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NATO Enlargement—Was There a Promise?

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NATO Enlargement—
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Joshua R. Itzkowitz
Shiffrinson

To the Editors (Mark Kramer writes):

Joshua Shiffrinson's article "Deal or No Deal?" presents a flawed account of the negotiations in 1990 that led to the reunification of Germany.¹ His observations at the end of the piece about Russian foreign policy under Vladimir Putin overlook the continuity of Russian policy toward neighboring countries since 1992, long before Putin came to power.²

In an article published in April 2009, I set out to determine whether it was true that, at some point during the 1990 negotiations on Germany, Soviet leaders received a promise that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would not eventually grant membership to countries beyond the German Democratic Republic (GDR).³ In the latter half of the 1990s, I frequently heard from Russian officials and from some Western observers that NATO leaders in 1990 had secretly offered "categorical assurances," "solemn pledges," and "binding commitments" that no former Warsaw Pact countries (aside from the former GDR) would be brought into NATO. Those allegations continue to be voiced in Russia to this day.

Archival documents bearing on those claims were declassified in Germany in the 1990s, but it took much longer for relevant Soviet documents to be released. However, after crucial Soviet materials finally became available in the late 2000s, including detailed notes from the negotiations, I sought to determine whether the Russian allegations are well founded. I concluded that they are not. The declassified negotiating records reveal that no such assurances or pledges were ever offered.

Subsequently, in 2015, together with colleagues from Austria and Germany, I published a thick volume of recently declassified Soviet documents pertaining to German reunification. The collection includes materials released from the Russian Presidential Archive as well as lengthy excerpts from the diaries and notebooks of Teimuraz Stepanov-Mamaladze, the chief aide to Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze,

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1. Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), pp. 7–44, doi:10.1162/ISEC_a_00236. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

2. Because I have limited space in which to respond, I do not deal with this latter issue here and instead focus solely on the 1990 negotiations.

3. Mark Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 2009), pp. 39–61, doi:10.1080/01636600902773248.

who took notes on Shevardnadze's discussions and thoughts before, during, and after the 1990 negotiations.⁴

Shifrinson does not make use of Soviet documents. Instead, he insists that "the key to determining whether Russian accusations have merit is understanding the rationale behind U.S. actions at the time," and he draws on formerly secret U.S. documents to present his interpretation of the matter. Shifrinson deserves credit for having obtained declassification of U.S. materials, but the problem is that his account does not provide a basis for "determining whether Russian accusations have merit." What U.S. officials said among themselves is not of direct relevance unless they conveyed it to their Soviet counterparts. An evaluation of Russian claims thus depends foremost on scrutiny of Soviet documents to gauge what Soviet leaders were aiming for, what they were told, and what they believed they were told.

Most of the primary sources about Soviet perceptions and goals are in Russian. But even if Shifrinson cannot use Russian sources, a few important items are available in English, including an illuminating interview with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev in October 2014 that appeared in English translation. Shifrinson has definitely seen the interview (I sent a copy of it to him in November 2014), but he never cites it directly and instead paraphrases it inaccurately. In the interview, Gorbachev was asked whether the topic of NATO enlargement beyond eastern Germany ever came up during the negotiations in 1990 on German reunification. Gorbachev's response was unequivocal: "The topic of 'NATO expansion' was not discussed at all [in 1990], and it wasn't brought up in those years. I say this with full responsibility. Western leaders didn't bring it up, either."⁵ Instead of citing these comments, Shifrinson briefly and misleadingly paraphrases Gorbachev as having remarked: "NATO expansion may not have been explicitly discussed in 1990" (p. 13). This cursory paraphrase misrepresents what Gorbachev actually said. The former Soviet leader did not use the equivocal formulation "NATO expansion may not have been explicitly discussed." He said very plainly that NATO expansion "was not discussed at all" and "was not brought up."

Shifrinson also omits any mention of Shevardnadze's repeated insistence that "a possible eastward expansion of NATO" beyond Germany "was never discussed in the inner circles of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1990" and that "the question never came up [in the talks on German reunification]. When I was the minister of foreign affairs in the Soviet Union, NATO's expansion beyond German borders never came up for negotiation."⁶ Shevardnadze was interviewed numerous times about this matter, and he always stuck by this basic position. The interviews with Shevardnadze appeared in Russian, German, and Georgian, but the full transcript of at least one such interview (an important one with *Der Spiegel* in November 2009) was translated into

4. Stefan Karner et al., eds., *Der Kreml und die deutsche Wiedervereinigung, 1990* [The Kremlin and German reunification, 1990] (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2015).

5. Maxim Kórshunov, "Mikhail Gorbachev: I Am against All Walls," *Russia behind the Headlines*, October 16, 2014, pp. 1, 2; also online at http://rbth.com/international/2014/10/16/mikhail_gorbachev_i_am_against_all_walls_40673.html.

6. "Interview with Eduard Shevardnadze: 'We Couldn't Believe That the Warsaw Pact Could Be Dissolved,'" *Spiegel Online* (international ed.), November 26, 2009, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/interview-with-eduard-shevardnadze-we-couldn-t-believe-that-the-war-saw-pact-could-be-dissolved-a-663595.html>.

English and posted on the *Spiegel Online* international website, where it was readily accessible to Shifrinson. Nonetheless, he makes no mention of it.

When dealing with the 1990 negotiations on German reunification, Shifrinson attaches anachronistic and untenable interpretations to passages that have already been carefully explored by me and by others. Gorbachev and Shevardnadze held crucial negotiations in February 1990 with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker and West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, but when the topic of NATO came up their only concern was about the future status of the territory that had been part of the GDR since 1949. More than 330,000 Soviet troops were still deployed on East German soil, and the Soviet Union as a postwar occupying power enjoyed international legal prerogatives in the GDR. The disposition of East German territory during the process of German reunification was a key sticking point in the negotiations, and Gorbachev and Shevardnadze discussed it at length with their Western counterparts. The United States and the Federal Republic of Germany were able to arrange a special transitional status for GDR territory, as spelled out in the final accords. The notion that Soviet leaders believed that those accords were referring to Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, or Bulgaria is an anachronistic distortion.

Shifrinson takes no account of the fluidity of the situation in 1990. The transcript of the discussions that Gorbachev had with senior advisers on January 26, 1990, and the notes of Shevardnadze's aide Stepanov-Mamaladze show that, in January and February 1990, Soviet leaders were still highly confident that the Warsaw Pact was going to survive. After all, Poland at the time was urging the Soviet Union to keep its troops in Poland (because of concern about possible German ambitions toward Poland's western territories) and was calling for the consolidation of the Pact. Conditions were very fluid, and what was true at one moment was apt to change soon thereafter. Until well into the latter half of 1990, Soviet leaders were still convinced that the Warsaw Pact was going to survive, and their confidence about this matter did not begin to dissipate for a surprisingly long time. Shevardnadze later acknowledged that during the East-West discussions about Germany in 1990, he and Gorbachev "couldn't believe that the Warsaw Pact could be dissolved. It was beyond our realm of comprehension."⁷ Hence, it is a retrospective distortion for Shifrinson to claim that Soviet leaders had in mind Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria when holding talks with U.S. and West German officials about Germany in February 1990 or afterward.

Shifrinson gives the impression that he alone appreciates the significance of informal assurances—as though I and other scholars had in mind only formal written assurances. But in fact the whole point of my April 2009 article was to examine the recently declassified negotiating records to see whether any assurances—formal or informal—were ever provided. If the only thing I had cared about was formal written assurances, I obviously would not have had to bother waiting more than a decade and a half for the declassification of the negotiating records so that I could go through them. All I would have had to do was look at the September–October 1990 agreements on German reunification, which contain no mention of NATO expansion. By contrast, those agree-

7. *Ibid.*

ments do cover all the important issues raised during the negotiations. The reason they do not cover NATO enlargement beyond eastern Germany is that, as I learned from going through the declassified records, the issue was never brought up during the negotiations. There were no assurances, formal or informal, about an issue that did not come up.

Let me stress that my April 2009 article was not intended as either a defense or a critique of NATO enlargement. The wisdom (or lack thereof) of NATO's decision in the mid-1990s to admit new members is a separate issue. In my view, once NATO governments decided to expand their membership, they would have been better off if they had encouraged Russia to aspire to membership along with the other former Warsaw Pact countries, but that was not the topic I was addressing in my April 2009 article, which had a much narrower purpose.

Debate about the merits of NATO enlargement—and whether it could have been pursued in a manner that would have allayed Russian leaders' concerns—will undoubtedly continue for years to come. But the notion that enlargement was ruled out during the 1990 negotiations on German reunification is spurious.

—Mark Kramer
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinon Replies:

I thank Mark Kramer for his comments on my article. In this reply, I want to clarify the contours of our disagreement over whether the United States offered the Soviet Union terms during the 1990 talks over German reunification that constituted an informal guarantee against the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization into Eastern Europe.

Kramer and I broadly agree on the facts of the case. We recognize, for instance, that the 1990 discussions never involved a formal pledge by the United States to forgo NATO expansion despite multiple rounds of East-West diplomacy. Likewise, we agree that U.S. leaders used rhetoric early in the diplomatic process—including Secretary of State James Baker's promise in February 1990 that "NATO would not expand one inch to the east"—that might be construed as a non-expansion pledge.¹

Nevertheless, we differ on how to interpret these facts, the scope of the 1990 diplomacy, and U.S. strategy. Kramer offers a straightforward account. In a 2009 *Washington Quarterly* article and in his letter, he emphasizes that U.S., Soviet, and other leaders in 1990 were discussing NATO expansion in the context of German reunification. Because the rest of the Warsaw Pact still existed, neither American nor Soviet officials envisioned NATO expansion beyond the former East Germany. It is thus wrong in Kramer's view to see U.S. negotiating terms as bearing on anything other than Germany;² if

1. Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinon, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Spring 2016), p. 15.

2. For our respective interpretations of the February 1990 talks, see Mark Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (April 2009), pp. 47–49; and Shiffrinon, "Deal or No Deal?" pp. 22–25.