

Evgeny Primakov, *Vstrechi na Perekrestkakh (Meetings at the Crossroads, Moscow 2015)* p. 209-211

I asked for the archival materials. They were from the period of German unification and the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty. Leaders of all leading Western member-states of NATO then assured the Soviet leaders that they were not thinking about expansion. They were doing it for very understandable reasons—to stimulate Moscow to decide to withdraw Soviet troops from East Germany and to soften a possible sharp reaction to the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty.

Here, from the documents, are the statements that were made by the Western leaders in 1990-1991.

J[ames] Baker. “NATO is the mechanism for securing the U.S. presence in Europe. If NATO is liquidated, there will be no such mechanism in Europe. 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.

We believe that consultations and discussions within the framework of the “two + four” mechanism should guarantee that Germany’s unification will not lead to NATO’s military organization spreading to the east. (*Record of Conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and J. Baker 09.02.1990*)

Note that the U.S. secretary of state personally suggested that NATO non-expansion could be put into law through an agreement on German unification.

I remember well when at a Politburo meeting in the spring of 1990 M.S. Gorbachev said that we could try to link our agreement to pull out our troops from the GDR to a united Germany leaving NATO. This was one of a few episodes when a Politburo session—in any case, when candidate members (I was one of them) and Central Committee secretaries were present—touched on issues of German unification. Usually those issues were “talked over” between the CC general secretary and the foreign minister or at the level of “full” Politburo members, who would initially gather in the Walnut room of the Kremlin and only then enter the Politburo sessions room, where the rest [of the participants] were waiting for them, sometimes for a long time.

It was absolutely clear that such a linkage between our troop pullout and the FRG leaving NATO was not acceptable. The pullout of united Germany from NATO would mean the end of the North Atlantic alliance, and the West would not have agreed to that. But, obviously, Gorbachev was considering that as a “starting position.” For that, in the end, we got the guarantees against deployment of nuclear weapons and foreign troops on a permanent basis on the territory of the former GDR, which were fixed in the Treaty on German Unification. But Baker was talking about something greater—about guarantees against expansion of the NATO military organization to the East!

And the assurances by Western leaders were not limited to this Baker statement.

H[elmut] Kohl. We believe that NATO should not expand the sphere of its activities. We have to find a reasonable resolution. I correctly understand the security interests of the Soviet Union, and I realize that you, Mr. General Secretary, and the Soviet leadership will have to clearly explain to the Soviet people what is happening. It is one thing when we are talking, but it is different when ordinary people talk. They remember the fate of their fathers and brothers. (*Record of conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and Federal Chancellor H. Kohl 10.02.1990*)

As the prime minister of Great Britain stated, he “does not foresee conditions (circumstances) [in which], at the present time or in the future, East European countries could be in NATO.” (*Information from Minister of Defense D.T. Yazov to M.S. Gorbachev about conversation with Prime Minister of Great Britain J. Major 06.03.1991*)

D[ouglas] Hurd made a statement about the absence of NATO plans to attach countries of Central and Eastern Europe to the North Atlantic treaty in any shape or form. (*Information of USSR Foreign Minister A.A. Bessmertnykh about the results of Great Britain’s Foreign Minister D. Hurd’s working visit to the USSR 26.03.1991*)

F[rancois] Mitterrand. There is one more consideration. Each of the countries I mentioned (he was talking about former members of the Warsaw Treaty—Ye. P.) will aspire to ensure its security by concluding separate agreements. With whom? Obviously with NATO. But this prospect is not appropriate for the USSR. This would also strengthen the feeling of isolation and even encirclement on the part of the Soviet Union. I am convinced that this road is not right for Europe. (*Record of conversation between M.S. Gorbachev and President of France F. Mitterrand 06.05.1991*)

I would like to emphasize two points.

First—Mitterrand’s assurances were given already at the time when the Warsaw Treaty was “barely breathing.” And he was talking precisely about the aspiration on the part of East European countries to plead to be [accepted] into NATO in the future.

Second—the French President directly admitted that the USSR could not be accepted into NATO, even in the future.

With great regret, one has to conclude that that the assurances by the Western leaders were not put into a treaty or legal form. However, we have every reason to believe that at that time it could have been done.

And still, why did the position of the countries playing the lead role in NATO, and especially of the United States, subsequently change in such a cardinal way? Why did they, contrary to their promises, which were supported by seemingly serious argumentation against drawing countries of the Warsaw Treaty into NATO (judging by their own words, they understood what it could lead to), turn 180 degrees away from their former assurances? There is no simple answer to these questions.

Indeed, leaders of Central and Eastern European countries had proclaimed their insistent desire to join NATO. Judging by the evidence, it is supported if not by the majority then by a considerable portion of [their] populations. Public opinion polls as well as the referendum in Hungary confirm that. What was behind it? Concerns that the situation in Russia would create a threat to their security? I don't think this is the main reason or even a real one. And moreover, many leaders of these countries emphasize that their choice is not predetermined by fear of some aggressive actions on the part of Russia. Today, after a multi-year period of development of the Russian state and the fundamentally different international situation, under any realistic—precisely realistic—configuration of forces in power in Russia, conversations about a possible military threat on its part to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as to other countries, look like elementary misrepresentation of facts.

It helps to remind one that even while the Soviet Union still existed, and in the most acute period when the process of dissolution of the socialist camp had already begun, on the eve of its allies leaving the Warsaw Treaty, Moscow was not pressuring them and did not intend to do so. I was present at a session of the CC Politburo, at which Gorbachev told us that a hysterical Ceaucescu (this was when the Warsaw Treaty still existed) asked to immediately send troops to Romania. But it was already 1990 outside, not 1968, remembered for the march of tank columns on Prague, and the affair was limited to informing the top Soviet leadership about Ceaucescu's appeal—not a single person present raised the issue of a possible military intervention in Romania. And in the current situation one can no longer talk about such a possibility.

Maybe some people are overwhelmed by memories [of past interventions]? I agree, many people do not part with those quickly and lightly. But still such a burden of the past is not a decisive element in determining who threatens the security of a state and in what way.

As far as countries of Central and Eastern Europe are concerned, it is apparent that the reason for their desire to join NATO stems from something else. They want to identify as part of Europe—not of the East but of the West—to join the European structures, mainly the European Union. But membership in the EU for them for many reasons has turned out to be hard to achieve, at least in the near future. There are grounds to believe that in those conditions joining NATO was seen by them as the shortest and least burdensome way of entering into the European structures.

Part of the blame for that belongs to us. After the liquidation of the Warsaw Treaty and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance we somehow did not pay appropriate attention to our former allies. There was an objective reason: reforms in Russia were higher on our scale of priorities than policies toward the countries of Eastern Europe.

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