

RUSSIA'S FORMAL WITHDRAWAL FROM THE TREATY ON CONVENTIONAL ARMED FORCES IN EUROPE (CFE)

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



On November 07, 2023, Russia formally completed the procedure to withdraw from the landmark Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE). The Russian Foreign Ministry's statement said that now the treaty was "history for Russia once and for all".¹

The statement also highlights the suspension of two other legally binding agreements closely associated with the CFE Treaty, the Budapest Agreement of 3 November 1990 and the Flank Document of 31 May 1996 – have also lost force for the Russian Federation.

Russia's official withdrawal from the CFE, which reflects its long-held dissatisfaction with the Treaty is a significant development in European security dynamics. The withdrawal comes amid heightened tensions due to the Ukraine conflict and broader geopolitical strains, which have made it untenable for Russia to continue its participation.

This move by the Russian Federation has raised serious concerns about a potential arms race and increased tensions between Russia and NATO, casting doubt on the future of arms control agreements and highlighting the challenges facing European security in a changing geopolitical landscape.

¹ "Foreign Ministry statement on the completion of the procedure for the Russian Federation's withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty)", The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, published on November 07, 2023. https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1913546/

What is the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe?

The Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) was signed in Paris on November 19, 1990, as a landmark arms control agreement. It was a product of the Cold War era's conclusion and aimed to establishing parity in major conventional forces and armaments between the Eastern (Warsaw Pact) and Western (NATO) blocs, stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals.²

This was a significant step as it established comprehensive limits on key categories of conventional military equipment in Europe, such as tanks, armoured combat vehicles (ACVs), heavy artillery, combat aircraft, and attack helicopters, and mandated the destruction of excess weaponry.³

The CFE Treaty sought to diminish the possibility of surprise attacks and the potential for major offensive operations in Europe by reducing the number of troops and armaments, particularly in Central Europe.

On May 15, 1992, the States Parties signed the Tashkent Agreement, also known as the "Flank Document"⁴ on the Principles and Procedures for the Implementation of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, which redistributed the former USSR's equipment and strength targets among the signatories.

The Treaty was ratified on November 9, 1992, and the Netherlands became its depository, highlighting its indefinite duration and multilateral nature.⁵

The CFE Treaty aimed to create a military balance at a reduced level of armaments between NATO and the former Warsaw Treaty Organization member states, fostering a more stable and secure post-Cold War Europe.

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- ² "Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty", U.S. Department of State, Archive, Fact Sheet, Bureau of Arms Control, published on June 18, 2002.
<https://2001-2009.state.gov/t/ac/rls/fs/11243.htm#:~:text=The%20Treaty%20on%20Conventional%20Armed%20Forces%20in%20Europe,and%20West%20from%20the%20Atlantic%20to%20the%20Urals.>
 - ³ Kimball & Hernandez, "The Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty and the Adapted CFE Treaty at a Glance", Arms Control Association, last reviewed May 2023.
<https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheet/cfe#:~:text=The%20treaty%2C%20signed%20on%20November,d%20employ%20between%20the%20Atlantic%20Ocean>
 - ⁴ Sarah Walkling, "CFE 'Flank' Accord Enters into Force; Senate Warns Russia on Deployments", Arms Control Association, accessed on November 10, 2023.
<https://www.armscontrol.org/act/1997-05/press-releases/cfe-flank-accord-enters-into-force-senate-warns-russia-deployments>
 - ⁵ "Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE)", The Nuclear Threat Initiative - NTI, accessed on November 07, 2023.
<https://www.nti.org/education-center/treaties-and-regimes/treaty-conventional-armed-forces-europe-cfe/#:~:text=The%20CFE%20Treaty%20established%20an,Duration%20Indefinite%20Depository%20The%20Netherlands>

It (the treaty) provides for the convening of a review conference 46 months after its entry into force and at five-year intervals thereafter. Before withdrawal of the Russian Federation, the CFE Treaty was ratified by 30 countries in total. (See Figure 1)

 Armenia	 Azerbaijan
 Belarus	 Belgium
 Bulgaria	 Canada
 Czech Republic	 Denmark
 France	 Georgia
 Germany	 Greece
 Hungary	 Iceland
 Italy	 Kazakhstan
 Luxembourg	 Moldova
 Netherlands	 Norway
 Poland	 Portugal
 Romania	 Russia
 Slovakia	 Spain
 Turkey	 Ukraine
 United Kingdom	 United States

(Figure 1)

Earlier, Russia had suspended its participation in the Treaty in 2007, halted active participation in 2015, and, following the commencement of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, President Vladimir Putin signed a decree denouncing the Treaty in May.⁶

Why did Russia withdraw from the CFE?

Russia's withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) can be attributed to several reasons that have emerged from a broader geopolitical context:

- **Perception of U.S. Actions:** Russia has cited the actions of the United States, which it perceives as undermining post-Cold War security. This particularly relates to the

⁶ Burc Eruygur, "Russian president signs decree denouncing arms treaty with NATO", Anadolu Agency, published on May 29, 2023. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/russian-president-signs-decree-denouncing-arms-treaty-with-nato/2909027>

enlargement of the NATO military alliance which Russia sees as a threat to its security and sphere of influence.⁷

- **NATO Expansion and Treaty Ratification:** The expansion of NATO and the failure of the U.S. and its allies to ratify an updated version of the CFE Treaty in 1999 are also among the key reasons behind Russia's decision to withdraw. The lack of ratification of the adapted treaty is viewed by Russia as a non-reciprocal move that disregards the balance and the security framework established in the post-Cold War era.⁸
- **Divorced from Reality:** Russia also claims that the situation, interests and priorities have significantly changed from the time when the CFE Treaty was signed. Therefore, it was necessary to modify and update the provisions of the Agreement which the other members, particularly the U.S., refused to do. Hence, the CFE Agreement in its original form, has lost connection with reality and there was no reason for Russia to keep adhering to an agreement that was going contrary to its interests.

Furthermore, Russia also claims that due to the recent global and regional developments, particularly the circumstances that developed post-February 24, 2022, the CFE Treaty became unacceptable from the standpoint of Russia's core security interests.⁹

These reasons reflect deep-seated tensions and power dynamics in the region and indicate Russia's dissatisfaction with the existing security arrangements and its perception of Western actions as adversarial.

Russia's Foreign Ministry cited the U.S. push for NATO enlargement as a significant reason, stating that alliance countries were "openly circumventing" the Treaty's group restrictions. Russia considered the preservation of the treaty unacceptable in terms of its security interests, especially after the admission of Finland to NATO and Sweden's application to join.

⁷ Nitish Verma, "Geopolitical Implications of Russia's Withdrawal from CFE Treaty", BNN, published on November 08, 2023.

<https://bnn.network/politics/geopolitical-implications-of-russias-withdrawal-from-cfe-treaty/#:~:text=The%20reasons%20cited%20by%20Russia,tensions%20and%20power%20dynamics>

⁸ Israel Ojoko, "Russia Withdraws from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe", BNN, published on November 08, 2023.

<https://bnn.network/world/russia/russia-withdraws-from-the-treaty-on-conventional-armed-forces-in-europe/#:~:text=The%20expansion%20of%20NATO%20and,Atlantic%20security>

⁹ "Foreign Ministry statement on the completion of the procedure for the Russian Federation's withdrawal from the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty)", The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, published on November 07, 2023.

https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1913546/

Additionally, the U.S. and its allies had not ratified the updated 1999 CFE due to Russia not fulfilling commitments on Georgia and Moldova, which Moscow regarded as an incorrect linkage.¹⁰

On the other side, NATO has been expanding eastward since the 1990s, which has been a contentious issue for Russia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many foreign policy experts urged Western leaders to establish a new security framework to redefine relations with Russia. However, some historical documents suggest that U.S. negotiators made promises to their Russian counterparts and had internal policy discussions opposing NATO's expansion to Eastern Europe.

For example, a State Department memorandum from 1990 indicated that it was not in NATO's or the U.S.'s best interest to grant full NATO membership to Eastern European states immediately after they emerged from Soviet control.

Despite these discussions, no official policy or legally binding documents were created with Russia. NATO maintained an "open door" policy, asserting the right of all countries to choose their alliances, which has been a point of contention for Russia, which saw NATO's expansion as a threat directed against it.¹¹

The issues surrounding NATO's eastward expansion and Russia's withdrawal from the CFE Treaty are deeply intertwined with the broader historical, political, and security dynamics of post-Cold War Europe. These actions reflect longstanding tensions and differing security perceptions between Russia and the Western alliance, contributing to the complex and often strained relations in the region.

Impacts of Russia's withdrawal from the CFE on European security:

Russia's formal withdrawal from the CFE has been described as a seismic shift in European security dynamics. The Treaty was a key part of post-Cold War security. Russia's departure from the treaty is seen as significantly altering the geopolitical landscape and has raised concerns over the future of European security.

This move has been criticized by NATO as undermining Euro-Atlantic security and raised concerns over the potential for future arms control agreements between Russia and NATO countries.

¹⁰ Faulconbridge & Kelly, "Russia formally withdraws from key post-Cold War European armed forces treaty", Reuters, published on November 07, 2023.

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-formally-withdraws-key-post-cold-war-european-armed-forces-treaty-2023-11-07/>

¹¹ William Noah Glucroft, "NATO: Why Russia has a problem with its eastward expansion", DW, published on February 23, 2022.

<https://www.dw.com/en/nato-why-russia-has-a-problem-with-its-eastward-expansion/a-60891681>

In response to Russia's withdrawal, the UK has condemned the decision, stating that it undermines strategic stability and the Euro-Atlantic security architecture. The UK, along with its allies, decided to suspend their participation in the Treaty and to work with like-minded nations to develop and implement voluntary stabilizing measures.¹²

The European Leadership Network (a pan-European think tank) highlighted the dilemma faced by the state parties to the CFE Treaty after Russia's withdrawal.¹³ A meeting in Vienna was called to consider whether to end the treaty, temporarily suspend it, or try to revitalize it.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs listed several reasons for its decision (as mentioned earlier), mixing genuine security concerns with questionable arguments. Russia's stance is that NATO's enlargement, particularly with countries that were not part of the original treaty like Finland and Sweden joining NATO, created a disadvantage for it.

However, the argument that this enlargement allows the Western group to bypass or exceed the group ceilings under the CFE was countered by the fact that treaty-limited holdings for each group are sufficiently high to accommodate additional military equipment.

Furthermore, Russia's complaint about the West's failure to ratify the 1999 Adapted CFE Treaty is seen as overlooking the treaty's victim status to changing geopolitical circumstances and the West's lack of legal obligation to ratify it.¹⁴ Meaning that the security needs and priorities of European countries have evolved since the end of the Cold War. New threats such as terrorism, cyber warfare, and asymmetric warfare are not addressed by the CFE Treaty, which focuses on conventional armed forces and equipment. This shift in security priorities has likely influenced the decision-making process regarding the Treaty's ratification. And, legally, countries are not obligated to ratify the Treaty. Ratification is a sovereign decision based on national interests and security considerations. In the case of the Adapted CFE Treaty, Western countries may have found that ratification did not align with their strategic interests or security concerns.

¹² "Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces - UK condemns withdrawal", GOV.UK, published on November 07, 2023.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/treaty-on-conventional-armed-forces-uk-condemns-withdrawal>

¹³ Pál Dunay, "After withdrawal, what? The dilemma facing the state parties after Russia leaves the CFE treat", European Leadership Network, published on June 28, 2023.

<https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/after-withdrawal-what-the-dilemma-facing-the-states-parties-after-russia-leaves-the-cfe-treaty/>

¹⁴ Pál Dunay, "After withdrawal, what? The dilemma facing the state parties after Russia leaves the CFE treat", European Leadership Network, published on June 28, 2023.

<https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/commentary/after-withdrawal-what-the-dilemma-facing-the-states-parties-after-russia-leaves-the-cfe-treaty/>

Conclusion:

Although Russia has withdrawn from the CFE Treaty, it has also been straight forward about the benefits that the Treaty provided during the time when it was initially signed, since mutual cooperation seemed highly feasible at the time and played a stabilizing role in the region and beyond.

The European response to Russia's withdrawal reflects a broader concern about the stability of European security and the future of arms control on the continent. The issue has brought to the forefront the need for ongoing dialogue and the development of new measures to maintain stability and prevent a potential arms race in Europe.

The trend of decoupling from security-based cooperation, especially within the Euro-Atlantic region, is intensifying with major agreements on key disarmament and arms control issues being suspended by parties involved. Several key security agreements that were signed in the late 1980s and early 1990s failed to stand the test of time, namely the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), New START Treaty, and Open Skies Treaty.

Moreover, with the persisting conflict in Ukraine, deployment of troops and military equipment in different parts of Europe (by NATO, Russia and Belarus), and intensification of nuclear rhetoric by both sides, the suspension of different arms control instruments, including the CFE, the security and stability in the Euro-Atlantic region is under substantial threat which will only increase risks of military conflict and add to the existing trust deficit, besides broader implications for the stability of international security, the 'rules-based order', and the management of geopolitical tensions.