

SALVAGING A SWEET DEAL

Were the Soviets trying to cheat on the European arms control treaty? Does it matter?

BY JANE BOULDEN

OF ALL THE SYMBOLS OF THE NEW Europe, one with some of the most tangible and immediate consequences will be the Treaty on Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE). The treaty, signed in Paris on 19 November 1990, codifies the new military reality in Europe by requiring the two military alliances* to destroy some fifty thousand pieces of heavy military hardware. However, the treaty was in trouble almost before the ink was dry because of what appeared to be Soviet efforts to evade the full consequences of its terms.

Since the signing, doubts about Soviet behaviour over the treaty have become so serious that they have brought activity in almost all other areas of arms control to a standstill, and threaten the agreement itself. The Bush administration decided to postpone sending the treaty to the US Senate for ratification – an essential step before its terms are put into effect – and Canada and other NATO countries made joint and individual formal protests to the Soviet Union about its actions.

In an effort to overcome the potentially fatal problems, in March, George Bush initiated a private exchange of letters with Mikhail Gorbachev which could lead to a compromise solution for resolving the difficulties. At the time of writing, what remains is for Gorbachev to indicate Soviet acceptance of the terms, and to guarantee that his military establishment will abide by them.

THE IRONY OF THIS DEAL, IF INDEED IT COMES off, is that it would see the United States and the North Atlantic alliance acquiescing – with some appropriate compensatory movement by the Soviets – to precisely the type of behaviour that ten years ago would have vindicated the most alarmist fears put about by the Reagan administration concerning Soviet trustworthiness. But the reality is that the treaty is too good

for the West and for NATO, to allow it to collapse without exhausting all efforts to save it – even if this involves accepting questionable Soviet behaviour as a fait accompli.

The CFE Treaty requires NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organization to reduce their conventional armaments in five categories of weapon systems: tanks, artillery pieces, armoured combat vehicles, combat aircraft and attack helicopters. It does not restrict the numbers of soldiers or other military personnel. In February 1990, before the treaty was signed, the US and the Soviet Union had agreed at an arms control meeting in Ottawa to limit their armed forces to 195,000 each in central Europe.

HOWEVER, AS THE NEGOTIATIONS ON THE CONVENTIONAL ARMS TREATY progressed, it became clear that the agreed number was simply too high: the Soviet Union was in the process of withdrawing virtually all of its troops from Eastern Europe anyway; and for budgetary and other reasons, the US would soon be well below that number as well. As it became increasingly probable that the two sides would be unable to agree on new personnel limits in time for the November deadline for completing the CFE treaty, they agreed in September that the personnel issue would be put aside for another time. So troop limits, along with aerial inspection measures, are to be negotiated in what is now known as CFE 1A – so called to indicate that these measures were really intended to be part of the CFE treaty.

The treaty operates as follows: the overall ceilings on the five categories of equipment apply to the two alliances (although the language of the treaty refers to “groups of states parties”). There are also sub-ceilings which establish certain regional limits and which ensure that no one state will maintain an overwhelming percentage of the forces allotted to each alliance as a whole. The treaty affects a geographic zone which is referred to as “Atlantic to the Urals.” This includes a portion of the Soviet Union extending as far east as the Ural mountain range, and all of the territory of the European alliance members (with the exception of a small portion of Turkey). US and

Canadian forces in Europe are subject to the terms of the Treaty but their national territories are not.

Both sides must reach the agreed levels forty months after the treaty enters into force. All equipment in the zone as of 19 November 1990, the date of signature, is subject to the terms of the treaty, wherever the equipment might be located after that date. The day before the signing, all countries involved exchanged thick packages of data with each other – providing information on the types, numbers, location, and technical specifications of equipment and their associated military units, within the zone. Exchanges like these will continue over the life of the treaty to monitor the reductions, and later to maintain the agreed limits on numbers.

According to very specific methods established in the treaty, equipment in excess of the agreed limits must be destroyed or converted to other purposes. A variety of options for carrying out the destruction are available. For example, tanks can be destroyed by severing specified key parts, by deforming them according to established procedures, or simply by blowing them up – again only according to methods established in the Treaty which, in the latter case, even specifies where in the tank the explosive charge should be placed. All destruction and conversion of equipment can be observed and inspected by other parties to the treaty.

IT IS THE SHEER SCALE OF THE REDUCTIONS THAT makes the treaty so valuable to the West. The Soviet Union will be required to reduce its equipment holdings by twenty-six percent or 18,840 pieces. Other Warsaw Pact members will reduce their equipment by an additional 18,223 pieces or almost forty-two percent. Following the reunification of Germany, East German equipment now counts as part of the West's inventory, so NATO will eliminate 13,586 pieces of equipment or almost fifteen percent. But without counting East German holdings, NATO reductions would be on the order of just under five percent.

The problems that arose to threaten all this have to do with Soviet behaviour in three areas.

*Although the Warsaw Treaty Organization will formally cease to exist, for the purposes of the treaty former WTO states will be treated as a group and will jointly and separately continue to be bound by the terms of the treaty.