

Tensions between NATO and Russia escalate

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Tensions between NATO and the former states of the Soviet Union reached a new climax last weekend, following Russia's unilateral withdrawal from the Treaty for Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE).

Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a presidential decree Saturday, effectively annulling the treaty. His decision takes effect in 150 days, should no new agreement be reached with NATO. Moscow has signalled its willingness to participate in talks, with the Russian State Department saying it is interested in further negotiations over the issues in contention.

The CFE treaty—negotiated in 1990 and ratified by 22 states in 1992—put an end to the post-war standoff between Washington and its allies, on the one side, and the Stalinist-ruled former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc allies, on the other. It set upper limits on the number of conventional weapons (tanks, artillery, combat aircraft and helicopters) that could be stationed on European soil. The result was a cutback in the big defensive armies assembled on both sides of the former Iron Curtain and their replacement by much smaller, more modern strike forces designed for worldwide intervention.

The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, together with NATO membership for a number of former Eastern bloc countries, undermined the basis of the CFE treaty in its old form. A revised CFE treaty (ACFE) was concluded in Istanbul in 1999 by a total of 30 states, but this treaty has only been ratified by Russia, Byelorussia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.

The NATO states delayed any ratification, arguing that first Russia must withdraw its troops stationed in rebel provinces of Georgia and Moldavia. Moscow, however, denies that agreement on the withdrawal of its troops from Georgia and Moldavia was ever a firm part of the ACFE agreement.

The NATO states' refusal to ratify the ACFE agreement is now being used by Russia to justify its own decision to quit the CFE treaty. Putin had already threatened such a move in April of this year. On Saturday, he merely spoke in general terms of "extraordinary circumstances," which

induced him to make his decision. It is clear, however, that the suspension of the CFE treaty represents a new stage in the steadily escalating confrontation between Moscow and Washington.

Russia feels threatened by Washington's aggressive intervention in central Asia and eastern Europe and is seeking to restore its role as a regional and global power broker. Its hands have been strengthened by rising oil and gas revenues, as well by the American debacle in Iraq.

Moscow has reacted sharply to plans for erecting elements of an American anti-missile system in Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as to the setting up of US military bases in Romania and Bulgaria. The Kremlin also regards NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine as unacceptable. Georgia lies at the heart of a region through which all the important energy pipelines of central Asia cross; and the admission of Ukraine into NATO would represent a major advance by the Western alliance towards Moscow and its presence in an area regarded for centuries as Russia's exclusive preserve.

There are also a number of contentious international issues. Russia rejects independence for Kosovo—a move endorsed by the US and the European Union. It also opposes America's confrontational course with Iran and has criticised the huge flow of US weaponry to Lebanon.

The debate is now underway inside NATO circles as to whether Russia's cancellation of the CFE treaty is merely a means for Moscow to induce NATO to ratify the ACFE contract and give way on other contested questions, or whether it augurs the beginning of a new arms race. Should the agreement be rendered invalid towards the end of the year, Russia could begin assembling large weapons arsenals at its western border and would no longer be subject to NATO inspections.

In Germany, the Social Democratic deputy Hans-Peter Bartels called for calm in response to Putin's initiative, portraying it as merely "a tactical manoeuvre by the Russians" that should not be seen as a return to the arms race. "There would be no enormous wave of rearmament rolling over us." His Green Party colleague, Winfried

Nachtwei, took a different view, warning of a “severe setback for disarmament and cooperative security in Europe.”

In fact, the undermining of the disarmament treaties reached with the Soviet Union began some time ago. The US made the first step in 2001 with its unilateral renunciation of the 30-year-old ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) treaty, which regulates the stationing of anti-missile defence systems. Washington justified its decision by arguing that the old treaty no longer served American interests.

If no agreement is reached with regard to CFE, there is speculation that other treaties could also be threatened. Kremlin advisor Gleb Pawlowski commented on Putin’s latest step with the remark, “If today’s message is ignored, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty will be next.”

The INF (Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces) treaty negotiated in 1987 required that the US and the Soviet Union destroy all their middle- and short-range missiles (500 to 5,500 kilometres). As a result, the US scrapped 846 and the Soviet Union 1,846 missiles. The treaty had been preceded by major protests against the stationing of American Pershing II and Russian SS-20 missiles in Europe. In Germany alone, hundreds of thousands had taken to the streets in protest.

Now, for the first time since the 1980s, Europe confronts a violent spiral of rearmament, and some commentators are already speaking of a second Cold War. This confronts European governments, squeezed between the US and Russia, with a major dilemma.

On the one hand, they depend for political and economic reasons on a good relationship with Russia, which amongst other things is a major source of European energy. Also with regard to foreign policy—e.g., over the issue of Iran—co-operation with Russia increases European leverage on the international stage.

A new arms race in Europe would also confront European nations with huge financial difficulties. In the 1990s, they had been able to make major cuts in their military budgets through the reduction of troop levels and the dismantling of conventional weapons—sums that were then spent on developing armed forces with high-tech weaponry designed for international intervention.

At the same time, the European governments refrained from any open conflict with the US, which constituted its most important ally and business partner at the end of the Second World War. Despite European criticism of the Iraq war, European governments are fearful of an

American defeat in Iraq, which would undermine their own imperialist interests in the Middle East.

Washington has repeatedly sought to exploit this dilemma by driving a wedge between Europe and Russia in order to split Europe. In this endeavour, it is able to rely on the support of the new European Union member governments in eastern Europe, whose ruling elites are overwhelming hostile to Russia and also fearful of a French-German alliance that could dictate terms in Europe.

This became clear during the Iraq war, when US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made his notorious distinction between an “old” and “new” Europe. Then came the recent decision over the stationing of a new US missile system, which followed bilateral negotiations between Washington and the Polish and Czech governments—bypassing NATO committees, where Germany in particular has expressed its objections. While it is still a matter of speculation as to whether the new missile system is technically feasible, it has already fulfilled one purpose—to exacerbate tensions between Europe and Russia.

American foreign policy aims at encouraging divisions within Europe on the basis of the thesis put forward by former US security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who declared that “America’s capacity to exercise global primacy” depends on whether Washington can prevent “the emergence of a dominant and antagonistic Eurasian power.” This aim is facilitated by the divisions already evident between the European governments, which increasingly defend the interests of big business and the banks, thereby asserting their own national interests, and undertaking increasingly aggressive attacks on the social gains and democratic rights of the European population.



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