



Casus Belli: NATO Enlargement to Eastern Europe as a Justification for Russian Aggression to Ukraine

Claudio Catalano

Introduction

Russian narrative claims that the Ukraine crisis stemmed from NATO enlargement to Russia's neighbouring countries. In a cold war-like mindset, Russian *élites* perceive NATO and the European Union (EU), but also the G7 - after Russia was excluded from the G8 as a result of the 2014 Ukraine crisis - as the "West" block opposed to Russia. Therefore, the West broke a promise (Sarotte 2014: 90) not to expand NATO and the EU in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE).

This point was raised for the first time in 1993 by President Boris Yeltsin, who stated that enlarging NATO was not in the "spirit of the Two-plus-Four Treaty" (Sarotte 2021: 168). At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, President Vladimir Putin stated the "broken promise" assumption, based on early 1990s Western assurances not to expand NATO. Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, chairing UN Security Council in April 2023 dredged up both NATO's provocations and "lies" rhetoric (Lavrov 2023).

It is interesting to note that the "broken promise" or even the idea of NATO expansion as a provocation to Russia has sowed the seeds in Western political thought (Lough 2021). An almost centenary George F. Kennan opposed in 1997 to NATO enlargement considering it an unnecessary provocation to the Russians, echoing positions like those of today's Putin's entourage. In the late 1990s respected intellectuals such as Thomas Friedman shared similar positions.

Every time, there are tensions with Russia this topic resurfaces. Michael MccGwire (1998) wrote an article on "top-level assurances" against NATO enlargement republished after ten years in 2008. By that time, the official documents were released proving the thesis was wrong (Kramer 2009: 53-54; Shifrinson 2016: 8).

The 2022 debate was inaugurated by Bernie Sanders' Congressional speech on the eve of Russian aggression to Ukraine, soon joined by Mearsheimer's (2022) justification of Russian actions in Ukraine, who had already accused Clinton administration of deceiving the Soviets (Mearsheimer 2014: 83). On the other hand, former US president, Bill Clinton (2022), wrote a testimony of 1990s enlargement policy by stating that to avoid future disputes, rather than defining NATO boundaries, it was more important that Russia remained a democracy.

More interestingly, in NATO-Russia framework, before it was suspended for Ukraine aggression, Putin proposed on 17 December 2021 a security agreement that NATO “arrogantly rejected” according to Lavrov (2023). But NATO’s rejection reciprocated the “broken promise”: “For more than 30 years NATO has worked to build a partnership with Russia” starting with 1990 London summit. “Yet Russia has broken the trust at the core of our cooperation and challenged the fundamental principles of the global and Euro-Atlantic security architecture” (*El País* 2022).

To fact-check these assumptions, this article tries to analyse Russian strategic thinking, the negotiations on German reunification and the Two-plus-Four Treaty, the 1997 NATO-Russia agreement as the only valid agreement on the matter.

1. Russian Strategic Thinking and NATO Expansion

Putin (2007) stated this position at the 43rd Munich Security Conference:

NATO has put its frontline forces on our borders, and we continue to strictly fulfil the treaty obligations and do not react to these actions (..) NATO expansion (..) represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust (..) against whom is this expansion intended? And what happened to the assurances our western partners made after the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact? Where are those declarations today?

He based this assumption by misquoting a statement by then NATO Secretary General, Manfred Wörner (1990): “The very fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee”. Actually, Wörner was focusing on NATO troops in East Germany after reunification, and not on CEE countries.

A Munich-like position on NATO expansion as “a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust” was officially adopted in February 2010 in the Russian Military Doctrine that regards the “global NATO” concept and the initiative of moving NATO “closer to the borders of the Russian Federation” as the first of the main external military dangers.

The “enemy at the gates” feeling is caused by “the deployment (build up) of troop contingents of foreign states (groups of states) on the territories of states contiguous with the Russian Federation and its allies and also in adjacent waters”.

In a bilateral meeting on 6 February 2010 with NATO secretary general, Rasmussen, Lavrov clarified that risks were caused not by NATO itself but by the global NATO’s: “Desire to give the military potential of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization global functions carried out in violation of the standards of international law, to move the military infrastructure of NATO member states to Russia’s borders including by expanding the bloc” (Interfax 2010).

On the other hand, the 2010 Doctrine also states that one of the main objectives of Russia in containing and preventing military conflicts is the development of relations with the EU and NATO (Interfax 2010).

The updated Russian Military Doctrine was published on 26 December 2014, after the Ukrainian Parliament had renounced to neutral status on 23 December intending to apply for NATO membership. The 2014 Doctrine again names NATO expansion as the key military threat among key external risks for Russia, including foreign force deployments close to Russia, which presumably refers to deployment of NATO aircraft in the Baltic States, Ballistic Missiles Defence (BMD) assets in Romania, and naval ships in the Black Sea (Trenin 2014). But it still retains a reference to collaboration with the United States or NATO, that are no longer a tool for collective security, but just “equal partners”.

Sinovets and Renz (2015: 11-12) argue that:

The 2014 Doctrine gives an impression of *déjà-vu*, and harks back to the great power doctrines of the past. In the manner of the Monroe doctrine, it sends Western powers the message that Russia’s neighbourhood should be regarded as its sphere of influence, which Moscow is ready to defend, if necessary by all means. The implicit concern in the doctrine over the threat to Kremlin-friendly regimes in neighbouring states is like a modern version of the Brezhnev doctrine, where direct military intervention is camouflaged by hybrid war-type activity.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) of the Russian Federation published in 2015 still retained the project of a partnership with the United States on shared interests and cooperation with the EU and its Member States, and with NATO focusing on enhancing security in the Euro-Atlantic region (Cooper 2021; Bilanishvili 2021).

The latest NSS adopted on 2 July 2021 confirms NATO as a threat to Russia, and any prospect of a partnership or cooperation with the United States or EU Member States quoted in the previous 2010 and 2014 Doctrines or 2015 NSS have disappeared. This may be interpreted as an attempt to show the West the Russian policy of so-called “Red Lines” as despite the extremely tense situation between the parties because of the Ukrainian crisis, Russia is not considering making any concessions (Bilanishvili 2021: 3).

As a matter of fact, partnership or cooperation with the West have been replaced by a more transactional view of international relations (Cooper 2021). In this view, US and EU sanctions against Russia are seen as a way to put political and economic pressure against Russia and its partners to gain advantage for the West over them (Bilanishvili 2021: 3).

With the 2021 NSS, strategy, it is now fully established in Russian elites the idea that Western intervention in Russia’s neighbourhood or “sphere of influence” could, in certain circumstances, be interpreted by Russia as “an existential threat to Russian interests and security” (Leszczenko 2021: 24; Sinovets, Renz 2015: 11).

This sphere also includes the concept of “cultural sovereignty” that is threatened by the “westernization” (Leszczenko 2021: 23).

Though 2015 NSS already mentioned “spiritual and moral values”, the 2021 NSS widens the issue by asserting that “traditional Russian spiritual, moral and cultural-historical values are under active attack by the U.S. and its allies, as well as by transnational corporations, foreign non-profit, non-governmental, religious, extremist and terrorist organizations” (Bilanishvili 2021: 5; Galeotti 2021).

As Galeotti (2021) put it, the 2021 NSS:

Does mark the progressive shift in the Kremlin's priorities towards paranoia and a worldview that regards not just foreign countries as a threat, but the very processes reshaping the modern world.

The "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity" has been well described by George F. Kennan (1946) as the Russian élites' "fear of more competent, more powerful, more highly organized societies" of the West:

Russian rulers have invariably sensed that their rule was relatively archaic in form fragile and artificial in its psychological foundation, unable to stand comparison or contact with political systems of Western countries.

Kennan also speculated on the commitment to "the concept of Russia as in a state of siege, with the enemy lowering beyond the walls" as a justification for power of the Russian ruling class, that "must defend at all costs this concept of Russia's position, for without it they are themselves superfluous." (Kennan 1947: 571).

2. Western Promises

The reunification of Germany was the first test for the post-cold war order. For NATO, the expansion of Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) over German Democratic Republic (GDR) territories meant to rethink European security East of Rhine and up to Oder-Neisse Polish border. For the Soviet Union the creation of a unified Germany fully integrated in the Western bloc, would officially mark the decline of its security framework (Bianchi 2021: 12).

Therefore, to appease the Soviets, in January-February 1990 two Western foreign ministers, respectively Hans Dietrich Genscher of the FRG and George Baker of the United States, made statements against NATO expansion, that were disavowed by their respective governments.

Genscher in Tutzing on 31 January 1990 stated "that whatever happens in Warsaw Pact, there will be no expansion of NATO territory eastward, that is to say, closer to the borders of the Soviet Union." (Sarotte 2022: 48; Zelikow and Rice 2001: 174-176; Kramer 2009: 47). The speech had not been cleared by German government, and Genscher made various similar statements to trade off Soviet assent for German reunification, but this idea was not shared by Kohl government.

The rationale of "Tutzing formulation" was explained by Genscher in a meeting with British foreign secretary, Douglas Hurd. His idea was to appease Gorbachev, who opposed to any NATO eastwards influence on GDR or CEE, by delivering public general statements on NATO non-expansion, to reassure that for instance a change of government in Hungary could not allow the country to join NATO. Hurd agreed in principle (Sarotte 2014: 91-92).

A few days before, Genscher discussed with Baker this issue in Washington on 2 February, and the secretary of state agreed in principle with the "Tutzing formulation" (Kramer 2009: 47). On the other hand, Baker "not one inch Eastwards" statement was meant to prevent, not to facilitate, a German-Russian trade off.

US President, George H.W. Bush, was in favour of a German reunification, because he trusted chancellor Helmut Kohl's loyalty to the Atlantic Alliance (Duroselle and Kaspi 2001: 558-559). Bush's plan was to keep a united Germany into NATO, by expanding NATO to GDR¹ (Sarotte 2022: 105).

Kohl agreed to Bush's proposal that Germany could not become a neutral State as a few German politicians suggested to please a large share of German public opinion (Duroselle and Kaspi 2001: 558-559). Only 20% of West Germans supported NATO membership for united Germany, and 1990 was election year in RFG.

On the other hand, Kohl was ready to make concessions to the Soviet Union to obtain his goal. For this reason, Bush administration feared that Kohl could cut off them from the negotiations, and bargain with Gorbachev on neutrality or even to leave NATO. They feared that Kohl might make such a move in his visit to Moscow in February 1990.

Therefore, US Secretary of State, George Baker met with Gorbachev and Shevardnadze in Moscow between 7 and 9 February to prepare the ground.

Baker expressed the "Tutzing formulation" on 8 February that a changed NATO should not move eastward, and if united Germany was in NATO no NATO forces would ever be deployed in GDR (Sarotte 2022: 55; Kramer 2009: 48).

Therefore, on 9 February, Baker met Shevardnadze by sponsoring the united Germany's full membership in a "changed NATO" framework supposed to "evolve into much more of a political one" and with "iron-clad guarantees that NATO's jurisdiction or forces would not move Eastward"² (Bianchi 2022: 13-14). These guarantees were meant to prevent a neutral Germany to acquire a military nuclear capability.

On the same day, Baker reiterated to Gorbachev the assumption that a neutral Germany did "not mean it will not be militaristic. Quite the opposite, it could very well decide to create its own nuclear potential instead of relying on American nuclear deterrent forces"³.

Baker echoed Lord Ismay's motto on NATO "to keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down" by saying that NATO was "the mechanism for securing the U.S. presence in Europe" and:

not only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries as well it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO, not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction⁴.

Baker also asked, specifying he was expecting a direct reply:

¹ *Memorandum of Conversation Bush-Thatcher of 24 November, Camp David*. George Bush Library. <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/memcons-telcons/1989-11-24--Thatcher.pdf> (accessed 30 September 2023).

² *Memorandum of Conversation between M. Gorbachev and J. Baker in Moscow*, 9 February 1990, NSA: 3, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4325679-Document-05-Memorandum-of-conversation-between>, accessed 30 September 2023.

³ *Record of Conversation between M. Gorbachev and J. Baker in Moscow (Excerpts)*, 9 February 1990, NSA: 5. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4325680-Document-06-Record-of-conversation-between>, accessed 30 September 2023.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

Supposing unification takes place, what would you prefer: a united Germany outside of NATO, absolutely independent and without American troops; or a united Germany keeping its connections with NATO, but with the guarantee that NATO's jurisprudence or troops will not spread east of the present boundary?

According to Baker's notes Gorbachev took time, referring to a decision at leadership level, but anticipated that "broadening of the NATO zone is not acceptable". Baker replied "we agree with that" and Gorbachev conceded that given the actual situation it was possible and realistic that "the presence of American troops [could] play a containing role" towards future German militarism outside of European structures⁵ (Kramer 2009: 47; Sarotte 2022: 55; Bianchi 2022: 14).

In Gorbachev's opinion this was the moment that "cleared the way for a compromise", while Baker was just testing the ground, but no written text was agreed. However, in the press conference Baker said that NATO jurisdiction would not be moved further (Sarotte 2022: 55).

According to Kramer (2009: 46), this promise was not important, as:

Gorbachev would not even have contemplated seeking an assurance about NATO expansion beyond Germany because in February 1990 that issue was not yet within his ken. Also, Gorbachev was not yet under intense domestic pressure over this issue.

Soviet aides were sceptical about Gorbachev concessions to the West, no one publicly criticised him, except for KGB chief Vladimir Kryuchkov. These negative opinions could be found in memorandums, internal documents or memoirs⁶.

After Moscow meetings, Baker informed Kohl that the Gorbachev would agree on a unified Germany tied to NATO in exchange for assurances that NATO would not expand itself further (Sarotte 2014: 92; Bianchi 2022: 14)⁷.

Nonetheless, Bush's position was that the Soviets could not decide over RFG relation with NATO. The NSC staffers also questioned "how could NATO's jurisdiction apply to only half of a country", and they drafted on Bush's behalf a note to Kohl on the eve of his visit to Moscow, that welcomed a "special military status" for GDR territories in NATO, meaning that united Germany was to be in NATO and face-saving solutions were to be found to make it easier for Gorbachev to accept this development (Sarotte 2014: 93). The term "Special military status" was first coined in a speech in Hamburg on 8 February 1990 – the day before Baker negotiations in Moscow – by Wörner, without detailing it. This was a change in US policy that implied extending FRG and NATO jurisdiction over GDR territories, although with specific military limitations (Kramer 2009: 49-50).

⁵ *Ibidem*: 8-9.

⁶ See for instance *Memorandum of Conversation between R. Gates and V. Kryuchkov in Moscow*, 9 February 1990, NSA, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4325681-Document-07-Memorandum-of-conversation-between>, accessed 30 September 2023; and the memorandum of Valentin Falin quoted in Bianchi (2022: 13, 15).

⁷ Letter from J. Baker to H. Kohl, 10 February 1990, NSA, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4325682-Document-08-Letter-from-James-Baker-to-Helmut-Kohl>, accessed 30 September 2023.

On 10 February 1990, when Kohl visited Moscow, Gorbachev stated that Soviet Union would agree “the Germans must decide for themselves what path they choose to follow”. In the secret bilateral negotiations, Gorbachev would oppose to a quick reunification and ask for a neutral united Germany. However, Kohl would insist on Gorbachev clear statement on German self-determination to achieve his goals on reunification without conditions, and Gorbachev had to convene. Nonetheless, Kohl offered a large financial help to the Soviets in return for their lack of opposition to German reunification. The financial aid was the key German concession to the Soviets, who were in the middle of an economic and social crisis. After the Germans received Soviet assent to reunification no further concessions on security issues were needed.

No bargaining on NATO expansion was made, because neither Kohl nor Gorbachev could decide for NATO. Anyway, Genscher repeated his offer on NATO non expansion to Shevarnadze. Nevertheless, when Kohl informed Genscher about the supposed deal in German self-determination he proposed a toast because they no more had to grant security concession for reunification, including NATO expansion.

However, Genscher, insisted on promising security concessions, and on 23 March 1990, in Luxembourg at a WEU meeting, he proposed that NATO and Warsaw Pact merged into one, in a single “composite of common, collective security” for Europe. Nevertheless, having won the 18 March 1990 General elections, Kohl wrote a “cease-and-desist” letter to Genscher to stop talking about it.

Moreover, meeting Baker on 2 February 1990, Genscher had suggested the “Two Plus Four” format that included the “two” German States, and the Second World War Four Powers: France, Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States. The two-plus-four format was discussed at the Ottawa summit between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries. The shift to this format meant that any items discussed at the bilateral meetings in Moscow in February would be superseded by the two-plus-four negotiations (Kramer 2009: 50-51; Sarotte 2022: 57-59).

After Ottawa summit, Baker abandoned the “not one inch Eastwards” motto, and adopted the Bush plan on a united Germany into NATO with special military status for former GDR. But the Soviet took a while to notice this shift and only by 18 April 1990, Falin noticed that Baker’s “not one inch” rhetoric had disappeared, and NATO was preparing plans with regards to GDR and Warsaw Pact countries (Kramer 2009: 50-51; Sarotte 2009: 49, 57-59, 61, 63-64, 66, 83-85).

3. The Two-plus-Four Treaty

During the negotiations on the final settlement of the status of Germany, at no point the Soviets mentioned NATO expansion to CEE countries beyond GDR (Kramer 2009: 51; Sarotte 2014: 96; Lough 2021: 29).

At the Bush-Kohl meeting at Camp David in February 1990. Bush position was unequivocal, and the Soviets could not have a say over NATO or FRG in NATO, and according to Deputy National Security Advisor (NSA), Robert Gates’ definition, the Germans had to bribe out the Soviets to obtain their assent (Sarotte 2014: 94; Sarotte

2022: 43-44). Kohl accepted the US position on the “special military status” (Kramer 2009: 51). After that meeting, Gates’ priorities were to keep Germany in NATO and avoid any trade-off between unification and denuclearisation of Germany, as the extension to East Germany of art 5 Washington Treaty should not come at the expenses of having to move nuclear weapons outside the FRG (Sarotte 2014: 97; Sarotte 2022: 77).

Moreover, the Helsinki principle, that allows all signatories to the 1975 Helsinki Final Act to choose their own military alliances, was reminded by French president, François Mitterrand in a meeting with Gorbachev on 25 May 1990 (Sarotte 2022: 88).

Bush succeeded in getting Gorbachev to confirm Helsinki principle, in Washington summit, at the end of May 1990. Gorbachev stated that Germans had their right to decide on their own on NATO, and Bush conceded that if Germany chose a different alliance, the US was to respect it. Soviet delegates Falin and Marshall Sergey Akhromeyev became angry as in their opinion Gorbachev did not understand the consequences of his concessions. In the Soviet Union, also Boris Yeltsin criticised Gorbachev deal. On 1 May 1990 Yeltsin had won elections as president of Russia, and in July left the PCUS. Bush administration understood Gorbachev power was over (Sarotte 2022: 89-91).

A press conference in the evening confirmed the trade off in favour of the West, thus FRG would renounce to ABC weapons, but there would not be US financial aid to Soviet Union.

In a visit to Russia on 15-16 July 1990, Kohl and Gorbachev agreed that Russia would allow Germany in NATO if no nuclear weapons and only German troops were to stay in GDR after Soviet troops withdrawal. Kohl also stated that Bundeswehr was to be 370.000 strong (Adomeit 2006: 17; Sarotte 2014: 96; Sarotte 2022: 96). These concessions were not what Bush administration had agreed – nuclear weapons and limitations to troops. But nor Gorbachev nor Bush would go back on these. Kohl also bribed out the Soviets with 12 Bn DM. On 3 August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and German reunification became low on US administration priorities (Sarotte 2014: 96; Lough 2021: 29; Sarotte 2022: 98, 103).

In the wake of Two-plus-four signing, Soviets also asked for dual use weapons (nuclear capable artillery or fighter bombers) to be excluded from GDR, and FRG insisted on not automatically apply 1954 status of forces agreement to GDR territory, this meant that non-German NATO troops deployment had to be agreed by German government. Until 1994, with Soviet troops staying in the former GDR territory, only German troops were to be allowed, but after Soviet withdrawal non-German NATO troops were supposed to be allowed. Bush phoned Kohl on these two issues twice on 6 and 10 September. But only on 11 September in Moscow final negotiation it was settled the dual use issue by granting that dual capabilities weapons were deployed if conventionally armed only.

The US and UK were keen on NATO crossing the Elbe-line issue, Genscher realised that this could jeopardise not only the Treaty but the reunification itself, as CEE countries were knocking on NATO doors.

Genscher negotiated with Shevardnadze, who agreed only on oral assurances to NATO deployment in GDR territory, and then bilaterally with Baker. In US-German talks, Robert Zoellick of the State Department found a solution that the article was to retain the formula agreed with the Soviet Union on non-deployment, but a “minute” was added as addendum to the Treaty specifying the meaning of deployment was to be decided by the German government, thus allowing the deployment of NATO troops. Zoellick explained later that the US needed to be able to deploy troops in East Germany if Poland was supposed to join, US troops should cross Germany to be stationed in Poland, as German reunification and NATO expansion were intertwined (Sarotte 2009: 100-104).

The “Two Plus Four Agreement” or the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany was signed in Moscow on 12 September 1990.

German Armed Forces were to be downsized from 370,000 to 345,000 personnel according to a declaration made in Vienna on 30 August 1990 at the Conventional Armed Force in Europe conference and FRG confirmed its participation to 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (art. 3). Soviet forces in Germany were to leave the country by the end of 1994 (art. 4) and they left in August 1994. Until Soviet troops were withdrawn, no non-German troops could be stationed in the Eastern territories, except for Four Powers forces in Berlin. After Soviet withdrawal, German armed forces assigned to NATO could be deployed in these *Länder* without any nuclear weapon carrier. In compliance to Wörner’s “special military status” East Germany became a nuclear-free zone for foreign armed forces (art. 5). Nothing was said on NATO expansion to CEE (Kramer 2009: 53, 55).

The Treaty had given a united Germany its independence and the right to choose alliances. FRG maintained its role in international organisations, and NATO and the EEC (in compliance with art.6), and GDR incorporated in the FRG became part of those organisations.

4. CEE Countries Request to Join NATO

United Germany maintained NATO membership, while the Soviets had lost influence over the Warsaw Pact countries. Anatoly Chernyaev, advisor to Gorbachev predicted on 4 May 1990 that Germany was “going to be in NATO. There is simply no realistic way for us to prevent this. It is inevitable” and the next step would be the “possible entry of Poland into NATO” however, what mattered was not the Oder-Neisse line or Germany and Poland in NATO, but the “nuclear balance between the Soviet Union and the USA” (Kramer 2009: 51; Sarotte 2022: 85).

Gorbachev admitted that the invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 were “errors”, so Hungarians and Czechoslovakian asked for Soviet troops to leave. On 23 January 1990, Hungarian prime minister, Miklos Némethy, obtained the promise of Soviet troops withdrawal, and Czechoslovakia was next, thus putting into question the very existence of the Warsaw Pact (Sarotte 2022: 46). On the other hand, Czechoslovakia and Poland were ambiguous about Soviet stationing in their territor-

ies. At Camp David meeting with Kohl in February 1990, Bush complained that Czech president, Vaclav Havel, wanted to have demilitarised CEE free from Soviet, but also wanted US troops out of Europe. The Poles, including Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki but except Lech Wałęsa, felt that Soviets should stay to prevent Germans to get back their former lands in Poland or violating the Oder-Neisse border line. This until a common statement by RFG and GDR parliaments confirmed the border on Oder-Neisse line, thus reassuring the Poles who renounced to hosting Soviet troops (Sarotte 2022: 79, 93).

The “security vacuum” created in CEE could be filled by CSCE or a Pan-European security organisation. Mitterrand had unenthusiastically conceived a Pan-European organisation because he was against CEE enlargement to the EEC. Havel also favoured Mitterrand’s project until the proposal failed at the Prague conference on 12 June 1991.

Quite the opposite, Kohl enthusiastically approved Poland in NATO, as he told to Party leaders on 11 June 1990: “The best thing could happen to us would be for Poland to demand NATO membership”. This would both take RFG off the frontline and ease Polish anxieties over German border. Germany opposing to NATO expansion to Poland would “destroy the alliance” (Kramer 2009: 42; Sarotte 2022: 87).

Hungarian foreign minister, Gyula Horn, asked on 1 March 1990 to US Deputy Secretary of State, Lawrence Eagleburger how NATO could provide a political umbrella for CEE, but Eagleburger downplayed it as “revolutionary”, and dictated by electoral propaganda for Hungarian elections. Polish foreign minister, Krzysztof Skubiszewski inaugurated on 21 March 1990, a series of visits by CEE countries to NATO HQ in Brussels by stating that NATO had a “stabilising effect”. Czech foreign minister arrived in March, the Hungarian foreign minister in June soon followed by his prime minister, and followed by Romanian and Bulgarian politicians (Sarotte 2022: 79-81).

The West started to think over welcoming CEE countries. The US State Department policy planning staff started in March 1990 to draft options for Hungary and Poland to join NATO or the EEC, as a solution to a “German-Russian security dilemma”, reasoning that Poles and other Eastern Europeans may support NATO if they could join it⁸.

CEE countries foreign ministers were invited to a special EEC ministerial meeting in Lisbon on 23-24 March 1990 to see what forms of affiliation were possible (Sarotte 2022: 80).

However not until late Spring 1990 there was the idea to dissolve Warsaw Pact with new Hungarian prime minister, Jozsef Antall leading the way (Kramer 2009: 43). Gorbachev worried about Warsaw Pact countries requests to join NATO, wanted Warsaw Pact countries to sign bilateral agreement on security, but Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia refused. Gorbachev in a meeting with Baker on 18 May 1990 asked to that Soviet Union join NATO. For Baker, this was a serious proposal that he was to discuss with Bush (Sarotte 2022: 87-88, 111). This was just the first of a series of NATO applications by Russia.

⁸ See Harvey Sichermann, memorandum on 12 March 1990, US State Department policy planning, and Dennis Ross memorandum, both quoted in Sarotte (2022: 79-80).

5. London Communiqué, Visegrád Group and NACC

NATO summit's London communiqué of 5-6 July 1990 (declaration on a transformed North Atlantic Alliance) started relations and opened NATO liaison offices in CEE countries. On 6 July, Bush highlighted to Gorbachev the key messages of NATO London communiqué to transform NATO and expand over former Warsaw Pact countries, to win Gorbachev's opposers in the Soviet Union. The Communist party congress approved this NATO declaration. Gorbachev stated options to make Soviet Union acceptable to have RFG in NATO, because NATO has different degrees of membership, such as those of France or Denmark (Sarotte 2022: 94).

By reaffirming the Helsinki principle, Soviet Union signed the Charter of Paris in November 1990 with the commitment to "fully recognize the freedom of States to choose their own security arrangements" (Lough 2021: 30).

In the Summer-Autumn 1990, Havel, Wałęsa and Antall pressured the United States on accepting them in NATO if they dissolved the Warsaw Pact. Bush told Havel that NATO should focus on building liaison office with CEE countries as US administration was not sponsoring Eastern enlargement, only Dick Cheney at the Office of Secretary of Defense was for granting them an observer or "associate status".

Bush was referring to administration's reports. State Department on 22 October 1990 produced an analysis on "Eastern Europe and NATO" that concluded it was "not in the best interest of NATO or the US that these states be granted full NATO membership and its security guarantees" as the US should refrain from organizing "an anti-Soviet coalition whose frontier is the Soviet border". This would look predatory for the Soviets and spoil the good relations built. The European Steering Group (advisors to NSA, Departments of State, Defence, etc.) came to a similar conclusion in a session on 29 October 1990: "All agencies agree that East Europe government should not invited to join NATO anytime in the immediate future".

Prophetically, Havel said to Paul Wolfowitz in a visit to Prague on 24-26 April 1991 that he saw "two possibilities in the next ten years: NATO and the EC". CEE countries felt that after German reunification, NATO and EEC were to stay, mostly unchanged, while any other form of demilitarised zone or Pan-European association were to fail. Therefore, the European Post-Cold war division would be between NATO and EEC, and non-NATO or EEC countries, so they wanted to join NATO and EEC (Sarotte 2009: 109-110).

Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia established the Visegrád group cooperation in February 1991 to support their membership for NATO and the EEC. At the same time, the Warsaw Pact countries decided to disband their alliance that ceased to exist in July.

In June 1991, the Yugoslavian crisis burst out and the Europeans had to focus on it and after the coup in August 1991 in Russia, Yeltsin was manoeuvring to oust Gorbachev and to dissolve the Soviet Union.

National Security Council (NSC) considered again in October 1991 the options for NATO enlargement to CEE, but its conclusion was just to focus on NATO liaison offices in these countries. However, Wörner wanted an upgrade in CEE-NATO relations, and

a Baker-Genscher proposal was conceived for some kind of NATO affiliated organisation that CEE countries could join, leaving the door open, but avoiding full membership. This resulted into the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) to provide with a forum for dialogue and cooperation for former Warsaw Pact countries plus the Baltics. According to Wörner, Soviet republics and former Warsaw Pact countries were to receive a non-differentiated approach in processing applications to NACC. Visegrád group countries opposed to this approach, and Havel renewed on 22 October 1991, his request to for “some form of membership of NATO”. On the contrary, Yeltsin welcomed the NACC and to get Russia involved in that body as part of a support to NATO for a new security system from Vancouver to Vladivostok (Sarotte 2022: 124-126,128). A plan emerged to announce the NACC at NATO summit in November 1991, and the NACC convened its first session in December 1991.

CEE countries renewed requests to NATO in 1992, but NATO preferred to deepen NACC and on 10 March 1992, all former Soviet Republics, except for Georgia, joined NACC. This diluted Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland aspirations for fast-track membership. On 6 May 1992, in Prague, Visegrád leaders stated that their goal was a full-fledged NATO membership.

After Maastricht Treaty, in March 1992, Kohl told Bush that CEE countries would have to wait until the end of 1990s to join the EEC, because Sweden, Finland, Austria and possibly Norway had higher priority for enlargement. Kohl said that it was unlikely that any former Soviet Republic may join, but they may have their own economic zone “as a bridge from Europe to Asia”. The EU also needed to address the violence in Yugoslavia, and also Visegrád countries and Ukraine were already cooperating with NATO in Croatia and Bosnia (Sarotte 2022: 141, 149).

US Department of State debated again on NATO enlargement, this time there were opposing views. The con was “where to stop” once enlargement had started not to provoke Russia, while the pro focused on a “sequential” approach to candidate countries, and raised the issue that FRG was not more willing to host US troops, while Poland was welcoming them. Rand corporation also reasoned that if Poland was out of NATO it would develop nuclear weapons and if attacked by Russia, it would be helped by Germany thus involving NATO (Sarotte 2009: 141-142).

6. Clinton, Yeltsin and the Founding Act on Russia-NATO Relations

If Bush administration was not very supportive of CEE demands for NATO, Clinton administration was more favourable of NATO expansion thus finding a positive attitude of Yeltsin.

But Yeltsin had his “ups-and-downs” and in a letter to Clinton on 15 September 1993 inaugurated the “broken promises” argument, stating that NATO enlargement, in particular for Poland, was in contrast to the “spirit” of Two-plus-Four Treaty. By recalling art.5, he implied that it prevented NATO from expanding to CEE countries. Therefore, US State Secretary Warren Christopher, and Wörner consulted the German foreign minister Klaus Kinkel, and his adviser, Dieter Kastrup a close aide of

Genscher. Kastrup replied that Yeltsin was formally wrong as the Treaty focused on FRG alone, nonetheless there was “political and psychological substance” in Russian claim, based on Genscher’s various promises on NATO expansion, so that the Russians may think that the “basic philosophy” of the Treaty was on preventing NATO eastward enlargement. Wörner, who was the only one of them in office at the time of the negotiations, rejected this interpretation, reminding that the Treaty focused on FRG only and not on NATO, and the second paragraph of the art. 5 allowed German NATO integrated forces to deploy in East Germany, after the Soviet troops had left, a condition that was to become reality in the following months (Sarotte 2022: 168). Philip Zelikov too, who was at the NSC confirmed, that “the option of adding new members to NATO” was “not foreclosed by the deal actually made in 1990” (Zelikov 1995; Kramer 2009: 40).

The Partnership for Peace (PfP) was a solution to widen NACC and was positively welcomed by Russian government - though Duma expressed concerns - that signed a PfP Framework Document on 22 June 1994 hoping to influence NATO policies. Russia got a special status by participating to the Contact Group informal forum alongside the United States, the United Kingdom and FRG.

But a “new form of encirclement” feeling was expressed by Yeltsin, who told Clinton in a meeting on 10 May 1995 that Russia could not accept the NATO bloc continuing to exist and to expand towards Russia’s borders, while the Warsaw Pact had been abolished.

On 21 April 1996, they met at Kremlin. Yeltsin was concerned about the Russian general elections in June and the raising anti-Western sentiment of Russian voters. Yeltsin suggested postponing NATO expansion until 1999 or 2000, but he accepted trade-off. Clinton who was also pressed by the Republican-controlled Congress, that if Russia accepted NATO enlargement she would obtain a clear statement on candidate status for NATO and a greater integration in other organisations as the G7 (NSC 1996: 4; Bianchi 2022: 19-21)⁹.

After having been both re-elected, Clinton and Yeltsin met between January and May 1997 to resume NATO-Russia relations.

At their meeting in Helsinki in March 1997, Yeltsin reiterated the idea that NATO enlargement was wrong, but he was forced to accept it, and he offered a legally binding agreement between 16 NATO countries and Russia that no conventional or nuclear weapons were to be deployed close to Russia to create a *cordon sanitaire* and a secret “gentlemen’s agreement” that no former Soviet Republic would enter NATO, in particular Ukraine. Yeltsin reasoned: “You are conducting naval manoeuvres near Crimea. It is as if we were training people in Cuba. How would you feel? It is unacceptable to us.” Clinton quietly refused Yeltsin’s proposal: “I can’t make commitments on behalf of NATO, and I’m not going to be in the position myself of vetoing NATO expansion with respect to any country, much less letting you or any-

⁹ NSC Records Management System, “Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin”, Clinton Digital Library, meeting on 21 April 1996: 4, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569> (accessed 30 September 2023).

one else do so." This also because NATO decision-making operates by consensus of all the countries (NSC 1997: 2-64)¹⁰.

The final result of these negotiations in early 1997 was the only official text on NATO-Russia relations, the "founding act on Russia-NATO relations" signed at the Paris summit on 27 May 1997. In the document, the only promise made by NATO was that no nuclear weapons could be deployed or stored in on the territory of new NATO members.

NATO also stated that the Alliance "will carry out its collective defence and other missions by ensuring the necessary interoperability, integration, and capability for re-inforcement rather than by additional permanent stationing of substantial combat forces" but the fact that "it will have to rely on adequate infrastructure commensurate with the above tasks" actually watered down this commitment by allowing NATO military installations in Eastern NATO countries, including the BMD in Romania, and more recently "Camp Trump" in Poland.

In the agreement there was no mentioning of NATO expansion to Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland that few weeks later at NATO Madrid summit in June 1997 were invited to join, and in a couple of years at the Washington summit in April 1999, would officially join the Alliance, in a move negatively viewed by the Kremlin. Moscow soon retaliated in June, after the end of Kosovo war, when the Russian peacekeepers exiting Bosnia cut the road to KFOR "initial entry force" reaching first the Pristina airport, and causing a diplomatic incident.

The 9/11 and the terrorist threat linked to Russian-Chechen war, forced a reconciliation between the United States and Russia, and Rome declaration in May 2002 "opened a new page", thus inaugurating the NATO-Russia Council (Bianchi 2022: 26).

Eventually, a few months later, no incidents happened when at Prague NATO summit on 21-22 November 2002 seven countries (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) were invited for membership, and officially joined NATO at the 2004 Istanbul summit.

7. Conclusion

There is no "smoking gun", there had been no official promises or written agreement from Western leaders to Russia not to expand to the East. Therefore, there was no "broken promise".

The West obtained "green light" on German reunification, but Gorbachev never obtained a written agreement (Sarotte 2014: 91), and no one among Gorbachev's advisers or among his opponents, not even those who more or less openly distrusted the attitude of the Western leadership, explicitly recommended asking the other party to set out a written arrangement on NATO non-expansion (Bianchi 2022: 16).

Putin too admitted in 2017 Oliver Stone's interview that there was no official agreement, just a gentleman's promise from Bush administration to Gorbachev. He referred

¹⁰ NSC *cit.* Memorandum of Conversation: Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia 21 March 1997: 2-64 <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569> (accessed 30 September 2023).

to informal meetings with Senior Republicans. However, by means of the spoiling system, retirement or ageing, they were out of office, retired or even dead about ten years later in the late 1990s, when Clinton administration launched NATO expansion to CEE.

The Two-plus-Four Treaty gave a clear view of commitments on German reunification that did not involve any commitment on NATO enlargement (Kramer 2009: 40). But misinterpretation of Western reassurances over a united Germany in NATO as a permanent ban on NATO enlargement is common in every Russian leader. It was evident in the Putin speech in Munich, but also Yeltsin in 1993 gave a broad interpretation of the Two-plus-Four Treaty. This can be explained by Kennan's thesis that without the "concept of Russia as in a state of siege" the Russian ruling class would be "superfluous".

One may reason that when Yeltsin requested reassurance on NATO expansion to former Soviet States in 1997, and Clinton objected because he could not decide for the whole alliance, Clinton was already sponsoring NATO and EU enlargement by that time. Conversely, there is no evidence that, in the absence of EU and NATO enlargement, Russia would have suspended its traditional security thinking (Lough 2021: 30).

Until proven otherwise, the only official text on NATO-Russia relations, the Founding Act of 1997, only stated that NATO was not to deploy nuclear weapons in the CEE. Nevertheless, this did not mean a promise not to expand NATO to the East, and in a couple of years, Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland would join NATO.

Chernyaev's prophecy in 1990 maintained that not enlargement but nuclear balance was the key issue of future NATO-Russia relations, and Art. 5 of Two-Plus-Four Treaty ruled that East Germany was to be free of foreign nuclear weapons after Soviets left.

Nuclear weapons were also the subject of the 1991 Minsk Agreement, when former Soviet republics agreed that Russia would be given charge of all nuclear armaments.

Ukraine after various afterthoughts returned nuclear weapons to Russia in 1996 in change for aid and security assurances. Two years before the 1994 Budapest Memorandum signed by the Ukraine, United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom included security assurances against the threat or use of force against Ukraine's territory or political independence.

Risks of a war between Russia and Ukraine had been predicted since Ukrainian independence. In a meeting in Washington between Bush, Baker and Gorbachev's aide Alexander Yakovlev, on 19 November 1991, Baker asked if there would be an open conflict if Ukraine separated from Soviet Union, Yakovlev replied that there were 12 million of ethnic Russians in Ukraine with "many mixed marriages" so "what sort of war could that be?", Baker just answered "a normal war" (Sarotte 2022: 126).

Ukraine became independent after the referendum on 1 December 1991, and since then it had become a possible candidate for NATO membership.

One year after Putin's Munich-speech, US President George W. Bush proposed at Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008 to include Ukraine and Georgia in the Membership Action Plan for future NATO membership according to "open door" policy. However, FRG and France opted for just a compromise communique, that stated a future

membership for the two countries. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, was keen on opposing to the Ukraine membership, reasoning about Putin's reaction. The end compromise, as one Ukrainian diplomat put it "the door was open, but we were not invited" (Le Monde 2023).

Bucharest summit made Putin think that NATO was divided, and he invaded Georgia in the short Russian-Georgian war in August 2008 (Le Monde 2023). NATO membership was one of the reasons for the war (Sarotte 2014: 91), and in September 2008, Lavrov reiterated the "broken promises" rhetoric (Kramer 2009: 40). Nonetheless, in December 2011, NATO assured Georgia the status of an "aspiring" country¹¹.

After Georgia, Russia started to confront with the EU. A dispute with Ukraine made Russia cut off gas supplies to Europe in 2009, and EU anti-trust investigation of Gazprom in 2011 changed attitudes in EU-Russia relations (Lough 2022: 30). The direct cause of 2014 Ukraine crisis was Russia's stated opposition to the signature of the EU-Ukraine Association agreement. On 21 March 2014, just three days after Russia had annexed Crimea, Ukraine signed the political part of this Agreement, during the extraordinary EU-Ukraine Summit. The economic part of the Agreement was signed by President Poroshenko at the margins of the European Council on 27 June 2014, and the Ukrainian and European Parliament simultaneously ratified the Agreement on 16 September 2014, to be provisionally applied from 1 November 2014. On 1 September 2017, the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement came into full force despite Russian opposition and the occupation of Crimea and Donbas.

Apart from technical criteria for accession, the issue of Ukraine in NATO or EU real question is "where Europe ends?". A question posed since George H.W. Bush administration.

To answer to this, we should remind that not an invitation by the West, but the self-determination of CEE democracies and their transition to market economy was the real reason for NATO and the EU expansion. Starting from Visegrád Group, the CEE countries voluntarily applied to NATO and the EU, although it is true that Clinton administration, and in particular Czech-born Ms Albright, sponsored their applications also in opposition with a few Member States.

Clinton was supporting a "doctrine of enlargement" to expand the community of market democracies around the world, as CEE countries were then considered as countries in transition to market economy (Clinton 2022). It shall be reminded that the concurrent EU enlargement launched by the Copenhagen European Council meeting in 1993 had set the "Copenhagen criteria" focusing on democracy, rule of law, economic and *acquis communautaire* requirements for countries who wanted to join the EU.

In conclusion, the fact that NATO is a voluntary community by self-determination of a country is confirmed by the fact as a reaction to the Ukraine crisis, Sweden and Finland abandoned their longstanding neutrality and joined NATO.

¹¹ Final statement, Meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of Foreign Ministers held at NATO Headquarters, Brussels, on 7 December 2011.

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