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Moscow Open for Dialogue on European Security Issues

The recent European Security Conference in Moscow confirmed that Russia and NATO remain poles apart on ballistic missile defenses and conventional forces. But it's not all bad news, notes Richard Weitz. Both sides still see counterterrorism as an ideal way to promote deeper Russia-NATO cooperation.

By Richard Weitz for ISN

The end result of discussions held at the May 23 [Moscow European Security Conference](#) (which this author attended as an NGO delegate) made clear that Russia and NATO will not reach an agreement on ballistic missile defenses (BMD) or the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) - issues that have been straining East-West ties for years - any time soon. However, prospects for increased cooperation concerning a host of mutual security concerns seem more promising.

Unsteady Europe

The Russian Ministry of Defense organized the conference to highlight what its leaders see as major weaknesses in the continent's security system: its failure to reflect the indivisibility of European security as well as Russia's reduced influence in Europe's NATO-dominated structure. Although the Balkans, the South Caucasus, and other potential European hotspots have become more tranquil in recent years, Russia [believes](#) that Europe's security flaws, if left unaddressed, could lead to renewed instability and conflict.

The Russian speakers at the conference acknowledged that their ties with NATO had improved considerably since the 2008 Georgia War, which led to a suspension of direct NATO-Russian security cooperation. In a letter read aloud at the opening session, President Vladimir Putin [cited](#) such positive developments as the end of major ideological differences within Europe and the growing military and other exchanges between Russia and the West. Nonetheless, Putin and other Russians expressed regret about deeply-rooted mistrust, diverging national priorities, and a general lack of confidence between the parties. They saw these factors as weakening Europe's collective capacity to address twenty-first century challenges.

Not budging on BMDs

One might have hoped that the Pentagon's [decision](#) this March to cancel its plans to deploy advanced Standard Missile-3 (SM-3) IIB long-range interceptors in eastern Europe would have, if not warmed Russian hearts, then at least made the discussions over BMD less frigid. But the Russian speakers

[asserted](#) that, despite the changes, they remain doubtful that the U.S. missile shield will not have the potential to threaten Russia's strategic nuclear deterrent.

In particular, they [argued](#) that 1) the three phases of the so-called European Phased Adoptive Approach remain a major threat, 2) that the decision could be easily reversed if the United States overcomes the technical and financial bottlenecks cited by the administration as the reasons for the cancellation of the IIB program, and 3) that Washington still fails to keep Moscow adequately informed about its plans, claiming that they learned about the recent changes from the news media rather than the U.S. government. The Russian speakers also expressed concern about 1) the announced augmentation of Ground-Based Mid-Course Interceptors in Alaska, 2) increasing U.S. BMD capabilities in Asia, and 3) the unconstrained growth and unpredictable future capabilities of the U.S. missile defense architecture.

NATO officials have tried to ease Russian concerns by offering to share more information about the limited nature of these BMD capabilities with Moscow. They have also [proposed](#) several joint Russia-NATO initiatives with the hope that, by cooperating on some BMD projects, Russians would better understand the modest and stabilizing nature of NATO's BMD efforts.

Russian officials have called these proposals premature, pending a more general Russia-NATO agreement on the acceptable purposes and parameters of European missile defense. At the conference, the speakers reiterated the demand that the United States sign a [binding treaty](#) that would limit U.S. BMD capabilities—even though several Russian delegates acknowledged in side discussions that the Congress would never ratify such an agreement, which Moscow wants to include limits on the location of U.S. BMD radars and launchers as well as constraints on the number and speed of BMD interceptors.

CFE to Return?

Russian opposition to resurrecting the existing [Conventional Forces in Europe \(CFE\) Treaty](#) remains unrelenting. The Treaty, which entered into force in 1992, created a sophisticated system of monitoring, inspections, and verification of conventional military deployments and activities in the zone extending from the Atlantic to the Urals. Besides the limits on the permissible number of tanks, armored vehicles, artillery pieces, combat aircraft, and helicopters, the Treaty established an extensive system of military confidence-building measures that helped eliminate the possibility of large-scale surprise attacks in Europe.

Unfortunately, NATO's subsequent membership enlargement and the stationing of Russian military units in the separatist regions of Georgia and Moldova have resulted in mutual accusations of treaty violations. The sides negotiated a settlement regarding these issues in 1999, but they have disagreed over whether NATO must first ratify an adopted treaty that incorporates NATO's new members, or whether Russia must first remove its forces from occupied Georgia and Moldova.

On December 12, 2007, the Russian government "[suspended](#)" its participation in the CFE Treaty due to "exceptional circumstances" that allegedly jeopardized Russia's "national interests in the sphere of military security." Since then, Russia has stopped informing the other State Parties to the treaty about the size, location, and activities of its armed forces. In November 2011, NATO governments [imposed](#) the same limitations on the data they shared with Russia.

At the Moscow conference, the Russian speakers rejected NATO offers to end their mutual suspensions. They demanded that NATO either accept the revised CFE Treaty adopted in 1999 or that NATO and Russia negotiate an entirely new treaty that would also deal with precision-guided munitions, unmanned robotic systems, naval forces, and other weapons not covered by the original

CFE Treaty.

A New START?

Russians also cited the BMD and CFE disputes as reasons for their lack of enthusiasm regarding U.S. proposals that Moscow and Washington begin negotiations on a new strategic arms reduction treaty. The Russian speakers agreed with the United States that the 2010 New START agreement, which imposed modest limits on Russian and U.S. strategic nuclear forces and extended some expiring verification measures, was a solid accomplishment of the 'reset' that occurred in President Obama's first term. They concurred that both sides were implementing the treaty as required, with no major disagreements. Army General Valery Gerasimov, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces and a First Deputy Minister of Defense, called New START a "[gold standard](#)" for nuclear arms control treaties. But he and other Russian speakers conditioned agreeing to any further cuts in their nuclear arsenal on Washington's accepting binding constraints on U.S. and NATO strategic defenses and addressing Moscow's concerns regarding perceived growth in the capability of NATO's advanced conventional forces to inflict a devastating attack against Russia's nuclear deterrent.

The scenario the Russians feared was that NATO would employ its precision-guided munitions and its prompt global strike weapons (such as long-range ballistic missiles armed with conventional warheads) to launch a first strike against Russia's nuclear forces as well as key command-and-control nodes. Russian leaders would then find themselves in a desperate situation. They could launch a ragged response with their depleted nuclear forces, which would now be more vulnerable to NATO missile defenses, and then suffer a devastating NATO counterstrike. Or they could hold on to their remaining nuclear arsenal as ultimate survival weapons through the threat of mutual assured destruction, but otherwise have to accept a diminished role in a world now made safe for Western conventional superiority.

Russian speakers also raised additional obstacles to negotiating a new START-like nuclear arms reduction treaty, including the large number of U.S. non-deployed strategic warheads and the need for other nuclear weapons states--such as Britain, France, and China—to agree to limit their own nuclear potential.

And now for the Good News

Conversely, Russian and Western speakers agreed that fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere remained a shared priority between Russia and NATO. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu cited global terrorism as the main threat to Russia's security, while the head of Russian military intelligence, Lt. General Igor Sergun, [warned](#) that the Taliban and other Islamist movements would support European converts to Islam who were eager to bring the war to their home countries.

Russian officials did repeat their complaints that NATO has neglected its counter-narcotics responsibilities in Afghanistan, enabling the Taliban to raise considerable revenues that often find their way to Russia and other European countries. They also complained about the reluctance of NATO to work directly with the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a bloc of Moscow-leaning Eurasian countries that includes Armenia, Belarus, and all the Central Asian states except for Turkmenistan.

Nonetheless, the Russian speakers agreed with their Western colleagues that countering terrorism in Afghanistan and elsewhere would remain an important arena for continued Russia-NATO collaboration even after the Alliance's combat troops leave Eurasia—a good topic for a future Moscow security conference.

For additional reading on this topic please see:
[The European Union and Russia at a Crossroads](#)
[Impact of US Nuclear Reductions on European Security](#)
[Next Steps in Nuclear Arms Control with Russia](#)

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[Richard Weitz](#) is Senior Fellow and Director of the [Center for Political-Military Analysis](#) at [Hudson Institute](#).

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ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland