



THE NATO EXPANSION: DID THE WEST DECEIVE GORBACHEV?

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ABSTRACT

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is security organization created by the United States, Canada, and several Western European countries in 1949 to counter the Soviet Union¹⁰⁰. Tensions amongst the Soviet Union and the U.S rose after World War II due to disagreements over the occupation of Germany and the spread of communism in Eastern European countries. Fearing the rise of communism in Europe and the possibility of a bilateral deal between the Soviets and Western European countries, the United States, under the Truman administration, proposed a European-American alliance that would ensure American commitment to strengthening the security of Western Europe¹⁰¹. NATO played a crucial role in deterring Soviet aggression and protecting Allies from its threat throughout the Cold War. It was also more than a military pact, and its members had shared values such as democracy, liberty, and the rule of law that they sought to uphold through the organization¹⁰². The events from the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the subsequent reunification of Germany followed by the disbanding of the Warsaw Pact until the official fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 significantly changed Europe and the World¹⁰³. These events eliminated NATO's raison d'être since there was no threat of military invasion or nuclear war in Europe, and former Warsaw Pact countries were democratizing on their own.

Keywords

US, Russia, NATO, Soviet Union, Gorbachev, Europe

Introduction

¹⁰⁰ Roache, Madeline. "Breaking down the complicated relationship between Russia and NATO." *Time* (2019).

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 1

¹⁰² Wallander, C. A. (2000). Institutional assets and adaptability: NATO after the Cold War. *International organization*, 54(4), 705-735

¹⁰³ Ibid 705-735.



Lacking in function, the future of NATO looked bleak, and there were calls to disband it¹⁰⁴. Many both inside and outside NATO thought it wise to keep the organization as a source of stability and security in Europe¹⁰⁵. The reunification of Germany was the first hurdle that NATO faced after the fall of the Berlin Wall since the Soviets objected to East Germany joining NATO. After assurances that NATO forces would not pursue an expansion eastward, the Soviet Union agreed to the reunification. Not long after this, NATO commenced an Eastward expansion by admitting former Warsaw Pact countries with American and Western European officials touting the expansion as necessary for the political stability of Europe¹⁰⁶. Scholars have no consensus about when NATO expansion started, but many agree that it began in the early 1990s and increased during the Bush administration. Eckel argues that many Cold War scholars point out that the onset of NATO expansion history was in February 1990 during the meeting between US Secretary of State James Baker and Mikhail Gorbachev, the then leader of the Soviet Union¹⁰⁷. According to a National Interest article by Michael Krapon (2020), NATO expansion began during the Clinton administration. Regardless, the expansion eastward by NATO brought about a new reality in the relationship between NATO, the US, and Russia.

The expansion about dissent in Russia – a successor state to the Soviet Union – claimed to have been deceived and backstabbed by the West about their assurances that they would not move an inch to the East¹⁰⁸. The West responded by saying that Russia's deceit claims were propaganda to create anti-Western sentiments, and NATO only made assurance regarding eastward expansion in East Germany. This has since brought up a heated debate. One side claimed the West did make assurances on Eastward expansion, and the other claimed such assurances are fabricated, and no records exist to prove them.

Was Gorbachev Deceived?

Following NATO expansion in the mid-1990s, several Russian leaders, including Boris Yeltsin, Mikhail Gorbachev, Vladimir Putin, and Dmitry Medvedev, have decried a violation of the non-expansion arrangement made

¹⁰⁴ Gordon, Philip H., and James B. Steinberg. "NATO Enlargement: Moving Forward; Expanding the Alliance and Completing Europe's Integration." *Brookings Policy Brief* 90 (2001).

¹⁰⁵ Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger. "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment." *International Politics* 57 (2020): 371-400.

¹⁰⁶ Thalís, Alexander, Benjamin Habib, Stephan Frühling, Andrew O'Neil, and Elizabeth Buchanan. "Threat or Threatened? Russia in the Era of NATO Expansion-AIIA." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, June 3 (2018).

¹⁰⁷ Eckel Mike. "Did the West promise Moscow that NATO would not expand? Well, it's complicated." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Last modified May 19, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/nato-expansion-russia-mislead/31263602.html>

¹⁰⁸ Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger. "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment." *International Politics* 57 (2020): 371-400.



between several Western leaders and Gorbachev during negotiations for the reunification of Germany¹⁰⁹. The West heartily objected to the claims stating that no such deals were ever made and it was all propaganda being spread by the Russian federation¹¹⁰. With both sides sticking to their stories, several historians and political scholars sought to find the truth by studying declassified documents and communication transcripts recorded during the negotiations for the reunification of Germany. In Russia, the claims of deceit by NATO are often framed to accuse Gorbachev of being gullible and failing to ask for a binding written agreement¹¹¹. There is a divided opinion in the West, with some claiming that the West did deceive Russia with talk of non-expansion and the other camp stating that no assurances were made¹¹². Over the years, several declassified documents and transcripts have given insight into what transpired in the 1990-1991 period and why Russia feels deceived.

Transcripts of the meeting between then Soviet leader Gorbachev and then US Secretary of State James Baker on the reunification of Germany show that the issue of expansion of NATO to other Warsaw Pact countries was never discussed or raised¹¹³. The two agreed to have no NATO troops on East Germany, but there was no mention of possible NATO expansion eastwards. However, the National Security Archive article NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard by Savranskaya and Blanton (2017) disagrees with this, arguing that western leaders made a flurry of promises to Gorbachev that NATO would not move even an inch closer eastward towards the USSR. According to the article, declassified documents show that many Western states and their leaders were opposed to the idea of NATO eastwards expansion and relayed the same to Mikhail Gorbachev¹¹⁴. The documents showed that in the meeting with Gorbachev, in which many historians claim no assurances about NATO expansion were made, Baker talked about NATO not moving an inch towards the USSR thrice in the meeting and assured Gorbachev that any expansion by NATO would be unacceptable (Savranskaya & Blanton, 2017). Despite all these assurances in the meetings, no binding pact or agreement

¹⁰⁹ Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger. "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment." *International Politics* 57 (2020): 371-400.

¹¹⁰ Shiffrinson, Joshua R. Itzkowitz. "Deal or no deal? The end of the Cold War and the US offer to limit NATO expansion." *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 7-44.

¹¹¹ Palazhchenko, Pavel. "Mikhail Gorbachev and the NATO Enlargement Debate: Then and Now." *Hamilton and Spohr, Exiting the Cold War*: 443.

¹¹² Shiffrinson, Joshua R. Itzkowitz. "Deal or no deal? The end of the Cold War and the US offer to limit NATO expansion." *International Security* 40, no. 4 (2016): 7-44.

¹¹³ Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger. "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment." *International Politics* 57 (2020): 371-400.

¹¹⁴ Palazhchenko, Pavel. "Mikhail Gorbachev and the NATO Enlargement Debate: Then and Now." *Hamilton and Spohr, Exiting the Cold War*: 443.



was tabled between the two sides, with many citing that NATO expansionism or the fall of the Soviet Union was at the time unthinkable.

Although no binding agreements were made between Gorbachev and Western leaders, their statements and assurances made many people in Russia believe that NATO had no intention of expanding eastwards¹¹⁵. Their assurances were a strategy aimed at getting Gorbachev to agree to the terms of German unification planned by the Western countries, and they had no intention of keeping their promises. In this sense, the Russian leadership is right to claim that Gorbachev and Russia, in general, were deceived. Western nations were aware of Russian concerns about its interests in Eastern Europe but chose to proceed with the expansion. The expansion resulted in Russian mistrust of its Western counterparts and a conflict of interests that would define the relationship between the two for the better part of the early 21st Century.

Current level of situation

NATO's eastward expansion soured relations with Russia who were displeased with the intervention of Western countries in their perceived rightful sphere of influence¹¹⁶. At the dawn of the 21st century, NATO embarked on a new phase of expansion that revitalized mutual mistrust and suspicion between Russia and Western Europe and America. Motivated by Russia's weak position economically and politically, NATO developed a 'winner takes all' stance that saw them encroach further east and closer to Russian territory. All Russia could do was complain about the actions of NATO since they were in no position of authority. This all changed when Russia's economy recovered in the early 2000s thanks to high energy prices and the stabilization of its internal political environment¹¹⁷. Russia now took a more assertive position internationally, especially in speaking against the West, causing a rise in sentiment in NATO that Russia had gone back to its traditional principles of authoritarian rule and imperialism. Russia intervened militarily in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 to counter the Western influence and thwart the perceived efforts of NATO and the West to marginalize Russia and throw it into oblivion¹¹⁸. The West responded by accusations of unprovoked aggression, imposing sanctions against Russia, and ending interactions with Russia, bringing NATO and Russia on the verge of a new Cold War.

¹¹⁵ Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger. "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment." *International Politics* 57 (2020): 371-400.

¹¹⁶ Kühn, Ulrich. "US-Russian relations and the future security of Europe." *Arms Control Today* 47, no. 1 (2017): 18-25.

¹¹⁷ Smotradeev, Mikhail. "Eastward NATO Expansion: Did the West Deceive Mikhail Gorbachev?" Delfi.ru. Last modifies December 2017.

¹¹⁸ Thalís, Alexander, Benjamin Habib, Stephan Frühling, Andrew O'Neil, and Elizabeth Buchanan. "Threat or Threatened? Russia in the Era of NATO Expansion-AIIA." *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, June 3 (2018).



NATO's expansion eastward has increased tensions between Russia and the collective Western Nations and the US. According to a TASS report, Russian President Vladimir Putin argued that Russia viewed NATO's expansion as a security threat and a violation of trust, calling it a "spat on Russian interests"¹¹⁹. By moving closer to Russia, NATO reduces the flight time of its missiles to Moscow, inching closer to under 10 minutes which is a significant threat to Russia's security. This threat has caused President Putin and Russia to respond in kind, launching a diplomatic offensive against the West, often accusing them of imperialistic behaviors and trying to isolate Russia¹²⁰. The expansion of NATO to the east happened when relations between Russia and the West were relatively good. The expansion made Putin declare that the West only cares about their interests without considering the interests of other nations or their relationship with them¹²¹. This killed any hopes that Russia had of normalizing relations with the West and began the onset of Russian dissent of Western countries. Russian actions, especially the military interventions in Georgia and Ukraine, have their roots in mistrust of the West due to eastward expansion.

Currently, Russia-NATO relations are defined by accusations of imperialism and bellicose against each other and constant games of chicken in Eastern Europe and over the Baltic and the Black Seas (Trenin, 2016). Russian military jets and bombers frequently violate the airspace of NATO countries. In retaliation, the West also gets their planes and warships into or near Russian territory and vice versa (Trenin, 2016). Roache opines that NATO expansion resulted in the growth of anti-western sentiments and nostalgia for the Soviet Union in Russia¹²². Baltic States that opted to join NATO are the worst affected by Russian practices of destabilization and intimidation through military exercises, cyber warfare, and disinformation¹²³. There have been numerous efforts to normalize relations between the West and Russia and promote peace, but they all hit a wall due to the conflicting interests of the two parties. NATO perceives its actions of bolstering its military presence in the east as necessary to protect the Baltic States against a belligerent Russia. At the same time, Russia views NATO's actions as a violation of their interests and a threat

¹¹⁹ Russian News Agency. "By enlarging NATO, West 'spat upon' Russia's interests despite good relations, Putin says," TASS. Last modified, June 10, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1300975>

¹²⁰ Menon, Rajan, and William Ruger. "NATO enlargement and US grand strategy: a net assessment." *International Politics* 57 (2020): 371-400.

¹²¹ Russian News Agency. "By enlarging NATO, West 'spat upon' Russia's interests despite good relations, Putin says," TASS. Last modified, June 10, 2021. <https://tass.com/politics/1300975>

¹²² Roache, Madeline. "Breaking down the complicated relationship between Russia and NATO." *Time* (2019).

¹²³ Farkas, Evelyn. "The Future of NATO: New Challenges and Opportunities." *GMFUS. org. The German Marshall* (2019).



to their sovereignty¹²⁴. With no side willing to compromise and communication between them worsening, the current situation is likely to be upheld in the foreseeable future.

Future relations between NATO, Russia, and the USA

The hope for good relations between NATO, Russia, and the USA In the future looks bleak. Further disagreements and confrontations between Russia and NATO and the US are expected since no side is making any productive steps towards normalizations of relations. During the Trump administration, it seemed that a breakthrough would be made due to Trump's efforts to appease President Putin, his criticism of NATO, and his efforts to withdraw American efforts and funding for the defense of Europe^{125,126}. However, no significant headway was made due to opposition at home, Trump's erratic nature, and 'Make America Great Again.' The Biden administration has, on the other hand, promised to take a harsher stance on Russia. President Biden has imposed several new sanctions against Russia to dissuade Russia from involvement in Eastern Europe and interference in US and Western politics¹²⁷. President Biden has, on numerous occasions, vocalized his disdain for Russian and its leader Vladimir Putin, calling him a dictator and alluding that he has no soul¹²⁸. Putin's personal and political attacks are set to worsen the relations between the two heads of state and reduce the likelihood of negotiations or improved relations between the US and Russia.

Western European countries are increasingly worried about Russian interference in Western affairs through hybrid tactics such as cyber-warfare, misinformation, and proxy wars¹²⁹. This has led to a renewal of efforts to create a Western Europe anti-Russian pact. Taking advantage of this, President Biden has spoken about bolstering the military alliance between the US and NATO to gain an edge over Russia. They are also drumming up lobbying efforts to admit more Eastern European countries, including Ukraine and Georgia, into NATO, which Putin is strongly opposed to. NATO has increased the number and frequency of military exercises and war games close to Russian territory and plans to increase their scope in the future further. Russia has openly objected to the behavior of the

¹²⁴ DW. "Putin promises countermeasures in response to NATO expansion." Last modified November 11, 2016. <https://www.dw.com/en/putin-promises-countermeasures-in-response-to-nato-expansion/a-36465534>

¹²⁵ Kühn, Ulrich. "US-Russian relations and the future security of Europe." *Arms Control Today* 47, no. 1 (2017): 18-25.

¹²⁶ Pothier, Fabrice. "Five challenges that NATO must overcome to stay relevant. IISS Analysis, 4 April April 2019." (2019).

¹²⁷ Seriola Carlotta. "The Future of US-Russia Relations Post-2020." *Global Risk Insights*. (2020). <https://globalriskinsights.com/2020/11/the-future-of-us-russia-relations-post-2020/>

¹²⁸ Seriola Carlotta. "The Future of US-Russia Relations Post-2020." *Global Risk Insights*. (2020). <https://globalriskinsights.com/2020/11/the-future-of-us-russia-relations-post-2020/>

¹²⁹ Farkas, Evelyn. "The Future of NATO: New Challenges and Opportunities." *GMFUS. org. The German Marshall* (2019).



US and Western countries and has taken retaliatory measures¹³⁰. It has continually developed weapons to gain a strategic edge against its Western counterparts and is also seeking military partnerships that will counter the might of NATO¹³¹. Russia is also increasing its military exercises in the territory near Ukraine and the borders with Eastern European countries supported by NATO as a show of force¹³². Anti-Western sentiment in Russia has also increased, and there are fewer talks of normalization of relations with the West.

Conclusion

Further deterioration of relations between NATO, Russia, and the US is expected in the future. The US administration is increasing sanctions, taking a more aggressive stance against Russia, and lobbying for the expansion of NATO to create a front against Russia. There is growing support for an anti-Russian stance in Western European countries and calls for collaboration with the US to counter a belligerent Russia. On the other hand, Russia is developing its military potential and increasing anti-Western sentiment in retaliation to the actions of Western countries to marginalize it on the international stage. Each side is garnering support from other countries to protect their future interests, best signaling that relations will likely worsen. China is now on the rise economically and politically. With US and Western countries' perceptions of an assertive China as a threat, the focus is shifting away from Russia and China¹³³. This new focus on China will perhaps lead to more attention and resources being placed against China, pacifying the relations with Russia.

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¹³⁰ [DW. "Putin promises countermeasures in response to NATO expansion." Last modified November 11, 2016. https://www.dw.com/en/putin-promises-countermeasures-in-response-to-nato-expansion/a-36465534](https://www.dw.com/en/putin-promises-countermeasures-in-response-to-nato-expansion/a-36465534)

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Kühn, Ulrich. "US-Russian relations and the future security of Europe." *Arms Control Today* 47, no. 1 (2017): 18-25.

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