

## Strategic German Conference

# An Eyewitness Account of How Peace Was Lost

by Ambassador Jack Matlock

Oct. 4—*The following is an edited transcript of the Oct. 2, 2024, remarks by Ambassador Jack Matlock to the Schiller Institute conference “Another Step Closer to Nuclear Armageddon—Germany Needs a New Security Architecture.” Matlock, a 35-year career diplomat, served as U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union from 1987 to 1991. Subheads have been added. The video is available [here](#).*

Thank you very much. Helga has described the situation so thoroughly and so accurately, it leaves me little to do, except to elaborate on some of her points.

I will simply say, first of all, that one of our historians has described the First World War as Europe sleep-walking into war in 1914. The current situation reminds me of that: Because as all of these developments are developing—the war in Ukraine, with the Western powers in effect waging war against Russia; then the violence in Western Asia, with what can only be described as a genocidal attack on the people in Gaza; and now growing hostilities between Iran and Israel, and Israel invading Lebanon; and then we have not so much violence in Asia, except reports that senior American military officials are talking about preparing for a war with China if there should be a Chinese invasion of Taiwan—I think this is an incredibly dangerous situation.

And I think that looking back as one who was present during one of our crises earlier—I was in the American Embassy in Moscow during the Cuban Missile Crisis; I helped translate some of the messages that [Soviet Premier Nikita] Khrushchev made to [U.S. President John] Kennedy—and looking back on that, we realize that we came very close to a nuclear war at that time. There were certain decisions made by—I would say—some of the lower-ranking military officials that prevented nuclear weapons being used.

Now, also, I would say that the diplomacy that we used in the late 1990s up to '91 to end the Cold War has, in effect, been reversed, since the end of the Cold War. We didn't follow the lesson from after the Second

World War, when the United States insisted that Germany and France bury the hatchet and start cooperating instead of starting new wars. Well, at the end of the Cold War, we should have insisted that a European structure be built that would guarantee [security for] all of the newly-independent countries, including Russia. Instead, we started simply expanding NATO.

Now, NATO was set up to resist a possible Soviet attack on Western Europe. And if there had been such an attack, it could have been a catastrophe, because there were already tactical nuclear weapons deployed in the area. It would be impossible for these to be used without destroying the very areas we were supposed to be defending. So, thank God, this never happened. It turns out, in looking at the historical records, that the Soviets never intended to attack Western Europe. They did have plans if we attacked them, they would respond. But after the Chernobyl nuclear accident in 1986, it became clear, even to the Soviet military leaders, that a nuclear war would be a catastrophe for all.

### **A Nuclear War Can Not Be Won**

In their first meeting, President Reagan and then-General Secretary Gorbachev agreed that a nuclear war cannot be won, must not be fought, and therefore there can be no war between us. And they continued to negotiate. The two of them hoped they could eliminate nuclear weapons. That turned out to be not possible.

I remember that during that time, when we were trying to provide better protection to Europe, we decided, because the Soviets had their SS-20 missiles aimed at Western Europe, that could hit our NATO capitals in Western Europe in minutes, and Western Europe had nothing comparable, so, we decided in order to get them to remove those missiles, we would deploy intermediate-range missiles in Germany. This was highly controversial in Germany. I remember at that time I was working in the White House on these security issues, and I was visiting Munich when there were demonstrations—huge demonstrations! “*Nie wie-*

*der! Nie wieder!”* They did not want nuclear weapons again, but the reason for deploying them was to get rid of all of them. And we did. We finally deployed— We made an agreement, and then both sides removed them all, the Soviets removing many more than we did, because we never deployed as many as they had.

It really pains me, today, to see that the head of the Green Party—at that time, the Greens were the most vociferous in arguing against those deployments—and now you have a Foreign Minister [of Germany, Annalena Baerbock] who is, in effect, threatening Russia with nuclear weapons. I cannot understand a decision to redeploy intermediate-range missiles in Germany. It just boggles the mind that any German government would agree to that. It hasn’t happened yet, and let’s hope it doesn’t. But I would point out that for Europeans to think that, if nuclear weapons are used against them, any United States President would risk his country to the intercontinental missiles of Russia in order to retaliate in any direct sense—well, I can simply say, “I wouldn’t count on that.”

The thing is that once these things start, if you begin to escalate, you are going to have the sort of nuclear war that destroys civilization. Because there’s no known way, if one side retaliates to violence with the other side—back and forth—there’s no way to stop it. And I think we are at that stage now.

### **NATO Expansion Was a Huge Mistake**

Let me say further, that it was a huge mistake for the West to expand NATO at a time when there was no threat from the East. Actually, I think Helga is right that not only American, but also British and German senior people, the Prime Ministers, the Foreign Ministers, assured Gorbachev that NATO would not expand to the East, if German unification was decided essentially on terms set by West Germany. These are simply forgotten, and the expansion occurred.

And in this century, the United States began to walk out of all of the arms control agreements that we had signed with the Soviet Union, and the ones that were essential for ending the Cold War. We started in the 1990s, leaving the ABM Treaty [Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty], then other treaties. We, finally, under President Trump’s administration, pulled out of the INF Treaty [Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty], on I would say very shaky grounds, saying simply there were Russian violations. But they never defined exactly what they were.

This was never debated. And when I think back, the way all of these things during the Cold War were debated by our public, by our governments, and now they simply are passing, and all of our public is concentrating on other things of much lesser importance.

So, I would add only one thing in this discussion, and that is, that I feel that my country, the United States, is very much overextended in the guarantees it has given the world. We are paying for almost all of our military efforts by debt. And our debt now is up to something like \$33 trillion, which is far more than our Gross National Product in any given year. What’s more, that debt is increasing every year, and neither of our political parties has plans that would bring that budget back into balance. I think in the long term, that is unsustainable.

### **We Must Act Now To Encourage Peace**

I do think that we have to find a way to encourage the parties to act peacefully, instead of fueling the fighting. There could have been a perfectly reasonable agreement between Russia and Ukraine, if the two Minsk agreements—which actually were signed also by Germany and France—had been implemented by Ukraine. They were not! Instead, the allies started simply supplying military equipment to Ukraine in order to, in effect, continue the fighting, so that I think now it’s also a horrible thing; war anywhere is a horrible thing. And the war in Ukraine is damaging Ukraine much more than any other country.

But, one of the things we hear now, I would not agree with: People say, “If you don’t stop Russia now, Russia will go after the Baltic states or Poland or Eastern Europe.” That’s nonsense! There’s no evidence whatsoever. And anybody who really, intimately, knows the history of that area, knows that Russia’s relations with Ukraine and Belarus are very special. This is their neighborhood. And any Russian government is going to consider the possibility of a foreign military alliance and military bases in those two of their neighbors as completely unacceptable. We Americans would not accept foreign military bases in Mexico, for example. We probably wouldn’t even accept them in South America—and why we can’t understand that, I don’t know.

Let me simply conclude by saying that right now, I see no immediate prospect for these things turning. But I also have experienced in my lifetime quick turnings that were not expected. And let’s hope that there will be some that are more encouraging soon.