



A production of H-Diplo with the journals *Security Studies*, *International Security*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, and the International Studies Association's Security Studies Section (ISSF).

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**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* 40:4 (Spring 2016): 7-44. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00236](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00236)**

Review by **Timothy Andrews Sayle**, University of Toronto

Published by ISSF on 18 November 2016

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“The mills of historical research grind slowly,” Yale historian Hajo Holborn wrote in the early 1950s. Holborn made his observations with reference to the German delegation to Versailles in 1919. While it would have been “no doubt desirable” to the Germans to have “set into motion an objective study of the causes of the world war” to help them push back against Article 231, the “war guilt” clause, there was no hope such a history could be produced in time.<sup>1</sup>

But nearly 100 years after Versailles, and more than six decades from when Holborn put pen to paper, the grindstones are spinning faster and faster. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been a tremendous - if imperfect - increase in access to previously classified archival records, including documents related to the end of the Cold War, German unification, and the Soviet collapse.<sup>2</sup> The puzzle that has produced the most grist is

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<sup>1</sup> Hajo Holborn, “Diplomats and Diplomacy in the Early Weimar Republic,” in *The Diplomats, 1919-1939*, ed. Gordon Alexander Craig and Felix Gilbert (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953).

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, even before researchers began to make their *Freedom of Information Act* and Mandatory Declassification Review requests at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library, the general outline of American policy and diplomacy was publicly available. In 1995, Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice published a detailed account of the

whether the United States promised the Soviet Union that NATO would not expand to include states in Eastern Europe. The issue of a broken promise is not only a matter for historians (if anything ever is), but a matter of disagreement between Russia and the allies of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Russian leaders claim that NATO's broken promise necessitated Russian actions that NATO, in turn, views as unprovoked and bellicose. Meanwhile, American officials insist that no such pledge was made. Students of the subject might have been forgiven for thinking that Mary Sarotte had essentially written the last word on the matter in 2010 when she argued, convincingly, that "for a moment in 1990, the Soviet Union could have struck a deal with the United States, but it did not."<sup>3</sup>

Enter Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin, who challenges both the scholarly orthodoxy and the claims of US and NATO officials by arguing that "Russian assertions of a 'broken promise' regarding NATO expansion have merit" (40). Amidst the diplomacy of German reunification, he writes, the United States offered a quid pro quo: No NATO expansion in return for German unification. In Shiffrin's telling, the American assurance against NATO expansion was purposeful and intentional; it was not a misinterpretation by Moscow. It was also broken. Throughout 1990, other American assurances about the future of European security all reaffirmed the deal. "Russians leaders," therefore, "are essentially correct in claiming that U.S. efforts to expand NATO since the 1990s 'violate the 'spirit' of the 1990 negotiations" (11).

Shiffrin's major contribution to the debate is to introduce international relations theory - specifically work on informal bargaining and agreements. He points out that the core of the debate over whether or not a pledge exists "is the question of what constitutes an agreement in world politics" (16). Must there be a treaty, flashbulbs, and press releases for an agreement to be said to exist? Of course not. The stuff of diplomacy, Shiffrin argues, includes incremental informal bargaining and spoken assurances. Any informal assurances that US officials offered to the Soviet Union must be considered when judging whether the Russians are correct to say they received a pledge of NATO non-expansion.

After introducing his theoretical lens, Shiffrin guides readers through a capsule history of the diplomacy of 1990. With reference to archival records, he shows that U.S. officials repeatedly offered their Soviet interlocutors verbal assurances that NATO would not expand eastward. Memcon by memcon, Shiffrin makes a case that Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev's concessions on German unification were lubricated by American informal assurances, made especially in February 1990, that NATO would not expand. Most of the evidence marshalled here will be familiar to students of the subject; what is new and important in this section

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swirling diplomacy of German unification: Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed: A Study in Statecraft* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). In 1998 George H. W. Bush and Brent Scowcroft published a joint foreign-policy memoir, *George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf, 1998). Anyone who has researched at the Bush Library will recognize that Bush and Scowcroft relied heavily on the archival record to write their account, even if they eschewed footnotes:

<sup>3</sup> Mary Elise Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward? Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the Origins of Russian Resentment toward NATO Enlargement in February 1990," *Diplomatic History* 34:1 (January 2010): 139. As the article under review provides a lengthy and excellent literature review, including, scholarly and journalistic writings, as well as written pieces and speeches by government officials, I will not attempt to encapsulate it here. I urge readers to consult the original article.

is Shiffrinson's argument that these repeated informal assurances that NATO would not expand eastward are themselves the pledge that the Russians insist was broken.

It is worth a reminder that the question driving Shiffrinson's analysis is concerned with NATO's later expansion into the states of Eastern Europe, not NATO's relationship with the territory of the former German Democratic Republic. The agreement regarding NATO and a unified Germany were the focus of diplomatic wrangling in 1990, and other scholars have put the inclusion of East German territory in NATO and later expansion on a continuum. Hence Sarotte's argument that "Germany united and NATO began to move eastward."<sup>4</sup> Shiffrinson, takes a different tack however, arguing that the terms for East Germany's inclusion in NATO - a 'special military status' - actually buttressed the Soviet belief that NATO would not move further East, i.e. to include new member states.

Shiffrinson might have left things here, arguing that the United States made informal assurances before breaking them later on. But his argument runs deeper. In 1990, United States officials spoke frequently of a new role for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) of which the USSR was a participant. They rhapsodized about a more political, less military role for NATO. This rhetoric, Shiffrinson argues, served to confirm the assurances against expansion made in February 1990. But while Washington whispered these sweet nothings to the Kremlin, the "Bush administration looked to use the collapse of Soviet power in Central-Eastern Europe to enhance U.S. preeminence on the continent" (35).

The notion that the strong United States did what it could while the weak Soviet Union suffered what it must fits uneasily with the popular memory of superpower cooperation at the end of the Cold War.<sup>5</sup> But it is accurate: By insisting that a unified Germany's place could only be in NATO, maintaining NATO's military command structure (with an American officer as Supreme Allied Commander, Europe), and pressing back against European and Canadian plans to dramatically reorganize NATO and European security, the United States maintained and improved its commanding position in Europe. Shiffrinson does not spend time explaining why the US sought such dominance in Europe but that is not the main thrust of his piece and would require another essay. Shiffrinson's point, overall, is that American policy remained predicated on maximizing U.S. interests, not cooperation with the Soviet Union, even after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But is there a connection between this ambitious American program in Europe and the informal assurances against NATO expansion? Shiffrinson thinks so; he sees "growing evidence that the United States was insincere when offering the Soviet Union informal assurances against NATO expansion" (34). While he concedes there is no evidence that in 1990 the U.S. was actively planning to expand NATO into Eastern Europe, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker refused to rule out expansion in a June press conference and wrote about the future possibility of expansion in July.

Overall, Shiffrinson's argument about informal assurances is engaging and valuable: it opens the aperture of the debate, allowing for a wider focus for evaluating whether assurances were made. Yet the argument leaves the reader with a nagging feeling. Just what were those informal verbal assurances against NATO expansion that other U.S. policy seemed to reaffirm? Baker, on February 9, made "iron-clad guarantees that NATO's

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>5</sup> Readers will recognize a phrase adapted from Thucydides.

jurisdiction or forces would not move eastward” and that “there would be no extension of NATO’s jurisdiction for forces of NATO one inch to the east” (23). That same day, Robert Gates, the Deputy National Security Adviser, spoke to the head of the KGB, Vladimir Kruchkov, of a proposal “under which a united Germany would be associated with NATO, but in which NATO troops would move no further east than they now were?” (24). Shiffrinson argues, reasonably, that when the United States promised NATO would not expand “eastward,” it can be safely assumed that the Americans were making a blanket promise that NATO would not move into the states of Eastern Europe (25).

But it is not at all clear that the Americans were speaking about anything other than the location of NATO troops in a unified Germany.<sup>6</sup> In February, the Americans were focused almost exclusively on Germany’s place in the alliance, not the alliance’s place in Europe. A 2014 interview with Gorbachev both supports and contradicts Shiffrinson’s argument. While Gorbachev did say that NATO expansion was “a violation of the spirit of the statements and assurances made to us in 1990,” he does not argue that he received an assurance against NATO expansion. He is unambiguous: “The topic of NATO expansion was not discussed at all.”<sup>7</sup> Gorbachev’s remarks seem to confirm that the discussion in February 1990 was about limits on NATO forces in Germany – no one, on either side it seems, thought they were talking about the expansion of NATO to include other states. As Shiffrinson points out, some of the U.S. memoranda of conversation are still partially sanitized; perhaps the fully declassified record will settle the matter. In the meantime, a wise Russian propagandist might reframe the whole debate as a broken German promise, for the Germans certainly did speak about limiting NATO expansion into Eastern Europe – a promise they were not in a position to make or keep.

Shiffrinson’s article might have given more attention to Gorbachev’s May 1990 visit to Washington. Up until that summit, after all, the Americans did not think they had achieved Soviet acquiescence to a unified Germany’s place in NATO. In May, President George H. W. Bush used Gorbachev’s rhetoric of self-determination to manoeuvre the Soviet leader into ceding that the choice of Germany’s continued membership in NATO was a choice for Germans alone.<sup>8</sup> That diplomatic tactic might have been ineffective if the leaders of the U.S. and the Soviet Union had previously agreed to limit the right of other states to accede to the North Atlantic Treaty. This is only to say that there is more work to be done to establish the “spirit” of 1990” as it was understood by both the Americans and the soon-to-be-Russians.

Despite these quibbles, “Deal or No Deal” is a model for scholars interested in combining the history, theory, and policy of international relations. There are few topics in 2016 more fraught with political baggage than arguments over NATO expansion and Russian intentions. Yet Shiffrinson works his way thoroughly through the existing literature, presents his argument clearly, and then effectively displays his evidence in support of a

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<sup>6</sup> The matter is made even more complicated by what Philip Zelikow and Condoleezza Rice call Baker’s “lawyerly” use of the phrase “jurisdiction.” Zelikow and Rice, *Germany Unified and Europe Transformed*, 180. NATO has no “jurisdiction” in any meaningful sense of the term, and this is not a phrase that NATO officials in any allied country used often, if ever, to discuss the Treaty provisions up until Baker’s use.

<sup>7</sup> Maxim Kórshunov, “Mikhail Gorbachev: I Am against All Walls,” *Russia behind the Headlines*, October 16, 2014, [http://rbth.com/international/2014/10/16/mikhail\\_gorbachev\\_i\\_am\\_against\\_all\\_walls\\_40673.html](http://rbth.com/international/2014/10/16/mikhail_gorbachev_i_am_against_all_walls_40673.html).

<sup>8</sup> Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 282.

reasonable and plausible argument. Theory is key to the article, but it serves to illuminate evidence rather than to do too much heavy lifting.

Shiffrinson concludes with a call for more work on the subject, and offers some possible policy solutions to the current quandary. Most importantly, he warns that “Russia’s leaders may be telling the truth when they claim that Russian actions are driven by mistrust” (43). This warning is valid whether one agrees with Shiffrinson that the United States purposefully gave non-expansion assurances, or concludes that either the Soviets misinterpreted the American position at the time or Russians have since. American policymakers who read the article might be reminded of former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s warning to empathize with their enemy (or in this case, not enemy but ‘strategic partner’).<sup>9</sup> In fact, even if policymakers disagree entirely with this claim, there may be some benefit in at least appearing to empathize with Moscow’s strategic predicament. Shiffrinson is right to worry that the toothpaste might be out of the tube: “the optimal moment for reassurance may have lapsed” (44). So is there any point in historians continuing to grind away?

Yes. Shiffrinson has lit a new path forward by reframing the history of American policy toward Europe at the end of the Cold War. Consider, for a moment, whether any armchair grand strategist would wish to play the turn of Russia in a contemporary game of Risk. The point is hardly to condone or excuse Russian policy; it is instead to emphasize that a policy of U.S. supremacy in Europe was not only the result of the collapse of Soviet power but an active policy, pursued in spite of obstacles. For better or worse, it has come at the cost of the Moscow’s influence. What drove U.S. policymakers to not only maintain but increase American power and influence on the continent? A vague quest for advantage and maximizing undefined interests? The tethers of sunk costs and a lack of creativity? Or continued suspicions of Moscow and a conviction that only American security guarantees could prevent Europeans from once again dragging the world to bloody war? What were U.S. policymakers’ intentions, and what were their calculations? To gauge what is possible in Europe today we need a fuller understanding of both the ambitions and fears that drove American policymakers at the end of the Cold War.

**Timothy Andrews Sayle** is Assistant Professor in the Department of History and a Senior Fellow at the Bill Graham Centre for Contemporary International History at the University of Toronto. He is also an associate of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University. His research on NATO, Canadian-American relations, and intelligence issues has been published in the *International Journal*, *Cold War History*, *Canadian Military History*, and *Intelligence & National Security*.

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<sup>9</sup> Errol Morris, “The Fog of War: Transcript [of the 2003 film: *The Fog Of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*],” undated, [http://www.errolmorris.com/film/fow\\_transcript.html](http://www.errolmorris.com/film/fow_transcript.html).