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NATO Non-expansion and German Reunification

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To the Editors (Richard W. Maass writes):

In "Deal or No Deal," Joshua Itzkowitz Shifrinson sheds new light on an important case.¹ At the article's core is a clear historical question: Did U.S. leaders offer to limit NATO expansion in 1990? Shifrinson provides substantial evidence that they did, proposing a quid pro quo that convinced Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to accept German reunification within NATO. The article frames its modern relevance by conflating that historical question with distinct causal and moral questions, however, distorting its contribution and undermining its policy recommendations.

First, the article claims that verifying the existence of the NATO-limitation offer resolves the debate over whether recent Russian aggressions were "responses to the broken non-expansion agreement" or "adventurism" using the offer as "pretext" (p. 7). In doing so, it neglects that a pretext need not be factually incorrect. Pretexts are claims that leaders use to justify an action that are not the true reasons why it was taken. They allege false causation, but much of their value comes from their historical accuracy, which allows shrewd leaders to twist critiques of the necessity or appropriateness of their actions into historical debates they have already won.

For example, President Franklin Roosevelt used deception "to preempt debate over whether the use of force is justified by shifting blame for hostilities onto the adversary." In doing so, he gained an unassailable pretext for war on December 7, 1941, even though he had long been maneuvering against the Axis powers.² President James Polk similarly used the claim that Mexico had "shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil" as pretext to conquer California.³ Although both pretexts occurred, neither adequately explains subsequent U.S. actions. Verifying the NATO-limitation offer is necessary but insufficient to argue that feelings of betrayal/insecurity caused recent Russian aggressions, much as showing that Adolf Hitler was rejected from art school is necessary but insufficient to argue that his acceptance would have prevented World

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1. Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "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. Subsequent citations appear in parentheses in the text.

2. John M. Schuessler, "The Deception Dividend: FDR's Undeclared War," *International Security*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Spring 2010), p. 163.

3. James K. Polk, *The Diary of James K. Polk during His Presidency, 1845 to 1849*, ed. Milo M. Quaife, Vol. 1 (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1910), p. 392.

War II. In Stephen Van Evera's terms, this is a hoop test, not a smoking gun: "[A] flunked test kills a theory . . . but a passed test gives it little support."⁴

Interpreting causation from U.S.-Soviet diplomacy in early 1990 to current U.S.-Russian relations is particularly delicate given the transformative magnitude of intervening events. As Shiffrinson notes, the NATO-limitation offer was made "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" (p. 35). At minimum, the Soviet Union's dissolution raises questions about how meaningfully we should speak of a "broken promise" (p. 40).

Second, the article conflates its core historical question with a moral one: Does the NATO-limitation offer justify Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and 2014 annexation of Crimea? Having determined that "Russian charges of U.S. betrayal are correct" (p. 9), it advises U.S. leaders to avoid further "justifying Russian aggression" (p. 44), confusing the historical accuracy of a grievance with the legitimacy of a response to that grievance. Instead of weighing the severity of the response against the gravity of the offense, the article implies that a broken promise justified conquering parts of two countries uninvolved in making that promise. Even a discussion limited to broken promises should include the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, in which Russia pledged "to refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of Ukraine."⁵ Annexing Crimea violated that pledge as well as broader international law, and it was a voluntary decision that cannot be excused as the inevitable result of opportunity.⁶

In a follow-up op-ed, Shiffrinson clarified his view that "NATO's widening umbrella doesn't justify Vladimir Putin's bellicosity or his incursions in Ukraine or Georgia."⁷ Yet no such disclaimer appears in "Deal or No Deal," which is troubling because its historical research and scholarly platform should make it more authoritatively cited. On the contrary, the article's rhetoric obscures moral comparisons by relentlessly characterizing U.S. foreign policy as aimed to "dominate post-Cold War Europe" (p. 42; cf. pp. 9, 11, 19, 28-30, 36, 38-40). This phrasing equates welcoming members into a defensive alliance with conquering foreign territory, and it neglects the fact that Eastern European leaders wanted to join NATO (just as Western European leaders had wanted to create the alliance in the first place). As President George H.W. Bush declared, "American troops will remain in Europe as long as the Europeans want them" (p. 27).

In the end, "Deal or No Deal" contributes to the very problem it aims to help solve. Despite Shiffrinson's intent to alleviate U.S.-Russian mistrust through historical accuracy, its framing problems exacerbate "Russia's sense of isolation and betrayal" without

4. Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 31.

5. "Budapest Memorandums on Security Assurances, 1994" (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.), <http://www.cfr.org/nonproliferation-arms-control-and-disarmament/budapest-memorandums-security-assurances-1994/p32484>.

6. For discussion of a state declining annexation despite opportunity, see Richard W. Maass, "Difficult to Relinquish Territory Which Had Been Conquered": Expansionism and the War of 1812," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 2015), pp. 70-97.

7. Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson, "Russia's Got a Point: The U.S. Broke a NATO Promise," *Los Angeles Times*, May 30, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-shiffrinson-russia-us-nato-deal-20160530-snap-story.html>.

scrutinizing the limits of those emotions as justifications for aggression (p. 10). This may enable those with ill intent to exploit good historical research to fuel outrage and revanchism. States do not always keep promises, which is precisely why NATO is increasing deployments in Eastern Europe—to allay fears that U.S. pledges to defend allies from potential Russian aggression might go unfulfilled. Shiffrinson's findings help analysts understand late U.S.-Soviet diplomacy, but they should not mitigate analysts' thorough skepticism of any pretexts for international aggression.

—Richard W. Maass
Evansville, Indiana

Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrinson Replies:

I thank Richard Maass for his response to my article and appreciate this opportunity to reply.¹ His letter raises two main points, which I address below.

First, Maass claims that I argue that recent Russian aggression in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere in Europe was a response to the broken U.S. pledge not to expand NATO following German reunification. Yet, I never said anything of the sort. My article was not about contemporary Russian foreign policy. I simply noted that some analysts draw a connection between growing NATO-Russian tensions and Russian actions in its near-abroad to a broken non-expansion pledge (p. 7). In contrast, others argue that Russian claims that the United States made a NATO non-expansion commitment is mere “pretext for Russian adventurism,” and that the United States “never promised to limit NATO expansion” (ibid.). I therefore thought it important to determine whether clear U.S. guarantees to limit NATO expansion had been made, only to be broken later. My finding that the United States reneged on assurances against NATO expansion that were, in fact, given to Soviet leaders in 1990 obviously bears on how current Russian policy is interpreted. If nothing else, concluding that Russian charges of a broken non-expansion pledge have merit should give analysts pause before concluding—as Maass does—that Russia is a revisionist actor and that its accusations against NATO are a pretext to facilitate Russian ambitions. Nevertheless, my article did not set out to examine whether Russian beliefs as to what happened in 1990 influenced current Russian policy, and never claimed otherwise.

Second, Maass argues that not only did I try to explain present-day Russian aggression within the context of a broken NATO non-expansion pledge, but that I sought to justify it. In particular, he suggests that I conflate a moral issue with a historical one by confusing “the historical accuracy of a grievance with the legitimacy of a response to that grievance.” To be sure, Maass notes my argument in a subsequent op-ed that NATO expansion does not justify Russian aggression in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere in Europe.² Still, he writes that I made “no such disclaimer” in my article. Yet, I

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did state in my article that there are “numerous reasons to condemn Russian behavior in Georgia and Ukraine, as well as against states in Eastern Europe,” merely clarifying that “Russia’s leaders may be telling the truth when they claim that Russian actions are driven by mistrust” (p. 43). Why Maass believes that these statements justify Russian aggression is a mystery.

My view on the morality of Russian policy, however, is not relevant to this discussion. As a political scientist, I was not making a value judgment. Rather, I sought to objectively analyze the veracity of competing claims about what happened during some of the key diplomacy at the end of the Cold War, recognizing that the results affect analysts’ understanding of contemporary international politics. Incidentally, this effort to separate scholarly analysis from personal beliefs also applies to my portrayal of the United States as seeking to “dominate” post-Cold War Europe: it is not, as Maass contends, a moral judgment that equates U.S. and Soviet/Russian policy, but a standard analytic description of a state’s efforts to (1) become more powerful than its competitors, and (2) ensure that its foreign policy preferences predominate.

In sum, the goal of my article was to assess whether the United States promised to forgo NATO expansion as part of the 1990 diplomatic settlement ending the Cold War. I am glad that Maass believes that I was successful in this effort and that he finds the results compelling. Now that the basic facts are clear, scholars can begin to examine whether and how Western violations of these guarantees have driven some aspects of recent Russian foreign policy.

—*Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin*
College Station, Texas