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“Wendezeit”: Helmut Kohl, German Foreign Policy and the Dispute over NATO’s Eastern Enlargement

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Abstract | Lisa Marie Freitag examines the contested narrative of NATO’s eastward enlargement after the Cold War, a key theme in Russian justifications for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Moscow’s claims that the West promised not to expand NATO rely on selective and decontextualized quotations rather than binding agreements. Focusing on Germany, the analysis highlights Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s cautious stance, shaped by his relationship with Russia, domestic political constraints, and the aspirations of Central and Eastern European states. While Kohl’s role was less decisive than in German reunification, his policies were pivotal in balancing dialogue with Moscow and supporting NATO’s enlargement as a stabilizing “anchor” in Europe. The essay argues that enlargement was neither aggressive nor illegitimate but part of a broader post-Cold War realignment, and shows how the Kremlin instrumentalizes history to cast Russia as a victim and deny neighbouring states’ sovereignty.



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1992: Federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl, former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, and former American President Ronald Reagan receive honorary citizenship of the city of Berlin during a ceremonial act in the Reichstag building.

From left to right: Reinhard Führer, Vice President of the Berlin House of Representatives; Christine Bergmann, Mayor of Berlin; Gorbachev; Kohl; Raisa Gorbacheva; Eberhard Diepgen, Governing Mayor of Berlin; Hannelore Kohl; Hanna-Renate Laurien, President of the Berlin House of Representatives; Frank Ryan Jr. (representing Ronald Reagan); and Tino Schwierzina, Vice President of the Berlin House of Representatives. Copyright: Bundesregierung/Julia Faßbender. Source: [Bundeskanzler-Helmut-Kohl-Stiftung](#)

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Introduction

[...] Ukraine joining NATO is a direct threat to Russia’s security. [...] they are trying to convince us over and over again that NATO is a peace-loving and purely defensive alliance that poses no threat to Russia. [...] But we are well aware of the real value of these words. In 1990, when German unification was discussed, the United States promised the Soviet leadership that NATO jurisdiction or military presence will not expand one inch to the east and that the unification of Germany will not lead to the spread of NATO’s military organisation to the east.

Vladimir Putin, February 2022 [1]

This claim, alongside other historical references, formed part of the justification that the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin used to announce the “special military operation” against Ukraine in February 2022. After more than three years of full-scale war in Europe, there is no doubt that this is a war of aggression in violation of international law. Since then, discussions have flared up again about NATO’s eastward expansion, the supposed promises made by the USA and the West and, ultimately, possible misinterpretations on both sides.

It is necessary to examine more closely the numerous statements coming from opponents of NATO’s enlargement that make direct connections between supposed promises regarding the alliance and debates about German reunification (as illustrated in the quote above), the role of the country, its political leaders and political actors. After all, there is widespread consensus in political science and historical research today that politicians shape public opinion, using persuasion to influence decision-making within institutional frameworks.[2]

The following essay therefore focuses on German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. As a politician he undoubtedly played an important role in the realization of German unity. But what was his role in shaping debates on NATO’s eastward expansion?

“Wendezeit”: The End of the Eastern Bloc

The change of climate in the Cold War began when Mikhail Gorbachev took office in the Soviet Union in March 1985. He clearly recognized that the country was in a difficult domestic and foreign policy situation. Reforms were particularly necessary in the economy. In January 1987, Gorbachev thus announced a decisive transformation with the slogans *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Citizens’ participation was to be increased, the legal system strengthened and legislation improved. New laws were intended to enable private enterprise to provide impetus for an economic upturn and to better supply the population with food and consumer goods.[3] In the field of foreign policy he initiated the resumption of arms control talks.[4] The first outcome of this was the signing of the INF Treaty (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty) between the USA and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in December 1987. Nuclear disarmament became a possibility for the first time since the beginning of the Cold War.[5]

Across the European socialist bloc, there was growing social dissent and resentment. While there was relatively peaceful transition in Poland, for example, in Romania the revolutionary mood saw the execution of dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu and his wife in December 1989. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the regime of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) was weakened and could no longer react appropriately to resentments in the country. The pressure on the state grew as dissatisfied citizens joined forces with the political resistance in the GDR – or engaged in mass migration. The economy was largely dependent on Western credits. Reforms thus seemed inevitable. However, the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 rendered any such efforts obsolete.[6]

All these developments were not without consequences in the Soviet Union either. Gorbachev began to encounter massive resistance in his own country. In addition, Soviet satellite states were declaring independence and Soviet republics were also seeking sovereignty. When Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to declare its sovereignty in March 1990, the collapse of the Soviet Union seemed increasingly inevitable. On 12 June of the same year, the heartland of the USSR, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic followed suit. In August 1991, members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) took part in a coup against Gorbachev. From then on, he had to rely on the help of his rival and later Russian president, Boris Yeltsin, to keep the state apparatus running. Shortly afterwards, Gorbachev announced his resignation as General Secretary of the CPSU. As the party had been involved in the coup, it was denied any options for action. Under pressure from Yeltsin, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was founded in December and the Union of Soviet Republics was dissolved. Shortly afterwards, Gorbachev also resigned from the office of President. On 26 December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist.[7]

New Constellations - New Challenges

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the military-political constellations that had been in place for

decades largely dissolved. In addition, the Eastern military alliance of the Warsaw Pact was dissolved. NATO, as the Warsaw Pact’s counterpart, now faced existential questions for the first time since 1949. To complicate matters, European organizations were exploring whether the transatlantic alliance had outlived its purpose and should be replaced.^[8]

The fact that NATO has nevertheless been able to persist and, more importantly, establish itself as the most important military and security alliance is due, on the one hand, to the creative will of individual political leaders, such as Secretary General Manfred Wörner. On the other hand, NATO has always been more than just a military alliance. It was also a community of countries with the same (security) interests and, above all, values that linked the Western European sphere to the United States of America (USA). This was an important prerequisite for the transformation of the alliance and its prevalence after 1990.^[9]

While the turn of the early 1990s is seen in the West as a time of new beginnings, globalization and European integration, the experience of a decade of decline still prevails in the post-Soviet region. The CIS remained a loose merger without proper structures. Instead of democratic restructuring, the collapse ended in chaos in many countries. Former administrative borders became international state borders overnight. From then on, Russia fought with Ukraine over Crimea, where the former had stationed its Black Sea Fleet. Azerbaijan continuously clashed with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, while Georgia and Tajikistan sank into civil war.^[10]

In addition, the new ruler in Russia, Yeltsin, continued to see his state as the legal successor of the Soviet Union and, accordingly, as a great power. He thus wanted to be treated correspondingly in international organizations. According to his interpretation, principles of international law, non-interference and the sovereign equality of all states must be subordinated to the prerogative of the great power. ^[11]

It is therefore hardly surprising that the states independent of the Soviet Union sought new safe havens. The decades of traumatic experiences under Soviet domination also played a fundamental role in this. For these states, NATO was an “anchor of stability”, in which they sought long-term protection as potential member states. Those countries were thus the main driving forces for NATO’s enlargement to the East.^[12]

It must be noted that in the early stages of transformation, the Kremlin did not directly oppose the idea of NATO-enlargement. On the contrary, Yeltsin claimed carefully that the Russian Federation could become a member too, if the alliance would be willing to transform itself into a system of collective security. This attitude however changed in the context of new power dimensions and bloody clashes in the early 1990s – especially on the territory of Yugoslavia and its successor states. In spring 1994, Yeltsin sharpened the tone and stated that an Eastern enlargement of NATO would cause immense security problems for Russia.^[13]

NATO itself was too divided in its approaches to a possible enlargement and changed course several times. Member states could not find a consensus either on which countries should first receive an invitation to join or when the actual enlargement should begin.[14] Thus NATO’s eastward expansion remains highly controversial to this day, as it undermined the incipient détente between the West and Russia and contributed to a deep rift that would reach a new low in the 21st century.

Kohl and Germany’s Role in the Discussions about NATO’s Enlargement to the East

It was clear to everyone involved that diplomacy could not be based legally on verbal statements by individual politicians – only contractual agreements created obligations. [...] Nowhere in the treaty on German unity was there a declaration on the non-expansion of NATO.

The starting point of German involvement in the dispute over NATO’s expansion must be seen in the negotiations about its unification in 1990. It is hardly surprising that German leaders, like Kohl and his foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, were willing to go to great lengths and make vast concessions in order to secure Gorbachev’s consent. Thus, they reiterated Germany’s abdication of NBC-weapons, agreed on a drastic reduction of their armed forces and – a crucial point for the later dispute – ensured that foreign troops would not be stationed on former GDR-territory. These agreements were ratified as part of the “Two-plus-Four”-Treaty on 12 September 1990.[15]

In the course of these negotiations, there were several one-on-one meetings in which statements were made that the political elite in Russia later interpreted as assurances. For instance, Genscher told his Soviet counterpart, Eduard Shevardnadze, in February 1990 that NATO structures should not be extended eastward, although the integration of the reunified Federal Republic into the structures of the European Community as well as NATO would be indispensable.[16]

However, such indications should not be taken out of their time and context. While emphasizing the willingness of the Foreign Ministry to accommodate the Soviet Union’s security concerns to enable German reunification, this idea never became a guiding principle of West German policy. The reason for this was a clear violation of the fundamental principles of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), according to which states have the right to self-determination and the freedom to choose their alliances.[17] Furthermore, it was clear to everyone involved that diplomacy could not be based legally on verbal statements by individual politicians – only contractual agreements created obligations. And here it must be clearly stated that nowhere in the treaty on German unity was there a declaration on the non-expansion of NATO.[18]

Nevertheless, Germany, together with other member states such as the USA and France, was sceptical

about NATO’s eastward expansion for a long time. In order to counteract fears of Russian disaffirmation and to comply with the wishes of the Central and Eastern European (CEE) states, the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) was established in December 1991 on the initiative of Germany and the USA. In addition to the NATO member states, the former Warsaw Pact states became members of this body on equal terms. After the USSR collapsed in the same month, the newly independent states – including Russia – joined the NATO body in 1992. Ultimately, similar to the Partnership for Peace (PfP) – another institution for a middle way solution – it remained ineffective. The Kremlin complained that Russia was not being treated as an equal, while the CEE-states criticized the lack of security guarantees. They therefore continued to strive for concrete NATO membership.[19]

For Kohl personally, NATO enlargement remained a secondary topic for a long time, as he focused his efforts on the establishment of the European Union (EU) and its consolidation. His line of action thus called for prudent proceedings, working to integrate, rather than humiliate, Russia. He pursued this goal without compromising the CEE-states or awarding veto rights to the Russian leadership. This approach was also in line with the general attitude in NATO.[20] However, not everyone in the German government agreed with this. A real driving force for NATO’s eastward expansion was defence minister Volker Rühle, a convinced transatlanticist, who argued that NATO’s enlargement was indispensable for security in Europe. However, Rühle’s pleas were met with a cautious or even hostile response from Russia. Kohl’s policy was characterized by the fact that he knew how to use the *Richtlinienkompetenz* (authority to issue directives) in a targeted and skilful manner at critical moments. It can therefore be assumed that he also intervened here and called on his minister to row back. In October 1993, Rühle thus publicly declared that rapid accession of the reform states in the east was out of the question.

Kohl [...] emphasized the transatlantic solidarity between NATO and the EU as well as the desire of the CEE states to be included in the alliance. At the same time, however, he also referred to the “historically grounded fears of isolation and encirclement” in Russia [...]. Kohl demonstrated a keen sense of the real political situation, as Yeltsin later warned that this approach would undermine Russia’s fragile democracy, divide Europe, and create a new ‘Cold Peace’.

The NATO-summit in Brussels in 1994 marked an important stepping stone towards NATO’s Eastward enlargement, where this goal was declared publicly for the first time in the closing communiqué. Kohl described the summit as a “milestone” and emphasized the transatlantic solidarity between NATO and the EU as well as the desire of the CEE states to be included in the alliance. At the same time, however, he also referred to the “historically grounded fears of isolation and encirclement” in Russia, which is why comprehensive cooperation with the Kremlin must be sought. Kohl demonstrated a keen sense of

the real political situation, as Yeltsin later warned that this approach would undermine Russia’s fragile democracy, divide Europe, and create a new ‘Cold Peace’.[21]

By early 1995, the international climate had started to change. A new rift between USA and the West on the one side and Russian policy on the other developed due to NATO’s involvement in the crisis in Yugoslavia as well as Russia’s brutal war in Chechnya between 1994 and 1996. Nevertheless, the alliance remained divided with regard to the question about how to approach a possible enlargement. While the United Kingdom wanted a singular but large enlargement programme, the USA pleaded for a more open approach. Germany was a big advocate for the invitation of the so-called Visegrád-states (Poland, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia), while others, such as France and Romania suggested the Baltic states.[22]

Kohl justified the German consensus to NATO’S expansion with the change of geopolitical climate. He increasingly feared destabilization, which could only be countered by the NATO “anchor.” Enlargement therefore had to be implemented before the end of 1997. Germany’s geopolitical position was decisive in this argumentation. Kohl wanted to move on from Germany’s decades-long role as a frontline yet geopolitically peripheral state in the Cold War. It was, he argued, in the national interest to ensure borders were transcended yet secured within the international framework agreements. However, Kohl was also pursuing his own domestic political interests with this line of argument: Bundestag elections were due in 1998. The Christian-liberal (CDU/FDP) government had been facing criticism since the budget and pension cuts. The economy stagnated and reforms had no effect. An election victory for the “Chancellor of Unity” was therefore anything but certain. Kohl now had to complete one of the major projects before the elections.[23]

At the July 1997 summit in Madrid, NATO members finally reached an agreement and invited Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic to join admission talks. German ideas seemingly won out in the end. In 1998, the states officially joined the alliance. At the same time, NATO obligated itself not to deploy any conventional forces or nuclear weapons on the territory of the new member states. To appease Russia, membership of the new G8 of industrial nations was granted as was a place in the European Council, despite not fulfilling all the necessary criteria.[24]

At the same time, the German government always endeavoured not to “lose” the Russians completely in the course of this process. Alongside the US administration, Kohl and his Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel (in office since 1992) therefore became the main actors in the integration and expansion of bilateral meetings. The Federal Chancellor also used his personal relations with Yeltsin to convince him of the positive effect of NATO’s eastward expansion. Ultimately, these efforts were in vain, although it was possible to strengthen the partnership with Russia, for example with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act.[25] It is essential to mention that both sides committed themselves in this document to respecting the sovereignty of all countries. Russia also recognized that it has no right to veto the NATO membership of other countries.[26]

“Wendezeit 2.0?”

In 2000, the former KGB (Committee for State Security) agent Vladimir Putin succeeded Yeltsin as Russian president. He started to alter the democratic course of his country, trying to establish internal controls and restore great power status in foreign policy. This entailed renunciation of what is typically described as the Western liberal value system. Following traditions of Russian autocracy, Putin sought to put all elements of policy, law, economy and society under state control. Nominally free elections were marked by manipulations and press freedom was restricted. Still, relations with the West were maintained. In 2002, for example, he took part in the re-founding of the NATO-Russia Council and supported the Western fight against terror after 9/11. In 2004, he did not oppose the renewed NATO enlargement with the accession of Slovakia, Romania, Slovenia and the Baltic states.[27]

However, the first cracks in the facade of cooperation appeared with the West when NATO institutionalized its deployment with the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, taking command of the force in 2003. Putin also rejected the US mission against Iraq in 2003 – as, indeed, did many of its Western partners. Russia increasingly turned to other nations, such as China, India and Pakistan, who were striving for a multipolar world order against US hegemony.[28] The final break came with the NATO summit in Bucharest in 2008, at which Georgia and Ukraine were to be invited to join. France and Germany opposed this policy with a view to Russia’s claims that both states were part of its sphere of interest. In retrospect, the consequences were fatal. Both countries were promised membership at a later date, but no concrete details were forthcoming.[29]

Conclusions

the Russian regime uses historical misrepresentation to legitimize its policies. Using decontextualized statements, the Kremlin tries to cast Russia in the role of a victim of NATO’s policy even though, it bears repeating, the West never promised not to expand NATO to the east.

At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin delivered a much-noted and widely discussed speech in which he stated that NATO’s enlargement “represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust”. According to Putin, the West had broken earlier promises. To prove his argument, he quoted former NATO Secretary General Wörner with a statement from 17 May 1990, where the latter spoke of “the assurance not to push NATO troops beyond the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany [...]”.^[30] Putin conveniently overlooked the fact that Wörner was only referring to the former GDR and not to member states of the former Warsaw Pact.^[31] This became clear in the context of Wörner’s speech: “Moreover, one can imagine, for a transitional period, that Soviet troops remain stationed in reduced numbers on the territory of the former GDR. The desire of the Soviet Union not to alter the military balance of power is thus respected.”^[32] This assurance by Wörner was then also

incorporated into the “Two-Plus-Four” Agreement, which stated: “Foreign troops and nuclear weapons or their carriers will not be stationed or deployed in this part of Germany.”^[33] In fact, NATO has adhered to this promise to this day.^[34]

This is just one – albeit highly telling – illustration of how the Russian regime uses historical misrepresentation to legitimize its policies. Using decontextualized statements, the Kremlin tries to cast Russia in the role of a victim of NATO’s policy even though, it bears repeating, the West never promised not to expand NATO to the east. NATO is a defensive alliance and Russia had in the past recognized that it has no veto power over the NATO membership of other countries,^[35] although it creates facts on the ground that effectively prevent it in the case of Ukraine and Georgia, for example.

This brief review of Germany’s conception of, and role in, NATO’s eastward expansion at the turn of the twenty-first century suggests it was a major foreign policy success. The Federal Republic was now embedded in a community of friends, it had played a leading role in developing Western institutions’ alliances with countries in CEE, strengthening democratic processes there and preventing regional instability, taking the wishes and concerns of Central and Eastern European states seriously. At the same time, it secured its own economic and political interests while trying to maintain stable relations with Russia, integrating the country into the new security order as far as possible and desired by the counterparts in the Kremlin.^[36]

In terms of Chancellor Kohl’s own role, in contrast to the German unification, he did not impose his personal stamp on the eastward expansion of NATO, even though it was one of his key political objectives during his later years in office. There were domestic political reasons for this. While Kohl was, for example, one of the main drivers of the implementation of the NATO Dual-Track Decision in 1983, after the Cold War he pursued a cautious policy. On the one hand, this was certainly due to his personal relationship with Yeltsin and the associated desire to win Russia as a partner. On the other hand, Kohl did not question the sovereignty and decision-making freedoms of the former Soviet states, not least because of his personal and direct experience of reunification. Nor was the Federal Republic’s loyalty to the transatlantic alliance at any time under discussion. In the end, CEE countries and their leaders actively sought membership of NATO and thus became the real drivers of the expansion.

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by: [Lisa Marie Freitag](#)|Section:[Essays](#)|Key Words:[Germany](#), [Helmut Kohl](#), [NATO](#), [NATO enlargement](#), [Russia](#), [Security](#), [USSR](#), [Ukraine](#), [War](#), [conflict](#), [foreign policy](#), [multipolarity](#), [sovereignty](#), [state socialism](#)|Publishing Date:2025-09-22



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