

MOSCOW'S ACTIONS JEOPARDIZE CONVENTIONAL ARMS CONTROL

When the Soviet Union agreed to the outlines of NATO's proposed Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty in March 1989, the outlook for European security seemed almost too good to be true. Moscow, after all, had agreed in principle to eliminate its military advantage over NATO by destroying any military equipment in Europe — including the European territory of the Soviet Union — over the weapons limits allowed by a CFE treaty. Because the Soviet Union had so much equipment in Europe exceeding CFE limits, NATO assumed that a CFE treaty would require the Soviet Union to destroy about 80,000 pieces of major military equipment, including artillery, tanks, and other armored vehicles. As it turns out, this is not to be the case. With a CFE treaty about ready to be signed by 22 nations, including the United States and the Soviet Union, it seems Moscow will destroy less than half the weapons originally anticipated.

What happened to the rest of the equipment Moscow was to have destroyed? Apparently in the past few months, this equipment was transferred from the European part of the Soviet Union, which is to be covered by CFE limits, to just across the Ural Mountains into Soviet Asia. Because territory east of the Urals is not covered by CFE, none of this equipment will have to be destroyed to comply with a CFE treaty. While the State Department is not saying exactly how much equipment the Soviets have moved, it amounts to at least 15,000 tanks, 15,000 to 20,000 heavy artillery pieces, and 25,000 other armored combat vehicles. These figures may turn out to be even higher when the official pre-CFE tally is released later this week. These weapons, if well maintained, could be rushed back into Europe in the event of a crisis, posing a threat to the security of America's allies.

NATO is ignoring this potential threat and is rushing headlong toward a CFE treaty signing in Paris next week. Secretary of State James Baker has received only vague assurances from Moscow that most of the weapons moved east of the Urals will be destroyed or converted to civilian use. Still, it is not too late for George Bush to force Moscow to commit to the destruction of this equipment. But he must act quickly. He should instruct Baker to inform Moscow, and America's allies, that the United States will not sign a CFE treaty unless Moscow signs a side agreement promising to destroy the equipment that has been withdrawn beyond the Urals since the CFE negotiations began in March 1989.

Moscow's Guarantee. A CFE treaty was supposed to signal the end of the Cold War. By bringing Warsaw Pact arms down to levels equal to NATO's, with excess arms destroyed, CFE was to be Moscow's guarantee that it no longer would seek its own security through overwhelming military superiority and the insecurity of others. After CFE, the Soviet Union still would be left with Europe's largest armed forces. Its 13,500 tanks in the European theater would dwarf any other European power, including Britain, which has about 1,000 tanks, France with 1,350, or Germany with 5,000 (a figure sure to shrink in coming years). With huge numbers of Soviet arms destroyed, Moscow's neighbors would have been far more secure.

Things may not work out this way. Instead, Europe may well have to live with the specter of a Soviet mobilization in which the trans-Urals forces are brought back to Europe. These artillery, tanks, and combat vehicles are close to, and perhaps greater than, the numbers that all of NATO combined will be allowed to station in Europe after a CFE treaty is ratified. Western governments reportedly were astonished at the speed with which Moscow moved all this equipment from Europe to Asia, most of it in a matter of weeks. If maintained in good working order, it could be moved back as quickly.

Europe will have no way to match a Soviet mobilization of these forces. Other European countries will have no comparable reserves. Most American forces undoubtedly will be gone from Europe, and U.S. reinforcements — 3,000 miles and an ocean away — will be pared back drastically by coming budget cuts. As important, this Soviet move poisons the atmosphere for future European arms reduction talks, which were to have achieved even deeper cuts in conventional forces.

Unconvincing Explanations. Soviet diplomats offer a number of reasons for the wholesale transfer of military equipment from Europe to Asia, including the high cost of destroying it. Moscow has not complained, however, of the cost of building an average of 3,400 tanks per year during the Gorbachev era — about four times U.S. average production — or of producing about 2,000 artillery pieces per year — about 10 times annual U.S. production. If Mikhail Gorbachev simply brings Soviet military production rates down to levels appropriate for self defense, he will save more than enough rubles to cover the expense of destroying equipment under a CFE treaty. Another argument sometimes made is that Moscow needs this equipment to defend its border with China. But the Soviet Union already has 11,500 tanks facing China's 7,500 tanks, none of which could be considered modern by U.S. or Soviet standards.

Perhaps this military equipment moved back behind the Urals never will turn out to be a problem: it could well be left out in fields simply to rust and fall apart; Moscow is not likely to maintain an army large enough to use it all anyway; and the Soviet Union is on the verge of collapse. Still, at least some Soviet civilian or military leaders managed to convince Gorbachev to go to the tremendous expense of moving all that equipment 1,000 miles, despite Western expectations that it would be destroyed. The chances thus are good that Moscow will attempt to keep the equipment in good working order and retain the ability to dispatch it quickly back into Europe. As such, NATO cannot afford to proceed toward a CFE signing next week. Bush should instruct Baker to inform Moscow that the U.S. will not sign a CFE Treaty without a binding side agreement requiring the Soviet Union to destroy equipment withdrawn to behind the Urals since the CFE negotiations began in spring 1989.

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