



ISSUE BRIEF

No. 335

April 2022

NATO Expansion: The Other Side of the Story



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Introduction

Two episodes regarding NATO expansion have caught the popular imagination and characterised opinions held by many— the first is the now legendary ‘will not move one inch further to the East’ assurance given by the US Secretary of State, James Baker, to the Soviet Leader Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990¹ and the other is the speech delivered by Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Munich Security Conference in 2007² wherein he railed against the NATO expansion and how it was perceived as a security threat by Russia, thus presciently warning about the current ‘special military operation’ in Ukraine. In addition, Paul Mearsheimer’s talk on “Uncommon Core: The Causes and Consequences of the Ukraine Crisis” in June 2015 at the University of Chicago went viral on YouTube³, nearly seven years after the event, as the Russia-Ukraine crisis edged closer to war. cursory reading of all of these ‘unequivocally’ puts the blame for the crisis on the US’

Key Points

- The history of NATO’s expansion deserves to be re-visited from the European perspective to give a more balanced view of events that have shaped the 21st century thus far.
- Throughout its history Russia/Soviet Union has been an expansionist state.
- Its past record of aggression against weaker states inspires little confidence among central and east European countries.
- These states have looked upon NATO as a stabilising force for European security.
- Events involving Russian military interventions of the past two decades provide the rationale for NATO expansion.



arrogant hegemony in a unipolar world of the 1990s and 2000s and its/NATO's expansionist policies which led to the incorporation of 14 additional Central/East European countries into NATO 1999 onwards, including the erstwhile Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR) of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia.

As these beliefs, which are based on the Russian misgivings—about NATO expansionism and the perceived deceit by the US during the period of a weakened Russia—have been so articulately advanced by several analysts, it behooves a deeper look at the other side of the story. History is surely anything but a definite science and thus open to interpretation. However, if based on a one-sided narrative, it is more likely to be inaccurate than a look at events from multiple angles.

The aim of this paper is to view the historical events concerning NATO's expansion from the European standpoint and draw a more balanced picture of the events that led to it.

Historical Perspective

Russia has historically been nothing if not an expansionist power.—Emerging from the small Muscovy State, it went on to become one of the largest empires in history, encompassing most of the Eurasian landmass including Alaska at one point.⁴ The vast country, recognised as Russia today, did not come about as a fortuitous event but was a result of relentless campaigns of aggression against smaller states starting in the medieval period and lasting up to the modern era.

In the 20th century, the core Marxist-Communist belief that, 'Proletariat of the world is one community' and the 'concept of nation is a Bourgeoisie creation',⁵ was best illustrated in Stalin's renowned work— *Marxism and the National Question*⁶, in which, the very notion of nationalism is panned as a 'Bourgeoisie' concept and lays the foundation of internationalism, or in more realistic terms, one-party rule. In this vein Stalin wrote, "*...to unite locally the workers of all nationalities of Russia into single, integral collective bodies, to unite these collective bodies into a single party—such is the task...Therefore, the national type of organisation is a school of national narrow-mindedness and stagnation...The path of "compromise" must therefore be discarded as utopian and harmful...There is no middle course: principles triumph, they do not "compromise"...Thus, the principle of international solidarity of the workers is an essential element in the solution of the national question...*".

These notions led to the multiple wars of assimilation, fought by the Soviet Red Army against forces of nationalism in several distinct nationalities, which became a part of the Union of



Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) ruled by the central power of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU), though retaining notional territorial sovereignty. Ukraine, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan and others were incorporated into the USSR within the first few years of the October Revolution of 1917. Nor did it end there.

The infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, commonly known as the 'Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact'⁷, and its secret protocols, which came to light only after the Nazi defeat in 1945 resulting in the capture of Nazi archives, laid the grounds for the Soviet invasion of the Baltic states and their incorporation as SSRs in 1939-1940, the Soviet threat of aggression against Romania and the creation of the Moldovan SSR in 1940 as also the Soviet invasion of Poland and its division between Nazi and Soviet areas of influence in 1939 and later the entire territory of Poland under the Soviets after 1945, a condition that prevailed till 1991. Many of these invasions were followed by purges which led to millions of killings as a result of judicial executions, ethnic cleansing and population transfers.

The period during and between the Great Wars may be glossed over as a period of immense global turmoil when the world was yet to figure out a global order and codified international law based on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations. It did so in the post-war period which held hope of peace. But that did not deter the Soviets from militarily intervening in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland again in 1980-81. The entire so-called "Eastern Bloc" was brought under and stayed under the Soviet thumb, not so much by ideological affinity alone but a large dose of military threat and aggression as well. This cultivated fear, distrust and hatred for the USSR, not only in the minds of the Western Bloc countries, but also the Soviet allies.

Dissolution of the Soviet Union: 1991

Figure 1: NATO, Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact in 1990



Source: <https://www.geoawesomeness.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NATO-Russia-Warsaw-Pact-122815.png>

The fall of the Berlin Wall on 09 November 1989, set in motion a set of events that changed the course of history, the first being the end of the Cold War. Most important among these was the process of re-unification of the two Germany's that had been a part of the opposing alliances vis. NATO and Warsaw Pact, and had been home to opposing alliance armies for decades. It was in this context that talks were held between the US Secretary of State—James Baker, the Soviet Foreign Minister—Eduard Shevardnadze and the Soviet President—Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow on 09 February 1990. The transcript of these talks, which was publicly available in Russia since 1996 but was only published in the English language in 2010, is at the root of the Russian misgivings about NATO perfidy and broken promises. The relevant portion of James Baker's statement is worth reproducing in full.⁸

“...And the last point. NATO is the mechanism for securing the US presence in Europe. If NATO is liquidated, there will be no such mechanism in Europe. We understand that not only for the Soviet Union but for other European countries as well it is important to have guarantees that if the United States keeps its presence in Germany within the framework of NATO, not an inch of NATO's present military jurisdiction will spread in an eastern direction...”



And again,

“...I want to ask you a question, and you need not answer it right now. Supposing unification takes place, what would you prefer: a united Germany outside of NATO, absolutely independent and without American troops; or a united Germany keeping its connections with NATO, but with the guarantee that NATO’s jurisprudence or troops will not spread east of the present boundary...”

Gorbachev’s responses are revealing⁹,

“...I want to say that in general we share this way of thinking...” and thereafter he proceeds to speak about the processes of German re-unification.

And to the second reference of NATO,

“...We will think everything over. We intend to discuss all these questions in depth at the leadership level. It goes without saying that a broadening of the NATO zone is not acceptable...”

The context of this conversation is important. By this time, it was generally accepted that the unification of Germany will involve the dissolution of East Germany, which was a member of the Warsaw Pact and had Soviet troops stationed within its territory, and its merger with West Germany, which was already a part of NATO, with its troops. There were also widespread apprehensions among the European nations, both in the West and East, that a unified Germany could again witness the rise of nationalist forces which, given the technological and industrial capacity of Germany, could threaten European security again. Hence, when the unification of Germany finally happened, an agreement under the ‘Two +Four Mechanism’ (the two Germany’s and the Allies — US, USSR, England and France) known as the ‘Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany’, was signed on 12 September 1990, in Moscow.¹⁰ Under the terms of this treaty, a unified Germany agreed to the following among other issues:

- To give up any claims on territories beyond the borders that existed at the time of unification especially with respect to its borders with Poland.
- To limit its defence forces to a fixed number and eschew nuclear weapons.
- To retain the right to join any alliance in the future.
- To the withdrawal of Soviet troops in its Eastern part by end 1994.



- To not station any of its troops integrated in any alliance structure in the East till the Soviet withdrawal.
- Thereafter, to only station its own troops in the East and no foreign troops to be deployed there.

From the above, it is evident that the Soviet Union negotiated this treaty with the understanding that NATO will not expand east of its boundaries as they existed in West Germany before the unification. There was another reason for the Soviet Union to not negotiate for or expect any more. With the eastern half of unified Germany becoming free of alliance troops, there was a near complete buffer between the two opposing alliances' forces that ran from Yugoslavia in the South to Finland in the North, with only a small portion along the Germany-Czechoslovakia border, in Central Europe, being the exception.

This was also a period of great bonhomie between the Cold War adversaries as they officially signaled the end of the war. Therefore, they began negotiations in 1989 on a treaty to remove mutual distrust and build cooperative mechanisms to maintain a stable security situation in Europe. Thus, the Warsaw Pact countries and the NATO counterparts signed the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) on 19 November 1990.¹¹

Nobody at this time imagined that in less than a year, the Warsaw Pact would cease to exist and the Soviet Union would itself dissolve into independent nations breaking away from its constituent whole. Eduard Shevardnadze admitted as much in an interview in 2009.¹² Mikhail Gorbachev, however, went a step further in 2014 when he said that 'no commitment about NATO expansion East of Germany was ever sought or made by Western leaders. His reply to the specific question deserves to be quoted in full,¹³

"The topic of "NATO expansion" was not discussed at all, and it wasn't brought up in those years. I say this with full responsibility. Not a single Eastern European country raised the issue, not even after the Warsaw Pact ceased to exist in 1991. Western leaders didn't bring it up, either. Another issue we brought up was discussed: making sure that NATO's military structures would not advance and that additional armed forces from the alliance would not be deployed on the territory of the then GDR after German reunification. Baker's statement, mentioned in your question, was made in that context. Kohl and [German Vice Chancellor Hans-Dietrich] Genscher talked about it".



And later,

“...The agreement on a final settlement with Germany said that no new military structures would be created in the eastern part of the country; no additional troops would be deployed; no weapons of mass destruction would be placed there. It has been observed all these years...”

It must be admitted that in the same interview he did say that ‘NATO expansion was against the spirit of those talks and the period’ and he has several times elsewhere called ‘NATO expansion a mistake’.

But President Putin gave the Russian grievance a twist during his speech at the Munich security Conference in 2007 when he quoted the Secretary General of NATO, Manfred Worner’s speech from 1990 thus,

“...the fact that we are ready not to place a NATO army outside of German territory gives the Soviet Union a firm security guarantee...”¹⁴

At closer scrutiny, it turns out that this was a blatant misquote as Manfred Worner had in reality said something different,

“...the very fact that we are ready not to deploy NATO troops beyond the territory of the Federal Republic gives the Soviet Union firm security guarantees...”¹⁵, quite evidently referring to Western Germany before the re-unification, as acknowledged by Eduard Shevardnadze and Mikhail Gorbachev years later!

Post Soviet Period: 1991 Onwards

The economic reforms during Perestroika and the openness or transparency in state institutions during the Glasnost period initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the independence of all the constituent states. Many of the Eastern Bloc countries including several of the erstwhile SSRs, chose to become Democratic Republics following a free market, capitalist model of economic restructuring. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the lifting of the ‘Iron Curtain’ seemed to usher in a new era of hope and peace after tense decades of the intense Cold War. But that peace was short-lived.

The Russian Federation emerged as the successor state of the Soviet Union and was soon making military alliances of its own. The Collective Security Treaty or the Tashkent Pact was signed on 15 May 1992 by Russia and 5 other of the erstwhile Soviet states, less than 6

months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Countries of Central and Eastern Europe like Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania and the Baltic states had plenty to worry about, given their past experience with the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union over the last century, if not the millennium. In fact, the abundant caution did prove insightful as Russia did not let a year go by before it began to intervene in numerous internal disputes in territories that had ceded from the Soviet Union, annexing some of these and disintegrating others. Thus, there were wars in Abkhazia/Georgia in 1991-93, the Transnistria War of 1992, the Chechen Wars in 1994-1996 and again in 1999-2009, the Georgian war in 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, along with the intervention in Eastern Ukraine/Donbas.

The spectre of an expansionist Russia was very real once again and suddenly everyone wanted to join the NATO. Therefore, by 2009, the colours on the map had changed as denoted in **Figure 2**. While the actual accession of states and the expansion of NATO happened in multiple tranches up to 2020, the lobbying for membership by most of the states had already commenced in the 1990s.

Figure 2: NATO and Russia in 2015



Source: <https://www.geoawesomeness.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/NATO-Russia-Warsaw-Pact-122815.png>

Conclusion

The US/NATO has intervened in multiple nations militarily since 1990. Justifications for the interventions are built around narratives of genocide, ethnic cleansing, terrorism and possession of WMDs. The Russian interventions also tend to revolve around similar themes.



The question that arises is that while all of this was going on, why were most nations, which were witnessing events from a close proximity, drifting in one direction, away from the other? Perhaps the Liberal Order was more alluring than an Authoritarian Oligarchy. Perhaps it will survive, yet.

End Notes

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⁸ N.1.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany", *Treaty Series*, 1999, pp.124-128. Available at <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201696/v1696.pdf>. Accessed on 11 March 2022.

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¹⁴ N.2.

¹⁵ Address by Secretary General, Manfred Wörner to the Bremer Tabaks Collegium "NATO online library", 17 May 1990. Available at <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1990/s900517ae.htm>. Accessed on 15 March 2022.

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