1990 briefing], folder "Chron File: May 1990—June 1990 [3]," box CF01309, Burns Files, GBPL. For details, see, *inter alia*, Roger George to Robert Zoellick and Dennis Ross, "The Two Plus Four Tightrope," March 12, 1990, folder "2+4 Germany #3 [1]," box CF00721, Rice Files, GBPL; State Department, "German Unification—Two Plus Four Process," May 25, 1990, folder "Chron File: May 1990—June 1990 [3]," box CF01309, Burns Files, GBPL; and James Baker, "June 22 Two-Plus-Four Ministerial in Berlin," DOS/FOIA.

112. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 250–265, 450 n. 25.

113. Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, pp. 268–275.

itary forces in Europe via the Conventional Forces in Europe negotiations; and (3) to transform NATO into an increasingly “political” organization.<sup>114</sup> At a time when Soviet leaders were seeking “a new security structure” and “some guarantee of security” given changes in Europe,<sup>115</sup> the United States designed these terms to “underscore our commitment to seek to meet Soviet concerns.”<sup>116</sup> After all, if the CSCE were to become a vibrant security institution, if NATO were to take on an increasingly political role, and if interlocking institutions were to ensure the United States and the Soviet Union a place in the “New Europe,” then NATO’s eastward expansion would be unlikely as NATO became less important to European security.<sup>117</sup>

Efforts to reassure the Soviet Union and downplay NATO’s dominance occupied a prominent place in discussions over Europe’s future throughout the spring of 1990. Even before revealing the Nine Assurances, Bush used a speech in Stillwater, Oklahoma, on May 4, 1990, to highlight steps that the United States and NATO planned to take to build a more cooperative Europe.<sup>118</sup> Meeting with Shevardnadze on May 5, Baker tied promises on the CSCE, military reductions, and NATO transformation to Soviet concerns over NATO’s future and German reunification, telling the Soviet foreign minister that U.S. proposals “would not yield winners and losers. Instead, [they] would produce a new legitimate European structure—one that would be inclusive, not exclusive.”<sup>119</sup> Baker was still more direct when presenting the Nine Assurances to Gorbachev on May 18. During their talks in Moscow, Baker explained that the United States did not want any “unilateral advantage” from the diplomatic negotiations, promised “a different kind of NATO,” and pledged that the United States was committed to building the pan-European security institutions de-

---

114. Baker et al., “Memorandum of Conversation.” For additional discussion of these points, see Condoleezza Rice to Brent Scowcroft, “Issues for Camp David,” and enclosed briefing cards, June 1, 1990, folder “Washington Summit June 1990 [2 of 4],” box CF00717, Rice Files, GBPL; James Baker, “My Meeting with Gorbachev,” May 18, 1990, DOS/FOIA; “Baker Handwritten Notes from May 1990 Camp David Summit,” May 31, 1990, folder 1, box 109, Baker Papers, SMML.

115. Soviet comments in, respectively, Baker et al., “Memorandum of Conversation”; and Memcon, “Meeting with Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze,” April 6, 1990, GBPL online, [http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/pdfs/memcons\\_telcons/1990-04-06—Shevardnadze.pdf](http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/pdfs/memcons_telcons/1990-04-06—Shevardnadze.pdf).

116. State Department, “German Unification—Two Plus Four Process.” Accompanying documents suggest that Zoellick briefed Bush on this report on May 29. See Brent Scowcroft to the President, “Briefing on Germany—the Future of Europe,” May 27, 1990, folder “Chron File: May 1990–June 1990 [3],” box CF01309, Burns Files, GBPL.

117. Quote is from Rice, “Issues for Camp David,” enclosed briefing cards. Author’s analysis.

118. George H.W. Bush, “Remarks at the Oklahoma State University Commencement Ceremony in Stillwater,” May 4, 1990, GBPL online, <http://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/1853>.

119. James Baker, “My Meeting with Shevardnadze,” May 5, 1990, folder “Gorbachev (Dobrynin) Sensitive 1989–June 1990 [Copy Set] [2],” box 91127, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.



sired by the Soviet Union.<sup>120</sup> Bush reinforced these assurances when meeting the Soviet leadership in Washington on May 31–June 2, arguing (per his talking points) that NATO, the CSCE, and the European Commission (EC) made up “the cornerstone of a new, inclusive Europe,” while a Conventional Forces in Europe agreement represented “the gateway to developing a new political and security structure in Europe.” At a basic level, the United States claimed not to want—as Bush told Gorbachev on May 31—“winners and losers” but instead a Soviet Union “integrated [ . . . ] into the new Europe.”<sup>121</sup>

The intended takeaway from these negotiations appears clear: given Bush’s February 1990 acknowledgment that German reunification would accommodate the “legitimate interests” of all parties, Soviet acceptance of the U.S. terms might result in a reunified Germany within NATO, but the Soviet Union’s broader concern with limiting NATO encroachment would be respected.<sup>122</sup> Indeed, the State Department itself predicted on the eve of the May 31–June 2 Washington Summit that “Gorbachev will be open to using CSCE to guarantee pan-European security and diminish the need for military alliances or Germany’s membership in NATO, [but] is likely to insist on establishing parameters for Germany itself,” including limits on the German military.<sup>123</sup> Although the United States and the Soviet Union differed over specifics, U.S. calls to build the CSCE, limit military forces, and transform NATO thus played to Soviet interests by suggesting a post–Cold War Europe amenable to Soviet concerns. As Baker explained to his NATO colleagues in Brussels in early May 1990, “[A]daptation of NATO, the EC, and the CSCE to new European realities” avoided “a loss to Moscow” and helped prevent “creating the image of winners and losers.”<sup>124</sup> He was even clearer when suggesting the possibility of institutionalizing the CSCE, telling Shevardnadze in Moscow on May 18, that “it can create a sense of inclusion not exclusion in Europe [ . . . ] I see it as being a cornerstone over time in the development of a new Europe.”<sup>125</sup> Nor was this just Baker’s personal effort: analysts from France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and West Germany were explicit in their calcu-

---

120. Baker et al., “Memorandum of Conversation.”

121. Memcon, “Meeting with President Gorbachev,” May 31, 1990, folder “Gorbachev (Dobrynin) Sensitive July–December 1990 [1],” box 91128, Scowcroft Files, GBPL; and Rice, “Issues for Camp David,” briefing cards.

122. Memcon, “Meeting with President Gorbachev.”

123. State Department, “Gorbachev’s Summit Agenda: Looking Ahead,” May 29, 1990, DOS/FOIA.

124. U.S. Mission NATO, “Secretary Baker’s May 3 NAC Intervention,” May 10, 1990, DOS/FOIA.

125. Baker et al., “Memorandum of Conversation.”

lated appeals to Soviet interests, concluding that the Soviet Union would accept reunification in NATO “provided it is coated with sufficient sweeteners” about cooperative security and included “appropriate assurances” about accommodating Soviet security concerns.<sup>126</sup> These efforts also appear to have resonated to some degree with Soviet leaders, as Gorbachev “made clear” in a meeting with Baker in May that “he approved [Western proposals] very much.” In June Shevardnadze told Baker that a revamped CSCE was “laying the basis for substantive guarantees of stability” in Europe.<sup>127</sup>

Even if Western proposals did not fully meet Soviet demands, the Soviets thus still had good reason to believe that the United States was, at minimum, suggesting a future in which NATO would be unlikely to expand further east. The point of U.S. proposals was not that NATO would disappear, but that Europe would become more cooperative and more integrated. By implication, NATO was unlikely to enlarge beyond Germany as it became less relevant to Europe’s security landscape.<sup>128</sup>

#### A DEAL WITH NON-EXPANSION ELEMENTS, JULY–OCTOBER 1990

The diplomatic discussions came to a head in July 1990. Early that month, Western leaders met in London to consider NATO’s future. Discussions over the preceding weeks suggested that the Soviet position on Germany might change “depending on steps taken by NATO,” as Soviet leaders sought changes in NATO policy that would allow them “to tell our people that we face no threat—not from Germany, not from the US, not from NATO.”<sup>129</sup> To reinforce the narrative of an integrated Europe acceptable to the Soviet Union, the United States sponsored the “London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance,” whereby NATO’s members pledged to “enhance the political component of our Alliance.”<sup>130</sup> Equally important, the Declaration called

---

126. P. John Weston to J. Stephen Wall, “Meeting of the One Plus Three in Brussels on 10 April,” April 11, 1990, in Patrick Salmon, Keith Hamilton, and Stephen Twigge, eds., *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, series 3, Vol. 7: *German Reunification, 1989–1990* (New York: Routledge, 2010), doc. 192.

127. James Baker, “My Meeting with Gorbachev,” May 19, 1990, DOS/FOIA; “Memcon from 6/22/90 mtg w/USSR FM Shevardnadze, Berlin, FRG,” June 22, 1990, box 38, Soviet Flashpoints, NSA.

128. As Zoellick explained in May 1990, because Soviet leaders linked German membership in NATO “to a fundamental question of strategic balance,” U.S. policymakers sought to indicate “that we are trying to meet legitimate Soviet concerns and that we want unification to contribute to stronger cooperation in Europe.” See State Department, “German Unification—Two Plus Four Process.”

129. “Notes from Jim Cicconi re: 7/3/90 pre-NATO Summit briefing at Kennebunkport”; and “Memcon from 6/22/90 mtg w/USSR FM Shevardnadze, Berlin, FRG.”

130. NATO, “London Declaration on a Transformed North Atlantic Alliance,” July 5–6, 1990, <http://www.nato.int/docu/comm/49-95/c900706a.htm>.

for the CSCE to “become more prominent in Europe’s future, bringing together the countries of Europe and North America,” while NATO governments committed to “working with all in the countries in Europe [. . .] to create enduring peace on this continent.”<sup>131</sup> The goal, as Bush explained, was to shape “Soviet attitudes on the vital questions Moscow must answer in the next few months” and, as Baker expressed in a cable to Shevardnadze, to showcase NATO’s willingness to “work with the Soviet Union to build a new Europe characterized by peaceful cooperation.”<sup>132</sup>

Against this backdrop, Gorbachev and Kohl met in mid-July 1990 to discuss Germany’s future. At the time, neither the U.S. nor West German leadership expected a drastic shift in Soviet policy.<sup>133</sup> To their surprise, however, Gorbachev moved to settle the terms of German reunification. During successive meetings with Kohl in Moscow and the Caucasus, Gorbachev agreed that a reunified Germany would remain within NATO, that NATO security guarantees would cover the former East Germany, and that Soviet troops would withdraw quickly from East Germany.<sup>134</sup> In return, Kohl offered loans to the Soviet Union and pledged that neither NATO nuclear weapons nor non-German NATO troops would move into the former East Germany.<sup>135</sup> Although subsequent U.S. pressure led to permission for non-German NATO forces to enter the former GDR in an emergency after the Soviets withdrew, this basic deal—with NATO security guarantees extending to the former GDR and non-German forces banned from permanent stationing on former East German territory—became the core of the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, signed in September 1990.<sup>136</sup> On October 3, 1990, East and West Germany officially reunified.

In sum, it was amid Western and, especially, U.S. suggestions of an inte-

---

131. In retrospect, cynics might argue that the United States was engaging in bait-and-switch: promising not to expand NATO only to reverse course afterward. I address this argument below.

132. “President’s Intervention on the Transformation of the North Atlantic Alliance,” July 1990, folder “NATO: London Summit—July 1990,” box CF01526, Lowenkron Files, GBPL; and James Baker, “Message from Secretary Baker to FONMIN Shevardnadze,” July 12, 1990, folder “London Summit July 1990,” box 901/CF01646, Gordon Files, GBPL.

133. Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, pp. 331–332; and Christopher Mallaby to Douglas Hurd, “My Telno 837: Kohl’s Visit to Moscow,” July 12, 1990, in Salmon, Hamilton and Twigge, *Documents on British Policy Overseas*, series 3, Vol. 7, doc. 215.

134. Sarotte, 1989, pp. 177–184.

135. Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence,” pp. 132–133; and Von Plato, *The End of the Cold War?* pp. 291–300.

136. Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, “German Unification: Soviet Draft Settlement Document,” September 4, 1990, file “German Reunification [1],” box CF01414, Hutchings Files, GBPL; and “Secretary’s Letter to Genscher: Bilateral Issues,” September 5, 1990, folder “Germany, Federal Republic of—Correspondence [1],” box CF01413, Hutchings Files, GBPL. Thanks go to Bob Hutchings for clarifying the September–October arrangements.

grated and mutually acceptable post–Cold War Europe that Gorbachev consented to German reunification within NATO. The United States did not formally commit to forgo NATO expansion, but its efforts throughout 1990 to engage the Soviet Union implied the existence of a non-expansion deal; as Gorbachev subsequently noted, assurances against NATO expansion were part of the “spirit” of the 1990 debates.<sup>137</sup> Ultimately, if Europe was to be linked by a new set of security institutions while NATO was militarily constrained and had an increasingly political focus, then formal non-expansion guarantees were superfluous. The structure of the deal would suffice: promises of new institutions, a transformed NATO, and an alliance with a circumscribed role in the former GDR suggested that NATO expansion was off the table.

### *Caveat Emptor: Private Signs of U.S. Ambitions*

There is growing evidence that the United States was insincere when offering the Soviet Union informal assurances against NATO expansion. As Sarotte first observed, declassified materials from U.S. archives suggest that U.S. policymakers used the diplomacy of German reunification to strengthen the United States’ position in Europe after the Cold War.<sup>138</sup> Yet, whereas Sarotte implies that the effort to expand the United States’ presence in Europe began only in late February or March 1990, a review of the James Baker Papers, materials in the National Security Archive, and documents released by the George Bush Library since the late 2000s suggest that the impetus for an expanded U.S. footprint—especially into Eastern Europe—began closer to the turn of 1989–90.<sup>139</sup>

#### THE FALSE PROMISE OF ACCOMMODATION

The United States’ effort to maximize its influence reflected the Bush administration’s general strategy for what it thought the United States should do in response to the collapse of Soviet power; it did not reflect a fully articulated plan of action.<sup>140</sup> Nevertheless, U.S. policies were structured to block Soviet influence over German reunification while still giving the appearance of accommodating Soviet concerns. Under these circumstances, Soviet troops would be gone from Central and Eastern Europe, Soviet influence would be reduced,

---

137. Kórshunov, “Mikhail Gorbachev.”

138. Sarotte, “Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence,” pp. 118, 135.

139. *Ibid.*, p. 118; and Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?” p. 137.

140. Shifrinson, “Falling Giants,” chap. 3.

and the Soviet Union would be in no position to challenge U.S. policies. The United States could then decide whether to support NATO enlargement while enjoying outside influence within NATO itself.<sup>141</sup> Put simply, U.S. policymakers intended that the results of German reunification would give the United States a free hand by consolidating a reunified Germany—the great prize of Cold War Europe—within NATO, and blocking any deal that would foreclose American options in Europe’s new strategic landscape. As Bush observed when meeting the West German leadership at Camp David on February 24–25, 1990, “[T]he Soviets are not in a position to dictate Germany’s relationship with NATO. What worries me is talk that Germany must not stay in NATO. To hell with that! We prevailed and they didn’t. We can’t let the Soviets clutch victory from the jaws of defeat.”<sup>142</sup>

Contrary to what U.S. officials told their Soviet interlocutors, the Bush administration privately looked to use the collapse of Soviet power in Central-Eastern Europe to enhance U.S. preeminence on the continent.<sup>143</sup> This policy, moreover, appeared to make strategic sense at a time when no one expected the Soviet Union to disintegrate and U.S. planners had to prepare for a world in which the Soviet Union might remain the largest military threat in Europe.<sup>144</sup> Even before meeting the West German leadership at Camp David in late February 1990, Baker was ebullient over the prospect of reunifying Germany within NATO, noting in the margins of a briefing paper that, relative to the concessions the United States and West Germany would have to offer, “you haven’t seen a leveraged buyout until you’ve seen this one!”<sup>145</sup> The key to this end, as the paper elaborated, was structuring the diplomatic process to create the appearance of U.S. attentiveness to Soviet interests, but actually avoiding a Soviet “veto” and giving Gorbachev “little real control” over the terms of German reunification.<sup>146</sup> The objective was to ensure Soviet acquiescence to a reunified Germany within NATO and thus maintain U.S. involve-

---

141. By 1992, senior U.S. officials were publicly discussing the merits of NATO enlargement. See James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether but When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institutions Press, 1999), p. 18.

142. Quoted in Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, p. 253.

143. Prior to 1990, the United States was interested in maximizing power at the Soviet Union’s expense but feared the dangers of trying to overturn the European status quo, leading it to pursue a more cautious strategy. See Shiffrinson, “Falling Giants,” chap. 3; and Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, “The Malta Summit and U.S.-Soviet Relations: Testing the Waters amidst Stormy Seas,” Cold War International History Project e-Dossier No. 40 (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, July 2013), <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-malta-summit-and-us-soviet-relations-testing-the-waters-amidst-stormy-seas>.

144. Scowcroft, “Points to Be Made for Meetings with FRG Chancellor Helmut Kohl.”

145. [no author listed; appears to be Robert Zoellick], “Two Plus Four.”

146. *Ibid.* See also Rice, “Preparing for the German Peace Conference.”

ment in Europe through the alliance.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, Scowcroft wrote to Bush before the May–June 1990 Washington Summit that the United States needed to underline to Gorbachev the “critical link” between “a forthcoming Soviet foreign policy—particularly regarding Germany—and further improvements in U.S.-Soviet relations.”<sup>148</sup> The senior-most U.S. leaders, in other words, were focused on garnering the strategic advantages of moving a reunified Germany into a U.S.-dominated alliance, and were even willing to threaten the overall state of U.S.-Soviet relations in support of this objective.

Reflecting this thinking, a State Department official could quip in March 1990 that the Two-Plus-Four negotiations represented a “two by four,” because they offered “a lever to insert a unified Germany in NATO whether the Soviets like it or not.” Assuming that the United States began reaching out to other former Soviet clients in Eastern Europe while Soviet military retrenchment continued, the United States could then see “the outlines of the new Europe, with Germany inside NATO [. . .] and a revived ‘active buffer’ between the Germans and the Russians.”<sup>149</sup> The United States was therefore not going to accommodate the Soviet Union so much as take advantage of the opportunity to position itself for achieving maximum leverage in post-Cold War Europe. Already in late December 1989, Scowcroft was advising Bush that the United States was at a “strategic crossroads” and would either “find a way to keep up with the intensifying pace of diplomatic interaction” in Europe or find itself excluded from continental politics. Central to resolving this dilemma was ensuring that a reunified Germany maintained its ties to NATO while moving into Eastern Europe’s “power vacuum” to facilitate “a much more robust and a constructive U.S. role in the center of Europe.”<sup>150</sup> NSC staffers Robert Hutchings and Robert Blackwill elaborated on this perspective in mid-January 1990, writing to Scowcroft that German reunification and an expanded U.S. presence in Europe were mutually reinforcing.

The United States needs to stand between Germany and Russia in central Europe. If and as our military presence recedes, we will need to find ways of replacing it with a much greater political, diplomatic, cultural, and commercial presence.

A strong U.S. presence in Eastern Europe will also be an important means of

---

147. Interagency paper on Two-Plus-Four enclosed with Robert Blackwill to Brent Scowcroft, “State Department Papers on the Two Plus Four Talks,” February 23, 1990, folder “German Reunification 11/89–6/90 [1],” box CF00182, Blackwill Files, GBPL; Rice, “Preparing for the German Peace Conference”; and Scowcroft, “Meetings with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl.”

148. Brent Scowcroft to the President, “Your Meeting with Gorbachev,” n.d. [content indicates it was developed for the Washington Summit], folder “POTUS Mtg w/Gorbachev May–June 1990 [1 of 2],” box CF01308, Burns Files, GBPL. Thanks to Flavia Gasparri for this document.

149. Harvey Sicherman to Robert Zoellick and Dennis Ross, “Our European Strategy: Next Steps,” March 12, 1990, folder 14, box 176, Baker Papers, SMML.

150. Scowcroft, “U.S. Diplomacy for the New Europe.”

shaping the process, now seemingly irreversible, of German reunification. By increasing our own influence in Eastern Europe, we can better manage an eastward drift in FRG [Federal Republic of Germany] policy and better position ourselves to affect the future of a reunified Germany.

Finally, Eastern Europe is a key to strengthening our future position in Europe as a whole. Our ability to maintain a strong political consensus in the Alliance and to develop a partnership with the EC [European Community] will depend importantly on our playing a major role in Eastern Europe.<sup>151</sup>

#### REINFORCING NATO AND DEBATING ENLARGEMENT

Against this backdrop, calls from East European leaders starting in the winter of 1990 for a NATO presence in the region intersected with the United States' interest in deepening its involvement in post-Cold War Europe. In a late February 1990 meeting in Budapest, for example, Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger heard from Hungary's foreign minister "that a new NATO could provide a political umbrella for Central Europe"; similar calls from Poland followed shortly thereafter.<sup>152</sup> By mid-March, the United States' interest in Eastern Europe and Eastern Europe's interest in NATO started to overlap, as the United States began thinking of NATO as the vehicle through which it might "organize" Eastern Europe.<sup>153</sup> In July, Baker himself acknowledged the possibility of NATO's eastward expansion, arguing that a revamped CSCE would provide a "'half-way house' for governments who want out of the Warsaw Pact [. . .] but can't join NATO and EC (yet)."<sup>154</sup> Given that U.S. policymakers were simultaneously promising to emphasize NATO's political nature so as to render NATO acceptable to the Soviet Union, Baker's comment suggests the dual nature of U.S. strategy.<sup>155</sup>

Other U.S. positions support this assessment of the administration's two-pronged approach. For example, even as Bush and Baker suggested in the spring of 1990 that the CSCE would provide a way of overcoming Cold War divisions,<sup>156</sup> State Department officials maintained in June that "CSCE must

---

151. Robert Hutchings to Brent Scowcroft, "U.S. Policy in Eastern Europe in 1990," January 10, 1990, folder "Soviet Power Collapse in Eastern Europe (December 1989–January 1990)," box 91125, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.

152. Lawrence Eagleburger, "Impressions from Hungary, Poland, Austria, and Yugoslavia," March 1, 1990, folder "Soviet Power Collapse in Eastern Europe (February–March 1990)," box 91125, Scowcroft Files, GBPL; Sarotte, 1989, p. 140; and Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door*, p. 13.

153. Sicherman, "Our European Strategy"; and Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence," pp. 118–119.

154. James Baker, "JAB Notes from 7/4–5/90 G-24 Ministerial Mtg., Brussels, Belgium & 7/5–6/90 Economic Summit, London, UK: CSCE," July 1990, folder 3, box 109, Baker Papers, SMML.

155. Also informative is Baker's press conference on June 4, 1990, in which he refused to disavow the possibility that NATO would become an "all European" security institution. See James Baker, "Press Briefing by James Baker Enroute ANDREWS AFB to Shannon, Ireland," June 4, 1990, box 163, folder 16, Baker Papers, SMML.

156. "Memcon from 6/22/90 mtg w/USSR FM Shevardnadze, Berlin, FRG"; and Baker, "JAB

complement NATO, not replace it.”<sup>157</sup> Likewise, Baker privately cautioned Bush, Scowcroft, and other senior policymakers in July that the “real risk to NATO is CSCE”;<sup>158</sup> U.S. support for transforming CSCE into a powerful institution was correspondingly lukewarm.<sup>159</sup> By the time Germany officially reunified in October 1990, U.S. efforts to reinforce NATO dominance and limit the CSCE’s influence had crystallized. On October 5, an interagency review concluded that “the key U.S. interest is to ensure that NATO remains the central pillar of Europe’s security architecture.”<sup>160</sup> And on October 9, senior NSC officials argued that NATO needed to be strengthened to prevent European attention from shifting to the CSCE while ensuring that NATO remained the “central institution in providing for Europe’s defense” and managing “East-West security policy.”<sup>161</sup>

Meanwhile, NATO’s eastward expansion increasingly became part of discussions of U.S. options in Europe. By late October 1990, officials from the NSC, State Department, intelligence community, and Defense Department were asking: “Should the United States and NATO now signal to the new democracies of Eastern Europe NATO’s readiness to contemplate their future membership?”<sup>162</sup> Although U.S. policymakers at the time decided against expanding NATO, the State Department Policy Planning Staff and the Office of the Secretary of Defense still sought to keep NATO’s “door ajar and not give the East Europeans the impression that NATO is forever a closed club.”<sup>163</sup> Even those opposed to NATO expansion at that moment acknowledged that U.S. policy might change, and they agreed to reserve all American options “as

---

Notes from 7/4–5/90 G-24 Ministerial Mtg., Brussels, Belgium & 7/5–6/90 Economic Summit, London, UK: CSCE.”

157. [No author], “NATO Summit: CSCE Proposals,” June 28, 1990, file “NATO Summit—Kennebunkport—July 1990,” box CF01646, Gordon Files, GBPL (emphasis in the original).

158. “Notes from Jim Cicconi re: 7/3/90 pre-NATO Summit briefing at Kennebunkport.”

159. In contrast, Baker told Soviet officials that the CSCE “can serve as a pan-European security structure without supplanting NATO.” Hence, whereas U.S. strategists intended CSCE to be a second-tier organization, presentation of the U.S. position suggested that NATO and CSCE would be complements. See “Memcon from 6/22/90 mtg w/USSR FM Shevardnadze, Berlin, FRG.”

160. [No author], “Enhancing NATO’s Political Role in Support of Security,” October 5, 1990, folder “NATO—Strategy [6],” box CF00293, Wilson Files, GBPL.

161. Philip Zelikow and Adrian Basora to Brent Scowcroft, “Objectives for Our Strategic Dialogue with the French,” October 9, 1990, folder “File 148 NATO Strategy Review #2 [1],” box CF01468, Zelikow Files, GBPL; and David Gompert to Brent Scowcroft, “Thoughts on the Future of the Alliance,” October 9, 1990, folder “File 148 NATO Strategy Review #2 [1],” box CF01468, Zelikow Files, GBPL.

162. David Gompert to Reginald Bartholomew et al., “Agenda for the Meeting of the European Strategy Steering Group on Monday, October 29, 3:00–5:00 PM,” October 26, 1990, folder “File 148 NATO Strategy Review #2 [3],” box CF01468, Zelikow Files, GBPL.

163. Philip Zelikow to Robert Gates, “Your Meeting of the European Strategy Steering Group, on Monday, October 29, from 3:00 to 5:00 pm,” October 26, 1990, folder “NATO—Strategy [4],” box CF00293, Wilson Files, GBPL.



the political situation in Europe evolves.”<sup>164</sup> Considering that the officials most interested in exploring NATO expansion were among the closest advisers to decisionmakers such as Secretary of State Baker and Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, these discussions are particularly revealing:<sup>165</sup> not only was NATO expansion under consideration, but policymakers with access to the highest levels of U.S. strategic decisionmakers were seeking to examine the issue further. Thus, whereas U.S.-Soviet bargaining throughout 1990 was meant to convince the Soviets that the United States would not expand NATO en route to creating a cooperative Europe, the October 1990 discussions show that the United States was already loosening the non-expansion pledge by holding NATO expansion hostage to (1) Soviet behavior, and (2) debates within the U.S. government over U.S. interests. Distinct from what the United States told the Soviet Union, non-expansion was not sacrosanct; under certain circumstances, the United States would consider enlarging NATO.

#### U.S. DOMINANCE AND THE DIPLOMACY OF 1990

To be clear, there is no evidence that the United States was actively planning to expand NATO into Eastern Europe in 1990, and it is debatable whether policymakers in Washington would have reinforced the preeminence of the United States at unlimited cost to U.S.-Soviet relations.<sup>166</sup> Still, the available evidence suggests a sharp disjuncture between what the United States told the Soviet Union and what U.S. policymakers privately intended. For Soviet and other external audiences, U.S. policymakers depicted a world in which the United States would forgo NATO expansion and craft a mutually acceptable European order. Privately, however, U.S. policymakers sought to expand the United States’ presence in Central-Eastern Europe; they discounted the importance of the cooperative and pan-European security structures presented to the Soviet Union; and they opposed arrangements that would foreclose future U.S. op-

164. Ibid.

165. Ibid. The report notes that “OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] and State’s Policy Planning Staff (and possibly Zoellick)” were in favor of keeping NATO’s door “ajar,” whereas career State Department officials and NSC members were opposed. For the importance of OSD officials, the Policy Planning Staff, and Zoellick to United States policy at the time, see Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, p. 23; and “Richard Cheney interview, March 16–17, 2000, Dallas, Texas” (Charlottesville: George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia), pp. 40, 76–80, [http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp\\_2000\\_0316\\_cheney.pdf](http://web1.millercenter.org/poh/transcripts/ohp_2000_0316_cheney.pdf).

166. Even as the United States helped reunify Germany and prepared for possible NATO expansion, U.S. leaders were concerned with Gorbachev’s political survival. If forced to choose between helping Gorbachev stay in office or reinforcing U.S. preeminence, it is debatable which option the United States would have pursued. For an appreciation of the dilemma, see Brent Scowcroft to the President, “Turmoil in the Soviet Union and U.S. Policy” August 18, 1990, folder “USSR Collapse: U.S.-Soviet Relations thru 1991 (August 1990),” box 91118, Scowcroft Files, GBPL.

tions in Europe. As part of this effort, the United States was also actively considering expanding NATO despite assurances to the contrary.

Overall, and as State Department Counselor Robert Zoellick described in June 1990, U.S. policy was designed to “give an impression of movement” on European security and to offer Gorbachev “some things to make him more comfortable w[ith] the process” of German reunification.<sup>167</sup> Meaningfully limiting NATO’s future, however, was not the real goal. Rhetoric and substance diverged as the United States suggested that it would respond to Soviet concerns, yet took practical steps to reinforce U.S. dominance in Europe. Appropriately, Bush had previewed this dual approach early on, telling Kohl at Camp David: “We are going to win the game, but we must be clever while we are doing it.”<sup>168</sup> Even as diplomatic talks with the Soviet Union proceeded, the United States was moving to circumvent many of the promises made during the 1990 negotiations.

### *A Broken Promise*

Contrary to the claims of many policymakers and analysts, there is significant evidence that Russian assertions of a “broken promise” regarding NATO expansion have merit.<sup>169</sup> Applying insights from international relations theory to both new and preexisting evidence on the 1990 negotiations suggests that Russian leaders are essentially correct: NATO expansion violated the *quid pro quo* at the heart of the diplomacy that culminated in German reunification within NATO.<sup>170</sup> There was no written agreement precluding NATO expansion, but non-expansion guarantees were still advanced in 1990, only to be overturned.

Scholars and policymakers versed in realist theory and the practice of *realpolitik* might argue that U.S. policy is unsurprising. Ultimately, international politics take place in a competitive realm in which diplomatic deals are often most durable when backed by the threat of force.<sup>171</sup> The Cold War itself showcased this issue. For forty-five years, the United States and the Soviet

---

167. “Notes from Jim Cicconi re: 7/3/90 pre-NATO Summit briefing at Kennebunkport.”

168. Memcon, “Meeting with Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany.”

169. See, *inter alia*, Baker quoted in Gordon, “Anatomy of a Misunderstanding”; Zelikow, “NATO Expansion Wasn’t Ruled Out”; Pifer, “Did NATO Promise Not to Enlarge?”; NATO, “Russia’s Accusations”; Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia”; Sarotte, “A Broken Promise?”; and Sarotte, “Not One Inch Eastward?”

170. Ironically, this matches more with what analysts without access to declassified materials occasionally claimed in the 1990s than with what later studies argue. See McGwire, “NATO Expansion,” p. 26.

171. Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (Basingstoke, U.K.: Macmillan, 1988).

Union sought to expand at the other's expense, constrained largely by the punishment each could inflict on the other.<sup>172</sup> Faced with the decline of Soviet power in 1989–90, Soviet policymakers could have expected the United States to seek a Soviet retreat on terms that would give the United States a free hand in Europe. Such a victory would not only allow the United States to shape the region to suit U.S. objectives, but would enable U.S. policymakers to accommodate or disregard Soviet concerns as American interests dictated. This changed distribution of power meant that if the United States decided to expand NATO, the Soviet Union would have great difficulty preventing it.<sup>173</sup>

At the same time, however, Western scholars and policymakers should not be surprised that contemporary Russian leaders resent the United States' post-Cold War efforts and are willing to prevent further NATO expansion—by force, if necessary. Just as the United States' relatively strong position in the 1990s and 2000s allowed U.S. officials to sidestep the assurances given the Soviet Union in 1990, Russia currently has more options than it did in the past to oppose Western efforts in Ukraine and other areas to which NATO is considering expanding.<sup>174</sup> More important, just because a state has the capacity to revise a prior arrangement does not make it advantageous to do so. Not only can states often improve their security by cooperating with one another rather than competing, but violating diplomatic arrangements today can make states compete more intensely in the future.<sup>175</sup> Hence, even if some Russian revisionism was inevitable as Russia began its slow recovery after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, the broken non-expansion arrangement likely makes Russia compete harder, while reducing the likelihood that Russian leaders will trust Western diplomatic initiatives.

### Conclusion

This article has made two main claims. First, during the diplomacy surrounding German reunification in 1990, the United States repeatedly offered the Soviet Union informal assurances against NATO's future expansion into Eastern Europe. In addition to explicit discussion of a NATO non-expansion

---

172. Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*.

173. There is some evidence that Gorbachev eventually realized what had happened. He told Kohl in September 1990 that he felt "like he had fallen into a trap." See Sarotte, 1989, p. 191.

174. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault"; and Lawrence Freedman, "Ukraine and the Art of Crisis Management," *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (May 2014), pp. 7–42.

175. Charles L. Glaser, "Realists as Optimists: Cooperation as Self-Help," *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Winter 1994/95), pp. 50–90; and Robert F. Trager, "Long-Term Consequences of Aggressive Diplomacy: European Relations after Austrian Crimean War Threats," *Security Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (May 2012), pp. 232–265.

pledge in February 1990, assurances against NATO enlargement were epitomized and encapsulated in later offers to give East Germany special military status in NATO, to construct and integrate the Soviet Union into new European security institutions, and to generally recognize Soviet interests in Eastern Europe. Because prior studies (1) focus heavily on developments in February 1990 alone, and (2) equate an international promise with the formal deals reached between states, they miss the central role that an informal NATO non-expansion pledge played throughout the 1990 diplomacy around German reunification.

Second, the United States privately entertained greater ambitions for dominating post-Cold War Europe than many former policymakers and scholars have detailed. Around the turn of 1989–90, U.S. policymakers began to actively explore ways of projecting U.S. power and influence into Eastern Europe, and soon focused on NATO as the vehicle to achieve this end. Thus, U.S. policymakers worked to ensure that the diplomatic deals around German reunification substantively kept open U.S. and NATO options in post-Cold War Europe. The result was a bifurcated strategy, as the United States presented assurances to the Soviet Union that were meant to look powerful, while the United States maneuvered to dominate post-Cold War Europe.

Understanding the dual nature of U.S. policy in 1990 and the resulting Russian antipathy has implications for history, theory, and policy. First, the revised history of the diplomacy of German reunification highlights the need for further research into U.S.-Soviet diplomacy at the end of the Cold War. Numerous analysts consider the diplomacy of German reunification indicative of broader U.S.-Soviet cooperation at Cold War's end.<sup>176</sup> This study shows, however, that the cooperation narrative has empirical problems: even as the United States pledged to address Soviet security concerns, it staked out self-interested positions for post-Cold War Europe. Key elements of the Cold War settlement—the fate of Germany and NATO—were thus subject to significantly more competition and maximization of U.S. power than is often appreciated.

Second, the case calls for additional research into the sources of international cooperation and competition. As noted, U.S.-Soviet relations at the end of the Cold War are often held up by international relations theorists as a leading example of great power cooperation despite past mistrust. Scholars have attributed burgeoning U.S.-Soviet cooperation to several sources, including Soviet efforts at reassuring the United States by engaging in costly arms reduc-

---

176. Ikenberry, *After Victory*, chap. 7; Bennett, "Trust Bursting Out All Over"; and Robert Zoellick, "Two Plus Four: The Lessons of German Unification," *National Interest*, Fall 2000, p. 19.

tions;<sup>177</sup> growing economic incentives to reduce U.S.-Soviet competition;<sup>178</sup> diminished U.S. threat perceptions vis-à-vis the Soviet Union owing to Soviet domestic reforms;<sup>179</sup> and the restraining effect of Western institutions on U.S. foreign policy.<sup>180</sup> On the core issue of German reunification and NATO's future, however, the case shows that the United States exploited Soviet weaknesses despite presenting a cooperative façade. As a result, it suggests that international cooperation may be difficult to obtain, even when a host of theories predict that cooperation should occur. Given the difficulties these theories face in this keystone case, future work is necessary to reexamine whether and why cooperation is possible in world politics.

Finally, this article highlights the need to reconsider U.S.-Russian relations in the post-Cold War era. There are numerous reasons to condemn Russian behavior in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as against states in Eastern Europe, but Russia's leaders may be telling the truth when they claim that Russian actions are driven by mistrust. This possibility has largely been obscured by discussion of whether an explicit, codified deal constrained NATO's future. Because absence of a deal is not evidence that a deal was absent, NATO's eastward march may have left Russia feeling isolated by upending the informal arrangement of 1990. Ironically, the State Department recognized this risk as early as October 1990, arguing against NATO expansion on the grounds that "we are not in a position to guarantee the security of these countries [ . . . ] and do not wish in any case to organize an anti-Soviet coalition whose frontier is the Soviet border. Such a coalition would be perceived very negatively by the Soviets and could lead to a reversal of current positive trends in Eastern Europe and the USSR."<sup>181</sup>

As a result, calls to deter Russia by reinforcing NATO's eastern presence and leaving NATO's door open to states including Georgia and Ukraine are likely to deepen Russian insecurity.<sup>182</sup> In contrast, efforts to reassure Russia may produce a more stable U.S.-Russian relationship. Of course, Russia's deep sense of

177. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, chap. 8.

178. Dale C. Copeland, "Trade Expectations and the Outbreak of Peace: Détente 1970–1974 and the End of the Cold War 1985–1991," *Security Studies*, Vol. 9, Nos. 1–2 (Autumn/Winter 1999), esp. pp. 46–56.

179. Mark L. Haas, "The United States and the End of the Cold War: Reactions to Shifts in Soviet Power, Policies, or Domestic Politics?" *International Organization*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 145–179.

180. Ikenberry, *After Victory*, chap. 7.

181. State Department, "NATO's Future Political Track of the Strategy Review: Questions to Ask Ourselves," October 22, 1990, box CF00293, folder "NATO—Strategy [5]," Wilson Files, GBPL.

182. Eric Schmitt and Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Is Poised to Put Heavy Weapons in Eastern Europe," *New York Times*, June 13, 2015; "Ukraine Sets Sights on Joining NATO," Associated Press, April 9, 2015; and "Bolstering a Vulnerable Russian Neighbor: Georgia Is Making a Case for NATO Membership," editorial, *New York Times*, September 11, 2014.

betrayal means that the optimal moment for reassurance may have lapsed. Nevertheless, reassurance may still be preferable, as it holds the potential to (1) transform perceptions of the United States, (2) empower moderates among Russian policymakers, and (3) avoid steps that would continue justifying Russian aggression. As other analysts suggest, the key is to find ways of forgoing additional NATO expansion and, unlike in 1990, prevent circumvention.<sup>183</sup> One approach might be to give a more prominent decisionmaking role to NATO members that are less enthusiastic than the United States about buttressing or expanding NATO's East European presence and forswearing military deployments, such as those announced in early 2016, to Eastern Europe.<sup>184</sup> Also, U.S. and allied policymakers should refrain from treating Russian accusations of a broken non-expansion pledge as deceptive. The United States therefore faces a dual task in improving U.S.-Russian relations: not only must it accept its role in overturning the 1990 guarantees, but the legacy of having done so means that policymakers must overcome Russian mistrust and worries that the United States will reverse course yet again.<sup>185</sup>

---

183. Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault"; and Henry Kissinger, "To Settle the Ukraine Crisis, Start at the End," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2014.

184. Germany, for instance, has been more reluctant than the United States to confront Russia over Ukraine. See Paul Belkin, Derek E. Mix, and Steven Woehrel, "NATO: Response to the Crisis in Ukraine and Security Concerns in Central and Eastern Europe" (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, July 31, 2014), p. 4. On military deployments, see Rick Lyman, "Eastern Europe Cautiously Welcomes Larger U.S. Military Presence," *New York Times*, February 2, 2016.

185. Policymakers such as Michael McFaul argue in part that because the issue of NATO expansion did not arise in U.S.-Russian negotiations before the Ukraine crisis, Russian actions cannot be explained by NATO expansion. See McFaul, "Moscow's Choice." This article challenges such reasoning: Russian leaders might still have harbored suspicions over U.S./NATO ambitions because of the legacy of the broken NATO non-expansion pledge.