

Origins and Achievements of the CFE Treaty

The CFE Treaty is the most ambitious, and in many respects the most successful, project in arms control and disarmament ever attempted. In over thirty years of sporadic East-West arms negotiations during the Cold War era there was little reason to believe that Moscow would sign an agreement on conventional arms strategically acceptable to the West. Talks on Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR), inaugurated under the auspices of superpower détente during the mid-1970s, had the source of their failure written on their very name: because the Soviet Union enjoyed a significant quantitative advantage in conventional arms in Europe, only *asymmetrical* reductions could improve the West's strategic position.

By the mid-1980s domestic political reforms within the Soviet Union created a diplomatic atmosphere in which radical arms reductions could be proposed. These very reforms ultimately led to revolutionary change within the Soviet Union, the dismantling of the Soviet state, and the dissolution of the Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO or Warsaw Pact). The negotiation of CFE Treaty represents one aspect of broader range of negotiations, including the treaty on Intermediate Range Nuclear Forces (INF) signed in December 1987, for ending the East-West conflict of half a century. By the time the treaty was signed at the summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), November 19-21, 1990, official diplomacy had been overtaken by events in Warsaw Pact capitals which eventually led to the reunification of Europe.¹

The CFE Treaty eliminated the Soviet Union's edge in conventional weapons by setting equal ceilings on the number of tanks, armored combat vehicles (ACVs), heavy artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters that NATO and the Warsaw Pact were permitted to deploy between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains. Under the CFE provisions for Treaty Limited Equipment (TLE) each alliance was permitted 20,000 tanks, 30,000 ACVs, 20,000 heavy artillery pieces, 6,800 combat aircraft, and 2,000 attack helicopters for the treaty's area of application. The member-states of each alliance then divided their alliance limits among themselves, thereby establishing "national" ceilings. After the Soviet Union's dissolution its national total was distributed among eight of its successor states.²

Because on the Soviet side the CFE's territorial application ended at the Ural Mountains, Russia's vast interior space afforded it an advantage unavailable to NATO forces in Europe, namely that a large amount of equipment could be withdrawn from Europe to storage East of the Urals and yet remain at Moscow's disposal. Still, the advantage is mostly theoretical. The reintroduction of the equipment to the European theatre would take several weeks and could easily be monitored. Additionally, storage conditions east of the Urals are less than ideal, so that the condition of the equipment could deteriorate rapidly in the absence of an investment to maintain it. This was a problem even before the post-Soviet economy of Russia went into steep decline in the mid-1990s. Lastly, the balance between the two alliances became fictive once the Warsaw Pact had been dissolved in March 1991, because it could not be assumed that former members of the Warsaw Pact would combine their forces with a recidivist Russia against NATO.³

By May 1996, when the treaty's first review conference was held, more than 58,000 pieces of TLE had been destroyed and 2,700 inspections conducted to ensure compliance.⁴ Beyond these reductions the CFE's inspection regime itself did much to reduce tensions and build confidence during a phase of critical change. The treaty helped to calm concerns arising from the headlong rush to German reunification in particular and facilitated the closely related withdrawal of Soviet forces from Eastern Europe. In light of the

¹ Richard A. Falkenrath, *Shaping Europe's Military Order: The Origins and Consequences of the CFE Treaty*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), pp.1-31; Raymond L. Garthoff, *The Great Transition: American-Soviet Relations and the End of the Cold War*, (Washington DC: Brookings, 1994), pp.411-413, 434.

² It should be noted here that the Soviet Socialist Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were removed from the CFE area of application on October 18, 1991 after they had received sovereign independence. As part of the dissolution of Czechoslovakia, a former member of the Warsaw Pact, in January 1993, the successor Czech and Slovak Republics agreed on respective national limitations.

³ *The Conventional Armed Forces In Europe (CFE) Treaty at a Glance*, Arms Control Association, <http://www.armscontrol.org/subject/caec/cfeback2.asp>; Pál Dunay, "The CFE Treaty: History, Achievements and Shortcomings," *PRIF Report No.24*, Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, October 1991, p.26.

⁴ Implementation was delayed by the disintegration of the Soviet bloc. It did not get underway until November 1992 after the signing and ratification of protocols for the Soviet successor states of Belarus and Kazakhstan.