

Conventional Arms Control in Europe: Some Thoughts About an Uncertain Future

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There is no question that conventional arms control in Europe is in a dry and difficult time. That some progress, or better, some resurrection of conventional arms control, needs to happen is equally obvious. European security and cooperation have long rested on several components, with the military dimension in turn composed of two complimentary elements, strategic nuclear and conventional arms control and confidence-building measures. Today progress towards deep cuts in the strategic arms of Russia and the United States depends in part on resolving perceived conventional threat imbalances. Equally important, while nuclear weapons thankfully are not employed but linger in the “dark corners” of deterrence, conventional weapons have been killing and wounding and directly threatening peace and stability in Europe.

So, is there some new initiative in conventional arms control that could help to bolster European security and strengthen nuclear safety, security and stability?

If there is, it will require close examination of those very foundations on which security and cooperation in Europe are based. We need to rebuild a common understanding of basics, just as was done 40 years ago with the Helsinki Accords. We must ask, and find an answer to, the question of why we need conventional arms control at all. What are the goals for European security? How can arms control objectives serve those goals? And how can we work towards those goals within a “Helsinki 2” type process that addresses all aspects of security in Europe, not just the military dimension?

Major Obstacles Ahead

There are major obstacles to doing this. There is no common vision of security basics such as non-use of force, self-determination, and territo-

rial integrity. There do not appear to be agreed common goals on which we might agree and within which we can arrange reasonable compromises on contested areas. Not least, a “Helsinki 2” might well divide Europe into spheres of interest, influence or control. Today states are both asserting and resisting such a de facto division.

But let us assume we agree on process and overcome obstacles. Who should the participants be in future conventional arms control agreements? Part of the answer is easy: all Europe, everyone in the Atlantic to the Urals, regardless of present or prior affiliation or status as a neutral. For a variety of reasons, North America must also belong. The United States as nuclear protector and chief ballistic missile defender, and, alongside Canada, with long-time cultural, economic, political and military ties to Europe, cannot be excluded. These are claims no other state without territory in the area of application of a likely treaty could reasonably make.

Within this negotiating framework, no one state should act as leader of a bloc, nor should any group negotiate as a bloc. But any state should be allowed to consider how groups of which it is not a member affect its own security. This is simply an acknowledgement of reality, that one bloc, NATO, exists and one very large country, Russia, thinks NATO is threatening to its national interests. But this reality should not be allowed to bend a new treaty towards a bloc-to-bloc approach.

This outdated concept was thoroughly and rightly rejected as long ago as the mid to late 1990s during negotiation of an adapted Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE Treaty). A bloc-based approach is no more desirable today. It would be a step backwards towards Cold War thinking and imposition of divisions in Europe. Nor should a new treaty be

based on setting up another bloc or group of blocs to “balance” NATO. The potential process of assigning individual states to bloc membership, or bloc aspiration, or bloc neutrality would be too messy and politically intolerable. Finally, negotiating on the basis of a bloc or blocs would recognize an implicit need for bloc aggregate ceilings. The huge aggregate ceilings of the original CFE Treaty of 1990 are meaningless in the light of much reduced force levels at present and into the foreseeable future. And, as shall be argued below, national ceilings of treaty limited equipment, while necessary, are not nearly so important as where units with that equipment are located, in or out of garrison, and where in proximity to international borders.

Getting to agreement to have a new conventional arms control framework will be difficult, no question. And it must be achieved knowing full well that the use of military force in the pursuit of vital national interests will not be prevented by solemn agreements. Paper will never stop a tank. But the common understanding that produced that piece of paper may well prevent a tragic miscalculation or give a critical pause to the process of violating a commitment in the name of sovereign interests.

Having built a castle in the air on very uncertain foundation, how might we visualize a future conventional arms control agreement fulfilling commonly held security objectives for a Europe that may or may not be divided, but is at peace? At the very least, an arms control regime should help preserve that peace, preventing as far as possible aggressive action by any state or group against another. Let me propose four elements of such a regime:

- numerical limits on things that can be counted,
- inclusion of countable things that most threaten aggression,
- transparency measures, and
- a consultative mechanism.

This is not a call to exhume and resuscitate the CFE Treaty of 1990, as adapted (signed 1999, not ratified by most States Parties). That treaty established some valuable precedents and posi-

tive examples, but a new agreement will differ significantly. In addition, important confidence-building measures have been developed in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) – particularly through the Vienna Document – and in other arms control and non-proliferation fora. These provide more examples of what works and what doesn’t.

Key Elements of a New Approach

Limits should be national and not aggregated into any sort of bloc. The emphasis should be less on total inventories and more on the actual location and activity of units that possess the key equipment being limited. All such limited equipment and the units that possess them would be declared at home garrison, where they are normally stationed, whether that is within a state’s home territory or within another state’s boundaries as legitimately stationed foreign forces. There will have to be limits on where some units can be stationed, based on their ability to conduct or support cross-border combat from their “peacetime” station. There may have to be limits on how many units can be out of garrison at any time or place. Because of their inherent mobility, longer-range combat aircraft and dismounted airborne forces present special problems.

Things both countable and threatening – **key equipment** – include:

- Combat vehicles providing armor-protected mobility to ground maneuver elements.
- Ground-based fire support, all ground-based means of launching strikes on ground targets, regardless of caliber or means of delivery. This category might also include short-range ground-launched cruise missiles, forward-deployed attack helicopters, and armed drones.
- Because of the essential role they play in modern integrated warfare, air defense, active electronic warfare, and some combat engineer equipment may also be included.

Transparency is essential to assure all parties that what is agreed to, is being implemented. It helps prevent dangerous miscalculations and, at best, might lead to building trust. It must maintain a balance between openness and necessary regard for what, in the civil context, would be called privacy, or proprietary information.

Transparency includes declarations of data and ways to confirm that these numbers are accurate. Declarations would specify, on a recurring basis, amounts of all key equipment, by unit and garrison. All changes of garrison would have to be reported. This is the familiar audit of the static stability of the CFE Treaty. But the environment today is quite different. We are not so concerned with long-term treaty monitoring of units in fixed garrisons, but with concentration of military capabilities in sensitive areas. Critically, all out of garrison activity above fairly low thresholds involving key equipment would have to be declared as they occur.

To confirm declarations, a percentage of all garrisons holding key equipment would be subject to recurring inspections. This is by now a familiar model, sampling a given population, all of whose members are at risk of random check. The on-site inspection provisions of CFE and other arms control treaties have led to confidence in the accuracy of declarations, all at a reasonable burden on budgets and internal security.

All declared out of garrison activity would be subject to inspection of that activity. There would have to be a provision for unrestricted challenge inspection of any suspect out of garrison activity that has not been declared. These provisions must go well beyond the challenge inspections of CFE or the Vienna Document. Finally, if not otherwise geographically constrained, units capable of cross-border combat from their “peacetime” location would have to be subject to more stringent inspection.

To balance the need for openness with concerns about internal security, there could be a way to declare limited areas for limited times that are sensitive or of special concern, and so may not be inspected. Such restrictions could, of course be manipulated or abused by a declaring state, but this would thereby provide a kind of negative declaration with its own consequences.

In addition to the principle of non-interference with national technical means of verification, there could also be agreement on the role of other technical verification measures and of public sources of information. Again, public media and technical capabilities of information gathering can be abused and manipulated, but on balance, the default setting of world information is openness and transparency. Technological progress of the past quarter century has also offered ample evidence that greater transparency is increasingly possible at lower costs. There will always be the need to preserve secrets, but there should be ways to minimize the number of them and to increase mutual assurance that what is unknown doesn’t become the basis for a fatal miscalculation.

There must be a **consultative body** to manage the operation of the agreement. First, and perhaps most important, it would have to resolve ambiguities in operation of the agreement. This needs to be done quietly, calmly, out of the glare of publicity and as far removed as possible from immediate “political” reaction to perceived evidence of bad faith, non-compliance, or hostile intent. Second, such a group would have to manage and protect the confidentiality of information regarding declarations and inspections. Third, the consultative body could work to develop improvements to the operation of the treaty itself.

All of the foregoing are well-known and proven capabilities of bodies such as the CFE Treaty’s Joint Consultative Group and various similar bodies of other bi- and multilateral treaties. But another function would be extremely important. This would be to streamline the inspection process, perhaps through standing inspection teams that represent and report to the consultative body. A model for such a process can be found in monitoring the safeguards provisions of nuclear non-proliferation agreements.

The Aim: Reversing the Negative Trend

It will be difficult to agree on basic principles of European security and cooperation 40 years after Helsinki. Some are immutable, such as host nation consent for the stationing of foreign forces. Others are often at odds with one another, such as territorial integrity and self-determination, or non-use of force and humanitarian intervention.

It will be difficult to agree that conventional arms control can and should serve these principles. Assuming all such difficulties are overcome, there should be no illusions that negotiating the specifics of a future conventional arms control agreement will be a pleasant walk in the Vienna Woods. There are vexing questions, just for starters, about definition of the area of application, of the role of longer range aviation assets, of the role of even littoral naval capabilities, and about getting buy-in and political leadership from all necessary participants.

Obstacles abound, but the need is great. A major impediment to progress on further nuclear reductions must be removed. Everything must be done to reverse a trend in post-Cold War Europe to abandon peaceful resolution of conflict and resort to threat, intimidation, and conflict. Happily, there is reason to be optimistic that a modern conventional arms control treaty is possible and that we know what its general outline should be. In a world of problems demanding attention, it is important to continue to assert that, while a piece of paper may not stop a bullet, it might stay the hand that pulls the trigger.

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The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Deep Cuts Commissioners or organizations associated with the Deep Cuts project.

About the Author



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