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There was no promise of NATO non-expansion: Myth made by Putin

By HAKAMADA Shigeki

The situation in Ukraine has worsened, and the possibility of military invasion by Russia has become an urgent international issue. The most pressing issue is the deployment of 100,000–120,000 Russian troops on the Ukrainian border around February and the end of last year, as well as to Belarus at the start of this year. The premise behind these actions has been Russia's (i.e., Putin's) insistence that "despite the promise by NATO and the United States not to expand NATO by even an inch to the East, this was just a verbal promise, so they have broken this promise and continued to expand NATO since 1997."

At his annual Press conference on December 23, 2021, President Putin was asked by a British participant, "Will you guarantee unconditionally that you will not invade Ukraine or any other sovereign country," to which Putin replied with extremely emotive language, saying, "We remember... how you promised us in the 1990s that [NATO] would not expand itself by an inch to the East. We were tricked. You cheated us shamelessly."

On the premise of this "promise," Russia has this time demanded that NATO or the United States promises further non-expansion of NATO and the return to the state of armaments in Eastern Europe and the Baltic states to that before 1997, not orally but in writing.

What is even more problematic is that the Japanese media, experts, and politicians have developed various information and interpretations based on Russia's (i.e., Putin's) claim of a "verbal promise in the early 1990s," without questioning such a claim. For example, Ukraine was recently featured on BS Fuji Prime News from 20:00 on January 28, and BS TV Tokyo from 9:30 on January 29. In the latter case, the broadcaster showed a photograph of Mikhail Gorbachev meeting with U.S. Secretary of State James Baker on February 9, 1990 and explained that "NATO promised not to expand one inch to the East, but did not put this in writing," with the entire broadcast based on this premise. During these broadcasts, none of the invited experts and politicians questioned this premise, despite repeating the claim.

Here, it is argued that the Russian premise is based on entirely wrong or intentionally fake information. Since explaining this with just Western information is not convincing, I use Russian information that proves my argument; I also use the testimony given by Gorbachev, as well as statements by Russian politicians in the early 1990s and Russian experts from the present day.

This is a somewhat long citation, but it is a clear and concrete article from the Russian media published several years ago.

The first is an excerpt of an article by the international reporter B. Yunanov, published in the Russian newspaper *Novoye Vremya* ("The New Times") (January 18, 2016).

“In early April 1994, the NATO Council stated that NATO should not intervene in the Bosnian War in the east. However, on the contrary, NATO Secretary General M. Wörner argued that NATO should intervene to maintain Bosnian peace against ethnic cleansing, and was endorsed by the Council. In this way, the concept of ‘eastern NATO expansion.’ Initially, this was not meant as an approach to Russia, but to prevent dictatorships like in Serbia. However, on January 5 of this year [2016], President Putin denied this fact, and suddenly stated, ‘NATO said that it will not expand to the east after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. I remember that it was then-NATO Secretary General Wörner who said this.’ In 2010, former Chairman of the NATO Military Committee K. Naumann stated that, “nobody has told the Soviet Union, either verbally or in writing, of NATO’s denial of eastern expansion. In other words, the concept of “eastern NATO expansion” was born from the Bosnian War in 1992, but contrary to Putin’s claim, nobody was thinking of expanding to Ukraine or Georgia at the time. The ethnic cleansing and the response to the ‘Greater Serbia’ principle in the wake of the breakup of Yugoslavia were at the forefront of everyone’s minds. Putin has always cast the threat of ‘eastern NATO expansion’ like an incantation. His followers in turn have said the same thing.”

The following testimony is an excerpt of an article by N. Gulbinsky, a spokesman for Vice President Alexander Rutskoy in the early 1990s and later active as a writer and critic, published in the Russian newspaper *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (“Independent Newspaper”) (December 15, 2015). The hypnotic effect of “Putin’s myth” is described as follows:

“The Russian people have been dangerously hypnotized by TV, from which the following myths have been disseminated. The West is hostile to Russia and is trying to insult, plunder, and destroy Russia. At the core of this myth is the ‘invasive NATO.’ NATO is approaching the Russian border and is aiming for a first strike on Russia. However, what is clear is that from 1991 to the Crimea incident, the West has done no serious damage to Russia. Even when Russia was facing a crisis in domestic politics (1990s), the West did not fan local Russian separatism or referendums, did not annex or isolate Russian regions; instead, it allowed Russia to join important international organizations. The responsibility for the difficulties that have arisen in our country lies not with the mythical NATO expansion or ‘international conspiracy,’ but rather, with ourselves.

With regards to NATO expansion, the idea that ‘the West promised Gorbachev that it would not expand’ is also a myth. In *Russia Beyond the Headlines* (Russian English-language media) on October 16, 2014, Gorbachev himself stated that “The topic of ‘NATO expansion’ was not discussed at all, and it wasn’t brought up in those years. I say that with full responsibility.” At the time, Russia was not viewed as an enemy to Western nations and was expected to be their ally and partner. Inevitably, as Russia progressively deviated from the path of liberal democracy, the image of ‘NATO as an enemy’ became stronger in the eyes of Russia.”

A. Arbatov, director of the Center for International Security in the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), who is an authority on issues of Russian security, security advisor to the current Russian government, and a former State Duma member, stated the following: (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 17, 2022)

“NATO expansion has not stopped, and the number of NATO member states has increased from 16 to 30. Though the responsibility lies with NATO, we also need to consider why 14 Eastern European and former Soviet countries wanted to join NATO instead of being neutral country after the end of the Cold War. As a result of this change, the soldiers and armaments in the 30 NATO member states is less than those of the 16 member states prior to expansion. Why then is Russia feeling so uneasy? What the West cannot accept among Russian demands is that of NATO non-expansion. The reason for this is because this demand goes against the NATO Treaty. Article 10 of the NATO Treaty states that all European countries that accept NATO principles will be accepted their application. Membership of the applicant country is permitted with the consent of all NATO member countries. Setting Ukraine and Georgia as exceptions to this requires a revision of the NATO Treaty, which also requires the consent of the 30 current member states. Today, half of NATO member states and a majority of the U.S. establishment oppose Ukraine and Georgia’s accession to NATO. The issue is whether our nation’s military forces, pressure, and diplomatic skills can force NATO to concede, or whether this will further strengthen their position of ‘not yielding principles.’ We cannot tolerate Ukraine possessing missiles that could reach Moscow in 5–10 minutes. It is likely possible that we could once again negotiate and agree with the United States that such missiles will not appear in Ukraine or other European countries as they did before the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM Treaty).

Neutral, NATO non-member states such as Finland and Sweden will join NATO at once, if a war over Ukraine erupts. If this happens, then instead of just a border with Ukraine, Russia will also share a border with NATO states, Finland and Sweden, for several thousand kilometers over land and sea. In other words, all Baltic countries, like the Black Sea countries, will become enemy states.”

The fact that Russian parsons and officials concerned in the early 1990s and Russian media in recent years have stated the false nature of Putin’s self-victimization, where he repeats how “the West broke the promise that NATO will not expand even an inch to the East” like an incantation, is introduced above.

What should be considered not only by Putin but also by Japanese media, politicians, and experts who seem to follow him is the issue raised by A. Arbatov of “Why 14 Eastern European and former Soviet countries chose not to be neutral after the end of the Cold War and instead wanted to join NATO.” Western nations did not want the Russian Federation to collapse or break up following the Soviet Union in the 1990s, as Putin describes in his paranoia. On the contrary, the important international issue was “support for Russia” so that it can make a soft landing on democracy and a market economy without disruptions, based on the awareness that a Russia with nuclear weapons going the way of Yugoslavia would be a crisis for humankind. In Japan, a Trilateral Forum between Japan, the United States, and Russia was organized with the Japan Institute of International Affairs at its core to improve relations between the three nations, and I was a member of this committee. Despite having some territorial problems between Japan and Russia, I was also involved in Japan’s support for Russia, referred to as “monetization,” where food and daily necessities were donated to

Russia through a Japanese trading company, these products were sold at Russian stores, and the proceeds were used for national welfare. Therefore, I am familiar with the attitude of Western countries toward Russia in the 1990s. Japan also strongly recommended Russia's accession to APEC.

NATO's expansion and worsening of relations between the West and Russia are largely related to Russia's "revival as a great power" and "expansion of its sphere of special interests." Former Deputy Prime Minister and reformist A. Chubais also praised Soviet nationalism in 2003 and supported a "liberal imperialism" (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, October 1, 2003). The editor-in-chief of *Moskovskie Novosti* ("Moscow News") V. Tretyakov, who was also a reformist, also advocated for an annexation of Central Asia by Russia "following the will of the people" (*Moskovskie Novosti*, March 3–9, 2006). In 2006, an official of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs put out "self-determination rights" instead of "territorial integrity" (*Izvestia*, June 2, 2006), which foreshadowed the "independence" of South Ossetia and Abkhazia following the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the "annexation of Crimea" in 2014. The reason Putin does not allow for the independence or annexation of Donetsk People's Republic or Luhansk People's Republic, or "Novorossiia" in southeastern Ukraine, is that if Ukraine splits into two, then the western half of the country will inevitably join NATO. However, the annexation of the entirety of Ukraine would incur too great a political and economic burden for Russia.

(This is the English translation of an article written by HAKAMADA Shigeki, Academic Member, GFJ / Trustee, JFIR / Chairman of The Council on National Security Problems / Professor Emeritus, Aoyama Gakuin University.)