

Editor: Diane Labrosse

Commissioning Editor: Seth Offenbach

Production Editor: George Fujii

**Marc Trachtenberg, "The United States and the NATO Non-extension Assurances of 1990: New Light on an Old Problem?"** *International Security* 45:3 (2021): 162-203. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00395](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00395)

Published by ISSF on 11 November 2021

<https://issforum.org/to/iar151>

Review by Julie Garey, Northeastern University

---

The November 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in myriad discussions about German reunification. In addition to questions about the domestic future of Germany, concerns over who would be responsible for Germany's security and stability and with whom the new German state would ally persisted. Marc Trachtenberg revisits the February 1990 meeting wherein United States Secretary of State James Baker assured the Soviet Union that the U.S. would not support NATO's eastward expansion if Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev would accept its presence in a newly reunified Germany. While both the Soviet Union and the United States expressed an understanding of the consequences of leaving Germany to unilaterally reestablish its own security, Baker's statement was remarkable. Perhaps even more remarkable, though, was the Soviet Union's willingness to accept this condition knowing that it would likely alter the global balance of power, at least in the short term. Thirty years later, Germany remains a successful example of reunification as a democratic state reintegrated into the international system. A key exception from what was envisioned in that February meeting, however, is that in the same thirty-year period NATO grew from sixteen to thirty member states – it expanded significantly further than Baker's "one inch" east promise.<sup>1</sup> The United States' ultimate decision to support and advocate in favor of NATO expansion post-Cold War was met with Russian condemnation which persists to this day.

Foreign policy scholars, however, tend toward different interpretations of American support for expansion despite the February 1990 statement. Trachtenberg concisely presents a thorough review of the existing authoritative literature with a particular focus on three existing claims used to argue against the prevailing Russian viewpoint of the United States' broken promise: first, the American assurances only applied to East Germany<sup>2</sup>; second, in lieu of a formal signed

---

<sup>1</sup> "Record of Conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker in Moscow. (Excerpts) | National Security Archive," accessed July 22, 2021, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16117-document-06-record-conversation-between>.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Elise Sarotte, "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion." *Foreign Affairs* 93:5 (2014): 90–97, accessed July 27, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2014-08-11/broken-promise>; Sarotte, letter to the editor (exchange with Mark Kramer), "No Such Promise," *Foreign Affairs* 9:6 (2014): 208-209, accessed July 26, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24483985>; Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward? Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the Origin

agreement, there was nothing binding about any non-expansion assurances<sup>3</sup>; and third, American policymakers did not intend to mislead their Soviet counterparts by making a promise they intended to break.<sup>4</sup> These claims, Trachtenberg asserts, are unsatisfactory in that “broad issues of interpretation turn on fairly narrow historical claims” (165). The consequences of these different perspectives are at the heart of Trachtenberg’s analysis. He also introduces new and important details to Baker’s statement and the subsequent interpretations in supplementing the existing literature. Although understanding the conditions under which this deviation took place is critical, Trachtenberg argues in favor of a re-examination of both primary and secondary source information and the existing paradigms through which this statement is interpreted. This is necessary, he posits, to answer the ultimate question of whether the U.S. intentionally or unintentionally misled the Soviet Union in that pivotal moment.

Whether Secretary Baker meant East Germany or Eastern Europe extends beyond a simple definitional omission. Those who argue that Baker almost certainly meant the soon-to-be reestablished German border do so based on two propositions. First, there was widespread belief that, in early 1990, no one was thinking of a potential Warsaw Pact dissolution; although significant domestic changes were underway in states like Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, faith in the counter-alliance to NATO was strong. Thus, according to proponents of this conclusion, the U.S. had no focus and no real interest in trying to expand the alliance beyond Germany in 1990.<sup>5</sup> The second proposition is based on the topic of the negotiations themselves.<sup>6</sup> Gorbachev and others recalled how reunification talks almost exclusively focused on Germany. The belief that Baker was only referring to East Germany was bolstered also by the tangible negotiation outcome: the Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany, also known as the Two Plus Four Agreement, signed in September 1990. The agreement did not include any reference to the non-expansion of NATO, and because it was believed that Secretary Baker was only referring to East Germany in his statement, any alleged promise would have been superseded by the September treaty. Both of these propositions led scholars to conclude Baker’s statement did not constitute a broken promise to the Soviet Union. It was only because of changes to the international system and the dissolution of the Soviet Union that NATO expanded; this certainly could not have been what the United States initially intended. Trachtenberg challenges each proposition by exploring both the chronology of events in and around the same time and statements made by Germany’s Federal Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, and others. He provides several instances wherein the future of the Warsaw Pact was not only questioned but also hypothesized to be on the decline as support for Communism waned, as well as evidence that Eastern Europe as a whole was on everyone’s minds. He concedes the accuracy of claims regarding the extraordinarily narrow focus of reunification negotiations, but argues this is not evidence in and of itself as

---

of Russian Resentment toward NATO Enlargement in February 1990,” *Diplomatic History* 34:1 (2010): 119-140, accessed July 27, 2021, <https://academic.oup.com/dh/article/34/1/119/379802>.

<sup>3</sup> Rodric Braithwaite, *Across the Moscow River: the World Turned Upside Down* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002); Kristina Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting? The ‘NATO Enlargement Question’ in the Triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow Diplomacy of 1990–1991,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14:4 (2012): 4-54, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26924149>; Michael Rühle, “NATO Enlargement and Russia: Discerning Fact from Fiction,” *American Foreign Policy Interests* 36:4 (2014): 234–239, accessed July 27, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10803920.2014.947879>.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Kramer, “The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia,” *Washington Quarterly* 32:2 (April 2009), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600902773248>.

<sup>5</sup> Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Kristina Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting? The ‘NATO Enlargement Question’ in the Triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow Diplomacy of 1990–1991,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14:4 (2012): 4-54, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26924149>; Vladislav Zubok, “With His Back Against the Wall: Gorbachev, Soviet Demise, and German Reunification,” *Cold War History* 14:4 (2014): 619-645, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2014.950251>.

to the locus of Baker's statement or the Soviet Union's interpretation of events. The existing broken promise propositions, he argues, are not definitive; rather, Trachtenberg asserts that based on the existing records it is not possible to determine whether there was an explicit promise not to expand into Eastern Europe and if so, whether that promise was broken.

The second claim bolstering the defense of American policymakers' support for NATO expansion after the February reassurance is linked to interpretations of international law.<sup>7</sup> As Trachtenberg details, both the degree to which diplomacy can be binding absent a codified legal document in general is an unsettled question. However, arguments as to whether the United States did not break its promise to the Soviet Union do not quite rise to the threshold of the larger debate regarding the degree to which states are bound in international law. The belief that each side, at least to some extent, can be trusted is paramount to diplomatic negotiations. As negotiations unfold, states engage in different behaviors to signal the degree to which they believe their statements and the statements of their partners to be binding. Trachtenberg highlights the explicitness with which the United States' promise was made, the ways in which other policymakers reiterated Baker's statement, and the context in which the assurance was made as evidence the U.S. may have made a promise it did not intend to keep. There is strong evidence for the first two elements, but, as Trachtenberg notes, the third element is less clear. Although Genscher was clearer in his belief that the assurance applied to all of eastern Europe, Baker did not explicitly state whether he meant the entire eastern European region – despite the fact that he had many opportunities to do so after the February meeting. On the other hand, “there is little evidence to show that Gorbachev and Shevardnadze at the time actually saw them as applying to Eastern Europe as a whole” (189). Gorbachev's later reflections on the February meeting muddied the water as to the context of Baker's statement and the interpretations of each side. The third and final claim grapples with whether American officials were negotiating in bad faith and intentionally misled their Soviet and Russian counterparts.<sup>8</sup> This is perhaps the most challenging question to answer for both proponents and opponents of the broken promise theory, and although Trachtenberg highlights several key factors informing the debate, he too does not speak definitively to the merit of this argument.

Trachtenberg's exploration of the claims made in support of the United States' actions after the fateful February 1990 assurance clearly demonstrates the need for additional scrutiny of existing analyses, particularly in light of current U.S.-Russia relations. In some ways, German reunification was only the tip of the iceberg; the international system evolved so dramatically and rapidly during this time that it is unlikely that policymakers on any side knew what was in store for the post-Cold War era even if they doubted the viability of peaceful German reunification, the Soviet Union, or the Warsaw Pact. The lesson for scholars to be drawn from this analysis is to avoid situating events in altered or irrelevant contexts to draw conclusions and explanations for behavior. Perhaps more important, however, are the lessons for policymakers and for those tasked with the future of diplomacy.

In the context of international law, this discussion is unlikely to shift prevailing definitions and beliefs about what constitutes 'binding' which, as Trachtenberg notes, is outside of the scope of his analysis. Conversely, concerns about the perception of bad-faith actors, or actual bad-faith actors, based in historical events such as these must be considered. The third claim as to whether the United States acted in bad faith or not may be entirely unanswerable given the empirical evidence, but in some respects it may be irrelevant if contemporary Russian policymakers view it as such. Abandonment of other agreements or a failure to ensure the fulfillment of assurances in other areas, such as nuclear weapons, will only exacerbate these perceptions. Since 1990, NATO has grown as the U.S. and its Western European allies welcomed former Warsaw Pact and Soviet satellite states into the alliance's ranks. This rapid expansion has been

---

<sup>7</sup> Kristina Spohr, “Precluded or Precedent-Setting? The ‘NATO Enlargement Question’ in the Triangular Bonn-Washington-Moscow Diplomacy of 1990–1991,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14:4 (2012): 4-54, accessed July 26, 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26924149>.

<sup>8</sup> Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, “Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion,” *International Security* 40:4 (April 2016): 7-44, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00236](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00236), as cited in Trachtenberg.

met with condemnation by Russia officials and at times jeopardized progress in both U.S.-Russia relations and NATO-Russia relations.

When the heads of state gathered in Brussels during the June 2021 NATO Summit, the question of two more Eastern European states – Ukraine and Georgia – featured prominently on the agenda. These aspiring member-states, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina, are not the only area wherein NATO might look to expand. Trachtenberg’s analysis suggests that perhaps the Russian belief the United States broke its 1990 promise should merit further consideration as the United States and the alliance attempt to move forward in building relations with Russia, which may be threatened by continued NATO expansion. The importance of the questions Trachtenberg raises spans well beyond ensuring the most accurate interpretation of events and the most nonbiased historical record; indeed, as Trachtenberg notes, the future of U.S.-Russia relations and the NATO alliance is at stake. Moreover, answers to these questions will inform the ways in which scholars approach diplomacy, strategy, and international relations theory.

**Julie Garey**, Ph.D., is an assistant teaching professor of political science at Northeastern University and author of *The US Role in NATO’s Survival After the Cold War* (Palgrave, 2020).

©2021 The Authors | [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 United States License](#)