

POST-COLD WAR CONTROVERSIES. THE 1990 US–USSR AGREEMENT NOT TO ENLARGE NATO IN THE EVENT OF GERMAN REUNIFICATION

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Abstract

The end of the Cold War was immediately followed by the 1990 Unification of Germany. That historical event was an exceptional diplomatic exercise, based on an innovative instrument (the „Two plus Four” mechanism), which led to a dramatic shift in the strategic map of Europe. Soon after the successful unification process, there was the start of a controversy whether the Western powers (the US, the UK and France) have pledged not to expand NATO eastward if the USSR would agree to the unification of Germany. After a 25 years long denial of such a pledge by the key Western participants to the „Two plus Four” mechanism, the declassification of different diplomatic documents has shown a completely different situation. There was in fact in 1990 a real cascade of promises that were generously expressed to the USSR leaders, starting with the famous James Baker’s assurance that NATO would enlarge „not one inch to the east”. However, the USSR collapsed at the end of 1991, and the European security situation changed radically, so that the issue of NATO enlargement entered firmly on the agenda of North Atlantic Alliance’s member states, despite the opposition of post-Soviet Russia.

Keywords: post-Cold War Europe; German Unification; „Two plus Four” diplomatic mechanism; European strategic agenda; USSR dissolution; NATO enlargement.

The first year following the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 was dominated by the historic process of German unification. As is well known, the merger of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) with the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) took place under Article 23 of the 1949 Basic Law of the FRG, which provided for the entry into force of this law “for other parts of Germany on their accession” to the Federal Republic¹. The

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¹ Cf. Roger Morgan, “*Germany in Europe*,” in “The Washington Quarterly,” Autumn 1990, pp. 148. See also Timothy Garthorn Ash, “*Germany’s Choice*,” in “Foreign Affairs,” 73, 4, July–August 1994, pp. 65.

actual unification involved the modification of borders in Europe and, consequently, it was achieved in accordance with the provisions of the First Principle of the Decalogue contained in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, which stated that borders can be changed, “in accordance with international law, by peaceful means and by agreement”². However, the unification process could not be a simple transposition of the above provisions, as Germany was not an ordinary state, as long as it was in the heart of Europe, and during the Cold War it had straddled the main line of confrontation between the two ideologically and politically hostile alliances, the Warsaw Pact and NATO, respectively. Unification therefore had to address the issue of Germany’s future geopolitical status, and for that it required an original formula for dialogue and negotiations between the stakeholders.

I. The German Unification—Diplomatic Approaches and Geopolitical Interests

The structure for negotiation and persuasion in order to make possible the German unification was provided by the United States and was called the “Two plus Four” mechanism. It provided the framework that allowed the simultaneous involvement of the two German states and the four occupying powers in Germany after the end of World War II (the USSR, the US, France and Great Britain). In fact, in early 1990s, the restoration of German unity seemed a feasible project only in the medium or long term. The USSR opposition was taken for granted, France and Britain were tempted to support a slow and evolving unification process, and many other NATO member states had reservations about a rapid process of unification of the two German states, as “they feared so much a crisis in relations with Moscow, as well as the reaffirmation of German power in Europe”³.

The United States, on the other hand, believed that an eventual postponement of the unification could jeopardize the whole process, as it could either serve some opposing Soviet interests, or find the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in a too weak position for reaching an agreement on this issue. That is why, in February 1990, Washington launched the Two Plus Four mechanism—on the basis of a concept devised by Robert Zoellick, then the US State Department Undersecretary—through which both the two German states and the four postwar Occupation Powers could be ensured that their interests were not neglected. The

² The text of the Helsinki Final Act in Arie Bloed (ed.), *The Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972–1993*, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, 1993, pp. 141–218.

³ Robert Blackwill, “*German Unification and American Diplomacy*,” in “Aussenpolitik,” Volume 45, No. 3, 1994, p. 212. Under President George H. W. Bush, Blackwill was Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs and senior director for European and Soviet Affairs, and in 1989–1990 he performed as the main White House specialist on German unification.

mechanism was agreed on 13 February 1990 by the ones that were to participate in the process⁴, and the carousel of diplomatic negotiations began to produce results.

On 15 March 1990, during a telephone conversation with President George H. W. Bush, Chancellor Helmut Kohl made a presentation of a “five-point plan” that he had illustrated the day before during a large public gathering in Leipzig, in which he summarized the great constraints of the unification process: “Last night I told 100,000 [people] in Leipzig that the main advantage of what we have achieved goes to the citizens of the GDR. ... The second remark I made was that our gratitude goes to our partners in the Alliance—first and foremost to the United States ... Then the third point I made was that it is thanks to Gorbachev’s perestroika that these new developments were possible ... Fourth, I said I was grateful to the reform movements in Hungary, Poland, and now Czechoslovakia. The actions of Hungary particularly made possible the events of last year ... I said that the Poles need not be concerned. A unified Germany would give guarantees on the Oder-Neisse border. The last point I made was that a reunified Germany will be a part of the European Community and NATO.” In his turn, President Bush insisted on the last point, as he was interested that the idea of a unified Germany in NATO was gaining popularity in the GDR⁵. In fact, this was a key issue on which the West Germans and the Americans had already agreed since the Bush-Kohl meeting at Camp David on 24–25 February 1990⁶.

The first ministerial session of the Two plus Four mechanism took place in Bonn on 5 May 1990, and only two months later—on 16 July 1990—Gorbachev and Kohl reached an agreement on German unification⁷. In the US view, this agreement “was essentially an enumeration of American positions,” stipulating that the unified state would embrace the two German states and the whole of Berlin, that the rights and responsibilities of the four Occupying Powers will end with the establishment of German unity, and, finally, that the “united Germany could independently decide whether it wished to belong to an alliance and if so, to which one”⁸.

In his letter to President Bush on 19 July 1990, Helmut Kohl thanked him for the extraordinary support the US had offered to Germans in their path to unity, and the chancellor was convinced that by the London Declaration, adopted at NATO

⁴ Ibid., p. 214. Robert L. Hutchings, *American Diplomacy and the End of the Cold War: An Insider’s Account of U.S. Policy in Europe, 1989–1992*, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, Washington, 1997, p. 106 et seq. At the time of the German unification, Hutchings served as director for European Affairs in the US National Security Council.

⁵ Cf. White House Memorandum on “Telephone call from Chancellor Helmut Kohl of the Federal Republic of Germany,” 15 March 1990 (GALE database of the *Centro Studi Americani* in Rome).

⁶ Robert L. Hutchings, op.cit., p. 121–122.

⁷ During this period, the West Germans “had been working virtually non-stop to address Soviet security concerns and extend emergency economic assistance.” Cf. *ibid.*, p. 137.

⁸ Robert Blackwill, op.cit., p. 221–222.

Summit of 5–6 July 1990, “we have thrown open the door to unified Germany’s incorporation in a changing NATO”⁹.

The next steps were the result of the already reached agreement, so that on 12 September 1990 the Treaty on the final settlement with respect to Germany¹⁰ was signed in Moscow by the foreign ministers of the Two plus Four, and the unification itself became reality on 3 October 1990.

The result of this process was, however, what Timothy Garton Ash has accurately summed up: “Germany is now the most powerful country in Europe. But it is not a superpower”¹¹. However, in relation to German unification, two problems were highlighted in that time and in the years that followed: on the one hand, the envisageable behavior of a unified Germany, and on the other, the consequences of the negotiations that led to unification on NATO’s repositioning in the post-Cold War strategic context.

II. Historical Memory and the Role of Germany in the Post-Bipolar World

The first of the two issues quickly caught the attention of European policymakers, all the more so as previous historical experiences left little room for optimism. In fact, the “German problem,” which had become a topic of European concern since the end of the Thirty Years’ War, and came to the fore in all-European politics with the creation of the Bismarckian Reich in 1871, was essentially how to integrate, or at least to limit, the economic power and the military potential of a unified German state, positioned right in the heart of Europe. In fact, renowned historians have considered over time that “what is wrong with Germany is that there is too much of it”¹² and that “unlike Britain, Russia or the United States, the Germans lacked the space to work out their abundant vitality. Moreover, because of geography, Germany’s vitality was an immediate threat to the rest of Europe. Modern Germany was born encircled. Under the circumstances, whatever the lesson of the wars between Germany and its neighbors, it cannot be found merely by analyzing the faults of the Germans”¹³.

To these elements reflecting geographical constraints was added the experience offered by the political character of the unified German state, since both the Germany created by Bismarck, endowed with aspirations for world domination

⁹ White House translation of the letter sent, on 19 July 1990, to President George H. W. Bush by German Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl (GALE database of the *Centro Studi Americani* in Rome).

¹⁰ *Treaty on the final settlement with respect to Germany*, in *Treaty Series. Treaties and international agreements registered or filed and recorded with the Secretariat of the United Nations*, vol. 1696, United Nations, New York, 1999, p. 115–151.

¹¹ Timothy Garton Ash, *op.cit.*, p. 67–68.

¹² A. J. P. Taylor, *Europe. Grandeur and Decline*, Pelican, London, 1967, p. 21.

¹³ David P. Calleo, *The German Problem Reconsidered. Germany and the World Order. 1870 to the Present*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 206.

by Wilhelm II, and the one on which Hitler built his National Socialist state were characterized by a tenacious inclination towards authoritarianism, militarism, intolerance and economic protectionism¹⁴, factors that had a major contribution—obviously along with other causes—to the outbreak of the two world wars. The division of Germany after the Second World War, a scenario that was envisaged in the last stages of the world conflict and became a reality in September-October 1949 through the creation of two German states, loaded the “German problem” with a new meaning. It became an intrinsic part of the postwar confrontation between the democratic West and the communist East. Under these circumstances, the division of Germany had become a symbol of the division of Europe, attracting on itself the focus of the Cold War on the old continent.

That is why, even in the context of the end of the bipolar confrontation, the unification of Germany was received with mixed feelings by the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, especially by Poland and Czechoslovakia. On the one hand, there were fears that the region could turn into an indebted and underdeveloped hinterland of the German economy, making Eastern Europeans feel that they had exchanged one form of hegemony—the Soviet one—for another—the German one—, with the observation that the latter was more beneficial, but still a hegemony¹⁵. This fear might have been related with residual resentments about German expansionism, which in the past had taken dramatic forms in Central Europe. For these reasons, there was a real possibility that a nationalist government might put on the agenda issues such as Germany’s 1937 borders, German ethnic minorities or the rights of persons of German origin that had been expelled from neighboring states. Therefore, it was not too difficult to fuel the fear that Germany could use its economic prowess to achieve in peacetime what it had failed to achieve by military means in the two world wars, namely the creation of a Central European space under its domination (Mitteleuropa), in order to transform it into a supplier of cheap products, labor, land and markets for German territory¹⁶.

However, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe did not hesitate to look to the West in order to orient their efforts to undertake a valid process of economic reform, and in this sense Germany was an attractive model of a prosperous and democratic country, with a social market economy, which could assert itself as a major provider of investments, assistance, technological expertise and knowhow for the East. In addition, the integration of the former GDR into the FRG and thus into the Western structures might be full of lessons for the countries of Central and

¹⁴ David Blackbourn, Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Germany*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 1984, p. 5 et seq.

¹⁵ Michael Howard, *The Remaking of Europe*, in “Survival,” Volume 32, No. 2, March/April 1990, p. 99–106.

¹⁶ Adrian G. V. Hyde-Price, *The European Security beyond the Cold War. Four Scenarios for the Year 2010*, RIIA, SAGE Publications, London, 1991, p. 98–99.

Eastern Europe in terms of economic reform, and might serve as a test for the former Communist economies' future accession to the institutions created by the Western world. To that, one should add, first of all, the fact that postwar Germany has been deeply committed to rejecting the nationalist excesses of the recent past, and, as a consequence, to embracing the values of democracy¹⁷.

III. The Strategic Cost of German Unification and the Prospect for NATO Enlargement

The second issue raised by the 1990 German unification entered the European public debate in the second half of the 1990s, and was related to the extent to which the Western states had made commitments during the Two Plus Four negotiations on non-enlarging NATO to include Central and Eastern Europe, which Moscow had dominated fully for half a century. In 1997, as the first wave of the Alliance's expansion into the ex-Communist area was being launched, a number of former Soviet dignitaries, led by Mikhail Gorbachev, claimed that the accession of former Communist states to NATO would violate a 1990 commitment made by the USA and Germany. In this regard, a former deputy foreign minister, Anatoly Adamishin, claimed that "When we were told during the German reunification process that NATO would not expand, we believed it"¹⁸. Interestingly enough, this view was also supported by former George H. W. Bush administration officials, such as Jack Matlock, who was US ambassador to Moscow in 1989–1990, as well as by a former US Defense Secretary, Robert McNamara, according to whom "the United States pledged never to expand NATO eastward if Moscow would agree to the unification of Germany"¹⁹.

However, the American and German leaders who were at the heart of the Two plus Four mechanism categorically denied these allegations²⁰. In particular, Philip Zelikow, the then head of the National Security Council on issues related to German reunification, stated that the United States had not committed itself in any way with reference to the future structure of NATO, as the issues addressed in 1990 were related only to the situation in Eastern Germany, and in the end were resolved by the Treaty on the final settlement with respect to Germany²¹.

¹⁷ Roger Morgan, *op.cit.*, p. 157.

¹⁸ Cf. Michael Gordon, *The Anatomy of a Misunderstanding*, in "New York Times," 25 May 1997.

¹⁹ Statement reproduced by Mark Kramer, *The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia*, in "The Washington Quarterly," Volume 32, No. 2, April 2009, p. 39.

²⁰ Helmut Kohl's Memoirs (*Am vrut unitatea Germaniei*, Institutul European, Iași, 1999) do not make any reference to that commitment as mentioned by R. McNamara.

²¹ Philip Zelikow, *NATO Expansion Wasn't Ruled Out*, in "New York Times," 10 August 1995. The issue of Soviet military presence in East Germany after unification was hotly debated in 1990. The Hungarian diplomacy, for instance, advocated even the usefulness of such a presence for a period of five years in order to ease the transition process (cf. Istvan Gyarmati, *Keep Soviets on German Soil*, in "Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists," Volume 46, No. 5, June 1990, p. 10–11).

In the first quarter of a century following the German unification, the latter point of view was fully supported by the declassified documents from the diplomatic archives of the states involved in the Two plus Four negotiations. In accordance with that stage of the documentation, the claims regarding a commitment of NATO leaders not to expand the Alliance to Eastern Europe were simply false. On this basis, Mark Kramer, a well-known researcher at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University, appreciated that, in fact, NATO's future enlargement policy had not been discussed in any way in 1990, as this issue did not even exist at that time. Kramer concluded that in 1990 the focus had been particularly on the situation in East Germany, as the Soviets were in fact trying to maintain their military presence in the area and at the same time to prevent the unified Germany from becoming a member of the Atlantic Alliance²². He concluded that, in the end, these Soviet aspirations were not reflected in the text of the abovementioned Treaty of 12 September 1990, as according to Article 5 the Soviet troops could remain in Germany only until 1994, while Article 6 stated that “the right of the united Germany to belong to alliances... shall not be affected by the present Treaty.” In Kramer's words, “Valid arguments can be made against NATO enlargement, but this particular argument is spurious”²³.

However, the debate on the content of the Two plus Four negotiations was not over. In this respect, it matters less that post-Soviet Russia has always challenged NATO's expansion to the western border of the Russian state. It is well-known that the statements made by Yevgeny Primakov—who was Russia's foreign minister in 1996–1998—went so far as to accuse the West of treachery and Gorbachev's diplomacy of incompetence, on the grounds that in 1990 the Soviet leadership was content with verbal promises, and got nothing in writing from the Western partners, including with reference to their commitment not to enlarge NATO to the east in the event of German unification²⁴.

Of greater importance for this debate is the fact that other diplomatic documents related to the first post-Cold War years have recently been declassified, and their content shows that the reality was completely different as compared with the dominant point of view in the first decade after the German reunification. On 12 December 2017, the US National Security Archive released declassified documents showing that the main leaders of the Western world—from the then-US President George H. W. Bush to NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner—made categorical promises to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev that the Alliance

²² Mark Kramer, *op.cit.*, p. 41–55

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁴ Vyacheslav Gorski, *Problems and Prospects of NATO-Russia Relationship: the Russian Debate*, Final Report, NATO Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council Fellowships Programme 1999–2001, Moscow, June 2001, p. 38.

would not expand to the East²⁵. According to these documents, the already famous “not one inch to the east” [enlargement of NATO] statement of the US Secretary of State James Baker—an assurance given to Gorbachev during a meeting on 9 February 1990²⁶—was part of a real cascade of promises that were generously expressed by the leaders of NATO states, mainly by the USSR’s partners in the Two plus Four mechanism.

The first of these statesmen was the German Foreign Minister Hans Dietrich Genscher, who promised, in a famous speech on 31 January 1990 in Tutzing, Bavaria, that NATO would not expand to the east and, moreover, that the East-German territory was to remain outside NATO even in the case of a reunified Germany²⁷. The “Tutzing formula” was then taken up by all Western leaders. For the persistence of this promise, we only mention that it was reaffirmed by the British Prime Minister John Major, during a visit paid to Moscow in March 1991, that is, about half a year after the German unification. Responding to a question from Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Dmitry Yazov about the interest of some Eastern European leaders in joining NATO, Major was adamant: “Nothing of the sort will happen”²⁸.

Not long after that, the geopolitical situation changed radically: the USSR disappeared at the end of 1991, and the issue of NATO enlargement entered firmly on the agenda of the political leaders in the North Atlantic Alliance’s member states, with the already known results, but also with the firm opposition of post-Soviet Russia, which still believes that moving NATO’s border to the east was a hostile gesture towards Moscow.

From all this, only one conclusion follows: in order to know the truth about a recent history—which is also of great importance for Romania—the access to the archive documents proves once again crucial. The documents declassified by the US National Security Archive are essential from this perspective. It is interesting that these documents were subjected, on 10 November 2017, to a debate organized in Chicago, during the annual conference of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies, on the following topic: “Who Promised What to Whom on NATO Expansion.” The irony was that Mark Kramer himself was also present at the debate, that is, the researcher who had categorically stated, only a decade before, that the idea of a Western commitment in the early 1990s not to expand NATO was just a myth!

²⁵ Svetlana Savranskaya, Tom Blanton, *NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard*, Briefing Book #613, National Security Archive, 12 December 2017 (<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, document no. 5 (Memorandum of conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and James Baker in Moscow, 9 February 1990).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, document no. 1 (U.S. Embassy Bonn Confidential Cable to Secretary of State on the speech of the German Foreign Minister: Genscher Outlines His Vision of a New European Architecture, 1 February 1990).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, document no. 28 (British Ambassador Rodric Braithwaite’s diary, 5 March 1991).