The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and the Adapted CFE Treaty at a Glance

• Fact Sheets & Briefs

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Negotiated during the final years of the Cold War, the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty is often referred to as the "cornerstone of European security." The treaty, signed on November 19, 1990, eliminated the Soviet Union's overwhelming quantitative advantage in conventional weapons in Europe by setting equal limits on the amount of tanks, armored combat vehicles (ACVs), heavy artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters that NATO and the Warsaw Pact could deploy between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains.

The CFE Treaty was designed to prevent either alliance from amassing forces for a blitzkrieg-type offensive, which could have triggered the use of nuclear weapons in response. Although the threat of such an offensive all but disappeared with the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, member states have repeatedly touted the enduring value of the treaty's weapons limits and inspection regime, which provides an unprecedented degree of transparency on military holdings.

Original CFE Treaty

The principal features of the original CFE Treaty are:

Treaty Limited Equipment (TLE): NATO and the former Warsaw Pact were each limited to 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. Member states of each alliance then divided their respective "bloc" limit among themselves, in effect creating national limits. (The Soviet Union's limits were subsequently parceled out among eight of its successor states in 1992.) To prevent any country from amassing a significant asymmetrical stockpile of weapons, the treaty prohibits a single state from possessing more than a third of the TLE total.

As of January 2007, NATO's 22 CFE states-parties claimed collective holdings of 61,281 TLE versus a cumulative limit of 101,697. Russia reported holdings of 23,266 TLE against limits of 28,216.[2] Russia has not provided detailed reports to CFE since 2007.

From 1992 through 2008, CFE states have reduced more than 52,000 pieces of conventional armaments under the treaty. Many states reduced their holdings more than required – with over 17,955 voluntary reductions or conversions below treaty limits. States also carried out some 6,000 CFE inspections through 2008.[3]

Concentric Zones: The CFE Treaty has four concentric zones capping the deployment of tanks, ACVs, and artillery radiating out from the center of Europe (much like a shooting target). The innermost zone with the smallest limits incorporates Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, while the fourth and largest zone encompasses the entire treaty area. (There are no zone limits for combat aircraft and attack helicopters.)
The Flank Zone: To alleviate concerns that either alliance would launch a flanking maneuver against the other, the treaty placed specific limits on the number of tanks, ACVs, and artillery for Europe's southern and northern flanks, including portions of Russia. Moscow has consistently sought to abolish the flank zone as it considers the limits to be unfair because it is the only country (aside from Ukraine) that has specific limits on where it can deploy TLE in its own territory. Russian concerns were partially met in 1996 when the CFE parties agreed that Russia's original flank zone limits would apply to a smaller area, while Russia's original flank territory would have larger limits. Moscow's total CFE limits, however, remained the same. Although Russia has been in noncompliance with even the higher May 1996 flank limits, Moscow has remained within its overall treaty limits and has repeatedly stated that its flank noncompliance is only temporary.

Transparency: CFE states-parties have carried out more than 4,000 on-site inspections.

Adapted CFE Treaty

Should it enter into force, the principal features of the adapted treaty are:

National Ceilings: Each country will have a specific limit on tanks, armored combat vehicles (ACVs), heavy artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters—collectively referred to as treaty-limited equipment (TLE)—that it can deploy in the treaty’s area of application, which covers the area between the Atlantic Ocean and the Ural Mountains.

Territorial Ceilings: Each country with territory in the treaty’s area of application will have a cap on the total number of tanks, ACVs, and heavy artillery that can be deployed within its borders. This restricts national and foreign-stationed TLE. During the adaptation negotiations, NATO refused Russia’s persistent efforts for similar caps on combat aircraft and attack helicopters.

Most countries, including Russia and new NATO members, agreed to set territorial ceilings equal to national ceilings, in effect requiring a state’s own TLE on its territory to be lower than its national ceilings if that state wanted to host foreign-stationed forces. A host country must give advance consent for any foreign TLE deployments. Both Russia and Ukraine will have subceilings establishing areas in which their ground TLE deployments on their own territories will be limited within their overall limits.

Temporary Deployments: A country’s territorial ceilings can be exceeded by 153 tanks, 241 ACVs, and 140 artillery pieces for military exercises and temporary deployments. In “exceptional circumstances,” countries outside the original treaty’s flank zone, which limited ground TLE in the northern and southern flanks of Europe, can temporarily exceed their territorial ceilings by 459 tanks, 723 ACVs, and 420 artillery pieces. “Temporary” is not defined, but regular notifications are required for TLE exceeding territorial ceilings.

Transparency: States-parties will be required to permit inspections of 20 percent of their “objects of verification,” which are military units down to the regiment level and storage, repair, and reduction sites with TLE present.

Annual reports on the actual location of tanks, ACVs, and artillery are required if they are different from their designated peacetime location. Quarterly reports must detail by territory the actual location of tanks, ACVs, and artillery, as well as the total number of combat aircraft and attack helicopters in the entire treaty area. Changes of more than 30 tanks, 30 ACVs, or 10 artillery pieces on a state’s territory must be reported. Any increase by 18 or more combat aircraft or attack helicopters in a country’s holdings in the entire treaty area must be notified to all states-parties.

History

CFE members signed an adaptation agreement in 1999 to update the treaty’s structure to reflect the breakup of the Warsaw Pact and an expanding NATO alliance. The revised agreement jettisons the bloc-to-
bloc and zonal limits of the original treaty and replaces them with a system of national and territorial ceilings. The adapted treaty will enter into force when all 30 states-parties have ratified the agreement. However, only Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Ukraine have ratified, and Ukraine has yet to deposit its instrument of ratification. As a result, the original treaty remains in effect.

Meanwhile, the United States and its NATO partners in CFE have refused to ratify the new treaty until Russia first complies with its new weapons limits and with the commitments Moscow made in the CFE Final Act and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Istanbul Summit Declaration. The Final Act and Declaration are political, not-legally binding documents concluded along with the adapted treaty. They set out additional commitments by CFE states-parties on future weapons deployments, including pledges by Russia to withdraw its treaty-limited weapons and military forces from Georgia and Moldova.

In 2002, Moscow declared that it had met the adapted treaty’s weapons limits. NATO accepted this claim but repeated that Russia must still fulfill its commitments with regard to Georgia and Moldova before NATO states would ratify the adapted treaty. Moscow was especially displeased at NATO’s decision not to ratify because four new NATO members (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia) are not party to the original treaty and therefore have no arms limits. No provision exists for additional countries to accede to the original treaty; they must wait to join the adapted treaty once it enters into force.

Citing the ongoing delay of the adapted treaty’s entry into force, Russia issued a Dec. 12, 2007 statement “suspending” its implementation of the CFE Treaty. (The treaty does not contain a provision for suspension, only withdrawal.) Under suspension, Moscow stated that it will not participate in treaty data exchanges, notifications, or inspections. Although the Kremlin noted that it has no plans for arms buildups, it also declared that it would not be bound by the treaty’s limits. NATO members, including the United States, called on Russia to reverse course and declared their intention to continue implementing the treaty "without prejudice to any future action they might take."

Recent Efforts Stall
Sporadic efforts have been made since 2007 to bridge the divide. Beginning in 2010, the Obama administration sought to resolve the CFE dispute through the development of a draft “framework” for new negotiations to strengthen the CFE Treaty regime. But by mid-2011, the talks stalled as Russia could not agree to the principle of host-country consent or to a resumption of compliance with the original CFE Treaty.

In response, the U.S. Department of State announced in a Nov. 22, 2011 press release that Washington “would cease carrying out certain obligations” under the CFE Treaty with regard to Russia, putting the future of the 1990 pact in serious doubt.

At a press briefing the same day, State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the decision means that the United States “will not accept Russian inspections of our bases under the CFE [Treaty], and we will also not provide Russia with the annual notifications and military data called for in the treaty.” She added that “it is our understanding that a number, if not all, of the U.S. NATO allies will do the same.”

According to the press release, Washington “will continue to implement the Treaty and carry out all obligations with all States Parties other than Russia” and will not exceed the pact’s numerical limits on conventional armaments. The United States would resume full CFE Treaty implementation “if Russia resume[d] implementation of its Treaty obligations,” according to the statement.

If CFE members [1] cannot get the treaty back on track, there is concern that Russian will increase its reliance on tactical nuclear weapons to defend itself from what Moscow now sees as NATO’s conventional superiority in Europe.

ENDNOTES

1. CFE States-Parties: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Italy, Kazakhstan, Luxembourg, Moldova, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

2. Crawford, Dorn. “Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE): A Review and Update of Key Treaty Elements,” Arms Control Bureau, Department of State, January 2007. The limits are the entitlements permitted under the original 1990 accord. Under the 1999 Adapted CFE Treaty, the cumulative national weapons limits for NATO members currently bound by the original CFE Treaty equal 92,678 arms.

3. U.S. Department of State, Adherence To and Compliance With Arms Control, Nonproliferation, And Disarmament Agreements And Commitments, July 2010, p. 28,
http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/145181.pdf

Source URL: https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/cfe