

# How America's Broken Promises May Lead to a New Cold War

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Then U.S. President George H. Bush gestures during a joint news conference with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, Tuesday, Oct. 29, 1991 at the Soviet Embassy in Madrid. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

The new Cold War, which now grips Europe and the United States, is not all Russia's fault. A seed was sown in the American assurances broken by Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, who reversed verbal pledges to refrain from expanding the Atlantic military alliance toward Russia. The Russians didn't get it in writing, and some analysts doubt that commitments were made, but official records of conversations suggest American bad faith.

That past doesn't excuse Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive effort to reconstruct Russia's sphere of influence. He has ignored one commitment that actually was put in writing, the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which obligated Russia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S. "to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine." Negotiated in exchange for Ukraine's relinquishing Soviet nuclear

weapons stationed on its territory, it was brushed aside by Putin in 2014 when he annexed Crimea from Ukraine and began an ongoing proxy war against Ukrainian forces in the country's east.

There are myriad reasons for Putin's own expansionism, including Russia's historic anxieties about the West's political and military encroachment. Nevertheless, the past American behavior helps explain his distrust of the U.S., his sense of victimization, and his worries about national security. As exaggerated as those concerns might appear to the West, whose alliance has not threatened to attack Russia, they are amplified by Moscow's experience with Washington after the Soviet Union's collapse. The former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev has said that he was "swindled."

Declassified documents tell the story of how American officials led the Russians to believe that no expansion would be undertaken by NATO, then later nearly doubled the size of the alliance. Russian and American transcripts and summaries of high-level meetings, posted in recent years by the National Security Archive at George Washington University, record multiple assurances in the early 1990s.

Some were explicit, others implicit and subject to interpretation. They were given repeatedly in various forms to Gorbachev, Russian President Boris Yeltsin, and other Russian officials by the highest American and European leaders, including President George H. W. Bush, Secretary of State James Baker, CIA Director Robert Gates, West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, British Prime Ministers Margaret Thatcher and John Major, French President François Mitterrand, and NATO Secretary General Manfred Wörner.

Those early discussions were conducted to avoid Soviet resistance to the reunification of East and West Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of Communist dictatorships across eastern Europe in 1989 and 1990. The Soviet Union itself was growing fragile as its republics tasted the prospect of independence, which all 15 of them achieved in 1991.

But Gorbachev would not have agreed to German reunification had he known that NATO would expand, he told Susan Eisenhower several years after the alliance began accepting eastern European members. Eisenhower, a policy analyst and commentator on Russian affairs at the time, told me recently that she and her then husband, Roald Sagdeev, former head of the Soviet Space Research Institute, were struck by Gorbachev's use of the term swindled. Sagdeev remembers the Russian word as naduvat, slang for swindling a friend.

The U.S. non-expansion promise was made several times during discussions in Moscow on February 9, 1990, according to a State Department "memcon," or memorandum of conversation. Secretary of State Baker told Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze that German reunification would be accompanied by "iron-clad guarantees that NATO's jurisdiction of forces would not move eastward."

Meeting Gorbachev later that day, Baker reiterated the pledge. “We understand that 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 direction,” Baker said. “Germany’s unification will not lead to NATO’s military organization spreading to the east.” And then again: “If we maintain a presence in a Germany that is a part of NATO, there would be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east.”

“To the east” lay multiple members of the crumbling Warsaw Pact, who eagerly joined NATO years later. Yet some American analysts now argue that Baker’s pledge referred only to NATO forces inside Germany or that he was merely floating a theoretical idea, not making a pledge. If so, Baker would have been committing a monumental deception, for the transcript contains no such statements.

At the time, the potential risks posed by a unified Germany weighed on both Moscow and Washington. Gorbachev worried that “history could repeat itself,” that a neutral Germany could develop into a threat once again. “We don’t really want to see a replay of Versailles, where the Germans were able to arm themselves,” Gorbachev told Baker, citing the writer Günter Grass’s observation “that a unified Germany has always been a breeding ground for chauvinism and anti-Semitism.”

Baker also worried that an independent Germany without NATO’s protection might seek its own nuclear weapons. He asked Gorbachev which he would prefer: a united, independent Germany outside NATO, or one inside the alliance “but with the guarantee that NATO’s jurisprudence or troops will not spread east of the present boundary.” Gorbachev said he’d think it over (and in a later meeting agreed to a united Germany in NATO), but he was clear on one point: “It goes without saying that a broadening of the NATO zone is not acceptable.”

“We agree with that,” Baker replied.

More than a year after Baker’s assurances to Gorbachev, NATO expansion remained off the table, according to a memo from high-ranking members of the Supreme Soviet. They reported in July 1991 being told by Wörner, NATO’s secretary general, that he and 13 of the 16 NATO members opposed expansion.

Then came the Clinton administration and an intense internal debate leading to a policy shift. Lynn Davis, Clinton’s undersecretary of state for international security affairs, advocated expansion to advance democracy in eastern Europe and prevent the rise of ultra-nationalism. “Twice before when such opportunities presented themselves in Europe,” she wrote, “the United States sought to avoid responsibility. But then threats to our vital interests required our return to Europe and to assume a leadership role. We confront a similar historical moment.” She called for a two-phase enrollment of eastern European countries.

Only in the second phase, depending on their “progress toward democracy,” would they be granted the treaty’s defense protection under Article V, which provides that an attack on one is considered an attack on all.

Davis was right that NATO membership would produce a modicum of democratic stability. But democracy is eroding in Hungary and Turkey, for example, and right-wing nationalism is on the rise elsewhere in the alliance.

In October 1993, then Secretary of State Warren Christopher visited Moscow. In a perceptive briefing memo beforehand, James Collins, the top diplomat at the U.S. embassy, warned Christopher that the issue of NATO expansion was “neuralgic to the Russians. They expect to end up on the wrong side of a new division of Europe if any decision is made quickly ... it would be universally interpreted in Moscow as directed against Russia and Russia alone—or ‘neo-containment,’ as Foreign Minister [Andrei] Kozyrev recently suggested.”

Containment of Moscow’s influence, as conceived by the diplomat George Kennan, shaped American policy during Cold War I, yet Kennan warned that “expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the post–Cold War era,” because it could “impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”

Subsequently, as the expansionist hawks in Washington won their case and the policy was changed, the Russians were not mollified by Clinton’s repeated reassurances of American respect for Russia’s security. Yeltsin, who was often drunk, had made confusing statements, once telling the Polish leader Lech Walesa that he wouldn’t mind Poland’s joining NATO, and then reversing himself. But he was clear enough with Clinton during a Kremlin meeting on May 10, 1995: “I see nothing but humiliation for Russia if you proceed,” Yeltsin declared. Note the word *humiliation*, an element too rarely considered in foreign policy.

“For me to agree to the borders of NATO expanding toward those of Russia—that would constitute a betrayal on my part of the Russian people,” he said, calling it “a new form of encirclement.” Note also the word *encirclement*, a long-standing anxiety in Russian history. “Russians have a sense of fear,” Yeltsin told Clinton.

The Russian leader suggested an alternative: “that Russia will give every state that wants to join NATO a guarantee that we won’t infringe on its security. That way they’ll have nothing to fear from the East.” He proposed “no blocs, only one European space that provides for its own security.” A nice promise, but probably not credible to policy makers in Washington, much less to eastern Europeans who had lived under the Russian thumb.

“Let me be clear, Boris,” Clinton said. “I’m not bargaining with you.” NATO would expand gradually, he said, “but don’t ask us to slow down, either, or we’ll just have to keep saying no.” For eastern Europeans impatient for NATO membership, Clinton explained, “it’s part of

being accepted by the West. But they also have security concerns. That's where it gets complicated. They trust you, Boris ... But they are not so sure what's going to happen in Russia if you're not around." A prescient remark.

Yeltsin's proposal and warning had no impact on Clinton's policy. The president conceded that "Russia does not present a threat to the NATO states." But since its creation after World War II, he argued, the alliance remained essential to American and Canadian links to European security.

NATO's growth began late in Clinton's presidency, in 1999, when membership was granted to the former Soviet satellites of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, all "to the east."

Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia followed in 2004 during the Bush II administration. Other eastern European countries then joined, bringing today's total number to 30, up from 16 in the days when Baker made his assurances of not "one inch."

Ukraine is not among the 30, and Putin wants to keep it that way, as a huge buffer between NATO members and Russia. So he has massed some 130,000 Russian troops with armor, artillery, and missiles on three sides of Ukraine.

Moreover, he wants to turn back the clock 25 years to the pre-expansion days, demanding NATO's retreat westward—that is, to revive Washington's pledges from that bygone era. "They said one thing and did another thing," Putin declared recently. "They played us, simply lied." But without NATO membership, would Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, the Czech Republic, and the others be safe from Russia? It's hard to imagine.

Understandably, then, the rollback demand has gone nowhere with the Biden administration. Facts on the ground, even broken promises, cannot easily be undone, and the ground of international relations is littered with broken promises. Welcome to Cold War II.

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