

Thesis review for:
Hasse Rams
NATO's No-Expansion Promise

By:
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The author seeks to answer the questions, “Was there a credible guarantee made to the Soviet officials not to expand NATO eastward, and if not, Did [sic] Gorbachev assume that any verbal assurances were final and binding?” (11) To answer the questions, the author focuses on the communications between the US and the USSR in 1990 concerning the reunification of Germany. (11) The author presents the arguments and the evidence that both support and refute the premise of a promise having been made, before evaluating the arguments and the evidence for both positions. The author concludes that,

There was no formal promise not to enlarge given, and the statements made in early discussions on German unification are unlikely to hold as legal promises under international law, however it is fair to argue, as Gorbachev did, that the spirit of assurances and non-enlargement were violated. It is a tragedy that in such a critical matter, the Soviet Union found satisfaction with nothing more than “A spirit” to ensure their future security instead of asking to have it in writing. (49)

The author has a very timely and pressing topic. One of the self-declared reasons for Russia's invasion of Ukraine is this exact issue of NATO's supposed deceit. The author does an impressive job at both making a historical argument while simultaneously critiquing other historical arguments on the subject. Two points in particular stand out exemplifying the value of the author's argument. First, the author repeatedly stresses the need for a “credible guarantee,” not merely something having been mentioned in passing. This is critical, as the author points out in the work, as many things are discussed back and forth in negotiations leading up to an agreement. What matters, though, is the final agreement. Second, the author makes a point to remind everyone about the reality of the context of these discussions back in 1990. There would be no sense in the US mentioning or even wanting to enlarge NATO eastwards in 1990, because “eastwards” would mean actively poaching Warsaw Pact members. Essentially, there was no “eastwards” in which to enlarge. With all this said, the author also stresses that Gorbachev seems to have believed in a “spirit” to not enlarge. As the author notes, though, belief in a spirit is not the same thing as the actual agreements and interactions repeatedly made, none of which limit NATO as the Russian's claim.

The author's argument is impressive in many ways, but also has some problems. The biggest problems are frustratingly also those that would have been the easiest to have corrected through a thorough proofreading. These range from the factual (Yeltsin's letter mentioned on the first page of the Introduction was to Clinton, not G. W. Bush) to the grammatical (the last line of that same page uses a comma instead of a period to end a sentence). Such typos and minor confusions can be found throughout the work, which is a shame as they detract from an otherwise solid argument. That such things as these are the main problems of the work is, in many ways, a testament to its strength, however.

The author does an impressive job showing the events from both sides' perceptions, as well as giving space to historical arguments on both sides of the issue. The author is sympathetic to the realities that, under the circumstances of the time, individuals got swept up in the excitement as well as the uncertainty of the times and did not always focus clearly on what should have been communicated. This understanding, however, does not change what was and what was not established at the time.

The work is impressive, and I recommend that it be given a lower A/excellent.

A few questions:

1. You begin the work mentioning Yeltsin's objections to NATO expansion years after German reunification, the fall of the USSR and Warsaw Pact, and a change in US administration. Accepting everything that you have established in your work, should this evidence of a problem existing not have been taken seriously by the US and led to a clearly communicated agreement about NATO and Russian relations going forward?
2. As mentioned in the review, your two points about needing a credible assurance and about keeping in mind the reality of the times in 1990 are both as simple as they are powerful. Having read many of the sources you have read and cited, there still seems to be a trend to ignore these points and embrace "the spirit" of the discussions. Why do you think this is so? Why are your simple straightforward criteria not embraced in those other arguments?
3. As a hypothetical, suppose that a formal agreement was made in 1990 that NATO would seal its membership and accept no new members. After the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and of the USSR, what do you think would have happened with this agreement? Would it have been maintained and honored? Would a new organization have been established to house the former WP members and perhaps form an alliance between that organization and NATO?