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Conventional forces treaty a year after Russia's moratorium

18/11/2008 MOSCOW. (Military commentator Nikita Petrov for RIA Novosti) - Russia announced a moratorium on the compliance of the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) a year ago.

Since then, it has not participated in inspections of military units in other signatory countries, received their military delegations, or provided information on the redeployment of its troops and the number of heavy weaponry (battle tanks, armored combat vehicles, artillery, combat aircraft and attack helicopters) in the zone of the treaty.

The idling CFE, which has been described as the cornerstone of European security, is unlikely to become effective again. The patient is more dead than alive, judging by the attention shown to it.

Why has the treaty gone cold? Why has Russia suspended its membership until the western countries ratify its adapted version? And why have they not ratified it?

The CFE treaty was signed in November 1990 in Paris between NATO and the Warsaw Pact countries and went into force in 1992 to limit the number of heavy weaponry on both sides, distribute quotas for signatory countries, and stipulate verification procedures.

The Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union fell apart soon after the CFE treaty was signed, and many post-socialist East European countries joined NATO. The treaty was adjusted to new realities in Istanbul in November 1999.

But only Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine have ratified the adjusted CFE treaty (Ukraine has not submitted its ratification documents), while the NATO countries said they would ratify it after Russia pulls its troops out of Georgia and Transdnestr.

Owing to the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the heavy weaponry quotas of the NATO countries now exceed the Russian quota by as much as six times in some areas. Limitations did not cover the Baltic countries, which have become NATO members. They refuse to allow Russian inspectors in but their representatives were added to the NATO groups that inspected Russian military units, in particular in the westernmost Kaliningrad region on the Baltic coast.

The United States set up military bases in Romania and Bulgaria and started preparations for the deployment of ballistic missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic. The Russian authorities, generals and military experts said these moves threatened Russia's strategic deterrence forces.

This cannot go on forever.

Russian politicians have said more than once that western countries' unilateral military advantages were impermissible, but their warnings have not moved Brussels or Washington. Therefore, Moscow has suspended its CFE membership until its western partners ratify the amended treaty.

The signatories said Russia had no right to do so and that they were ready to allay Russia's concerns, but have not acted on their words. So, do European signatories, the U.S. and Canada need the CFE treaty or not?

Many military analysts think they do, because the CFE treaty not only stipulates heavy weapon quotas, but is also an instrument for maintaining trust between its member states. Relations become closer when any member decides to inspect military units in a neighboring state and send an inspection within 48 hours of issuing the notification to see that the neighbor is not accumulating an offensive potential.

Unfortunately, the suspension of the CFE treaty has eliminated this possibility. NATO inspectors cannot visit Russian military units, and vice versa.

Georgia used the situation to build up its offensive capability, buy a huge amount of heavy weaponry in excess of its defense requirements and the CFE quotas, but its partners preferred to disregard these developments. The result was the August war in the Caucasus.

The United States has established military bases in Bulgaria and Romania, allegedly with "relatively small units rotating in and out of the bases for short periods of time." But it is not clear how small these units will remain.

The CFE treaty does not cover the deployment of ballistic missile defense systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, or the U.S. free-fall nuclear bombs stored at its European bases, which is not strengthening trust among European nations.

NATO members are not easy about the military reform underway in Russia, which provides for replacing armies and divisions with commands and brigades. It goes without saying that their deployment and weapons will not be the same as in the CFE quotas.

This means that a new security and trust infrastructure should be created in Europe, with the CFE treaty replaced with some other agreement, which should include the proposals made by President Dmitry Medvedev to the EU.

The new agreements must take into account not only Europe's concerns over Russia's intention to deploy the Iskander-M short-range ballistic missiles in the Kaliningrad Region in response to the deployment of U.S. antimissile interceptors in Poland, but also Russia's concern over the establishment of an ABM shield near its borders.

A new security and trust architecture cannot be created in Europe without mutual respect for the security interests of all European countries and military-political alliances, including NATO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) comprising Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

This is probably the main lesson of the frozen and forgotten CFE treaty.

The opinions expressed in this article are the authors and do not necessarily represent those of RIA Novosti.